Russian-Egyptian Cooperation: Implications for the Region

by Alexander Kornilov

While the Olympic Games took place in Sochi and the Geneva-II negotiation process kept us waiting for something positive to emerge, international analysts and commentators seemed to miss an event of extreme interest. This was the advancement of Russian-Egyptian relations in a period of uncertainty for the Middle Eastern country having suffered a new wave of terrorist attacks against foreign tourists.

The “2+2” Ministerial Format

Between February 12 – 13, 2014, Egypt’s Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense Abdel Fattah Sisi and Minister of Foreign Affairs Nabil Fahmy visited Moscow. They conducted separate and intensive meetings as well as negotiations in what is termed the “2+2” format with the Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov. Abdel Fattah Sisi and Nabil Fahmy were also received by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin. According to the joint statement released after the talks:

“In the course of consultations the Ministers discussed in details the prospects of comprehensive development of Russian – Egyptian relations, including the issues of accelerating the activities of the Joint Russian – Egyptian Commission on trade and economic cooperation and agreed that its next meeting will be held in Moscow on March 28, 2014 stressing the necessity of thorough preparation for this important bilateral event. They decided to speed up the preparatory work on the intergovernmental agreements on military and military-technical cooperation. The Ministers confirmed the aspirations of both sides to consolidate bilateral ties in the fields of culture, science and education”.

The 2+2 model of conducting a negotiation process with foreign countries has only recently been introduced by Moscow. Two key Russian ministers, one from defense and one from foreign affairs visit a foreign state and discuss a wide range of bilateral issues. Both Sergey Lavrov and in particular Sergey Shoigu, a career

diplomat and a professional soldier, though different in temperament enjoy the full trust of the Russian President Vladimir Putin. They also represent the two departments which are deeply involved in the international relations of the Russian Federation. Ministers Lavrov and Shoigu who seek to promote the strategic interests of Russia in every corner of the world are responsible for the direction of the Russia’s foreign policy.

Before this model was conceived, only one Minister from either the Foreign or Defense ministry visited a country. The Minister had to return to Moscow, spend time with colleagues and with the President in order to confirm or revise project(s) of cooperation. The “2+2” Ministerial Format as a model of policy implementation demonstrated its effect in the case of negotiations between Russia and the UK. As for Russian-Egyptian relations, the “2+2” Ministerial Format was launched in Cairo last November during the visit of Lavrov and Shoigu.

Focusing on the Egyptian aspect of the February negotiations, two ministers representing Foreign and Defense departments took part. One of the most intriguing questions being whether or not Al Sisi is going to become the next head of the Egyptian state as its President. Born in Cairo in November 1954, Sisi graduated from an Egyptian military academy in 1977 with a diploma in military sciences. He continued to train in the UK Joint Services Command and Staff College in 1992, and received a master’s degree at the US Army War College in Pennsylvania in 2006. So, Field Marshal Sisi does not belong to the Egyptian military generation that was oriented towards the Soviet Union and connected with the pro-Soviet sympathies of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Instead, he belongs to the generation of Presidents Sadat and Mubarak, with a corresponding military mentality and traditions. Al Sisi does not have combat experience but served as a military attaché in Saudi Arabia during the Mubarak regime. He then became chief of staff to the commander of the Northern military zone of Egypt. When the military council took power after the revolution, he was appointed as the head of military intelligence in February 2011.

The Interests of Russia and Egypt

Both Russia and Egypt are sincerely interested in each other and the numerous benefits from cooperation outweigh the existing contradictions between the two. Even the deposed President Morsi understood this and though faithful to the strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood he recognized the importance of a pragmatic cooperation with Russia. The 2013 visit to Moscow by Morsi was evidence of this realization.

So, what are the converging interests of Russia and Egypt? The answer to this question can be found partially in the joint statement cited above. The statement stressed, among other things:

“The Ministers condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, irrespective of its motivations, and underlined that terrorism cannot and should not be associated with any religion, culture or ethnic group. The Ministers agreed about the necessity to fight terrorism, piracy, organized crime, drugs trafficking and illegal migration they reaffirmed their total respect for the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria and rejection of any foreign intervention in its affairs and affirmed the right of the Syrian people to live in freedom, stability, security and prosperity. ...The Ministers reaffirmed their support for integrity and sovereignty of Libya and for the efforts of the Libyan leadership aimed at establishing stable and democratic state through a continued political process... The Ministers also discussed the issue of water use in the Nile basin, and stressed the importance of cooperation between the Nile countries for the realization of their developmental interests, while at the same time showing respect to international law governing the use of rivers by all countries of the basin”.

It is apparent that both sides are interested in combating the terrorist organizations which use the banner of Islam, regardless of where they commit their terrorist attacks – in the Sinai or in the Russian Caucasus. There is a supposition that the special services of two countries have started to develop a dialogue of mutual benefit. The ministers called for the territorial integrity of some Middle Eastern countries as a condition of building a safer and more pre-

---


3 Joint Statement upon the completion of the Russian – Egyptian “2+2” meeting Moscow, 12-13 February 2014. 270-13-02-2014.
dictable region. The unfortunate example of Libya serves as lesson for other states in the Middle East and North Africa. The critical issue on the agenda is Egypt’s battle for the water resources of the Nile in the coming decade. The battle will require modern weapons and a well-organized Egyptian army and the reasons as to why the defense ministers of two states discussed Egypt’s security needs in detail. The Russian Defense Ministry publication, Red Star stated that the counterparts’ agenda of cooperation consisted of: defense officials’ delegations mutual visits, joint military exercises and the training of Egyptian officers in Russian military schools. The Air Forces and Navy of Russia and Egypt have plans to deepen cooperation and improve coordination in meeting the security threats. In order to formalize this, according to Russian Defense Minister Shoigu a treaty or an accord on military cooperation needs to be signed 4

Putin’s Personal Diplomacy

As was the case with Algiers, Venezuela, Turkey, and some other countries, President Putin has continued to play the role of special negotiator in the case of Egypt. It is not only the fact that both Putin and Sisi share an intelligence background: Field Marshal Sisi served in Military Intelligence whilst President Putin served as director of Russian counterintelligence and in the foreign service of the Soviet KGB. Putin has intentionally used his political weight in promoting the foreign policy interests of Russia. He is the architect of the Syrian chemical weapons crisis settlement, the one who gave shelter to Edward Snowden and the sponsor of many of Russia’s international sports initiatives. Putin’s influence over policy in the Middle East is not an exclusion to the rule.

It should be noted that Putin does not engage with every foreign or defense minister who visits Russia. In this case, Putin decided to become acquainted with a man who is scheduled to become the next President of Egypt. Building personal acquaintances and establishing psychological bridges constitutes a complex but necessary objective of diplomats. The reports concerning the Putin-Sisi meeting confirm that this objective has been achieved to a degree. According to what has been reported, Putin told Sisi: “I know that you, respected Mr. Minister of Defense, have decided to run for president of Egypt. This is a very responsible decision, to take upon yourself responsibility for the fate of the Egyptian people. I wish you luck on my own behalf and that of the Russian people,” 5 This means that Putin has put his political weight behind a presidential bid by the Egyptian Army Chief in the hope of enhancing this relationship if Sisi wins the presidential election. However, as history demonstrates, unexpected political behavior can also occur.

Conclusion

To sum up, Russia has the following imperatives in its cooperation with Egypt:

• The Russian Federation is extremely anxious to obtain new strategic and reliable allies in the area after the Syrian crisis. The Arab Republic of Egypt seems to take pole position amongst the potential partners of Russia in the Arab East. In the opinion of Russian decision makers, relations with Egypt provide an opportunity for Russia to counterbalance the dominating influence of the United States in the Middle East.

• The Russian military industry aims to expand its markets for arms. Moscow sees Cairo’s interest in a military building up as an opportunity.

• Russia is possibly interested in elevating Egypt to a leading Arab power. It is no coincidence that President Putin in his discussion with Sisi said: the stability of the Middle East and North Africa depend in many ways on Egypt.

• Moscow is counting on cooperation for the continued fight against international terrorism. Due to the terrorist threat, thousands of Russians have refused to become tourists in Egypt. Additionally, Russia is afraid that the terrorist danger will spill over into its southern borders which even today cannot be classified as districts of stability and safety.


• Russia is going to increase its influence in the Middle East with the assistance of Egypt. Sensing support from China - which cannot be taken for granted – Russia is maintaining its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. We cannot exclude the possibility in the near future of an Egyptian proposal for the Russian Navy to deploy naval facilities in Alexandria or somewhere else on the Egyptian coast. After similar proposals from Cyprus this Egyptian initiative could be productive for Russia after problems emerged with the Syrian Tartus naval point.

An interesting geopolitical configuration is being formed in the Eastern Mediterranean in the form of Russia moves towards a deeper political-military cooperation with Cyprus and Egypt. Along with, Turkey, Cyprus and possibly Israel either separately or collectively as important partners in the energy security area. Time will demonstrate whether Moscow will be able to put Turkey and Egypt in the same basket.

In terms of Egypt, its elite has shown an interest in cooperating with Russia.

• Field Marshal Sisi and his team seek political diversification. They want to promote more space for political and diplomatic maneuvers with a change in the Middle Eastern policy of President Obama and the re-direction of the U.S. policy towards the Asian Pacific. Egypt under Field Marshal Sisi feels forgotten by the former patron and is rushing to protect his regime with the assistance of other Great Powers looking to take advantage of strains between Cairo and Washington.

• Cairo is also anticipating a battle over the Nile water resources and needs security assistance from reliable foreign partners such as Russia.

• Field Marshal Sisi is ready to guard the rights and safety of Christian minorities in Egypt. The Copts, for instance, have served as a traditional pillar of any political regime in Cairo. However, the interest of the General and his administration goes further. Egyptian decision-makers understand very well that supporting the local Christians will attract positive political relations with the EU and Russia and will create a better investment climate for the country.

In relation to the diverging interests between Egypt and Russia we can observe a paradox from the Egyptian side. If Russia considers the strained relations between Turkey and Egypt into account, Sisi is facing considerable challenges. The victory of Sisi over the Muslim Brotherhood translated into Saudi success in its regional competition with the Qatar. It is well known that Saudi Arabia and Russia disagree on some critical issues concerning the settlement of the Syrian crisis in any event, the Russian-Egyptian cooperation promises to be a constant and meaningful factor in the evolving geopolitical order of the Middle East.
Established in 2008, the Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM) is one of the leading think tanks in Turkey. As a non-profit, non-partisan organization BILGESAM operates under the guidance of a group of well-respected academics from different disciplines, retired military generals and diplomats; and aims to contribute regional and global peace and prosperity. Closely following the domestic and international developments, BILGESAM conducts research on Turkey’s domestic problems, foreign policy and security strategies, and the developments in the neighbouring regions to provide the Turkish decision-makers with practical policy recommendations and policy options.

Alexander Kornilov is Professor of international relations and head of regional studies department at Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod. He has published numerous articles on international relations and foreign policies of Middle Eastern and Transcaucasian countries.