

Resumption of U.S.-Egypt Strategic Dialogue

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Brief Analysis

Cairo and Washington both see the upcoming dialogue as a means of signaling that political disagreements will not torpedo the core relationship anytime soon.

On August 2, Secretary of State John Kerry will visit Cairo to begin the U.S.-Egypt Strategic Dialogue. The high-level exchange reflects both countries' desire to emphasize shared regional interests over the political disagreements of the past two years. In this sense, the dialogue is primarily about optics, since the more substantive aspects of the relationship are already being managed through other, less public channels.

THE STRATEGY OF STRATEGIC DIALOGUES

The United States holds strategic dialogues with a wide range of countries, including China, India, Israel, Morocco, New Zealand, and Pakistan. Whether these exchanges occur at the ministerial or assistant ministerial levels, they provide an opportunity for high-ranking officials to examine the fundamentals of key bilateral relationships. The dialogues typically include sessions on a wide range of issues such as security cooperation, trade, cultural exchanges, economic development, political reform, and shared regional concerns.

For Washington, these exchanges are primarily significant for their symbolic value. While lower-level officials in many different governmental agencies handle the substantive aspects of bilateral relationships every day, the fact that high-ranking U.S. officials dedicate whole days' worth of time to certain countries shows the importance that Washington attaches to these partners. Strategic Dialogues can send especially potent signals during moments of political disagreement, affirming the durability of key relationships despite short-term tensions.

A PERIODIC EXCHANGE

While the U.S.-Egypt Strategic Dialogue has been described as a "regular" bilateral exchange, this week's meetings in Cairo mark the first such talks in nearly six years. Prior to 2009, however, Washington and Cairo convened the dialogue periodically to emphasize shared regional goals even when they differed politically. One of the primary purposes of these discussions was to signal ongoing commitment to the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The first dialogue was held in July 1998 at the ministerial level. Coming at the height of the Oslo peace process, it sought "to ensure...close coordination on political and diplomatic matters and to draw public attention to this aspect of our strong bilateral relationship." The Clinton administration convened additional rounds of the dialogue at the assistant ministerial level in December 1998 and February 1999.

The George W. Bush administration similarly viewed the U.S.-Egypt relationship as vital for advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and in March 2002 it announced that it would initiate another round of dialogue meetings for "regular coordination on political, economic, and military issues." It repeated this call in July 2004 and February 2006, but did not ultimately convene another dialogue exchange until July 2006, at which point the Lebanon war and its regional fallout was added to the agenda. The dialogue also reflected the administration's desire to move beyond its disagreements with Cairo regarding the "Freedom Agenda."

During its first year in office, the Obama administration continued these efforts to "revitalize" the relationship. Following the president's June 2009 Cairo address, Washington reconvened the Strategic Dialogue at the assistant ministerial level, and a second round was held in December of that year. Drawing from leaked U.S. documents, the London *Telegraph* reported that the discussion focused on joint efforts to advance the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian peace processes, while also covering issues such as the Sudan humanitarian situation and Iraq's territorial integrity. At the time, the administration viewed the dialogue as an inappropriate setting for addressing concerns about Egypt's autocratic politics, and thus considered separate, nongovernmental channels for discussing political reform.

NEW PRIORITIES, NEW CONFUSION

Today, Washington and Cairo face a very different regional environment. In the six years since the previous dialogue, multiple states have collapsed, a terrorist organization has seized control of territory roughly the size of Belgium, and Iran's ascendancy has fueled a series of sectarian conflicts across the region. All of these developments have greatly affected Egypt, which has experienced multiple regime changes, deployed its navy to protect the Bab al-Mandab Strait from the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, and been forced to confront jihadists affiliated with the "Islamic State"/ISIS to the west (in Libya) and east (in the Sinai). As a result, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which has been dormant since April 2014, is no longer the focal point of U.S.-Egyptian relations, though Cairo continues to play a central role during periodic conflicts in Gaza.

These developments have caused tremendous confusion in the bilateral relationship. On one hand, there is significant strategic convergence between the two countries, as Washington and Cairo are aligned in combating ISIS, addressing Iran's ascendancy, and fostering political stability where possible. On the other hand, they have disagreed sharply on the necessity of political reform within Egypt. In this vein, Cairo's conviction of seventeen American pro-democracy NGO workers in June 2013, and the subsequent repressiveness of President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's government, have dulled Washington's enthusiasm for the relationship and generated substantial hostility toward Egypt in certain quarters. By the same token, Cairo has rejected Washington's repeated calls for more inclusive governance, viewing it as a recipe for empowering the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Egyptian government considers a terrorist organization. These disagreements have sometimes overshadowed the two countries' shared regional interests, with the most severe crisis arising after October 2013, when the Obama

administration withheld much of the \$1.3 billion in annual U.S. military aid to Egypt "pending credible progress toward an inclusive, democratically elected civilian government through free and fair elections."

To bridge these gaps, Cairo proposed a new Strategic Dialogue in late 2013, and Secretary Kerry accepted. The fact that these talks have taken nearly two years to convene reflects Washington's continued discomfort with Egypt's repressive trajectory, as well as the administration's shift toward more pressing regional matters such as nuclear negotiations with Iran and the fight against ISIS.

HARDLY THE ONLY CHANNEL

In recent months, the administration came to realize that its cool approach toward Cairo neither advanced U.S. strategic interests nor encouraged a more democratic path in Egypt. It therefore began working to improve the relationship. This process began in September 2014, when Obama met with Sisi on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting, and ties improved further in March 2015, when the administration lifted its hold on military aid.

The latest talks represent the next step in improving the relationship's optics. They are also part of the administration's strategy for reassuring Sunni Arab allies in the wake of the Iran nuclear agreement. After all, even without a Strategic Dialogue for over six years, the more substantive aspects of the relationship have remained sound -- counterterrorism coordination has continued, and Egypt still grants the United States preferred access in the Suez Canal and overflight rights for supplying military bases in the Persian Gulf.

Washington and Cairo have managed this feat by embracing other mechanisms for administering crucial facets of the relationship. For example, the Multinational Force of Observers mission has assumed a more central role in facilitating bilateral relations, while exchanges between U.S. and Egyptian intelligence and defense officials remain fluid. Moreover, Washington and Cairo have ensured that high-level channels for policy coordination remain open during times of crisis, including Obama's six phone calls with then-president Mohamed Morsi during the November 2012 Gaza conflict, and former defense secretary Chuck Hagel's thirty-plus phone calls with then-defense minister Sisi in the year following Morsi's ouster.

Given that significant differences over Egypt's domestic politics will persist beyond next week's Strategic Dialogue, these less public channels for managing the relationship will likely remain the center of gravity between Washington and Cairo for the foreseeable future. Yet the dialogue signals that those disagreements will not torpedo the overall relationship anytime soon.

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