

Egypt-Russia Relations: President Sisi Counts on Moscow

Egyptian President has done more for Russian-Egyptian relations than any of his country's leaders in decades. Resurrecting the historic Russian-Egypt Strategic Partnership?

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***President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi** traveled to Russia in the middle of October for a three-day visit that culminated in a meeting with his Russian counterpart in Sochi. The trip was important in showcasing the progress that Russian-Egyptian relations have made since Sisi assumed office in 2014 following a successful coup against Muslim Brotherhood-backed leader Mohamed Morsi who came to power after the so-called "Arab Spring". Relations between these two historic partners had frayed since the death of Old Cold War hero **Gamal Abdel Nasser** and his replacement with pro-American leaders **Anwar Sadat** and **Hosni Mubarak**. What had previously been one of the USSR's most strategic partnerships gradually become one of its most inconsequential ones, which was regarded as a geopolitical pity by many in Moscow and even some of those in Cairo as well.*

That all changed with Sisi's usurpation of power in 2013 and subsequent victory in national elections a year later. The former Minister of Defense must have been privy to the proof that Morsi's brief government was backed by the US and some of its regional allies such as Turkey and Qatar, both of whom are led by governments that are very closely aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. This would explain why Sisi sought to expand relations with Russia after becoming president because he wanted to send a message to the US that its previous patronage of a man who Cairo regards as the face of one of the world's most dangerous terrorist groups won't be without geopolitical consequences. That said, Sisi is also smart enough to know that it's best to "balance" between Great Powers instead of pivot from one to the other.

Resurrecting the historic Russian-Egypt Strategic Partnership has therefore been one of Sisi's geopolitical priorities because it gives his country a comfortable amount of flexibility on the international arena and shows the rest of the world that he's not the American puppet that Mubarak was. This is very important for boosting Egyptian national prestige and legitimizing his rule as the leader that the country needs for transitioning into the emerging Multipolar World Order. That's not to say that Sisi is entirely independent, however, because he's still very closely tied to the Gulf Monarchies who have patronized his government to the tune of tens of billions of dollars, mostly because they approve of his tough approach to the Muslim Brotherhood (which they also regard as terrorists) and also because of their desire to retain influence over the world's most populous Arab state.

That hasn't stood in the way of stronger Russian-Egyptian ties, though, and if anything it

might have even facilitated them in the past year since Moscow and Riyadh entered into their game-changing OPEC+ cooperation with one another. The Kingdom no longer has any reason to regard Russia as “infringing on its sphere of influence” like it may have previously thought was happening a few years ago when the two Great Powers were still at loggerheads over Syria, but the rapprochement between them has also led to an ever more pronounced betterment of Russian-Egyptian relations, too. As it stands, Moscow and Cairo are cooperating very closely in the military sphere and have accordingly also begun to coordinate their regional policies in the Mideast, too. This is very important, but the real significance of their reestablished strategic partnership rests in its economic potential.

Egypt will forever occupy a crucial geostrategic position along global maritime trade routes because of its control over the Suez Canal, which has only grown in the few years since it expanded this waterway to include a second canal. Russia was granted the right to construct an industrial zone there, which will enable it to finally reassert some of its economic influence in the Red Sea-Gulf of Aden region that it previously enjoyed during the Old Cold War, though only with the passage of time, of course. What Egypt has in fact provided Russia with is an opportunity to more easily export products throughout this part of the world, which links up with its newfound role in Syria and reunification with Crimea to create a series of Sea Lines Of Communication (SLOC) that are necessary to its revival as a Great Power of hemispheric relevance.

Arms, diplomatic coordination, and investment might be all that Egypt really needs from Russia in order to help “balance” between Great Powers, while its counterpart required a geostrategic foothold in the Red Sea from where it could step back into its Soviet-era footprints in order reassert itself as a trans-regional Great Power. Each country therefore gains from the other because they provide one another with strategic support that none of their other partners were capable of, which has resulted in the reestablishment of their historic strategic partnership. None of this would have been possible, let alone during the brief time that it happened, had it not been for Sisi’s visionary outreaches to Russia, which have allowed Egypt to prove that it still retains some degree of independence in spite of its financial bondage to the GCC and existing partnership with the US.

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