

Is Egypt on the Way to Becoming a Regional Power?

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Key Points

- Regional power is a term used to describe a country that has authority or power within a geographic area. Countries that exercise influence within a region of the world have and act with expressions not only of their own interests but, at least in principle, as representative of the region's interests as well.
- Internal stability leads to external influence. During the period of President Sisi's rule, Egypt succeeded in achieving internal stability and restoring its national identity.
- Egypt has adopted a clear foreign policy based on the principles of openness and balance to all regional and international powers in its foreign relations with other countries.
- Egypt follows a strategy that it does not accept spreading and exporting chaos in its neighborhoods, which is what it is working on hard within diplomatic policy and quiet contacts with neighboring countries.
- Seven years after the rule of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt turned into a regional power that controls the formulation of the region's policies and protects its interests anywhere.
- The most important challenges facing Egypt, which are directly related to threatening its national security and internal stability, are related to the Libyan crisis, the Renaissance Dam crisis, and human rights issues.

Introduction

Egypt's geopolitical importance lies in being open to different geopolitical dimensions at the same time. It overlooks the North African region from the east, connects to the African depth from the north, Sinai allows it to connect with the Middle East and the Levant by land and sea through the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and it overlooks the Arabian Peninsula through the Red Sea. This positioning gives it options to take roles on more than one regional platform simultaneously. Egypt possesses natural resources, the most important of which are gas, oil, and cotton, and is considered one of the world's richest countries with historical monuments, which qualifies it to occupy advanced ranks globally in terms of attracting tourists and consequently hard currencies. It also owns the Suez Canal, which generates regular income. Egypt is the largest in the Arab world in terms of population and possesses a military force not insignificant in terms of manpower and qualification. Considered one of the most important Arab countries, it is a great regional power and is distinguished by its strategic importance and has an effective role in the Arab region. Here, the same basic question arises: "Is Egypt a regional power?"

The definition of "regional power"

A regional power is part of a geographically, politically and economically intertwined politically, and culturally with the region, has a subjective impression of being a regional leader, greatly influences the geopolitical borders and political makeup of the region, and reflects/exercises its physical resources (military, economic and demographic) and its organizational (political) and ideological capabilities on the regional arena as a force that has a real influence on regional affairs in terms of “movements and results”, it exercises this influence through regional governance structures, and determines the regional security agenda to a large extent by itself. Its leadership position in the region is recognized by others, or respected by them, and acts on the behalf of not only of their own interests but is often seen as a representative of the interests of the region as well.¹

Regional power is a complex concept that requires a merger between the perspective of international relations and the perspective of geopolitics. It is a multifaceted issue that includes factors related to the internal strength of the country concerned, the natural resources it possesses, the method by which it is employed, the role of policies and strategies, the existence of a political system and institutions capable of employing its resources, and the interactions made with the regional environment. The concept of power is fundamental in international relations, and it is interpreted as the state's control over its resources, especially military ones.²

Analysis

Over the past several years, the political leadership of Egypt, headed by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, succeeded in rebuilding state institutions on national concepts that are consistent with the strategic vision of an effective regional state on the region. During that period of rule, and despite some unrest, as far as I am concerned, I consider Egypt to have succeeded in achieving stability internally and restoring its national identity, which enabled it to formulate a regional vision that gained the respect of various international powers. President Sisi's strategy was applied along parallel tracks, the first of which was to strengthen the home front and confront terrorism, an effort that was reflected in the world's respect for Egypt's handling of extremist groups. Egypt relied on the strategy of stabilizing the pillars of the state and restructuring its institutions on a national basis, thus enabling those institutions while dealing with external files in all directions. The confidence that President Sisi succeeded in gaining popularly enabled him to make difficult decisions in terms of economic reform, which forced the various countries of the world to re-evaluate their positions on the June 30 revolution.³

Regional supremacy of the Egyptian army

Choosing the path of peace with Israel some 42 years ago and accepting it according to various strategic calculations did not prevent the Egyptian army from developing its capabilities and bringing in advanced types of tactical weapons, aircraft, missiles, and naval frigates in preparation for preventing an attack on Egyptian interests and not for the purpose of initiating offensive battles with others. This remarkable growth in the Egyptian army dates back historically to the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, and since then the Egyptian army has received weapons from the United States worth \$1.3 billion annually.⁴ The Global Fire Power website,

1 Ali Hussain, “Is Egypt a "regional power"?” Aljazeera Center of study [المكانة الإقليمية لمصر في الذكرى الثامنة لاندلاع الثورة](#) | [Al Jazeera Center for Studies](#) (accessed Sep 8, 2021)

2 Nolte, Detlef, “, How to Compare Regional Powers: Analytical Concepts and Research Topics, , GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, May 2007, p.15 (accessed Sep 8, 2021)

3 Ahmed Aamer, “In 7 years, Egypt imposes itself as a regional power,” Alahram gate newspaper, <https://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/2758265.aspx> (accessed Oct 4, 2021)

4 Eman Moluk, “Regional supremacy of the Egyptian army,” Alarabia nsewspaper, <https://www.dw.com/ar/%D8%AA%D9%81%D9%88%D9%82-> (accessed Oct 5, 2021)

- The performance of the Egyptian pound, which achieved the second-best performing currency in the world during the first half of 2019, improved, and rose by 6.5% against the US dollar. The reason for this is due to the increase in inflows of hard currencies, whether from workers' remittances abroad or the rise in tourism revenues, as well as foreign direct investment.
- Decrease in the debt-to-GDP ratio to reach about 87%.

Egypt Political/Diplomatic Role

Egypt was able to prove its active role regionally, as seen through recent Egyptian moves, especially in the Libyan and Palestinian files. Egypt is following a strategy that does not accept spreading and exporting chaos in its neighborhoods, which it is focused on within the framework of diplomatic policy and quiet contacts with neighboring countries. One might say that Sisi is presenting himself as a regional mediator and is trying to return Egypt to the position of the main player or indispensable actor in the region. The Egyptian external performance reflects this trend. Egypt's adoption of a balanced policy with the international powers and the diversification of its sources of armament enabled it to reject dependency and guardianship over its political and strategic decisions. In the first half of 2021, Egypt signed cooperation agreements in the fields of defense, intelligence, and security with four countries in the Nile Basin: Sudan, Uganda, Burundi, and Kenya. In addition, President Sisi reorganized relations with Sudan and signed agreements to implement trade relations with Tanzania, Zambia, South Sudan, and Djibouti.⁸

At the regional level, Egypt has succeeded in maintaining its national security in the West through what it has done in confronting terrorist groups and mercenaries, actions clearly announced by Cairo where the Egyptian president sent a warning message to those who try to threaten Egypt's national security, stressing that his country's army is one of the strongest armies in the region. If the Egyptian army launches a military operation in Libya, a lot will change on the ground, putting terrorist militias and mercenaries in a very difficult position and pressuring the intrusive forces to withdraw. In the northern strategic direction, especially in the Mediterranean region, the Egyptian state established the concept of cooperation between the countries of the region, and the Egyptian role had the greatest impact in obligating all of the states to seek paths of cooperation as an alternative to conflict after Cairo proved that it will not allow any party to attack its wealth and undermine its gains.

In the northeastern direction addressing the Palestinian issue - the first Arab issue - Egypt played a pivotal role in bringing together the Palestinian parties and supporting them to agree on a national agenda, in addition to Cairo's role in stopping the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip. The Egyptian role in the Palestinian cause included several angles, and Egypt seeks to complement that success by returning the Palestinian cause to the focus of the global light. The Security Council thanked the Egyptian political leadership, headed by President al-Sisi, for its positive role in the Palestinian cause. Egypt made intensive moves in the southern direction, starting with supporting the will of the Sudanese people in their revolution, in addition to supporting the transitional phase in Sudan, and also the humanitarian support provided by Cairo to the Sudanese people. The Egyptian moves in this direction also included the countries of the Horn of Africa and of the Nile River Basin, and it signed a series of strategic, economic, and military agreements with those countries, led by Kenya, Djibouti, Somalia, Tanzania, Congo, and others.

⁸ Nawrz Khalel, "The Egyptian army, What are the capabilities of the military force," Skynews Alarabia, <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1354586-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A> (accessed Oct 12, 2021)

Whoever follows the Egyptian regional movements finds it revolving in the orbit of emphasizing political settlements in dealing with all conflicts and tensions related to Egyptian and Arab national security, or even the security and stability of the region and the world.⁹ Cairo focused on these areas based on strength calculations as it completed the construction of its advanced military machine, and after its success in breaking the monopoly on arming its army and not limiting it to one side. To devote Egypt its influence and role, or to invest that as a tool for deterrence and to give priority to political solutions. The first path is inconsistent with its completely nonaggressive historical character, which the current Egyptian regime continues to adhere to and intertwines its circles and works to stabilize it in all the tests and challenges it is going through. Egypt has avoided the first way and has moved away from defending its interests by war and has tried to fully avoid it, as it does not conform to the current desire of its leadership to build a modern, aspiring and stable state. Egypt evaded various attempts to exhaust it economically and distract its security attention in the war it waged against terrorist organizations and also managed to not be pulled directly into the military intervention in the Libyan crisis, and it still adheres to the friendly understanding with Ethiopia, based on the conviction that its power will not engage in wars unless there is a necessity to do so.

Who ended the raging conflict in Gaza? ¹⁰ Who led the world to end the conflict with the fate of the Palestinian people in Gaza in a short period of time, brought the parties together and charted the path to salvation? It was the Egyptian state, and all countries of the world have cooperated with it so that things do not reach such dire consequences. Turkey had broad ambitions, and this was evident in its interventions in the Arab world in more than one country, and its alliances with the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam groups are prominent.¹¹ Egypt was able to open the way for Turkey to return to a country that plays natural and realistic roles and opens new communications with Arab countries. In an event that gives positive indications, the Qatari foreign minister visited Cairo and presented statements suggesting new directions that represent the second phase after the Al-Ula summit that was held in Saudi Arabia. The Qatari minister stressed that Egypt is one of the major countries in the region and plays a leading role in regional files. In Libya, the important, effective, and influential Egyptian role has emerged in directing events there and managing the international and regional balances of power, guiding Libya to return to a stable and independent state whose people enjoy its bounties and rejects the new colonialists under any name or slogan. Egypt is not only the cornerstone or backbone of the Arab countries, but also announces its true regional hegemony through its presence in the Horn of Africa and the heart of Africa.

Egyptian-US cooperation

Egypt has formulated strategic and balanced relations with the major countries, led by the United States, China, and Russia, away from the concept of dependency and in accordance with the concept of equality. The US administration is striving to strengthen its cooperation with Egypt as an effective regional power amid regional challenges, especially the Iranian threat. Both Washington and Cairo showed a recent convergence in several interests in the region, especially in the need to support international efforts to combat terrorism and religious extremism, in addition to rejecting foreign interference in Libya and working to support political solutions. The United States is also counting on Egypt to support stability in the Gulf region with the escalation of the Iranian

9 Mohammed Fadl, "Egyptian military power to reduce regional tensions," Alarab newspaper, <https://alarab.co.uk/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8> (accessed Oct 13, 2021)

10 Abdullah Alotabi, "Regional balance and the return of Egypt," Alarabia newspaper, <https://www.alarabiya.net/politics/2021/06/01/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D> (accessed Oct 18, 2021)

11 Jonathon Markes, "Turkey's ambition," BBC news, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2016/10/161025_mosul_iraq_turkey_analysis (accessed Oct 20, 2021)

threat, as Washington believes that it is necessary to rely on allies, both international and regional, to confront the dangers posed by some forces that refuse to abide by international laws. The United States relies on Egypt to push the Palestinians and Israelis back to the negotiating table and support peace efforts, given that the file represents great importance to the Arab region and some regional powers are still exploiting it for their interests.

Development boom/infrastructure

The June 30 revolution brought about a great economic and social development boom that can be referred to through national projects on the part of the roads, infrastructure, and services sector, which was reflected on the stability of the country internally and moving towards external stability and for the region as well. Egypt conducted free medical examinations for about 70 million citizens as part of the initiative to detect communicable diseases, known as "100 million-health", and treated more than 6 million patients with the "C" virus. Egypt has provided housing for all classes of society, through real estate financing and social, medium and distinguished housing, and the lives of villagers are being upgraded through the "dignified life" project, in addition to Sinai entering the era of development by operating four universities, and it is expected to increase to six Universities soon.¹² The infrastructure witnessed a great development in Egypt, and the Egyptian government paid great attention to developing the infrastructure of the Egyptian state because it would have a positive impact on attracting foreign investments, resulting in Egypt being ranked first in Africa in terms of attracting foreign investment.

The Egyptian president decided to lift the state of emergency in the country for the first time in more than four years. Sisi attributed his decision to the fact that "Egypt has become an oasis of security and stability." On April 10, 2017, Parliament approved declaring a state of emergency for three months to "confront the dangers of terrorism", in response to two attacks that targeted two churches in the north of the country, killing at least 45 people. The terrorist organization "ISIS" claimed responsibility for these attacks at the time, and since then the state of emergency has been extended dramatically. Periodically, it was supposed to be extended. This is a good indication of the improvements, the internal development boom, and the internal stability that Egypt is witnessing.¹³

Egypt's internal stability that resulted from these improvements allowed Egypt to expand its influence regionally. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi launched the "National Human Rights Strategy" to develop the state's policies and directions in dealing with relevant files to enhance respect for all civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights, according to a statement by the presidency. On the other hand, the Biden administration has decided it will hold back some but not most of \$300 million in conditioned military aid to Egypt over human rights concerns. A US official stated that the money that is being sent will also have restrictions on its use.¹⁴ One might say that Egypt still faces human rights challenges from the point of view of the West. I partially agreed with this proposition considering the initiatives and achievements done during the era of President Sisi, I acknowledge the role of his government in promoting good health care and providing education for all classes of society.

12 Salman Esmaeel, "Egypt after June 30," Alroeya study, <https://www.alroeya.com/60-63/2227809-%D9%8> (accessed Oct 18, 2021)

13 Mohammed Qasem, "Sisi cancels the state of emergency in Egypt," Alrabia.net site, <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-rld/egypt/2021/10/25/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%BA%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84> (accessed Oct 18, 2021)

14 NAHAL TOOSI, "Biden to withhold, restrict some military aid to Egypt," Politico Foreign Policy [Biden to withhold, restrict some military aid to Egypt - POLITICO](#) (accessed Oct 18, 2021)

Consequently, as far as I am concerned, a new evaluation throughout another lens is required from the Biden Administration in regard with the human rights issue in Egypt.

Egypt and the US policy of Partner of Choice (PoC)

Egypt has adopted a clear foreign policy based on the principles of openness and balance to all regional and international powers in its foreign relations with other countries, without leaning to the right or left, as well as engagement, positivity, and effectiveness, and presenting purely Egyptian visions in various global issues, stressing the importance of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This was reflected in distinguished relations with America, Europe, Russia, and China. Key aspects of their policies include a comprehensive concept of human rights, the protection of Egypt's national security, a successful return to Africa, and the fight against terrorism and interference. The Egyptian foreign policy directly influenced its relations with various countries of the world, so that it became clear that Egypt can maintain its relations with the major powers without affecting the independence of its decisions or positions, and without any party understanding these relations as directed towards or against any other party. This was clearly demonstrated by the tremendous rapprochement witnessed by Sisi's presidency with the leaders of both Russia and China at the same time as it established the principles of close relations with the American side, and this was clearly demonstrated through Russia's participation in many development projects in Egypt, especially in the Suez Canal area, the energy sector, military cooperation, and coordination in several regional issues, particularly the fight against terrorism. The same applies to China, where Egyptian interest in benefiting from China's impressive economic experience coincided with China's interest in Egypt in the framework of its historic Silk Road project, and the trade value between Egypt and China rose to more than 11 billion dollars. In general, Egypt's relations with the three major countries were characterized by cooperation, understanding, and harmony, as well as friendly features that cannot be overlooked.¹⁵

Egypt is still eager for increased military cooperation with the US. However, the Egyptian leadership will continue to focus on increasing its capabilities, if not with US arms, then via deals with Russia or China. Cairo perceives itself as an indispensable strategic US ally in the Middle East. It shares US goals of peace and stability in the Middle East and North Africa. Mutual military cooperation goes beyond transactional military hardware purchases, as Egypt grants the US preferential logistical access through its airspace and the Suez Canal, which is fundamental for a sustainable US presence in the Arabian Gulf. Likewise, Cairo, amongst few other Middle East military powers, has the capability to effectively counter Iran's regional influence. The current approach to the PoC should be changed and adapted to meet the strategic requirements of the partner. The US should re-evaluate its partnering policies through better understanding of Egypt's strategic needs. The US planning process is generally limited to a 5-year period with a tactical focus based on foreign military sale (FMS). To better understand the needs of partners, the country teams' planning process should reset to form a medium-term and preferably long-term view (at least 25-year). Such an approach would provide a meaningful vision for USCENTCOM's SC and MIL GPC strategies. Thus, the US' short-term vision, excessive focus on transactional capacity building through weapons sales, and rigid restriction on partners buying systems from competitors, threatens US PoC status with Egypt. USCENTCOM's notion of a PoC appears to be derived from a transactional context. It focuses on the supplier-customer relationship. It is interesting to note that partnerships are not centered on transactions, but rather about the rationale, emotions, and perceived length of the relationship.¹⁶ Egypt has sought to diversify its

15 Hani Asel, "Sisi .. and an active and effective foreign policy Equality, balance, independence, mutual respect and partnership relations," Alahram gate study, <https://gate.ahram.org.eg/daily/News/203408/12/> (accessed Oct 19, 2021)

16 LCDR Stipe Skelin, "Defining 'Partner of Choice'" CSAG Strategy paper issued on Sep 15 2021, (accessed Oct 19, 2021)

defense relations given the difficulties with the United States and the Biden administration's decision to halt major aid. Consequently, Egypt sought to purchase weapons, including S-300 air defense systems, from Russia and the warship *Mistral* from France. Among the most prominent indications of the improvement of Egyptian-American relations is the increase in the volume of trade exchange between the two countries during the past year (2021) by 14.71%, from \$7.53 billion to about \$8.638 billion.¹⁷

Regionally, Egypt is facing challenges

Egypt is facing regional challenges that are mainly related to conflicts in their area, and Egypt's role in them and its ability to present initiatives for a solution in a way that prevents its repercussions from negatively spilling over to Egyptian interests. This also includes the Syrian war and the position of Iran's role, whether in the region or related to influencing the security of the Gulf. The most important direct challenges facing Egypt, which escalated at an accelerating pace at the end of 2019, and which will be a priority for Egyptian foreign policy, are those related to Ethiopia and Libya.¹⁸

Libya, which shares a western border 1,115 kilometers long with Egypt, represents the most important challenge recently, and the conflict in Libya is a challenge to Egyptian national security. Egypt hosted several meetings to bring the conflicting factions to the negotiating table, along with members of the House of Representatives in Tobruk to solve the Libyan crisis, which aims to end the Libyan conflict. But the Libyan crisis is still protracted and has continuing effects on Egypt, which includes in one of its objectives the exit of terrorist elements from Libya.¹⁸

The issue of the "Renaissance Dam" remains a pending file in which the Egyptian state has shown wisdom, prudence, and patience, with its constant affirmation that it will not give up its legitimate rights in the waters of the Nile. One might understand well the Egyptian position, respect the Egyptian options that are still open, know well the intractable internal problems of the Ethiopian decision-maker, and that the ways to get rid of them cannot be by exporting them to Sudan and Egypt. It can be said that the most important challenges facing Egypt, which are directly related to threatening its national security and related to the Libyan crisis and the Renaissance Dam crisis, show that the continuation of these crises without a solution exacerbates their repercussions, which threaten the interests of Egypt directly and its allies indirectly.¹⁹

Conclusion

From my own perspective, Egypt succeeded in achieving internal stability and restoring its national identity, which enabled it to formulate a regional vision that won the respect of various international powers, and thus succeeded in advancing a regional role as well. There is no doubt that Egypt as a country has resources of power and a political system capable of employing these resources as well as the will to employ them, the right policies and successful strategies to make it a regional power. The emergence of current and future indicators confirms that Egypt is a regional power because the political and economic situation in Egypt has been radically rehabilitated.

For this reason, Egypt succeeded in obtaining a temporary membership for two years in the Security Council, the presidency of the African Union for a year, and membership in many international organizations and institutions,

17 Ibid

18 Abdullah Alotabi, "Regional balance and the return of Egypt," Alarabiya news, <https://www.alarabiya.net/politics/2021/06/01/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%> (accessed Oct 20, 2021)

19 Ibid

in addition to the establishment of the Organization of Eastern Mediterranean Gas Countries based in Cairo. All these successes were achieved thanks to a clear political vision of the government, a popular confidence in the political leadership, frankness between the regime and the people, a serious effort toward cooperation, and a regional role that supports stability and peace in its Arab, African and international surroundings. The task of restoring the Egyptian state and its regional and international roles was a major task, undertaken by the Egyptian people and army with effects that became clear to everyone, and the unlimited support provided by Saudi Arabia and the UAE played an unforgettable role in this context. Finally, the return of a strong and effective Egypt is a re-arrangement of the balance of power in the Middle East, away from foreign interference

Recommendations for the US/USCENTCOM

- US Central Command should recommend the sale of FMS equipment to Egypt and long-term service packages based on Egypt requirements and their need of counter-terrorism equipment.
- US Central Command should recommend lifting political pressure on Egypt with regards to the issue of human rights.
- Continue security cooperation activities with Egypt's Armed Forces to strengthen joint counter-terrorism efforts, especially in Sinai and the Libyan border.
- Enhance Egypt's reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities to counter terrorist and weapon smuggling operations across the Libyan borders.
- Share intelligence between CENTCOM and Egypt's Armed Forces.
- Continue providing military assistance to Egypt to protect the Suez Canal and secure international energy routes to address terrorist groups' movements throughout the AOR.