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How to Judge Putin's Trip to Egypt

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Brief Analysis

The visit will give the Kremlin a chance to increase its reach in Egypt while signaling to the West that Putin remains an influential world leader.

On February 9-10, Russian president Vladimir Putin will travel to Egypt for a bilateral meeting at President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's invitation. "The full range of bilateral relations will be discussed at the upcoming summit, including political, trade and economic, and humanitarian relations," according to a Kremlin-issued statement; "The two leaders will also exchange views on the situation in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and with regard to the Palestinian-Israeli peace process." In addition, Moscow reportedly seeks to build a nuclear power plant in Egypt, and Russian companies are looking to enter the country's oil and gas sector, so these issues may be broached as well.

RECENT IMPROVEMENTS IN RELATIONS

As U.S.-Egyptian relations declined sharply after the military ouster of former president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, Russian-Egyptian relations began improving. Cairo grew increasingly mistrustful of what it perceived as U.S. engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood. For his part, President Obama was somewhat critical of the coup, but perhaps more important, Washington delayed weapons deliveries to Egypt, withheld military aid, and later halted the nascent bilateral strategic dialogue.

In contrast, the Kremlin expressed support for the new Egyptian leadership after the coup, and senior officials have exchanged a number of visits since then. In November 2013, an Egyptian delegation visited Moscow and thanked Russia for its support of the "June 30 Revolution." The following February, Putin enthusiastically endorsed Sisi's

presidential bid during a meeting with the field marshal outside Moscow, telling him, "This is a very responsible decision, to take upon yourself responsibility for the fate of the Egyptian people. I wish you luck on my own behalf and that of the Russian people."

As U.S.-Egyptian relations continued to worsen, Cairo increasingly turned away from the West and toward Russia. Last year, the two countries initialed arms contracts worth \$3.5 billion -- their largest deal in many years, to be funded by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The contract reportedly stipulates that Russia will supply the Egyptian military with MiG-29 fighter jets, Mi-35 attack helicopters, air-defense missile complexes, ammunition, and other equipment. Obtaining more helicopters is especially critical to Egypt's campaign against Islamist insurgents. The military already owns several Russian helicopters; according to firsthand pilot accounts, they are a very good fit for Egypt's needs. Thus far, however, there is no evidence that the sale has happened yet, most likely because Saudi Arabia has not come through with the payment.

Meanwhile, during a press conference in Moscow late last month, Egyptian ambassador to Russia Mohammed al-Badri reportedly described bilateral relations as "on the rise," describing how trade between the two countries had increased to \$3 billion in 2014. According to Russia's Federal Customs Service, the figure is even higher -- \$4.6 billion between January and December 2014, \$4.1 billion of which was Russian exports. Russia is the world's fourth-largest wheat producer, and Egypt is its second-largest buyer; for example, it purchased approximately 20 percent of Russia's wheat exports from 2013 to March 2014, according to the *Financial Times*. Georgy Petrov, a vice president with the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, noted recently that Russian businessmen are eager to enter Egyptian markets. Moreover, of the 10 million Russian tourists who traveled abroad in 2014, more than 3 million visited Egypt -- mainly Sharm al-Sheikh, effectively keeping the beleaguered Sinai resort city afloat.

RUSSIA VS. WASHINGTON ON THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

Moscow's position on the Brotherhood converges with Sisi's. In February 2003, the Russian Supreme Court banned the group from operating in the federation and officially labeled it a terrorist organization. The Brotherhood had long been problematic for Russia, with Moscow often claiming that it helped arm radical Islamists in the North Caucasus who continue to destabilize the region today.

To be sure, the Kremlin sought to improve ties with Morsi once he became president, in part to regain some of the influence it had lost in the Arab world. For example, Putin publicly supported his attempts at "normalizing the situation" in Gaza in 2012, while Morsi sought to restore economic cooperation between the two countries in an April 2013 visit to Russia, in the context of Egypt's financial difficulties. Yet the latter talks did not lead to action. Ultimately, Moscow prefers a secular government in Egypt due to its own domestic concerns about radical Islamists. For Putin, relations with Sisi simply create fewer strains than with Morsi.

By contrast, Egypt believed that the United States had abandoned it in the fight against terrorists. "You turned your back on the Egyptians, and they won't forget that," Sisi said in an August 2013 interview with the *Washington Post*, shortly after President Obama froze the scheduled delivery of F-16s and canceled joint military exercises. To some Egyptians, Washington even appeared to side with Morsi. In July 2013, Husam Hindi, a leader in the Tamarod (Rebellion) movement that spearheaded the campaign to oust Morsi, claimed that the Obama administration was collaborating with the Brotherhood. Reports that President Obama and the U.S. State Department hosted a number of Brotherhood members only added fuel to such conspiracy theories.

In this context, Russia's position on the Brotherhood bolsters Moscow's credibility in Cairo's eyes while diminishing that of the United States. The Kremlin will not criticize Cairo on its authoritarian bent, making relations with Russia a lot easier from Egypt's perspective and giving Cairo options should Washington become too critical.

POTENTIAL RUSSIAN OPPORTUNITIES IN CAIRO

Putin continues to take advantage of ambiguity and contradictions in Western policies toward the Middle East, and his visit to Cairo should be interpreted through this lens. Moreover, the Russian and Egyptian economies are stagnating. Russia has entered a deep recession due to both plunging oil prices and Western sanctions sparked by the March 2014 annexation of Crimea. In Egypt, poverty and unemployment are high amid threats from terrorism and violent domestic opposition. It is therefore unclear whether Putin's visit will amount to concrete steps or just talk.

Nevertheless, the trip may give Putin opportunities on several fronts. Politically, the visit is a statement to the West that he is not isolated internationally in light of his Ukraine aggression, despite Western statements to the contrary. Indeed, he may increase his official visits to non-Western countries in the months ahead to demonstrate that he is a strong global leader. Should he reach any concrete deals in Cairo, it would certainly bolster his claim. In this regard, any progress on the \$3.5 billion weapons deal is something to watch.

The Obama administration is correct to criticize Egypt's democratic backslide. But when Washington cut off military aid, it also signaled withdrawal of support from an ally. As long as this policy remains in place, it keeps open the door for Putin and other anti-Western players to gain influence in Egypt at the expense of U.S. interests.

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