

Egypt's Foreign Relations on Tightrope

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The internal crisis in Egypt has indulged the country in its most critical foreign relations test since these relations were shaped by the U.S. sponsored Camp David accords and the peace treaty with Israel in 1979.

An indicator is the warnings against travel to Egypt from east and west, which are exacerbating the rapidly shrinking tourism industry. Stopping production in Egypt by industrial giants like General Motors, Toyota Motor Corp. and Suzuki Motor Corp. is a second indicator. Summons of foreign envoys to Egypt by their governments, which invoked similar Egyptian reciprocal summons, is a third indicator. A fourth was cancelling the U.S. military's participation in next month's Operation Bright Star in Egypt and delaying the delivery of four fighter jets to the country. Suspension of the sale of military equipment used for "internal repression" by the EU was a fifth. Threats to cut or suspend aid to Egypt by the U.S. and EU was another more important indicator.

In the immediate proximity, and three days after the ouster of the elected president Mohammed Morsi on July 3, the Peace and Security Council of the fifty – four member African Union decided "to suspend the participation of Egypt in AU activities until the restoration of constitutional order."

On August 20, South Africa, a leading member of the AU as well as the BRICS five – member association, issued a statement to remind the "interim government" in Cairo that its "principled position is based on the Constitutive Act of the African Union, where any unconstitutional change of government – whatever the premise – is specifically rejected" immediately.

So far, the AU reaction is ironically the only concrete international diplomatic measure taken in defense of the western widely trumpeted rule of law and democracy. The African "sphere" is traditionally only second to the Arab one as a cornerstone of Egypt's foreign policy.

However, Denmark announced the suspension of aid to Egypt. The UK Foreign Secretary William Hague on Monday announced the suspension of all British joint programs with the Egyptian intelligence services and the export of "some" items to Egypt. Germany's development minister, Dirk Niebel, said Monday that Egypt will get "no further pledges this year" of aid from Berlin and added he has decided "that we won't negotiate this year" on any debt relief for the country. A day earlier, Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that her country would halt previously approved arms shipments to Egypt, but as part of a coordinated EU response.

Most likely the U.S. allies' final reaction will wait until the U.S. administration ends its open – ended stance, but while U.S. allies follow in its footsteps, the U.S. rival world powers grudgingly dealt with the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as the leaders of the

“Arab Spring” changes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya as a fait accompli; the removal of the Egyptian MB from power is a welcome development.

Ahead of their meeting in Brussels last Wednesday, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said that “no options would be off the table” at the meeting of his counterparts of the EU 28-member countries. Presidents of the European council and European commission, Herman Van Rompuy and José Manuel Barroso, warned jointly on Sunday that further escalation could have “unpredictable consequences.” The European Union threatened that it will “urgently review” its aid to Egypt , but, like the U.S. threat, it’s just a warning that has yet to materialize.

The EU and its member states last year pledged a combined 5 billion euros (\$6.7 billion) in loans and aid for Egypt .

Russia, China on Sidelines

Meanwhile, Russia and China are waiting on the sidelines to invest in what could evolve into a historical turning point in Egypt ’s foreign relations.

The Kremlin maintained what a writer in “Asia Times” described as a “stony silence,” until August 19 when the foreign ministry in a statement urged “dialogue” among “all” political players “without any foreign interference,” but the Egyptian embassy in Moscow said that Cairo counts on Russia ’s assistance in “this trying time, as it used to in the past.”

In 2010 the volume of trade and economic cooperation between the two countries amounted to \$2.1 billion. The number of Russian tourists visiting Egypt in 2010 alone was estimated to be 2,855,723, making it the number one country in providing Egypt with tourists.

Similarly China remained relatively quiet. On August 15, the foreign ministry in a statement said the country was following “closely the situation in Egypt ,” urged “maximum restraint” and “dialogue” to “restore order and social stability.”

Unofficially, Wang Jilie, an academic with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a State Council affiliated think tank, said that the Egyptian military “had no choice” but to “control the situation,” otherwise “the credibility of the interim government and the military would be undermined.”

In 2011, Sino-Egyptian trade rose to US\$8.8 billion, a 30 percent increase from 2010, according to Xinhua. [Last year it rose](#) to US\$9.5 billion.

U.S. Regional Strategy Unraveling

Short of designating the ouster and detention of Morsi a “coup” and short of condemning the dispersal on August 14, by what critics described as an “excessive use of force,” of two MB – led sit – ins in Cairo’s Raba’a al- Adawiyah and al-Nahdha squares, as an Egyptian copy of the Chinese “Tiananmen Square” in 1989, the un-decisive United States has put itself and Egypt in their most testing foreign policy dilemma.

The United States is finding itself swaying between “cutting” its aid to Egypt and “reprogramming” it and because it is torn between its foreign policy rhetoric of democracy

and the more realistic benefits of stability, Washington stands now reluctant to proclaim the involvement of the Egyptian military in the removal of Morsi a “coup.” U.S. allies are held hostage to this U.S. ambivalent position.

The bipartisan Working Group on Egypt , quoted by the Washington Post on August 15, demanded a shift in U.S. policy towards Egypt ; the group considered President Barak Obama’s “failure” to cut aid a “strategic error.”

However there is a strategic U.S. asset that successive administrations have considered an incomparable “vital” interest outweighing this “strategic error.” Egypt expert at the London School of Economics, John Chalcraft, had this explanation: The U.S. military aid “is a strategic rent that comes to Egypt in return, above all, for the ongoing Camp David Peace Treaty with Israel . So the significance of it is political and geopolitical, more than it is economic.” U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki, on August 21, confirmed this justification for her government’s ambivalent stance, though indirectly: “We have seen our aid to Egypt as something that is vital for our own national security purposes, for regional stability.”

No surprise then the United National Security Council (UNSC), in its “emergency” meeting on August 15, which was urged by Turkey and jointly requested by France, Britain and Australia , had nothing to say more than urging the parties in Egypt to “exercise maximum restraint.”

Egypt is the largest and strategically the most important Arab country, where the U.S. regional strategy could make or break.

Strategically, the internal crisis in Egypt has put the U.S. strategy of courting “moderate” Islamist political movements on the brink.

In his inauguration speech in January 2009, Obama signaled his intention to seek a fresh understanding with Islam and Muslims. Within a few months his “intention” had unfolded as a strategy that culminated in the end in an “understanding” with the MB, the oldest, largest and perceived as the most moderate among the Islamist movements.

On June 4, 2009 in Cairo , Obama declared: “I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world.” A few days later in Istanbul he confirmed: ““The United States is not and will never be at war with Islam. In fact, our partnership with the Muslim world is critical ... America ‘s relationship with the Muslim community, the Muslim world, cannot be based just on the opposition to terrorism. We seek broader engagement.”

His allies in Qatar and the Islamist leaders of the ruling Justice and Development party in Turkey joined forces and played a detrimental role in swaying the U.S. towards this conclusion.

The MB was born in Egypt . Eighty five years later it has proved a survival. It developed into an international organization in more than eighty countries in which the Egyptian Muslim Brethren are still playing the leading role. With their assumption of power in Egypt’s 2012 elections, their offshoot ruling now in Turkey, their Palestinian offshoot Hamas ruling in the Gaza Strip, the leading roles their brethren are playing in the governments of Tunisia, Yemen and Morocco, the leading roles they are playing in the opposition in other Arab

countries, and with the sponsorship of the financial magnet of Qatar, the MB has become a power per se to be reckoned with.

Following the Qatari and Turkish examples, the U.S. perceived in it a potential ally and planned its regional strategy accordingly.

With the removal of Morsi and the MB from power in Egypt , this U.S. strategy is unraveling now.

U.S. Allies Divided

The MB has received a very strong blow in its Egyptian heartland together with a burgeoning MB – U.S. regional “understanding.”

A regional U.S. sponsored Egyptian – Turkish – Qatari axis that could stand rival to the Iran – Syria alliance is at risk of becoming a past tense plan.

The U.S. regional allies stand now divided between the pro – MB led by Qatar and Turkey and the anti – MB led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The regional front against Iran of the U.S. – sponsored “moderates,” who are united in their efforts to enforce a ‘regime change” in Syria , is weakened as well.

While Syria is feeling relief, Iran joined its regional rivals in Qatar and Turkey as well as Cuba , Venezuela , the U.S. and the EU in condemning “the massacre of the population” according to a statement by its foreign ministry. The new Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Monday noted “how people’s votes are forgotten and downtrodden.”

America’s abrupt role reversal from an anti-Islamist crusader to a champion of political Islam has antagonized two of the U.S. closest Arab allies in Saudi Arabia and the UAE who promptly emerged as the major political and financial backers of the military – supported interim government in Egypt ; on the second day Morsi was removed, they contributed \$12b to Cairo .

Rejecting foreign interference in “ Egypt ’s internal affairs,” Saudi King Abdullah, in a statement read Friday on Saudi television, declared that what was happening in Egypt was “an Arab affair.” His foreign minister, Prince Saud Al Faisal, during a recent visit to Paris pledged to compensate Egypt for any cut in western aid, saying: “We will not achieve anything through threats.”

Obviously, Saudi Arabia , UAE and Kuwait , who contributed \$12b to Cairo the second day Morsi was removed, do not see eye to eye on Egypt with their strategic allies in the U.S. and EU; their position will for sure weigh heavily in their final stance.

Some commentators described as “hysterical” the Turkish reaction, which led Egypt to accuse Turkey of interfering in its internal affairs. On Tuesday Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Israel was involved in the “military coup” that removed Morsi from power; the White House denied the accusation. Earlier he accused Saudi Arabia and the UAE of being partners to the “Egyptian coup.” He had called on the UN to condemn the “massacres” in Egypt and described the developments in the country as a “conspiracy against the Muslim world targeting Turkey ” in particular.

Turkey is a loser in Egypt 's latest developments. Ankara is watching its leading regional role through an alliance with Egypt cut short abruptly and replaced by the revival of the Saudi regional leadership through the same alliance. Relations are expected to get worse between the three regional heavy weights.

No Business as Usual

The U.S. is leading the western condemnation of the crackdown on the MB and urging an "inclusive" political process that would make them an integral part of any future restructuring of the ruling system.

This line of U.S. thinking is creating an international environment that is fueling the MB defiance, which would inevitably perpetuate the violence and the crisis, the interim government in Cairo says.

This is exactly what leads the U.S. - led west to a collision course with the incumbent interim government, who accuse Morsi and his brethren are of leading a year - long effort of exclusion of all the other political players. The MB exclusion policies are said to be the major factor that led to the demise of their rule. The new rulers insist on inclusion of the MB on their own terms.

They accuse the world's condemnation of their "excessive use of force" as a contribution to what some of their commentators say it is a "war of attrition" waged by the MB against the Egyptian state, its interim government and defense forces.

More than 100 army and police officers were among no less than one thousand people killed since July 3rd. Michael W. Hanna, an expert on Egypt from the New York-based Century Foundation, was quoted by AP on Monday as saying: "Sure civil war is a possibility."

Obviously, Egypt 's post - Morsi rulers do not share the U.S. and European view of the MB as "moderates" who could be "included."

U.S. bilateral relations with Egypt seem about to head to a turning point, but for sure at least there is "no doubt" that Washington "can't return to business as usual" with Cairo as Obama told CNN on August 23.

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