Egypt: still American, Russian, or what?

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During most of its modern history, Egypt seemed to follow a more or less similar path in its foreign policy: it would align with one major power after another and would thus gain an advantageous position in the region. During the past two centuries, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States have replaced one another in more or less the same role. Amid the “new Cold War” trend being covered lately in the international press and Sisi’s recent visit to Moscow where he signed the first arms deal with Russia since the 1960’s, many have begun speaking of a renewal of the strategic relationship between the two countries and a consequent chill between Cairo and Washington.

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The Egypt issue is part and parcel of the increasingly complex international and regional balance of power. Multipolarity in the international system; a highly visible yet mainly economic in nature Chinese presence in the Middle East; the rise of Russia both generally but mainly in the Near Abroad; the upcoming US energy independence; the Geneva talks on the Iranian nuclear programme and through it the changing US relationship with the Gulf, the Fertile Crescent and the Levant among others shape a new reality both in the international system and more specifically in the Middle East.

Slowly but steadily paving its way towards energy autonomy, the US is gradually about to lose another one of its original reasons for remaining in the Middle East. The other reasons used to rationalise its presence were the now long gone need for the containment of the USSR, the relatively recent war on terror, and the seemingly ready to be dealt with Iran's nuclear policy. That, together with a new isolationist trend present in the US, is not to imply that Washington is leaving or about to leave the Middle East, but to suggest that there are now relatively fewer reasons for the US to spend its money, time, effort, and influence in the region. Thus, it is understandable that Washington seems less inclined to focus on issues such as Saudi and Israeli security, Libyan and Syrian integrity, as well as Iraqi and Egyptian stability. A new (seemingly less Americanised) reality is at hand in the Middle East and consequently, it is a natural reaction for other great powers to be attracted to the region, as well as for regional players to seek their presence.

Indeed, both Chinese and Russian investment and trade with Egypt have greatly increased. Cairo recently received a largely symbolic non-refundable grant of $24.7 million from Beijing with several high-level visits taking place between the two countries including ousted president Morsi’s visit to Beijing in 2012. Egypt’s relationship with Russia has also been rightly depicted as growing stronger, with several visits taking place, increased trends in FDI and trade, a $2 billion worth arms deal, and a Russian “proposal for Egypt to establish a free trade agreement with the Russia-dominated Customs Union”. Even if Chinese and Russian moves do change some of the standards which the US-Egypt relationship is based on, this trend does not appear to be of the greatest significance just yet. The fact that the US partially suspended military and economic aid to Egypt in October 2013 might provide an explanation as to why Egypt sought the Russian alternative, or why it might seek the Chinese in the future. Although the opening of Egypt to Russia closely resembles that of Cairo to Beijing, the latter relationship remains to be of lesser importance. In either case, it does not seem to represent anything more than simply acquiring new possible partners without abandoning the US. Just as China does not seem to represent a threat to Washington’s advantageous positioning in the Middle East, Russia also appears to be a relatively minor threat – at least for the time being. Russia has not been able to construct any worldwide alliance or extended sphere of influence, but only uneven and dominating relationships with countries mainly found in the Near Abroad. Its presence in the Middle East has been confined to supporting Assad in Syria and Iran’s right to nuclearisation. In short, as pointed out by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, “there is no foreign partner that can replace Washington”, at least not so easily.

Nevertheless, Cairo might also try to raise American interest in Egypt once again, a possibility that becomes more likely when considering the fact that other US allies in the region (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) are actually financing the deal. Egypt’s move, along with those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, might thus be viewed as a warning to the US that one-sided relationships cannot be maintained in a multipolar world. That in short, if the US is unwilling to pay, it will not be able to maintain its influence. As Elliot Abrams, analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations pointed out, “the arms deal between Egypt and Russia is a ‘symbolic message’”. Egypt, together with Saudi Arabia, “will continue to cooperate with...
the United States where they absolutely must. But they believe that they can no longer rely on Washington, as has been the case in recent decades. It is unclear whether the arms deal will be finalised, but if it is, it will underscore Egypt’s ongoing efforts to diversify the pool of suppliers for its defence needs as the country’s armed forces already field weaponry from the United States, France, and Russia – another example of decreasing dependency on Washington”.

This however does not mean that Egypt will or can necessarily go any further, even if it plans to. Russia’s aforementioned moves must be seen as a part of a larger picture including the rest of the Middle East and maybe even the Near Abroad. Moscow’s comeback in the 2000s has often been accompanied with opposition from Washington. This was visible mainly in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, but in the Middle East as well (Syrian civil war, Iranian nuclearisation). Russia seems to try and shake American influence off its traditional sphere and to extend its own power to other areas as well. Nevertheless, this could happen for another reason too: by creating problems for the US in the Middle East, Russia could try “to ensure that there are limits to how far Washington can push into the Russian periphery”. If this is true, this relationship could therefore be terminated by none other than Russia itself if its influence in the Near Abroad is consolidated and secured.

The larger picture is therefore quite complicated. In any case, the special relationship between Cairo and Washington does not seem to be in grave danger at the moment: Egypt has not jumped into Russia’s block, both because there is no such Middle Eastern block, as well as because this would not be so simple. Relationships as long and as deep as the one shared by Cairo and Washington are not to be easily ended; certainly not over what could be a temporary indecisiveness of the US or a rearrangement of the global balance of power, be it in the form of systemic, interactive, or systems change. In any one of these cases, Egypt would (and apparently does) wait for a more stable arrangement to emerge, so as to finally follow a more distinct path. To cut a long story short, Egypt is not as American as it was, but also definitely not Russian. It does however seem more than ready to reassess its options under Lord Palmerstone’s view of politics.
1. “Nearly half of Americans believe the United States should take a less active role in the outside world, ...”. Stratfor, “War fatigue grows in the United States”, (01/05/2014), http://www.stratfor.com/sample/geopolitical-diary/war-fatigue-grows-united-states


4. Washington resumed delivery of Apache helicopters to Egypt in late April 2014. However, a large part of the aid is still suspended


8. Ibid.


10. “Nations have no permanent friends or allies, they only have permanent interests”