

Egypt, Russia discuss closer military cooperation

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Last week, a Russian delegation headed by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defence Minister General Sergey Shoygu visited Cairo for bilateral talks with their Egyptian counterparts, Defence Minister and de facto military junta leader General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, and Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy.

The “2+2 talks” marked the highest-level meeting between Egypt and Russia for decades. While Lavrov has been in Egypt several times before, Shoygu was the first Russian defence minister to visit Egypt since 1971.

Egypt and Russia praised the visit as “historic,” vowing to re-establish closer economic and military ties. Shoygu announced that both countries have agreed to hold joint military drills to fight “terrorism and piracy” and “to step up exchange of delegations and expand cooperation between the Navies and Air Forces.”

Lavrov said Russia is “ready to help Egypt in all fields where it seeks co-operation,” particularly pointing to the “military and military-technical field.” Russia has reportedly offered to sell Egypt MiG-29 fighter jets, attack helicopters, anti-tank missiles and low-range air-defence systems worth at least US\$2 billion.

The Egyptian side was keen to stress the past close relationship with Russia. According to the official Egyptian news agency MENA, Sisi said the visit marked the continuation of “historic strategic relations” and the beginning of “a new era of constructive, fruitful cooperation on the military level.”

After a meeting with Lavrov, Fahmy proclaimed: “We want to give a new impetus to our relations and return them to the same high level that used to exist with the Soviet Union.”

Egypt and Russia had a close partnership during the 1950s and 1960s, when former Egyptian president

Gamal Abdel Nasser—after initially flirting with Washington—established close economic and military ties with the Soviet Union.

From the 1970s on, relations between the two countries cooled rapidly. In 1972, then-Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat evicted more than 15,000 Soviet advisors from Egypt and subsequently broke with the Soviet Union and realigned Egypt with the US after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Since the 1979 Peace Treaty with Israel, Egypt has become one of the staunchest US allies in the Middle East, receiving US\$1.3 billion in US military aid yearly.

Russia’s economic and military ties to Egypt pale in comparison to those of the United States. Russia is the second-largest supplier of weapons to Egypt with 19.4 percent of the arms trade, far behind the US’s 71.8 percent. On trade, Russia ranks only seventh, with a 2.8 percent share of Egypt’s foreign trade. This is after the European Union (23 percent), China (8 percent), the US (7 percent), and Turkey and Saudi Arabia (both 4 percent).

Moscow currently leads only in two fields: it is Egypt’s largest wheat supplier and also provides most of its tourists.

While Egyptian officials stressed that they are not seeking to replace Egypt’s close alliance with the US “with another party,” the Russian visit highlights increasing tensions between Cairo and Washington and the deepening crisis of US imperialism in the Middle East.

Commenting on the high-level talks between Russia and Egypt, Russian foreign policy and security experts declared that they were part of a move by Moscow to exploit the current weakness of US foreign policy in the Middle East.

The *Financial Times* quoted Ruslan Pukhov, a

member of the Russian defence ministry's advisory board, saying that strained relations between the US and Egypt had created “a loophole in the regional architecture. Now we are going to use this loophole to restore Russia's influence in the region.”

Another scholar close to the Russian foreign ministry said: “Look at Syria – it is in shambles. Look at Libya—it is falling apart. We want not only to be listened to but also to see our interests and wishes to be taken into consideration.”

Since the revolutionary ouster of Washington's long-time stooges Zine Abedine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in early 2011, US foreign policy in the Middle East lies increasingly in shambles. Washington's initial attempts to block the radicalisation of the working class and defend its hegemony over the Middle East have had disastrous consequences.

The NATO war against Libya has produced an unstable puppet regime in Tripoli under attack from the Islamist militias and rival gangs that NATO unleashed to topple the Gaddafi regime. In Syria, against which Washington nearly launched a full-scale war in September, the Obama administration has backed a deadly Islamist-led insurgency that has cost tens of thousands of lives and forced millions to flee their homes.

In Egypt, the US had to drop Islamist president Mohamed Mursi after mass protests erupted against his rule. Although Washington backed the July 3 military coup as a pre-emptive strike against mass protests by the working class, the Obama administration repeatedly criticised the Egyptian junta for failing to reach a deal with the Muslim Brotherhood regime that it toppled in the coup.

In an unprecedented step last month, Washington declared that it would cut some of its military aid to Egypt. The Egyptian junta criticised the decision as “wrong in terms of content and time,” and some Egyptian officials declared that Egypt could look for other countries for military aid—specifically mentioning China and Russia.

Following the Russian visit to Egypt, there are no reports that any deal has been signed yet. A number of international observers are questioning if the crisis-ridden Egyptian regime can finance such a major arms deal at all. However, other political analysts expect that

a considerable deal is under way. The US think tank Stratfor indicated that it expected it to be “certainly the largest and most important between the countries since the 1970s”.

Any such deal would have not only vast implications for Egypt-Russia relations, but for the international politics of the entire Middle East, throwing into question the strategic partnership between Egypt and the US and thus Egypt's peace deal with Israel.

According to Pukhov, “a package of this size would have to be not just equipment sales, but go hand in hand with a broader cooperation, including on foreign policy goals.”

In an unabashed challenge of US-Israeli positions, Russia and Egypt announced having a common view on Palestine and Syria. Fahmy declared that “we both agree on having a Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 borders, and a political, not military, solution in Syria.”

Following the talks, Egypt's interim president, Adly Mansour, held a phone conversation with Russian president Vladimir Putin inviting him to visit Cairo later this month. A statement issued by the Kremlin declared on Saturday that “both sides praised results of the talks between the defence and foreign ministers of Russia and Egypt held on November 13 and 14 in Cairo.” The statement added that Moscow intended to develop the Russian-Egyptian bilateral cooperation.

Highlighting Russia's increasing weight in Egypt, the Russian missile cruiser *Varyag*, the 11,490-ton flagship of the Pacific Fleet, docked in Egypt's Mediterranean port city of Alexandria last week, accompanying the Russian delegation.



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