As the Ukrainian crisis continues to develop in a negative direction, foreign policy experts have attempted to define the essence of Russia’s international strategy. Key questions have arisen: What is Russian President Putin’s thinking and strategy towards (1) EU and the US sanctions (2) Suspension of some NATO-Russia cooperation programs and (3) the effect of one million refugees from Ukraine displaced into regions across Russia. These questions are pertinent, especially since some in the West seem to think that all the problems in Ukraine point towards Russia as the guilty power.

There is nothing to suggest that President Putin has dropped his long-term strategy of transforming Russia into a power which commands international gravity and a pole of influence. Putin has maintained his schedule of visits, meetings and talks with foreign politicians and statesmen. The recent Russian-Egyptian talks in Sochi serve as an example.

Personal contacts and political agenda

Putin held talks in Sochi with President of Egypt Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on 12th August 2014, following which the two leaders made press statements. Before the official negotiations, Putin and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi visited the Laura Cross-Country Ski and Biathlon Centre in Krasnaya Polyana1 where intense discussions were held between the two sides.

It must be pointed out that the Sochi talks have a history. Although Field-Marshal Sisi became President of Egypt in June, Putin had meetings with him in February of 2014, during which he had wished the Egyptian military success in the Presidential elections. Sisi won the Presidential race and the Russian leader was probably the first foreign leader to congratulate him on his victory. Then in July, President Putin visited Brazil and openly showed his deep sympathy towards President Sisi when he said that if Sisi had not won Egypt would have been dragged into a nightmare of uncertainty. A move which was welcomed in Cairo. From the February talks in Moscow till the Sochi negotiations, the sides studied each other and discovered common ground on many foreign policy issues. As a result, the two countries are now considering the possibility of setting up free trade zones.

Agricultural cooperation was probably one of the main themes of the Sochi

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1 Russian-Egyptian talks. August 12, 2014. Sochi/ President of Russia// Available at: http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/22808
Russian-Egyptian Relations as a Part of the President Putin Strategy

Looking at the published statements in Sochi Russian experts have not rushed to make optimistic statements. Any optimism relates to tactics rather than the strategy of the Russian-Egyptian relations. In this sense it is interesting to read an estimation of one respected columnist in the Moscow-based Expert Online journal. Gevorg Mirzayan of the Russian Academy Institute of the US and Canada as well as contributor to the Expert Online thinks that agricultural cooperation between Russia and Egypt does not have long-term and strategic future. Firstly, because Egypt cannot be considered as a reliable supplier. The case is not in the stability or non-stability of the Sisi regime. The reason lies much deeper and relates to the water geopolitics in the Nile River basin. Ethiopia is going to finish building its hydro electrical power plant very shortly. The Ethiopian water reservoir building will bring considerable harm to the Egyptian irrigation system. Second of all, Mirzayan argues that Russian sanctions against Europe will be lifted in the near future. A strong and very influential agricultural lobby in the EU will force Brussels to normalize relations with Russia. As a result, Egyptian imports will lose their significance.

Hence, Mirzayan concludes that the Sochi agreements in the field of agricultural cooperation have tactical importance. Moreover, according to some experts, the Putin declaration about free-trade zone with Egypt seems to be more rhetoric than substance. It is also not clear, in what way this zone will correspond to the Customs Union and what will be the reaction of other participants in the CT Egypt’s accession.5

Russian Experts on Russian-Egypt Perspectives after Sochi

It is in the field of military technical cooperation which stands out as the most important and long-term element of the Russian-Egyptian cooperation. In recognizing this Putin stated,

*We are also actively developing military technical cooperation. In March, we signed a corresponding protocol. We are supplying arms to Egypt and have agreed to expand this cooperation.*

The question which the Russian experts are asking is related to the direction in which these military ties are developing. For example, should the Middle Eastern countries expect the Russian-Egyptian cooperation to grow high rates, and understand the necessity to increase grain imports. In Sochi, the Egyptian side wanted to know Russian export capabilities for this year. For Egypt, this will be at least 5-5.5 million tons. Russia covers about 40 percent of Egypt’s overall grain consumption. At the same time, Egypt has already increased its supplies of agricultural products to Russia by 30 percent, and is ready to increase this by another 30 percent in the near term.2

### Russian Agriculture

The President’s meeting on 12th August in Sochi with President Sisi of Egypt started with a meeting of the two presidents aimed to outline the key initiatives of their cooperation. The Russian and Egyptian sides stated that the current bilateral relations are at a high level both in high-level political contacts and in economic cooperation. Both Presidents also touched upon further cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Both Presidents also touched upon further cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy. In recognizing this Putin stated,

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2 Ibid.
3 Eghypit pomozhet Rossi pip kompensoirovat defisit fruktof i ovoschei/ Izvestia. 12 avgusta 2014// Available at: http://izvestia.ru/news/575178
4 Press statement following Russian-Egyptian talks. August 12, 2014. Sochi/ President of Russia// Available at: http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/22810
6 Press statement following Russian-Egyptian talks. August 12, 2014. Sochi/ President of Russia// Available at: http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/22810

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a Russian military base or should Russian naval facilities be established on Egyptian territory? According to Russian military analyst and head of the Center for Middle East and Central Asia Countries Research, Simeon Bagdasarov, the Egyptian President cannot refuse the substantial annual financial assistance from the United States. The same is with the case of Saudi Arabia, having already invested in Sisi’s project politically and militarily. Russia is ready to sell weapons but it knows that the money for the weapons has come from Saudi credits to Cairo. In other words, Sisi depends on Saudi and US financial and military assistance. Moreover, the Egyptian President has learned a very impressive lesson from the fight against the Moslem Brotherhood and President Morsi, both of whom used political support from the Obama Administration. Thus, in opinion of President Sisi, Russia could serve as a counterweight to the United States.

According to Bagdasarov, Sisi will limit his support to the sale of Russian military supplies and deliveries to Egypt. Sisi will not progress further because of political turbulence in the Middle East and serious problems with his country’s economy. Bagdasarov doubts that Russia will re-establish its military base in such a Middle Eastern country. Editor-in-chief of the Problems of the National Strategy and political scientist in the Moscow-based Russian Institute of Strategic Studies Adzhar Kurtov, expects US pressure on Egypt when it comes to the sale of Russian modern weapons such as the S-400 anti-aircraft system.

Another perspective sees the Egyptian market as promising for Russian investments and building projects. Vice-President of the Russian Academy of geopolitical problems, Colonel Vladimir Anokhin looks at the bilateral relations more optimistically. He has expressed a hope that President Sisi moves to a new version of Nasserism in ideology and action within Egyptian politics. Colonel Anokhin argues that Russian military specialists in Egypt could create a positive atmosphere in directing the re-establishment of a military base.

Russian Middle East researcher, Leonid Yisayev, sees a benefit to Russia from its cooperation with Sisi. Russia considers President Sisi as an ally in the fight against international terrorism and a partner in settling actual regional issues like the Syrian one. Alexei Malashenko of the Carnegie Foundation in Moscow asserts that neo-Nasserism as ideology is positively considered by the Kremlin and reminds them of the Soviet era warm relations with Egypt.

Conclusion

Russian-Egyptian relations under Putin constitute one of the instruments in Moscow foreign policy strategy. President Putin has obviously moved towards transforming Russia into an influential center of global influence and meaning. Some important components of the strategy have been put forward, such as military build-up, secret diplomacy, energy factor, Russian soft power. Other issues have been put aside, such as Russian relation and contribution to international organizations like WTO, courts and others. It is too early to predict what will be the case in 3-5 years as Putin proceeds with trial and error. Putin’s team has a variety of methods and instruments at its disposal. Such as: BRICS, Shanghai Organization of Cooperation, the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union as well as strategic agreements with China and Latin American states. Having unprecedented popular support at home and understanding in some foreign capitals, Putin has contributed to the process of establishing an alternative design of the international order. Regional dimensions of the new order in the Middle East has already led to the discovery of a special relationship with Turkey, Iran, Syria and today with Egypt. All these countries are meant to be poles (small poles) of independence. Some tactical concessions, retreats and defeats of Russia in the CIS or beyond will not remove the final aim of the strategy. In fact, quite the opposite.

7 Baza v strane pharaonov/ Russian Institute of Strategic Studies. 14.08.2014// Available at: http://www.riss.ru/my-v-smi/3491-baza-v-strane-faraonov#.U-x6aqBhQms
8 Ibid.

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.

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