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09

2023

From Arab Spring to Global Realities: Egypt's Regional Diplomacy in Flux

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Introduction

Egypt's geographical position has always made it a central player in the Middle East and Africa. As the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 marked a turning point in the political landscape of the Middle East, Egypt and many other Arab countries were deeply affected by these events. They underwent significant transformations that had implications until now.

Qatar-Egypt diplomatic roller coaster: Conflict, cooperation, and the quest for reconciliation

For example, Egypt's diplomatic relations with Qatar has been marked by a series of twists and turns, encompassing periods of both conflict and cooperation. Before the Arab Spring upheaval, Egypt and Qatar maintained relatively stable relations, characterized by

diplomatic and economic ties within regional bodies such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Qatar's response to the uprisings set the stage for a shift in its relationship with Egypt. During the early stages of the Arab Spring, Qatar's support for various movements across the Middle East, including those advocating for political change in Egypt, marked a pivotal departure from its previous positions. The significant point of contention emerged with Qatar's backing of Islamist factions, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood. This support diverged from Egypt's evolving political landscape following Mubarak's ousting. As the Muslim Brotherhood gained influence in Egypt's post-revolution political scene, the tension between the two nations escalated. The escalating tensions were further fueled by differences in regional alignments and competing visions for the future of the Arab world. Egypt, under its new leadership, sought stability and security, whereas Qatar's support for various movements reflected a more interventionist approach.

Qatar's support for Muslim Brotherhood was at odds with Egypt's national interests.

The climax of the strained relationship came with Egypt's military intervention in 2013,

leading to the removal of President Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood was at direct odds with Egypt's national stability interests, solidifying their conflicting stances. In the aftermath of the 2013 events, Egypt, along with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, took steps to isolate Qatar diplomatically due to its perceived support for Islamist groups. The culmination of tensions prompted both Egypt and Qatar to reassess their positions and seek avenues for reconciliation. The resolution of the Gulf crisis in early 2021 marked a turning point, as Egypt and Qatar endeavored to mend fences and prioritize regional stability over their previous differences. Diplomatic exchanges, economic cooperation and improved communication channels demonstrated a renewed commitment to conflict resolution and cooperation.

Egypt-Saudi relations: From deep roots to evolving dynamics

On the other hand, the diplomatic relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia have long been rooted in shared cultural, economic, and strategic interests. These historical ties have led to collaborative efforts on various regional issues, ranging from counterterrorism and Gulf stability to the support of Palestinian

causes. This bond took on a new dimension after the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi in 2013, leading to the rise of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime. Initially, Saudi Arabia provided strong support to the Sisi regime, viewing it as a stabilizing force in the midst of regional turmoil. Saudi Arabia saw Sisi as a bulwark against the growing influence of Islamist groups and the Muslim Brotherhood, which the kingdom regarded as a threat to its own political stability. As a result, Saudi Arabia offered political, economic, and financial support to the new Egyptian government. The kingdom provided financial assistance to Egypt to help stabilize its economy, address pressing economic challenges, and fund development projects. Additionally, Saudi Arabia invested in various Egyptian sectors, fostering economic ties that deepened the bilateral relationship. This economic partnership further solidified the alignment between the two nations. The rise of IS and the Yemen conflict demanded the kingdom's attention and resources, diverting its attention from its earlier robust support for Sisi's regime.

Saudi Arabia invested in various Egyptian sectors, fostering economic ties.

The transfer of the Tiran and Sanafir islands to Saudi Arabia in 2017 became a focal point of

attention, sparking debates and controversies that strained the diplomatic rapport. These islands, situated at the entrance of the Gulf of Aqaba, are of historical significance and possess strategic importance for maritime security. Egyptian government's decision to transfer sovereignty triggered protests, legal challenges, and questions about the process's transparency and legality. The incident revealed internal divisions and underscored the importance of transparency and public consultation in diplomatic decisions. However, over the years, this support underwent shifts and transformations as the dynamics in the Middle East evolved. A surprise visit by el-Sisi to Saudi Arabia in April 2023 aimed at addressing strained relations due to financial struggles and media exchanges between the two regimes. Saudi Arabia's hesitancy to provide new grants without reciprocation and the resultant media confrontations have highlighted underlying tensions. The economic landscape in Egypt has been tumultuous, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on tourism and global commodity prices. This economic distress has prompted Egypt to seek financial support from its Gulf neighbors. The demand for devaluation of the Egyptian pound, appointment of new economic officials, and private sector engagement illustrates Saudi Arabia's insistence on structural reforms as prerequisites for financial aid.

Türkiye-Egypt relations: Navigating geopolitical shifts and reconciliation prospects

In addition, the dynamics between Türkiye and Egypt have undergone significant shifts since the Arab Spring, particularly in relation to their respective stances on the Muslim Brotherhood. Türkiye, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, supported the ascent of Mohamed Morsi as Egypt's president following the country's first free elections in 2012. However, Morsi's ousting in 2013 and the subsequent rise of Sisi as Egypt's leader strained relations between the two countries due to Türkiye's continued support for the Muslim Brotherhood. Türkiye's support for the Muslim Brotherhood put it at odds with the Sisi regime, which considered the group a threat to national stability. Erdoğan's critical stance on Morsi's removal and his vocal criticism of Sisi's leadership further deteriorated relations. Both countries found themselves on opposing sides in regional conflicts, such as in Libya and Syria. Their differing stances on these issues complicated efforts to address common challenges, contributing to a fragmented regional environment. State-owned media outlets in both Türkiye and Egypt frequently employed inflammatory rhetoric against each other. The media war reflected the broader geopolitical rivalry and contributed to a perception of hostility between the two nations.

In recent years, there have been signs of a cautious rapprochement between Türkiye and Egypt.

Türkiye's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its activities in Libya, remain unaddressed.

Both countries expressed interest in improving their strained relations, recognizing the potential benefits of cooperation on regional issues, particularly after Sisi and Erdoğan met and shook hands during the opening ceremony of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Both countries have recognized the benefits of regional stability and cooperation. This signaled a potential shift in the strained relations between the two nations. The unexpected handshake between Sisi and Erdoğan, followed by a tripartite summit with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, caught the attention of diplomatic circles. While the meeting and subsequent talks may suggest a de-escalation of tensions, analysts emphasize that it falls short of ushering in full-fledged reconciliation due to several unresolved issues. Pending matters, including Türkiye's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its activities in Libya, remain unaddressed. These deep-seated disputes underscore the complexity of achieving true reconciliation between the two nations. The economically strained Cairo seems

to be shifting its focus away from prolonged bilateral disputes and towards economic recovery. Erdogan's eagerness for normalization is influenced by domestic and foreign concerns. Nevertheless, the divergent priorities of Egypt and Türkiye, driven by economic recovery and domestic stability, respectively, further complicate the process.

Sudan's struggle for stability: Divergent approaches of Egypt and the UAE

The ongoing conflict in Sudan, particularly the clashes between the army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), is raising significant concerns among GCC states due to their vested interests in the region's stability. Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia hold considerable influence in Sudan, yet their approaches differ significantly. The UAE's engagement in Sudan is driven by its broader ambition to expand its sphere of influence, particularly in the Red Sea region and Africa. The UAE has invested in key projects, such as the \$6 billion Abu Amama port, aimed at enhancing its maritime control and connectivity. Its support for both Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti") of the RSF and Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the Sudanese army reflects a strategic gamble that has led to the emergence of two competing strongmen.

As Egypt aligns with al-Burhan, and UAE supports Hemedti, tensions between two countries arise.

In contrast to the UAE's strategy, Egypt's approach centers on preserving stability and security in Sudan. Cairo supports al-Burhan and views the Sudanese army as a vital institution for maintaining the country's stability. This perspective aligns with Egypt's broader belief in supporting national armies over non-state actors. Egypt's focus on backing a respected army is driven by its conviction that strong state institutions are essential for lasting stability, as witnessed in its involvement in both Syria and Sudan's conflicts. The differing approaches of the UAE and Egypt have led to divergent stances on Sudan's internal dynamics. As Egypt aligns with al-Burhan, who represents the Sudanese army, and the UAE supports Hemedti, tensions between the two countries arise. This discord reflects broader shifts in their regional interests and alliances. Egypt's concern about the potential destabilizing effects of the Sudanese conflict, including spillover into neighboring countries, emphasizes its role as a regional stabilizer. The divergent strategies of the UAE and Egypt in the Sudan conflict underscore their contrasting regional priorities and alliances. While the UAE seeks to expand

its influence through calculated support for multiple strongmen, Egypt prioritizes stability by backing a recognized national army.

Navigating Nile waters: Ethiopia's GERD and the downstream dilemma

Crucially the Nile River is of immense significance to the countries through which it flows. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is a monumental hydroelectric project situated on the Blue Nile River in Ethiopia. The dam has been a focal point of contention between Ethiopia, which sees it as a crucial source of energy and economic development, and downstream Egypt, which fears potential adverse impacts on its water supply. Ethiopia's vision for GERD as a catalyst for economic development and electrification is evident in its budget of \$4.2 billion and its potential to generate over 5,000 megawatts of electricity. Egypt is heavily reliant on the Nile for water, agriculture and power generation. With its rapidly growing population and agricultural demands, Egypt relies heavily on the Nile's waters. This project holds the key to addressing Ethiopia's energy deficit, with vast rural areas still lacking access to the power grid. Egypt faces a dire water crisis resulting from a growing population and limited water resources.

Tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia persist, and concerns about conflict over water rights loom.

The Nile River, which provides nearly 97% of the country's irrigation and drinking water, is central to Egypt's survival. Any disruption in water flow could have dire consequences for the country's food security and economy. Ethiopia, on the other hand, views the dam as a way to alleviate energy shortages and drive economic development, emphasizing its sovereign right to manage its resources. The GERD issue has prompted diplomatic efforts between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan (another downstream country) to find a mutually acceptable solution. These negotiations, facilitated by the African Union and the United Nations, have been marked by periods of both progress and deadlock. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed emphasizes that while Ethiopia does not intend to harm Sudan and Egypt, the country cannot ignore its own developmental needs. Nevertheless, tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia persist, and concerns about potential conflict over water rights loom. As the waters of the Nile continue to flow, the challenge of coexistence and collaboration remains pivotal for both Egypt and Ethiopia's future.

Egypt-Iran relations: A tapestry of history, geopolitics and diplomacy

Egypt and Iran, two major regional powers with historical and cultural significance, have maintained a complex relationship shaped by a multitude of factors. Egypt and Iran had good relations during the 1970s. Under the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran maintained close ties with Egypt under then President Anwar al-Sadat. However, relations between the two countries began deteriorating in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which significantly changed regional dynamics and impacted the bilateral relations between Cairo and Tehran. In 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, decided to sever diplomatic ties with Egypt due to its signing the Camp David Accords with Israel. The tensions between the two countries deepened when President Sadat gave refuge to the deposed Shah in Egypt, where he died and was buried in 1980. Furthermore, relations worsened when Iran named a street in its capital after Khalid al-Islambouli, an Egyptian army lieutenant who was involved in the assassination of Sadat in 1981. The tensions between the two countries endured throughout the 1980s due to Egypt's support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. The ongoing war in Yemen and Saudi Arabia's sensitive relations with Iran have further added

to the intricate dynamics. The ongoing war in Yemen has strained Egypt-Iran relations. Egypt has been supportive of the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthi rebels, who are reportedly backed by Iran. This alignment has added to the existing tensions between Egypt and Iran.

The ongoing war in Yemen has strained Egypt-Iran relations.

As Egypt maintains close ties with Saudi Arabia, it has been cautious about taking any actions that could be perceived as supporting Iran's regional influence. The presence of embassies in both countries has allowed for diplomatic communication. Additionally, Cairo is seeking to strengthen regional and strategic cooperation with Tehran on various pressing issues, including those related to Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine. For example, Egypt's desire to mitigate tensions in the Gaza Strip stands as a prominent motive for seeking closer ties with Tehran given Iran's close relationships with several Palestinian groups, particularly Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Cairo is keen on maintaining stability in the strip and avoiding a military escalation with Israel. On another level, the development of economic and trade cooperation between Egypt and Iran is another key dimension, albeit one that has remained limited due to strained relations in the past. The

economic aspect carries vital significance for the Sisi regime, which currently faces a severe economic crisis characterized by high inflation and mounting external debt.

Global Impact: Shifting dynamics in the Middle East amid Ukraine war and China's rise

On a global scale, the ongoing war in Ukraine and China's increasing influence in the Middle East and North Africa have had a significant impact on regional dynamics and could bring Egypt and Iran closer than ever to normalizing their relations. Recently, the announcement of Iran and Saudi Arabia, alongside the UAE, Argentina, Egypt and Ethiopia, joining the BRICS economic bloc from next year has sent ripples through the global political landscape. BRICS, founded in 2009 by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, was established as a platform for emerging market economies to exert their influence on global affairs. It has grown to encompass around 40% of the world's population and a significant portion of the global GDP. As the bloc expands to include these nations, it not only amplifies the voice of the developing world but also sparks debates over China's growing political influence in the Persian Gulf and potential shifts in BRICS' dynamics. The entry of Iran and Saudi Arabia,

two major players in the Persian Gulf, into BRICS adds a layer of complexity to the dynamics of the bloc. China's close ties with both nations and its role in mediating détente between them raise questions about Beijing's growing political influence in the region.

Egypt had to strike a balance between cooperation with Russia and relationship with the US.

The Russian war against Ukraine has reverberated beyond the borders of Ukraine, affecting global and regional dynamics. Egypt, a significant player in the Middle East, has also been impacted by this conflict, leading to changes in its diplomatic landscape and relationships with various countries. For Egypt, the conflict has prompted a recalibration of its relationships and positions on key regional and international issues. Egypt's relations with Russia have deepened over the years, particularly in the economic, military, and energy sectors. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has introduced complexities into Egypt's relationship with Russia, forcing Cairo to carefully navigate its partnership while taking a stance that aligns with its own interests and principles. As the US and its allies imposed sanctions on Russia in response to its actions in Ukraine, Egypt's relations with the US faced

potential challenges due to its close ties with Russia. Egypt had to strike a balance between its cooperation with Russia and its relationship with the US, a key ally. The EU's sanctions against Russia prompted Egypt to evaluate its alignment with European partners. Economic and trade considerations played a role in influencing Egypt's approach to the conflict. The Russian-Ukrainian war indirectly impacted Türkiye's relationship with Russia, which had implications for Egypt's engagement with Türkiye. As regional dynamics shifted, Egypt had to navigate its stance towards Türkiye with greater sensitivity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Egypt's geographical significance has historically placed it at the heart of regional dynamics. The Arab Spring reshaped its relationships with various countries, leading

to intricate diplomatic shifts. Economic, geopolitical, and strategic considerations guided Egypt's nuanced responses and recalibrations in the face of shifting global and regional dynamics. In an ever-changing landscape, Egypt navigates its diplomatic path with pragmatism, seeking to safeguard its interests while promoting stability in the Middle East and Africa.

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