

Historic Breakthrough in Egypt-Russia Relations. Towards a Strategic Shift?

By [Nicola Nasser](#)

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The recent two-day first official visit in forty years by an Egyptian defense minister to Russia of Egypt's strongman Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, accompanied by Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy, was indeed an historic breakthrough in bilateral relations, but it is still premature to deal with or build on it as a strategic shift away from the country's more than three-decade strategic alliance with the United States.

The US administration sounds not really concerned with this controversy about an Egyptian strategic shift as much as with the Russian President Vladimir Putin's welcome of al-Sisi's expected candidacy for president.

"Egypt is free to pursue relationships with other countries. It doesn't impact our shared interests," said State Department deputy spokeswoman, Marie Harf, on this February 13.

The United States, which has been waging, by military invasion and proxy wars, a campaign of "regime changes" across the Middle East, was miserably hypocritical when Marie Harf invoked her country's "democratic" ideals to declare that her administration "don't think it's, quite frankly, up to the United States or to Mr. Putin to decide who should govern Egypt."

However, Pavel Felgenhauer, writing in the Eurasia Daily Monitor on this February 13, described the visit as a "geopolitical shift" that "could, according to Russian government sources, 'dramatically reorient international relations in the Middle East'." The People's Daily, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, on the following day described it as an "historic breakthrough" in Egyptian-Russian relations and a "transformation in the strategic compass of Egyptian foreign policy from Washington to Moscow."

The main purpose of al-Sisi's and Fahmy's visit was to finalize an arms deal reportedly worth two to four billion US dollars, al-Ahram daily reported on February 13. The joint statement released after the meeting of both countries' ministers of defense and foreign affairs in Moscow on the same day announced also that the Russian capital will host a meeting of the Russian-Egyptian commission on trade and economic cooperation on next March 28.

This is serious business; it is vindicated also by the arrival in Cairo on this February 17 of the commander-in-chief of the Russian Air Force, Lieutenant General Victor Bondarev, heading a six-member team of his commanders, on a four-day visit, according to the Egyptian Almasry Alyoum online the following day.

Egypt is the biggest strategic prize for world powers in the Middle East. "Egypt – with its strategic location, stable borders, large population, and ancient history – has been the principal power of the Arab world for centuries, defining the movement of history there like

no other,” Germany’s former Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor Joschka Fischer wrote on last July 26. No wonder then the flurry of speculations worldwide about whether Egypt’s Russian pivot is or is not a strategic shift.

In the immediate proximity, this “new concern” has been “preoccupying Israel’s strategists in recent weeks. They are beginning to worry about the high momentum” with which Putin is capitalizing on America’s “hands off policy” in the Middle East, according to DEBKAfile report on February 16. Al-Sisi’s trip to Moscow, which “put him on the road to the independent path he seeks” has “incalculable consequences” the report said, adding that “he is investing effort in building a strong regime that will promote the Nasserist form of pan-Arab nationalism, with Egypt in the forefront.” “This policy may well bring Egypt into collision with the state of Israel,” the report concluded.

Nonetheless, two former Israeli cabinet ministers of defense, namely Binyamin Ben-Eliezer and Ehud Barak voiced support for al-Sisi. The first publicly supported his bid for presidency. Barak said that “the whole world should support Sisi.” However, their voices seem to fall on deaf ears in Washington D.C., or sounds like it.

Both men’s support is consistent with Israel’s instructive official “silence” over the developments in Egypt, which is still committed to its thirty five-year old peace treaty with the Hebrew state. “Israel’s main interest,” according to Israeli officials and experts, quoted by The New York Times on last August 16, “is a stable Egypt that can preserve the country’s 1979 peace treaty and restore order along the border in the Sinai Peninsula,” which extends 270 kilometers (160 miles) from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea Israeli resort of Eilat.

Within this context can be interpreted Israel’s closed eyes to the incursion of Egyptian tanks and warplanes into what is designated by the treaty as a “demilitarized” “Area C” of Sinai.

The Litmus Test

Herein is the litmus test to judge whether al-Sisi’s eastward orientation and his supposed “Nasserist” loyalties indicate or not a strategic shift that trespasses the Israeli and US red line of Egypt’s commitment to the peace treaty.

Senior associate of the Carnegie Middle East Center, Yezid Sayigh wrote on August 1, 2012 that the United States “will continue keeping a balance between its relations with the (then) [Egyptian president](#) (Mohamed Morsi) and the Egyptian army. The balance will always shift to the side that ensures the continuity of Egypt’s commitment to the following: The Camp David Peace Treaty, the retention of a demilitarized Sinai, retaining multinational troops and observers led by the US, maintaining gas exports to Israel, isolating Hamas, resisting Iran’s efforts to expand its influence, resisting al-Qaida, and keeping the Suez Canal open.” (Emphasis added).

These are the bedrocks of Egypt’s strategic alliance with the US and because they were and are still safe in good hands under both the removed president Morsi and the prospective president al-Sisi, it will be premature to conclude that the revived Egyptian – Russians relations indicate any strategic departure therefrom.

Preserving or discarding these Egyptian commitments is the litmus test to judge whether Egypt’s revival of its Russian ties is a strategic maneuver or a strategic departure.

Other indicators include the financial and political sponsorship of al-Sisi's government by none other than the very close Arab allies of the US , like Jordan and in Saudi Arabia , United Arab Emirates and Kuwait , who had already together pledged twenty billion dollars in aid to al-Sisi and reportedly are funding his armaments deal with Russia .

Saudi Al Arabia satellite TV station on this February 13 quoted Abdallah Schleifer, a professor emeritus of journalism at the American University in Cairo, as sarcastically questioning President Barak Obama's performance: "What an extraordinary accomplishment President Obama will take with him when he retires from office - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia which provided (late Egyptian president) Anwar Sadat with both moral and financial backing to break with the Russians in the early 1970s and turn towards the United States - may now finance an Egyptian arms deal with the Russians," Schleifer said.

Al-Sisi's supposed "Nasserist" and "pan-Arab" orientation could not be consistent, for example, with inviting the defense ministers of the United Arab Emirates , Iraq , Bahrain , Morocco , and their Jordanian counterpart Prime Minister Abdullah al-Nsour to attend the 40th anniversary celebrations of the 1973 October War. Syria was Egypt 's partner in that war and Jamal Abdul Nasser's major "pan-Arab" ally, but it was not represented. The countries which were represented were seriously against Abdul Nasser's Egypt and its pan-Arab ideology, but more importantly they were and still are strategic allies of his US-led enemies and peace partners of Israel .

US Aid Counterproductive

US whistleblowers warning of an Egyptian strategic shift are abundant as part of blasting Obama for his foreign policy blunders. For example, US foreign policy scholars Tom Nichols and John R. Schindler, quoted on this February 13 by The Tower.org staff, who agree that they rarely agree on anything, are agreeing now that Obama's administration is undermining "nearly seven decades" of bipartisan American efforts aimed at "limiting Moscow's influence" in the Middle East.

But [Nael Shama](#), writing on Middle East Institute website on last December 16, said: "It can be argued that Egypt's flirtation with Russia does not mean a shift in the country's foreign policy away from the United States as much as an attempt to induce the United States to shift its Egypt policy back to where it was before ... in order to pressure the United States and to arouse concern among American politicians about the prospect of losing Egypt, encouraging them to amend unfavorable policies."

The Obama administration welcomed al-Sisi's assumption of power by calling off the biannual joint US-Egypt military exercise "Bright Star" and halting the delivery of military hardware to Egypt, including F-16 fighter jets, Apache helicopters, Harpoon missiles, and tank parts and when Last January the US Congress approved a spending bill that would restore \$1.5bn in aid to Egypt, it was on the condition (emphasis added) that the Egyptian government ensures democratic reform.

Le Monde Diplomatique in November last year quoted veteran arms trade expert Sergio Finardi as saying that the US aid money "never leaves US banks, and is mostly transferred not to the target country but to US defense manufacturers that sell the equipment to Egypt."

More important, US aid money is attached to Egypt 's commitment to the peace treaty with

Israel . Such a commitment is compromising Egyptian sovereignty in Sinai, which has become a no-man land where organized crime, illegal trade in arms and terrorist groups enjoy a free hand with a heavy price in Egyptian souls and governance.

Either the provisions of the peace treaty are amended, or the American conditions for aid are dropped altogether or at least reconsidered to allow Egypt to fully exercise its sovereignty in Sinai, or Egypt would look elsewhere for alternative empowerment, for example to start “a new era of constructive, fruitful co-operation on the military level” with Russia as al-Sisi told his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu, according to the official Egyptian news agency MENA on last November 14.

All the foregoing aside, Egypt wants to modernize its military-industrial complex per se. Shana Marshall, associate director of the Institute for Middle East Studies and research instructor at the George Washington University, quoted by <http://www.jadaliyya.com/> on this February 10, called this “Egypt’s Other Revolution.” The thirty five-year old arrangements with the United States are not helping out, but worse they have become the main obstacle to fulfill this aspiration.

All these and other factors indicate that al-Sisi is in fact pursuing vital Egyptian national interests and not seeking a strategic shift in his country’s alliance with the US . The Russian opening is his last resort. It is highly possible that he might backtrack should Washington decide not to repeat its historical mistake when it refused to positively respond to similar Egyptian military and development aspirations in the fifties of the twentieth century, which pushed Egypt into the open arms of the former Soviet Union .

‘Abject Failure’ of US Aid

For Egypt to look now for Russian armament and economic help means that the Egyptian – US strategic cooperation since 1979 has failed to cater for its defense needs and development aspirations.

Thirty five years on, during which a regional rival like Iran stands now on the brink of becoming a nuclear power with an ever expanding industrial military complex while the other Israeli rival is already a nuclear power and a major world exporter of arms, Egypt’s military stands weaker, seems stagnant, underdeveloped and pushed out of competition while its population have become much poorer.

Nothing much has changed since the US Middle East Policy Council in its winter edition of 1996 published Denis J. Sullivan’s piece, “American Aid to Egypt, 1975-96: Peace without Development,” wherein he pointed out that “the reality is that Egypt is far from a “model” of effective use of (US) foreign assistance.”

The country, despite the fact that “the US aid program in Egypt is the largest such program in the world” and that “in 21 years, Egypt has received some \$21 billion in economic aid from the United States plus over \$25 billion in military aid,” Egypt “remains poor, overpopulated, polluted and undemocratic ... In short, Egypt in 1996 continues to exhibit virtually all the characteristics the United States has claimed to want to change since it began its massive economic aid program in 1975,” Sullivan wrote.

Seventeen years later David Rieff, writing in The New Republic on this February 4, described what Sullivan said was a “failure” as an “abject failure” of “the US development aid to

Egypt.”

Militarily, Carnegie’s Yezid Sayigh’s paper of August 2012 quoted an assessment of US embassy officials in a 2008 cable leaked by WikiLeaks as saying that “tactical and operational readiness of the Egyptian Armed Forces has degraded.” He wrote that “US officers and officials familiar with the military assistance programs to Egypt describe the Egyptian Armed Forces as no longer capable of combat.” He also quoted “leading experts on Egypt Clement Henry and Robert Springborg” as saying that the Egyptian army’s “training is desultory, maintenance of its equipment is profoundly inadequate, and it is dependent on the United States for funding and logistical support ... despite three decades of US training and joint US-Egyptian exercises.”

US Back Turned to Egypt

The Tower.org on February 13 reported that the “White House two weeks ago [pointedly declined](#) to invite Egypt to a summit of African leaders.”

That was not the first indication that the US foreign policy has been alienating Egypt since Field Marshal al-Sisi assumed power early last July in response to a massive popular protest on last June 30 against the former president Mohamed Morsi.

Since US Secretary of State John Kerry’ visit to Egypt last November, who in this capacity toured the region more than eleven times and seems to spend more time in the Middle East than in US, Kerry has been dropping Egypt out of his itinerary. His president Obama, who is scheduled to visit Saudi Arabia next March, receive Israel ’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu early in the month and had received King Abdullah II of Jordan on this February 14, had no reported plans either to receive al-Sisi or to visit his country, which was previously a regular stop for US top visiting officials.

Is it a surprise then that al-Sisi’s first visit abroad was to Moscow and not to Washington D.C. , to meet with the Russian president and not with his US counterpart?

Al-Sisi in an interview with the Washington Post early last August accused the US of “turning its back” to Egyptians. “You left the Egyptians, you turned your back on the Egyptians and they won’t forget that,” he said.

However, al-Sisi does by no means dream of disturbing the existing political order in the Middle East, or coming to loggerheads with Israel or the US, but it seems obvious that he’ is fed up with the preconditions attached to US aid that have rendered his country’s military and economy backward in comparison to regional highly upgraded rivals. The US did not help Egypt become a “success story in economic development” as the USAID claims on its website.

Pavel Felgenhauer wrote on February 13 that, “It is clear Egypt is ready to accept Russian aid and weaponry as it did during the Cold War in the 1950s–1970s to show the US it has an alternative source of support.”

Indeed, al-Sisi thanked his Russian counterpart for “giving the Egyptian people economic and defense aid.” Putin said that he was “sure we can increase trade to \$5 billion in the future.” Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said: “We agreed to speed up the preparations of documents that will give an additional impulse to the development of military and military-technical cooperation.” It is noteworthy that all is without

preconditions, political or otherwise.

The Associated Press on February 13 quoted Abdullah el-Sinawi, whom the AP identified as “a prominent Cairo-based analyst known to be close to the military,” as saying that al-Sisi “wanted to send a signal to Washington.” “Egypt needs an international entrusted ally that would balance relations with America . Egypt will be open to other centers of power without breaking the relations with the US ,” he said.

Abdel-Moneim Said, another Egyptian analyst, wrote in Al-Ahram Weekly on last November 21 that Egypt is “merely seeking to expand its maneuverability abroad” and that “the Russian ‘bear’ that had come to Egypt has had its claws clipped”: “Soviet Union has collapsed, the Warsaw Pact is dead, and the Cold War is over ... (and) the US GDP ... is eight times more than Russia’s;” moreover the US-led world alliance accounts “for 80 per cent of global gross production and a larger percentage of the world’s modern technology.”

True, Egyptian Foreign Minister Fahmi said on last October 18 that the “Egyptian-American relations have changed after 30 June for the first time in 30 years to a peer relationship” and that “Egyptian decision making is now independent from any state.” A day earlier he told the state-run Al-Ahram newspaper that the bilateral relations were in “a delicate state reflecting the turmoil in the relationship.” “The problem,” he said, “goes back much earlier, and is caused by the dependence of Egypt on the US aid for 30 years.”

Therefore, “Egypt is heading toward Eastern powers,” Saeed al-Lawindi, a political expert at Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, told Xinhua on February 14, but Talaat Musallam, a strategic and security expert and a former army general, described al-Sisi’s Russian pivot as “a kind of strategic maneuver.” Musallam was vindicated by Fahmi’s repeated assertions that “Egypt’s closeness with Russia is not a move against the US ,” i.e. not a strategic departure from the United States .

However, international relations are not static; they have their own dynamics. Should the US passive sensitivity to Egyptian aspirations continue to be hostage to the 1979 Camp David accords and the Russian opening continue to cater for Egypt ’s military as well as economic vital needs, the “strategic maneuver” could in no time turn into a strategic shift.

Nicola Nasser is a veteran Arab journalist based in Bir Zeit, West Bank of the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. nassernicola@ymail.com

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