

What post-Brexit UK can learn from the blockade of Qatar



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Next week, the youthful ruler of the tiny Kingdom of Qatar will arrive in London to meet the Prime Minister. His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani's visit is aimed at promoting Qatar and what it stands for in the face of the year-long blockade by four neighbouring states – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. In doing so, he may have some valuable lessons for Theresa May in her embattled state.

The four countries had become infuriated with Qatar's growing influence in the region, its support for opposition groups and its ties with Iran. They accused Qatar of harbouring terrorists and made sweeping demands including the closure of its flagship Al-Jazeera Arabic news channel.

In June 2017, a land, air and sea blockade was imposed on the gas-rich state by the four countries without warning. Families with relatives straddling borders were torn apart, institutions cut off from contact in the blockading countries, ships refused passage through Emirati ports and planes banned from flying over neighbouring airspace.

Qatar's rupture with its neighbours is far more severe than

even the hardest Brexit would be for the UK. If Britain crashes out of the EU with no deal, trade and travel will become much more difficult. But that is very different from the imposition of a blockade.

Yet there are lessons from Qatar's experience for the UK. While there has been an outpouring of national sentiment – Qatari patriotism is on the rise like never before – the policy response has been to seek to make Qatar more open to the world rather than less.

Qatar has therefore lifted visa restrictions, offered permanent residency to parts of its large foreign workforce, and strengthened its commitment to human rights and freedom of speech – although it should be noted that critics maintain it needs to do more.

The tiny gulf Kingdom has made enormous investments in education, science, medicine and cultural institutions, with the goal of becoming an international hub. It has invested in a futuristic education campus, state-of-the-art hospitals, and a new national library and museum. Its goal is to be a more attractive destination.

As the UK considers its place in the world in the face of Brexit, there are some lessons it could draw from Qatar. The UK should become more open, not less; increase investment, not diminish it; and draw on our enormous scientific and intellectual talent, not alienate it.

There are three things the government could immediately do. First, scrap the net migration target and allow more international students to study in the UK – and permit them to contribute to our economy with post-study work visas. Second, increase investment in research so that we match the top quartile of advanced countries (the UK has been falling behind for more than a decade) and increase public investment in innovation. Third, make clear that Britain welcomes talent from all over the world, and is open rather than closed.

The shape of the UK's deal with the EU is highly uncertain – and it now seems possible that Britain will not leave at all.

There appears to be no majority in Parliament for any deal, let alone an ultra-hard Brexit. Yet Britain must now resolve the deeper question about what it takes to succeed in the world in the 21st century.

Distant as the gas rich city state is from the UK culturally, economically and geographically, Theresa May might draw some comfort from Qatar's resilience in the face of extraordinary pressure and much-changed regional circumstances. But the real lesson is that no matter the Brexit deal, the UK needs a radical rethink.

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