

Singapore Business in the GCC: Un Tour d'Horizon

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A rich environment in every way – business, cultural, and socio-political – the countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) provide a fascinating subject for academic study from a wealth of perspectives. Some of these perspectives are well-explored; others, markedly less so, the business dimension of this unique and complicated market among them. While a favored subject of our own research, the comparative dearth of similar research leaves the business opportunities and pitfalls of this region critically under-explained. This paper represents both a culmination of, and a new foundation to, our research into this cryptic and alluring region. In this paper, we cast our gaze across the expanse of Singapore's business horizons in the GCC countries, exploring in turn the experiences of Singapore companies in the region; their current state of operations and challenges in the light of current events; and the general direction going forward – providing, we aim, as accurate a depiction as we can of the state of Singapore business in the region in the wake of the Arab spring – of the as yet immense potential going forward alongside the continuing risk of financial shocks and uncertainties – and from this, perhaps, a limited road map for all those looking towards the region for their own new horizons.

1. Introduction

It would be no exaggeration to state that the past decade has been simultaneously a tumultuous and momentous time in the history of the countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC). Beginning, arguably, with the retraction of investments in Western countries back to domestic markets as a result of paranoia following the 9/11 attacks, the pace of development – infrastructural, economical, and financial – sparked and fueled by this reapportionment of funding was nothing short of meteoric; in not simply its breathtaking speed and scale, but also in the sudden halt it was brought to by the global financial crisis in some parts of the GCC, most famously in Dubai (Janardhan 2011; Young 2011). Property development – heretofore one of the premier industries in the region – hobbled to a mere crawl as local governments scrutinized projects and re-evaluated priorities, while the attendant side effects of the crisis made themselves felt across various other industries as funding from both domestic and international sources proved to be not quite as bottomless as initially believed. In contrast, however, to the effects of this financial crisis on other hard-hit regions, most notably several in Europe, recovery for the region was relatively quick, albeit owing partially to abundant natural resources; despite continuing investor caution, the region remained among the foremost investment destinations of the world, with areas such as the aforementioned Dubai adroitly re-tooling themselves away from overly capital-intensive projects. Very recently, however, to this was added a further complication to investor confidence, with the events of the popularly termed 'Arab spring' once again casting a shadow of doubt over the stability of investments in the region – most influenced, arguably, by events in Bahrain, previously a financial hub of the GCC and the Middle East at large. Indeed, for some investors in the region, navigating the socio-political currents in recent years has, in all likelihood, felt

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much like being a ship in a passing hurricane; spots of calm within periods very much less so.

Yet, despite the above, the GCC, as previously mentioned, remains a premier business destination among the world markets of today. Aside from the region's continuing relevance in energy provision, the Middle East at large, and the GCC in particular, still represents a gold mine of opportunity, a growth market also possessing both the means and the keen willingness to encourage and even promote financial, industrial, and infrastructural development (Abouchakra et al. 2008). The examples of this are myriad and manifold; the United Arab Emirates' (UAE), for instance, recently awarded a multi-billion contract to a Korean contractor for a series of nuclear energy plants, and Qatar, having won the bid for the 2022 World Cup, has embarked on a large-scale development plan to prepare for that global sporting event and beyond. Even considering the relatively short histories of many of the states in the region, this almost unprecedentedly swift rate of advancement is nonetheless an impressive achievement. In truth, though, this simply marks the progress of GCC development initiatives that began as far back as the 1990s, where the region's trade figures began moving away from long-standing oil-centric economic ties to OECD countries, toward emerging markets across the world and most particularly in Asia (Economist Intelligence Unit 2011), a function of the growing demand in these markets for not just oil, but also for capital (domestically) and economic space and opportunity (internationally); signaling, for the GCC, a distinct and ravenous appetite for trade and investment, and for diversification – an appetite pushed into voraciousness by aforementioned events just over a decade ago, and resulting in the region's relatively new prominence upon the world business stage. Asia is, at current projections, slated to overtake OECD countries as the GCC's largest trading partner by 2017; a business traveler to the region today would increasingly encounter, subsequently, counterparts from China, India, South Korea, Japan, Indonesia – and of course, Singapore.

These Asian firms and investors, however, inevitably encounter similar and selfsame challenges as their Western counterparts in doing business in the GCC – those being challenges arising from the socio-political dimension, particularly from differences in cultural, legal, and financial profiles. Business in the GCC is, in many ways, a rather different phenomenon from the Occidental pattern many modern businessmen are accustomed to; at times straightforward, at times byzantine, and most definitely not easily navigable for the uninformed – as, indeed, more than one firm discovered the hard way. As such, there exists a distinct need among potential investors and internationalizing firms for not just information and education on the rich and many-layered culture of the GCC, but also for empirical data and studies on business in the region, the latter need resulting in a gradual rise in previously near non-existent literature on business in the Middle East. More than this, however, there is a need for precious experience; the experiences, tribulations, and lessons learned of firms and individuals engaged in the region. It is to outline and analyze this very experience that drives our series of papers, having explored business in the GCC from various dimensions over the years; and hence, this paper, in which we present a culmination of, and a new foundation to, our research, with a collation and comparison of the experiences in the GCC of government-linked companies (GLCs) and of private local enterprises and small-medium enterprises (PLEs/SMEs) from Singapore – a country which already, arguably, straddles the Asian and Occidental. (Ellingsen 2006)

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In the following section, we outline some of the theoretical frameworks through which we contextualize our findings. In the next section, we first provide some degree of historical and current context to the internationalization of Singapore firms into the GCC, before laying out some of the observations and conclusions drawn from our research to date on the two main categories of Singapore firms in the GCC, namely, as previously mentioned, GLCs and the private sector PLEs/SMEs, each further illustrated by a recent case study of a firm in the relevant category selected from among our case studies, each including information gleaned through first-person interviews with relevant management staff of the companies involved. Finally, we conclude by presenting our direction for future research into the business environment of this fascinating yet arcane region.

2. Literature Review

Established theories (and frameworks) are not without critical literature, which challenges, confirms and extends these theories. Vernon's product life-cycle theory, and Porter's 'diamond' of competitive advantage are widely used to explain international business phenomena; both have been subject to criticism and extensions (Rugman & Verbeke 1993).

Dunning's eclectic paradigm is widely acknowledged in the research and teaching of international business. The paradigm is an all-encompassing framework, which proffers that firms need to have ownership, location, and internalization advantages (OLI) in order to cross borders and engage in foreign direct investment. In the same vein, the eclectic paradigm has also been challenged (Cantwell & Narula 2003; Rugman 2010). Dunning himself acknowledged the limitations of the OLI framework, incorporated refinements to account for different and often competing theories such as transaction costs economics and the resource-based view of the firm, incorporated changes (Dunning, 2001), and promulgated several extensions over time to encompass issues of globalization, regionalism and international competitiveness (Dunning & Narula 1996; Dunning & Lundan 2008).

This paper draws upon Dunning's more recent writings on the relationship between the competitive advantages of international firms, and the contribution of cross-border strategic alliances (as well as the hindrances posed by the converse) to economic development, a consideration that remains relevant even for private firms; and, *pari passu*, the implications for national governments as they seek to influence the nature and extent of the business-government nexus encapsulated in Dunning's (1997) alliance capitalism.

The latter is, of course, highly relevant to the context of Singapore, in which the government has a dominant role as a stakeholder, a facilitator and a partner to domestic enterprises seeking investments abroad. Owing to the city-state's small size, it operates through interlocking directorships in government-linked companies (GLCs); this has facilitated the implementation of strategic initiatives, at a national level, with minimal conflict of interests. Theoretically, the 'vested interests' within the interlinked collaborative system serve to expedite processes, garner exclusive incentives, and negate inept bureaucracy. While tried and tested in a local context, however, this created commonality of viewpoints and interests might be less suited for a business environment more contingent on adaptation and innovation, leading to arguments for a reconsideration of the GLC-centric approach (Low 2002).

Additionally, in recent years, several limitations of GLCs in general, and the Singapore-styled GLC in particular, have become increasingly clear (Feng et al. 2004), among them issues of accountability and complications in foreign acquisitions due to the stigma of government ownership (Shome 2009). These theoretical differences between GLCs and their private counterparts will form a central facet of discussion in this paper.

3. Singapore in the GCC

The city-state of Singapore occupies, in many ways, a unique position in Asia; a highly developed nation with a strong economy, despite its infinitesimally small size and dearth of natural resources. It would perhaps not at all be an exaggeration to say that the continued growth of Singapore's economy has largely been due to the city state's recognition at the onset that it needed to plug itself into the global economy, and to subsequent and continuing efforts to meet this need. Possessing limited economic space and subject to the inevitable rising cost structures of doing business at home, means were sought to encapsulate economic space overseas into which local enterprises could find room to grow their operations. Regionalization, and later, internationalization, became the city-state's key to unlock new and larger markets, and the policy document, Singapore Unlimited (Singapore Development Board 1995) encapsulated this paradigm shift.

Initial attempts to redistribute resource-dependent operations – particularly those of private local enterprises (PLEs) – to economic spaces orchestrated by the state in other countries reflected the city-state's government's intent to extend the Singapore state enterprise network, or Singapore Inc., to the region (Yeoh & Wong 2005; How & Yeoh 2007); a hallmark of these initiatives laid in the major involvement of the Singapore government itself, from provision of management to negotiation of incentives aimed at, for the most part, enticing the abovementioned PLEs to expand into these economic havens. As regionalization initiatives gave way to the current broader internationalization drives, however, the marked difference in the cultural, legal, and financial profiles of the city-state's new areas of exploration, along with the city-state's own previous experiences with regionalization initiatives, made it clear that a similar strategy of heavy government intervention would be suboptimal, at best. Going forward, a more firm-oriented approach would have to be taken with regards to internationalization; one relying very much more on the capabilities of Singapore firms themselves.

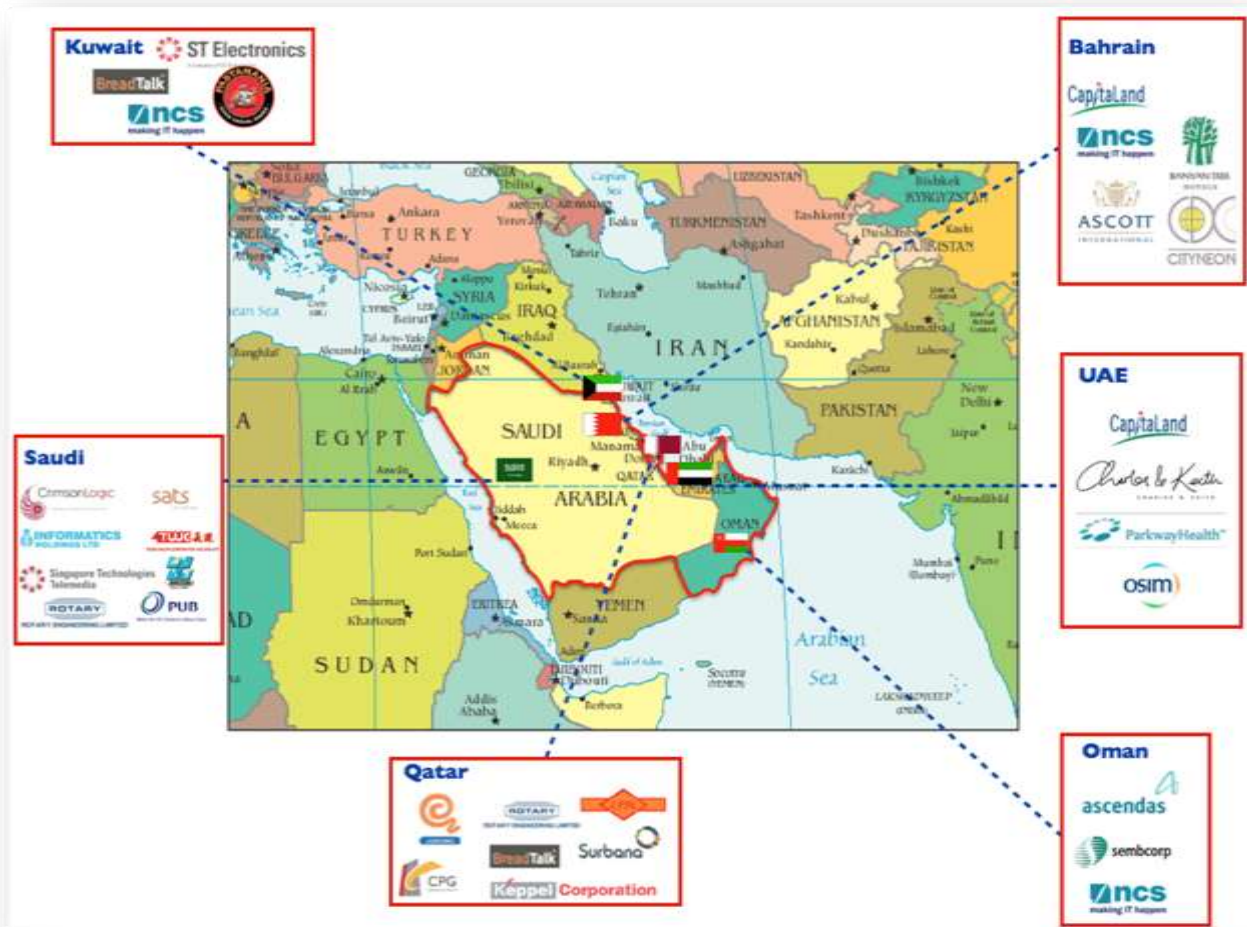
Singapore's approach to internationalization into the GCC combines the expected and traditional trailblazing by government-linked companies (GLCs) with various forms of indirect support for private enterprises through governmental organizations and otherwise, and with efforts towards promoting greater awareness and understanding of, and perhaps more importantly, interest in the Middle East domestically – a concerted and intentional effort, it can be inferred, towards creating indirect incentives for PLEs to enter the GCC, to encourage a self-sustaining and critical mass of Singapore private enterprise in this new frontier.

It is clear, however, that for various reasons, the two groups – government-linked enterprises and private enterprises – have had rather different experiences in the GCC. That Singapore GLCs have established a strong internationalizing presence in the GCC – most especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – is without a doubt; such

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GLCs have been involved in a good number of flagship infrastructural and property developments, the eventual fate of some of the latter notwithstanding, and arguably have indeed played the role of vanguard and trailblazer in a most exemplary fashion. Indeed, in a ranking of the top 100 Singapore international companies, the top 12 are dominated by GLCs (IE Singapore 2007/2008), many of which are or have been involved in the GCC. That this is the case is, however, possibly in and of itself a matter of concern; suggesting, as it does, evidence towards a confirmation of the perception of a high degree of risk aversion among Singapore PLEs – an especial concern towards internationalization into the GCC, which, to said Singapore PLEs, represents an unfamiliar region with substantial uncertainties, albeit one with high potential return (Yeoh & How 2011).

Figure 1: locates some of Singapore's investments in the GCC.



4. Government-Linked Companies

In theory, a government-linked company both garners advantages from its association with a sovereign government, and in return bears an additional responsibility to said government to further political aims and achieve extra-economic goals. In practice, of course, these purported advantages are heavily predicated upon the perception of reliability and other reputation-based factors of the associated sovereign government, while the additional responsibilities to government stakeholders tend to prove themselves ever present and not at all an ignorable factor

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in business relations.

It is fortunate, then, that in the case of Singapore GLCs in the Middle East, the government connection appears to have been largely an invaluable asset, likely owing to the generally positive perception of the city-state in the region, as well as to active efforts by the Singapore government and other Singapore-based entities to establish good relations with business and state entities of the GCC and environs. Such GLCs have generally experienced, in varying measures, both a certain preferred status with regards to flagship or government projects, and have also enjoyed a level of accommodation in the face of delays and other complications (many of these emanating, admittedly, from events leading up to the global financial crisis and the crisis itself) that many non-GLCs rather pointedly do not benefit from. For GLCs, at least, a clear and present advantage does indeed exist.

A less encouraging commonality, however, is the preponderance of human resource related issues, and, by extension, what might be called a continuing lack of acclimatization among Singapore staff to the business practices and cultures of the Middle East. Our research has, again, previously indicated similar and/or related issues. These ranging from issues with importing Singaporean staff, to disconnect between such imported Singapore staff and local staff, to negative undercurrents among local staff and local partners over Singapore-styled business practices; up to, on a more macroscopic level, decision-making structures hobbled by a requirement to communicate with and gain approval from the home office in Singapore, a distinct disadvantage in the GCC business culture, which appreciates decisiveness and swift negotiation processes. On a local level this translates to issues such as a distance and lack of communication between imported staff (Singaporean or otherwise) and local staff; a continuing reluctance of Singapore staff to move to the Middle East, and the additional pressures this causes combined with a frequent insistence that core positions remain in Singaporean hands. On a more macroscopic level, an endemic issue arises of Singapore GLCs, more used to the relatively more tepid Singaporean business environment, suffering from an arguably as yet insufficient shift in viewpoints towards the Middle Eastern business environment; resulting, on a day-to-day basis, in occasional miscommunication and delays in the business process, and in the longer term, in possible wrong footing with regards to assumptions of risks and relative stability, as several companies experienced in the wake of the Arab spring.

It should be noted that while many of the above points are largely endemic to Singapore companies, several points of relevance towards businesses in general looking towards the Gulf region are also apparent. The additional level of accommodation enjoyed by Singapore GLCs, for instance, points possibly towards the value of positive associations, most obviously with larger organizations possessing good repute in the Middle East; an advantage which other businesses may wish to attempt to procure for themselves, or, failing that, consider in their choice of joint-venture partners in the region. On a more general note, while issues arising from acute differences in cultural and business environments are brought to the fore in this case by several traits associated with Singapore companies and staff, the unique and quixotic nature of the Gulf region (and, indeed, the Middle East at large) naturally implies that similar differences can and in all probability do exist with companies and staff from any number of other countries engaged in the region – and, accordingly, implies that the potential for similar disconnects to arise does, in fact, exist, pointing, perhaps, to the need for international companies, too, to acclimatize

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their personnel and business practices somewhat more towards the region.

i. Case Study: Company G (Utilities)

A wholly-owned subsidiary of a larger group comprising various government-linked companies, Company G is a main provider of electrical and water utilities in Singapore, and further operates plants in over 16 countries – no stranger to international operations. Identifying the Middle East as a potential growth market with the region's water scarcity and interest in developing local infrastructure, and attracted to the region's abundant financial resources, Company G made its entrance into the GCC region around 2007, securing a contract for a major hybrid water and electricity power plant in the state of Oman via bidding through an international tender, in a joint bid with a major local private equity firm. This local firm forms, for this project, a consortium with Company G, with both holding roughly equal share in the consortium, but with majority ownership – and with it management control – in the hands of Company G; pointing towards, again, the presence of endemic Singapore-styled business practices that place an emphasis on keeping control within Singaporean hands. In this aspect, the company found the local partner reasonably receptive, apparently, stating a willingness among the local Omanis to allow the company to implement its own management practices.

This, however, is no conclusive indication of concessionary treatment accorded to Company G. Interviews, nevertheless, reveal a familiar positive impression of Singapore, and Singapore companies; and similarly interesting is the fact that the local partner is in fact essentially a government-linked company itself, with links to many GCC governments. Perhaps the strongest indication of accommodation granted to Company G, however, arises from a shortfall of funding experienced by the company near the close of the financial crisis in the GCC, which threatened the company's control of the project itself. Funding, in that case, was obtained through a non-recourse loan from a coalition of banks, including Oman's own national bank – a solution arising at least partially, most definitely, from the critical importance of the project to the state of Oman itself, and mitigated by the circumstances of the financial crisis at large; but nonetheless of note for the relative laxity of terms for Company G. A reputation such as Singapore's, it seems, does indeed have its benefits.

These benefits, however, also apparently only extend so far. Company G recently lost a bid for another major utilities plant in Oman to a consortium headed by a major Japanese infrastructure and utilities company – a decision, it seems, based mainly on a far more attractive price structure fielded by the Japanese-led consortium, and a setback for Company G which, for reasons arising equally from the relatively conservative and risk-averse Singapore mindset and from more practical resource issues, embarks only on a limited number of projects. Problems with price competition, apparently, stem from a variety of sources, one of which, the company states, appears to be a necessity for higher returns expected by stakeholders back home as a GLC – pointing, perhaps, to a disconnect between perceptions in Singapore with the increasingly competitive market in Oman and the GCC at large. Another stated source of cost pressures reveals, too, the now-familiar refrain of issues with importing Singapore staff into the Middle East, who find difficulty adjusting to the climate, culture, and (in the case of Oman) higher costs of living, and therefore demand higher remuneration and/or a more enticing package to relocate. Some staff, then, is imported instead from other countries, such as Pakistan, China, and India;

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but here, too, arise complications of cultural adjustments, in terms of both social and working culture. For instance, the company relates precisely such issues with a Chinese contractor, with communication issues and a need to reconcile working practices. Sometimes, it seems, there really are no easy alternatives.

At the current time, the 1st phase of the project is completed, and the plant itself has begun operation, likely enhancing the company's reputation in the region as a capable and reliable provider of utilities. It also, however, remains an undeniable and present fact that as Oman and the region develop further, the business environment grows ever more competitive as larger, less resource-stressed, and similarly well-reputed players enter the market – exemplified by the loss of the bid for the second major plant to the Japanese-led consortium, and underlined by continuing international competition from French and Korean companies. To this purpose, the abovementioned disparate observations on Company G's experience in Oman can be interpreted as collectively suggesting a greater need for adjustment and/or alignment of domestic expectations and attitudes in Singapore with the reality of the GCC business environment; a possibility which the company might wish to keep in mind even as it attempts to venture into other parts of the GCC.

5. Private Sector Companies

The need for adaptation and adjustment to new frontiers is a well-tread track of discussion in discourse on internationalization, one that we have touched on to varying degrees in previous papers. That such adaptation and adjustment might be rather more pertinent for a private enterprise than a GLC is also fairly self-evident – lacking political patronage and national credibility to take as shelter from socio-political influences, a private enterprise has to, at least to some degree, forge their own reputation, and build their own bridges.

Such adaptation and adjustment can largely be classified as taking two distinct forms; modification of operational practices and strategies to better suit local markets and conditions, and alignment of interests with local partners; both of which are contingent upon the relative operational and managerial dexterity which private companies possess as compared to their GLC counterparts and their additional stakeholders and priorities. It is certainly possible to avoid both of these to some extent, and thereby incur less adjustment costs and commitment risk; one such method lies in targeting not the local market per se, but instead the sizable population of international expatriates and business travelers in the region. The side effect of this particular strategy – and, indeed, of many similar strategies which aim to circumvent adjustment for local tastes and environments – however, appears to be a greater vulnerability to market shocks, especially those emanating from the socio-political dimension – a local market is, at the end of it, a more stable and captive market than one dependent highly on international financial and corporate interests in said market.

Such adaptations are markedly important for smaller private companies, which do not have the advantages of size and capital, nor the political patronage that GLCs enjoy. Many of the smaller Singapore companies engaged in the GCC at this time, from our empirical research, appear to possess an implicit understanding of this fact, employing market strategies that include attempts to align their interests with those of local partners, above and beyond operational adjustments in line with local cultural

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and business standards. As to how far this process of adaptation actually ameliorates business risk and promotes the performance of a company in the GCC, however, we find that while such adaptation does indeed seem to promote performance significantly in good times, in more turbulent times a private company is often likely just as vulnerable to business risk as any other company in its industry. By which we mean that our research finds that, as one would expect, firms in growth-reliant industries, even those performing quite well indeed in the GCC, largely found themselves just as vulnerable to shocks engendered by the debt crisis and subsequent socio-political instabilities in the region, albeit with (depending on their working relationships with local clients and partners, also interpretable as the strength of the alignment of their interests with said local clients and partners) better recovery time than some of its peers experienced; whereas companies engaged in industries with an emphasis on stable operations, such as retail and food & beverage, largely experienced only minor inconveniences, arguably due to the strong correlation of interests between these companies and their local partners. The adaptation process alone, it seems, is no foolproof shield against the vagaries of uncertainty; but can yet be, depending on the fundamentals of one's business, a very valuable tool indeed.

As far as Singapore's private companies are concerned, however, it is notable that while many continue to retain an expanding presence in the GCC, a distinct pattern emerges upon a simple study of this continued expansion – one in which the casual observer easily notes a drift away from areas such as Dubai and Bahrain, towards ostensibly more stable growth markets, most notably Oman and Qatar, as well as a continued movement into Saudi Arabia, the largest market in the region. Despite, in many cases, a demonstrated vulnerability to financial and socio-political shocks, this choice of future directions appears to imply, instead, yet another expression of the Singapore tendency towards caution and conservative movement, having, arguably, more in common with avoidance than adaptation. This may perhaps cast some doubt upon the viability of any internal measures being taken among these companies to reduce said vulnerability. Such measures being, of course, internal, only time and the test itself will tell – a test which, we likely all hope, will not be administered once more to the region any time soon. At the very least, it is clear that private companies seeking new horizons in the Middle East should and must take into account the further potential of similar shocks in the future, and put into place contingencies for and strategies to ameliorate such eventualities; most especially for private companies, who are most vulnerable to such instabilities, and most definitely for companies in industries heavily reliant on the continued growth of the host market.

ii. Case Study: Company P (Facilities Management)

Company P is a relatively smaller but still prominent player in Singapore's lucrative and growing, but also increasingly competitive and saturated, facilities management industry, and possesses a fairly wide portfolio of facilities management services, across a variety of property sectors. Identifying a need to look beyond Singapore for growth, Company P made the stride to embark on its first internationalization effort in 2009; and, in an arguably daring move, chose Qatar – already with a vibrant and resilient market, as arguably proven by the country's relative lack of trouble in the wake of the financial crisis, and with future demand for facilities management projected to grow exponentially due to the country's winning bid for the 2022 World Cup.

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Perhaps owing to the company's relative international inexperience and smaller size, however, Company P's strategies in Qatar proved to be somewhat less daring. Its initial partner in Qatar – a local trading and construction company – was chosen over larger and more influential government-linked companies to avoid possible loss of control to and conflicting priorities with a more powerful and demanding partner. This, arguably, led directly to one of the company's initial setbacks; targeting a more conservative number of high-value, high-visibility projects to build the company's reputation in the region while avoiding over-commitment to the region (this itself being far more practical rather than daring), the company instead failed to land many of its initial tenders for precisely such high-value, high-visibility government projects. This, ostensibly, was due to a lack of any track record in the region to date; a factor that may well have been ameliorated or eliminated by a more prominent and/or government-connected local partner. Indeed, such government-oriented local partnerships have been chosen by many of Company P's international competitors in the region.

Alignment of interests with the local partner, however, had already guaranteed Company P its initial project. Seeking to link Company P's expertise into its value chain, the local partner's partnership with Company P was predicated on the company undertaking the management of one of its developments, creating a secured, if limited, foothold for the company in Qatar. This alignment of interests proved to create favorable operational conditions for the company; for instance, the already asset-light company has limited expenses in Qatar as, in a sign of endemic Singaporean business practices, many secondary business activities are entirely performed in Singapore, partially funded by the local partner. A relative lack of problematic issues, too, contributed to the strong working relationship between Company P and the local firm – and the results speak for themselves, with feedback for the management of the development returning high levels of customer satisfaction. This project was, indeed, successful as a springboard; to date, the company has secured three other management projects, with other offers and tenders being considered. Company P's experience in Qatar to date, then, has been apparently quite a success story.

It is worth noting, however, that a number of long-term issues are evident in the company's operations. Company P's relatively small size and conservative pattern of behavior may prove a hindering factor in making further inroads into an industry that sees an ever-growing level of competition; and in the same coin, the company, which currently maintains only a fairly small workforce, seems less than optimally equipped to deal with the larger projects that are far from uncommon in the GCC, and in Qatar. It is projected that, even at current operational levels, the company must expand its workforce several times over by 2015; to say nothing of the staffing requirements which further expansion would necessarily require. Adding to these personnel complications are the familiar and expensive issues with importing managerial staff from Singapore, and the nebulous but eminently possible future complication of the added administrative requirements from future projects placing stress upon the lag time engendered by having supporting processes located entirely in Singapore. Company P's future prospects, while bright, are not unclouded; and, again, adaptation may again well be the answer – even if it is adaptation away from familiar Singapore business practices.

6. Conclusion

The global financial crisis arguably changed the face of business in the GCC; the Arab spring, while perhaps not going as far, has certainly exerted its influence as well. Despite these seemingly ever-changing circumstances, though, the countries of the GCC remain vibrant, dynamic, and highly lucrative markets. Decisiveness and adaptability are hallmarks of the region, no doubt contributing to the region's relatively quick recovery from said financial crisis; both GDP and FDI inflow are both again on the rise across much of the region. Consequently, the region now bears witness to a continually expanding pool of companies from across the globe now seeking to enter this high-potential market, and with a growing number of these companies arriving from various destinations in Asia – including, evidently, Singapore.

The future of the region, indeed, looks poised to take another economic leap forward. Much of the region continues to look forward, with long-term and large-scale development plans in place across various countries targeting periods between 2020 to 2030; the UAE's recent contract for nuclear power plants, too, was partially contingent upon having this energy provision in place for one such target development period. Our research going forward, then, will continue to monitor and observe the rapid pace of development in this region, and the reactions and adjustments; trials and tribulations; and, of course, gains and losses of Singapore's firms attempting to find and/or maintain their footing in this swift and ever-progressive business environment – and from there glean valuable information and experiences for companies from Singapore, and the world, with their sights set upon this flourishing and mystifying region.

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