

Russia's Alarming Attempts to Establish Influence in Egypt

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Brief Analysis

Russia is challenging the West, including through its current efforts to gain a foothold in Syria and in a number of countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The situation in Syria serves as a clear example of Russian meddling, but the actual challenge does not stop there. To take but one striking recent example: in December 2017, after signing the final contracts to establish the El Dabaa nuclear plant at a summit with the Egyptian president in Cairo, Putin stated that he was trying to create greater cooperation with Egypt and described the country as an old and reliable partner in the region.

The relationship between Russia and Egypt revived after President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood regime in July 2013. Putin had viewed the Brotherhood regime with some suspicion and anxiety due to the Brotherhood's relations with Islamist groups in the northern Caucasus. However, while the Russian Supreme Court had included the Brotherhood on its terrorist list since 2006, this had not prevented Putin from searching for ways to cooperate with the Muslim Brotherhood in an attempt to resecure some role for Russia in Egypt. This was clearly demonstrated by Putin's support for Mohamed Morsi's role during the 2012 Gaza war, as well as by Putin's April 2013 reception of Morsi in Moscow. However, the situation has undoubtedly improved with Sisi's rise. In Sisi, Putin believes that he had found the right match for a military partnership. Sisi represents what Putin seeks in an ally: a military man who had risen up in politics and is trying to rule in difficult circumstances, in need of support and ready to offer concessions. Putin has not missed this opportunity to turn Egypt into a country revolving within the new Russian orbit. The most important aspects of this effort have been military, economic, and political.

The Military Aspect:

The overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood and the decline of democracy and human rights in Egypt created a sharp disagreement between the Sisi government and the former U.S. administration led by President Obama. As a result of this dispute, Washington suspended some military aid to Egypt and blocked delivery of military equipment and aircraft that had been in the United States for maintenance. In response, Russia immediately exploited this situation, sending both the foreign minister and defense minister to Cairo at the head of a high-level military delegation that also included the president of the Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation and the president of the Russian weapons export firm, Rosoboronexport. The delegation arrived ready to discuss a Russian arms deals for the Egyptian army, which depends in large part on American armaments. After this meeting, Field Marshal Abdel

Fattah el-Sisi—also the defense minister at the time—and Egyptian foreign minister Nabil Fahmy traveled to Moscow to continue discussions with their Russian counterparts in what were known as the "2+2" meetings. The result was a Russian arms deal for Egypt with a value of more than three billion dollars, backed by Saudi and Emirati funding. Full deliveries, however, remain to be seen.

It is worth noting that the Egyptian army currently obtains annual military aid from the United States of 1.3 billion dollars, in addition to economic aid, which totals hundreds of millions of dollars. Since this aid was first approved in the late 1970s, Egypt has obtained about 76 billion dollars from the United States.

Within the military context, Russian and Egyptian forces carried out military exercises known as “Protectors of Friendship” in September 2017. Earlier the same year, some Russian special forces were deployed at a military base in the western region adjacent to the Libyan border in order to carry out operations and offer assistance to Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan militias, which enjoy both Egyptian and Russian backing. Recently, the two sides agreed to prepare a cooperation document allowing Russia to use Egyptian skies and military bases for military operations. This level of military cooperation between the two sides was unprecedented in recent decades. The current situation almost calls to mind the cooperation that existed between Egypt and the Soviet Union in the 1960s before President Sadat expelled his Russian advisers in the summer of 1972. However, despite all the progress in terms of military cooperation, Russia cannot serve as an alternative to the United States in Egypt's military field because it cannot match the volume of support given generously and regularly by the United States. Russia sees Egypt only as a purchaser and appears uninterested in supplying the sort of support the United States has provided for decades.

The Political Aspect:

When Sisi seized power, he had serious fears about dealing with the West led by the United States. He thus tried to find an ally on the international stage who could give him political support and international legitimacy. Putin provided this support, and Moscow became the first capital outside the Arab region to welcome Sisi in August 2014, about two months after Sisi took the presidency. Putin had even reportedly supported Sisi’s presidential nomination before Sisi himself had formally announced it.

As a result, Egyptian political decision-makers quickly entered the Russian political orbit. Reviewing the Syrian issue and Egypt’s behavior in this regard, it becomes clear the extent to which Egyptian policies follow Moscow’s, as over the past few years Cairo has displayed its full coordination with Moscow on this issue. It has even impaired relations with its most prominent Gulf backer, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, by voting in favor of Russian resolutions in the Security Council. Most recently, the Egyptian foreign ministry issued a statement in response to the military operation carried out by the United States and its allies in Syria, asserting that the operation threatened the safety of the Syrian people. The statement ignored the fact that the operation aimed to protect the Syrian people from the Assad regime, which was using internationally-banned chemical weapons to exterminate its people. Within this same context—this time in Libya—Cairo has adopted Moscow’s viewpoint regarding support for the so-called Libyan National Army under Khalifa Haftar.

The Economic Aspect:

The volume of commercial and economic exchange between Egypt and Russia has recently approached 5 billion dollars. Egypt’s exports to Russia reached 446 million dollars, while Russian exports to Egypt totaled 4.2 billion. Meanwhile, the amount of imported wheat—a strategic commodity that represents a large portion of the Egyptian people’s diet—equals 5.5 million tons imported out of a total 10 million, while Egypt locally produces and consumes about 4.5 million tons. In their recent meeting in Cairo, both Putin and Sisi stressed the importance of the Russian industrial zone in the Suez Canal area, which equals investments of up to seven billion dollars. Putin has also vowed to soon include Egypt in his Eurasian Economic Union.

And after a halt of more than two years, flights have recently resumed between Moscow and Cairo. This signals the return of Russian tourism to Egypt, which was stopped after the October 2015 bombing of the Russian plane that killed 224 Russians in Sinai. Russian tourists had represented about 40 percent of Egypt's tourism market, bringing in revenues of about 2.5 billion dollars in 2015. Notably, Russian behavior toward Egypt during this period was punitive, imposing a number of conditions on Egypt in order for it to restore Russian tourism. These conditions went so far as to include Russian security agents searching Egyptian planes. Egypt accepted all of Russia's conditions, reflecting its need for Russian tourists to save the country's long-troubled tourism industry.

Russia is also building a nuclear power plant for electrical generation in the Dabaa area in northwest Egypt, thereby achieving a long-awaited Egyptian dream. Russia will fund this project by offering Egypt a loan of 25 billion dollars. According to a statement from Alexey Likhachov, president of the Rosatom company carrying out the project, the deal "amounts to billions of U.S. dollars, [and is] the biggest non-feedstock deal in Russian history." Under the contracts, Russia will administer this station for a period that could reach up to sixty years, which will secure the state as a presence in Egypt throughout this period and will guarantee that there will be no repeat of the expulsion of Russians that occurred under Sadat in 1972.

Russian progress in the region has come only as the result of a decline of the American role, or an exploitation of disputes between the United States and its allies. Egypt is an excellent example of where Russia succeeded in creating a role for itself as a result of the dispute between the previous U.S. administration and the Sisi regime over issues of democracy and human rights. This has continued despite the departure of the Obama administration and the arrival of the Trump administration—which does not pay the same level of attention to democracy and human rights issues—and despite Sisi's invitation to the White House, which was an important confirmation of the Egyptian president's legitimacy.

Although the current U.S. administration continues to give Egypt military and economic support in its war on terrorists and insurgents in the Sinai, this aid has not succeeded in breaking ties between Moscow and Cairo and has not managed to stop Russia's persistent efforts to establish influence in Egypt. Sisi views Putin as a more dependable ally than the United States, notwithstanding all the aid which the United States has given Egypt. For that reason, the United States must adopt clearer and stronger language with Sisi regarding his rush to embrace Russia, similar to the language it used upon discovering cooperation between Egypt and North Korea. In the long run, Russia and Putin are no less dangerous than North Korea and Kim Jong-un; with this in mind, the United States should work to end Russia's efforts to establish its influence in Egypt. ❖

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