

# Egypt's Outreach to China and Iran Is Troubling for U.S. Policy

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## President Morsi's upcoming visits to Beijing and Tehran indicate that Egypt's foreign policy orientation is shifting away from the West.

**N**ext week, Egypt's Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi, will visit China at the invitation of President Hu Jintao. He will seek investments there that will enable Egypt to "dispense of loans and aid," according to Morsi's party vice chairman. From China, Morsi will travel to Tehran to attend the Non-Aligned Movement summit. Just two months after coming to power, Morsi is pursuing a rapprochement with Tehran and articulating a newfound ambition to jettison billions in U.S. foreign assistance dollars and financing from Western financial institutions. Taken together, these steps suggest that Morsi's Egypt may be headed for a foreign policy shift rivaling the scope of President Anwar Sadat's expulsion of the Soviets in 1972 and subsequent reorientation to the West.

Cairo's burgeoning rapprochement with Tehran is the most obvious of Morsi's foreign policy pivots. An Egyptian president hadn't visited Iran since the 1979 revolution, and the clerical regime there continues to celebrate Sadat's assassination. While the notion of a major long-standing U.S. ally self-identifying as "non-aligned" is odious, it was perhaps more tolerable for Washington during the tenure of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Given the heightened tension over Iran's nuclear program, the timing of the Morsi visit seems deliberately provocative.

More problematic for the U.S. is Egypt's outreach to China. Concerned about the effect of Egypt's new policy of intentionally downgrading -- and potentially even severing -- ties with its peace partner Israel, Morsi appears to be engaged in hedging. Much like post-revolution Iran, China could be a willing partner for an Islamist Egypt.

China has not fared particularly well in the so-called Arab Spring. In addition to losing billions of dollars in energy

sector investments in Libya, Beijing's ongoing support for the Bashar Assad regime's ruthless repression of the popular uprising has engendered the animosity of millions of Syrians. Beijing's vetoes of United Nations Security Council resolutions against Syria has made burning Chinese flags a popular pastime among the anti-Assad opposition, and when the regime is finally dispatched, the Middle Kingdom's economic and political interests in Syria will suffer.

Although an Islamist Egypt beset by insecurity and a failing economy might seem of little value to the Chinese, upgraded ties with the troubled nation would provide China with a foothold on the Mediterranean, and include, hypothetically, a port. Morsi's Egypt might also be amenable to offering Chinese warships priority access to the Suez Canal, as the U.S. has traditionally been afforded. This privilege would be particularly appealing to China, which increasingly sees a need to protect its investments in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

Another potential perquisite for China would be access to American technology in Egypt. According to an August 2009 U.S. diplomatic cable published by WikiLeaks, Egypt "had more potential Section 3 [Arms Export Control Act] violations than any country in the world." The leaked cable expressed specific concern with a visit that year by a Chinese military official to an Egyptian F-16 aircraft base.

And these violations occurred during the Mubarak administration, which maintained -- apart from difficulties with the Bush administration -- strong strategic relations with Washington. Absent the constraints of close ties to the U.S., it's difficult to imagine that Morsi's Egypt would be more protective of U.S. military technology.

The benefits for China of improved ties with Egypt are clear. But Morsi also sees advantages in diversifying Egypt's sources of assistance. At the most basic level, China's foreign policy is based solely on perceived national interest alone, and as such, unlike the United States, Beijing will have no qualms about Morsi's increasing limitations on press freedoms, restrictions on freedom of speech, constraints on women's rights or the ill treatment of minorities. At the same time, China is flush with cash, and Egypt will again be ripe for foreign investment when and if security is reestablished.

No doubt, Morsi's effort to recalibrate Egypt's foreign policy orientation away from the West is not without problems. Beijing is not altruistic, so investment will be more likely than loans or grants. And should Cairo need credit, it will probably have to raise it from the oil-rich Persian Gulf states, which will have onerous requirements, and will be none too pleased with Egypt's move toward Tehran.

If Morsi gets his way, improved bilateral ties to Beijing will embolden, if not enable, Cairo to downgrade Egypt's ties to Washington. Of course, with the Muslim Brotherhood at the helm -- and with increased domestic repression and unmitigated hostility toward Israel -- this trajectory was perhaps inevitable. But Egypt's shift toward China further complicates the relationship with the U.S. and U.S. policymaking in the Middle East. Alas, based on Morsi's new foreign policy tack, Cairo's transformed relations with Beijing promise to be just one of a litany of U.S. concerns with Egypt.

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