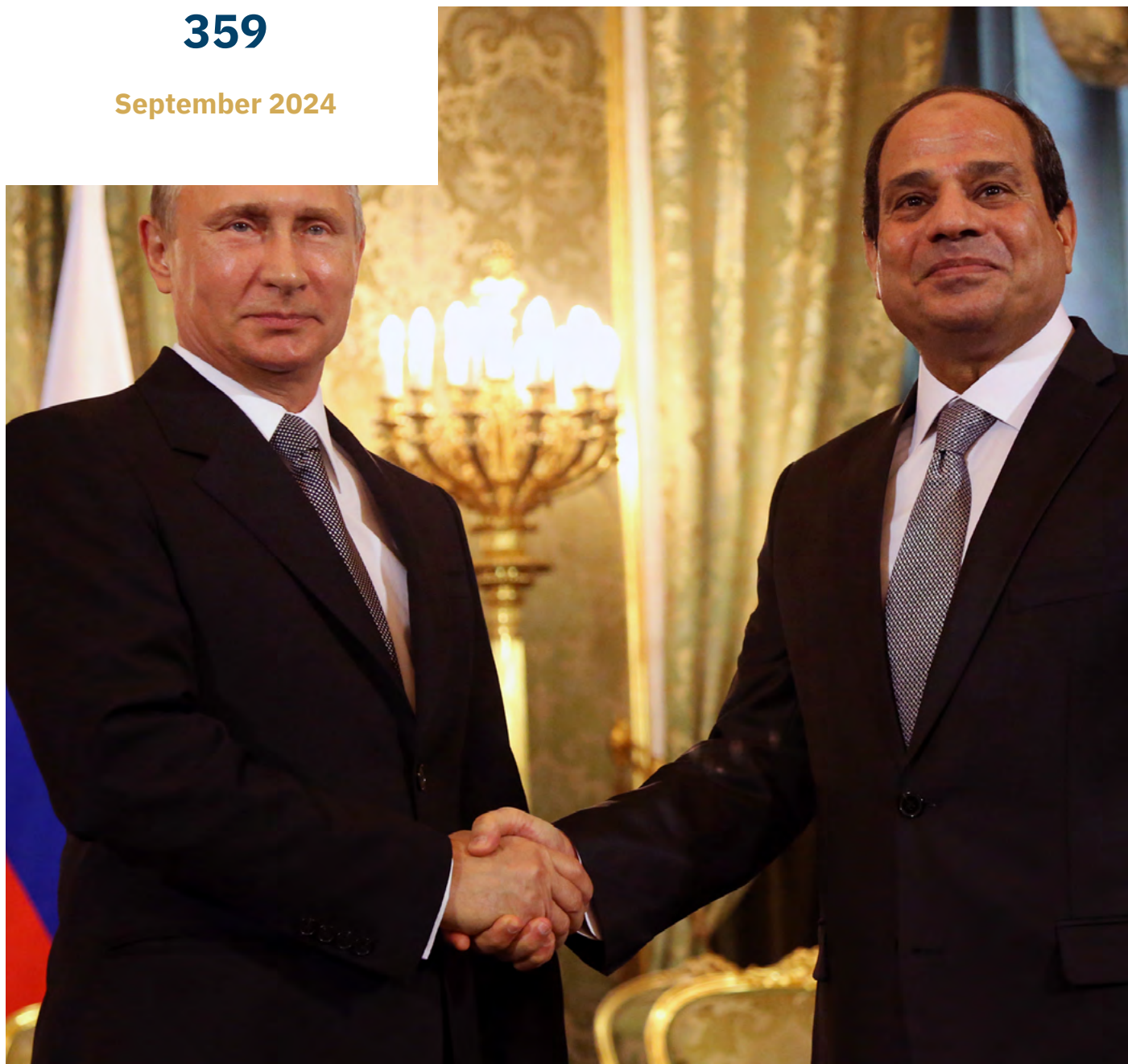


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Strategic Partners or Tactical Allies? A Decade of Egypt–Russia Relations

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Abstract

Egyptian–Russian relations have expanded significantly in the past decade, especially over the past five years. The two countries have collaborated extensively in the security, defence, energy and technology sectors, as well as bilateral trade. This has culminated in high-profile agreements and ventures, including high-level visits between the two heads of state. Their relationship appears to be withstanding various challenges and global tensions, such as attempts by the West to isolate Russia after it invaded Ukraine in 2022 and Egypt’s increasingly dire economic situation. This paper assesses the drivers of the current Egyptian–Russian relationship and its evolution over the past decade. Although both Cairo and Moscow have relied on the language of a strategic partnership to describe their close ties, the relationship reflects a tactical convergence and is mostly structured around mutual interests. Along with Syria, Iran and the United Arab Emirates, Egypt forms a key part of Russia’s turn to the Middle East and Africa. At the same time, Egypt perceives closer cooperation with Russia as a way to balance its relationship with the US. Meanwhile, both actors have expressed strong support for reinforcing national sovereignty and security and have aligned in their embrace of authoritarianism and strongman approaches, including in Syria and Libya.

Introduction

What are the drivers of the contemporary Egyptian–Russian relationship? How has this relationship evolved over the past decade? Has a strategic alliance developed as a result of intensifying bilateral relations between the two countries, and how does the growing Egyptian–Russian alignment fit with each country’s broader strategic priorities and objectives?

This paper explores the two countries’ diplomatic, military and economic relations. It focuses on the past 10 years (2014–2024), with particular attention given to the past five years (2019–2024). This is the period during which Egyptian–Russian relations intensified, with the election of Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi as president and the military’s return to power in Egypt. At the same time, 2014 is regarded as the starting point of the shift in Russia’s gaze towards Africa, mainly after sanctions were imposed on it as a result of its annexation of Crimea.¹

This relationship has become increasingly important over the past five years. Russia’s pursuit of new allies in Africa and the Middle East has become even more strategic in the face of its increasing isolation from the West. Similarly, Egypt’s desire to diversify its alliances and take advantage of the growing global multipolarity has resulted in a recognition of the benefits of closer relations with Russia. Russia’s military base in Syria, which has ensconced its presence in the region, along with its ability to fundamentally shift the outcome in the Syrian war, is viewed as an illustration of its power and its potential value as an ally.

It would be a mistake to understand Russian policy as originating in this period and emerging as a result of its isolation

It would, however, be a mistake to understand Russian policy as originating in this period and emerging as a result of its isolation. Instead, Russian focus on the Middle East and Africa is the result of a concerted effort for more than a decade to regain its past influence and glory. This effort has only begun to bear fruit in the past decade.²

From the mid-1950s until the 1970s, the Soviet Union was Egypt’s main global ally despite Egypt’s official posture of neutrality and non-alignment during the Cold War. The Soviet Union helped to construct key industrial infrastructure in Egypt in the 1950s. Examples

1 Tereza Němečková, Lea Melniková and Natalia Piskunova, “Russia’s Return to Africa: A Comparative Study of Egypt, Algeria and Morocco”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 59, 3 (2021): 367–390.

2 Alexey Malashenko, “Russia and the Arab Spring”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 1, 2013.

include the Aswan Dam and Egypt's first nuclear research reactor, in Inshas. The Soviet Union was also Egypt's military supplier and backer during the Arab-Israeli wars in 1956, 1967 and 1973. When Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat sought to realign Cairo with the US, he expelled Soviet diplomats and experts. The US-brokered peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, the Camp David Accords, signed in 1978, cemented Egypt's status as a US ally, with it receiving over \$2 billion a year. While Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, re-established diplomatic relations with Russia, the relationship remained surface level, mainly focusing on issues such as Russian tourism to Egypt.

After Mubarak's ousting during the Arab Spring in 2011, Muhammed Mursi was elected president the following year. During his year in office, he officially visited Moscow, where he sought to restore relations with Russia. Mursi ultimately failed to secure much support from Russia, which was generally sceptical about the revolutions in the Middle East. The shift in the Egyptian-Russian relationship occurred in 2014 after the election of Sisi, who had deposed Mursi in a coup d'état the previous year. Sisi's approach and position aligned with that of Russia's President Vladimir Putin, particularly the emphasis on stability at all costs, the desire to restore the military's power and the pursuit of a more flexible foreign policy.

This became all the more pertinent to the Egyptian president after his lukewarm reception in Western capitals, which led Cairo to reassess its relationship with Washington. Since 2014, Russia and Egypt have collaborated in strategic realms, such as military exchange (with Egypt procuring advanced Russian weaponry) and trade (Egypt currently represents 40% of Russia's trade in Africa).³

In assessing the drivers of contemporary Egyptian-Russian relations and their evolution over the past decade, this paper suggests that the relationship does not necessarily represent a strategic partnership, even if it has expanded significantly. Rather, the renewed bilateral ties between Cairo and Moscow stem from their converging positions on critical contemporary issues. The two actors have shown substantial flexibility and pragmatism in their relationship.

The paper begins with an overview of the context of Russia's 'entry' into the Middle East and Africa, after which it discusses diplomatic, military and economic relations. It highlights how diplomacy has revolved around security and stability and how Egyptian and Russian relations have been marked by flexibility and pragmatism. The focus then shifts to Egypt's procurement of Russian military materials while still seeking a degree of malleability and neutrality. The paper also examines trade, tourism and technology exchange, which are critical sectors for collaboration between Egypt and Russia. It concludes by reflecting on the implications of this relationship and the potential hazards that may undermine it in future.

3 Russia-Africa Second Summit, "Outcomes of the first Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum. Roscongress to Continue Working on the African Track until the Next Forum", <https://summitafrica.ru/en/news/podvedeny-itogi-pervogo-sammita-i-ekonomicheskogo-foruma-rossija-afrika-roskongress-prodolzhit-rabotu-na-afrikanskom-treke-v-period-do-sledujushego-foruma/>.

Overview: Russia, the Middle East and Egypt

Russia's foray into the Middle East and the African continent has expanded significantly over the past decade.⁴ Its presence in the Middle East and Africa is based on opportunism, as it seeks to promote multipolarity, offering alternatives to the status quo of Western dominance. In addition to gaining geopolitical leverage through these partnerships, Russia also pursues alternative economic arrangements in Africa, including agreements on natural resources.⁵ The most significant indication of its footprint in the region is the permanent Russian military base near Latakia in Syria, which was inaugurated in 2015. There are plans for a Russian naval base in Sudan as well, although the deal has not yet been finalised.⁶

In addition, Russia continues to be involved in the war in Libya, which has entailed the deployment of the private military contractor known as the Wagner Group (now Africa Corps) since at least 2018. Wagner has also operated in the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Mali, Sudan and Burkina Faso.⁷ Moscow has signed more than 20 bilateral military cooperation agreements with various African states since 2015.⁸ In the Sudanese civil war, it provides Sudan's military leadership with arms and political support in exchange for gold, while Wagner supports the Rapid Support Forces (the militia fighting the military).⁹

Beyond the military sphere, Russia increasingly seeks to engage the Middle East and African regions through various economic and scientific collaborations.¹⁰

Reports suggest that many regional actors have a positive view of Russia's presence, either because it is seen as a counterbalance to the dominance of other global actors or because of Russia's history in supporting independence movements.¹¹ At the same time, the US and Western Europe are critical of Russian influence in Africa. However, Russia is unlikely to retreat from the continent – in fact, it is more likely to increase its presence as it challenges the perception that it is facing international isolation.

Relations between Egypt and Russia are structured around various mutual interests. If there is any ideological congruity between the two, it pertains to authoritarianism and the emphasis on reinforcing national sovereignty and security. To varying degrees,

4 Mariel Ferragamo, "Russia's Growing Footprint in Africa", Council on Foreign Relations, December 28, 2023.

5 Vuk Vuksanović, "Moscow's Continent: The Principles of Russia's Africa Policy Engagement" (Occasional Paper 341, South African Institute of International Affairs, Johannesburg, March 2023).

6 Hamza Hendawi, "Sudan Army Set to Give Russia Red Sea Base in Exchange for Arms", *The National*, June 5, 2024.

7 Isaac Kaledzi, "Where Do Russia's Ties with Africa Stand?", *DW*, July 25, 2023.

8 Emmanuel Dreyfus, "Moscow's Limited Prospects in Sub-Saharan Africa" (Kennan Cable 47, Wilson Center, Washington DC, February 2020); Jakob Hedenskog, *Russia Is Stepping Up Its Military Cooperation in Africa*, FOI Memo 6604 (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018); Karolina Lindén, *Russia's Relations with Africa: Small, Military-Oriented and with Destabilising Effects*, FOI Memo 8090 (Stockholm: FOI, January 2023).

9 Nima Elbagir et al., "Russia Is Plundering Gold in Sudan to Boost Putin's War Effort in Ukraine", CNN, July 29, 2022; Nima Elbagir et al., "Exclusive: Evidence Emerges of Russia's Wagner Arming Militia Leader Battling Sudan's Army", CNN, April 21, 2023.

10 Mathieu Droin and Tina Dolbaia, *Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa. What's the Limit?*, Report (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 15, 2023); Paul Stonski, "Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa" (Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, October 16, 2019).

11 Droin and Dolbaia, *Russia Is Still Progressing*.

both countries have sought to regain lost glory, with Russia seeking to become a global superpower again and Egypt aiming to revive its role as a regional hegemon. While each has adopted its own tactics to pursue these objectives, their strongman approaches are often aligned. Sisi was re-elected as president in December 2023 in another broadly farcical election, which took place after lawmakers changed the constitution and allowed him to seek a third term while extending the term to six years. Similarly, Putin won his sixth presidential election in March 2024, expanding his one-person rule in Russia (he also served as Russia's prime minister for two terms).¹² Crackdowns against political opponents marred both polls in a shrinking space for dissent.¹³ Both presidents have faced international criticism of their leadership style. Having cemented their power, Sisi and Putin are trying to obtain more room for manoeuvre to achieve their political objectives. Still, they face significant challenges, mainly linked to potential economic collapse.

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Russia has strengthened its ties with Turkey and Iran as well, alongside its intensive involvement in Syria since 2012, which enabled the survival of the Assad government. Yet it would be a mistake to view Egypt's increasing collaboration with Russia as a step towards the creation of a new alliance or a regional bloc. Neither Russia nor Egypt seems interested in restructuring its foreign policy according to this relationship, which instead demonstrates flexibility and balance.

Indeed, Russia's partners in the Middle East and Africa do not constitute a cohesive group, as Egypt has relations with numerous actors in the Middle East and beyond, including Iran. For example, Egyptian-Turkish relations saw a significant downgrade after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's condemnation of the coup d'état launched by Sisi against the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, which Turkey had tacitly supported.¹⁴ The two countries officially restored relations only in 2023. The move towards a rapprochement – although they continued to trade extensively even at the height of the dispute – suggests a recognition of mutual interest.¹⁵

12 Pjotr Sauer and Andrew Roth, "Vladimir Putin Claims Landslide Russian Election Victory", *The Guardian*, March 18, 2024.

13 Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Court Punishes Activists for Challenging al-Sisi: Prison Sentences Aim at Deterring Peaceful Dissent", February 8, 2024; "Vladimir Putin Extends His Crackdown in Russia", *The Economist*, February 8, 2024.

14 "Rival Powers Turkey and Egypt Try to Mend Ties After Long Rift", *Reuters*, May 5, 2021.

15 Amr Adly, "How Egypt and Turkey Trade Amid Tensions", Carnegie Middle East Center, October 19, 2021; Borzou Daragahi, "Turkey and Egypt Bury the Hatchet, Marking an End to Emerging Third Axis in the Middle East", Atlantic Council, March 15, 2024.

Egypt has sought to balance its relations with Western states and Russia in an increasingly multipolar global order. In this context, its foreign policy has rested on a desire to diversify its alliances, relying on a strategy of diplomatic hedging. It endorses forums such as BRICS, for example, as a tool of this new multipolarity with more leadership from the Global South.

Diplomacy, security and stability, pragmatism

Egypt began to invest more in its ties with Russia after 2013. Their relationship was revitalised, changing dramatically during this period. While this did not redefine Egypt's foreign policy stance, the turn to Russia offered it an alternative to its traditional allies.

Following the 2013 coup, the US and Western states seemed reluctant to embrace the new leadership.¹⁶ They had supported the popular revolution that ousted Mubarak and were hesitant to embrace the return of the military, particularly after a massacre in August 2013 that killed nearly 1 000 Muslim Brotherhood supporters. Sisi, however, had the backing of regional actors – such as the Gulf states and Israel – that perceived the return of the military as a return of stability. They considered the military familiar and dependable, as well as capable of curbing Islamism in the region. Given the fear of being isolated by the West, Sisi began seeking other allies, such as Russia.¹⁷

Turning to Russia weakened Egypt's long-standing relationship with the US, and Sisi found more commonality with Moscow, which was weary of the Arab Spring. Russia feared the prospect of regime change, which many associated with the rise of Islamism and its potential spread across the Middle East and closer to Russia's own borders. In addition, Russia feared that the geopolitical upheaval would pave the way for US unilateralism, which prompted its intervention to prop up the Assad regime in Syria. Russia advocated stability rather than revolutionary change, which aligned with Sisi's outlook and agenda.

Historical relationship

There is a strong convergence of interests between the two authoritarian leaders of Egypt and Russia. The two presidents increasingly seek to signal to the US that their foreign policies are not up for debate or influence. Both want to show that they are not isolated internationally or beholden to the policies of the US in the Middle East. They are also keen to emphasise their historical relationship, including, for example, Soviet expertise in building Egypt's Aswan Dam, and have likened it to the construction of the El Dabaa nuclear power plant by Rosatom (a Russian state corporation).¹⁸ Yet, while the Soviet legacy

16 Michele Dunne, "US Policy Struggles with an Egypt in Turmoil", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 22, 2014.

17 David Butter, "Egypt and the Gulf: Allies and Rivals" (Research Paper, Chatham House, London, April 20, 2020).

18 Gamal Essam El-Din, "The Russians Are Coming", *Ahram Online*, January 30, 2024; "El Dabaa NPP as Significant as Aswan High Dam, Says Russian Ambassador", *World Nuclear News*, March 11, 2021.

is invoked to emphasise the depth of the relationship, the Egyptian–Russian partnership is predominantly grounded in contemporary circumstances, and this historical legacy does not play a practical role beyond the level of popular nostalgia.

The relationship between Sisi and Putin seems, in fact, personal. Numerous analysts have cited their chemistry and shared worldview, which prioritises stability.¹⁹ Some attribute the mutual warmth to their shared military backgrounds and pragmatic approaches. Other top figures in the Egyptian and Russian political spheres are also said to have developed warm personal relationships.²⁰ Furthermore, as scholars have suggested, Russia seeks relations with authoritarian leaders who also face increasing isolation.²¹ Egyptian military and intelligence agencies dominate not only the realm of security in the country but also government, economic policy and even cultural institutions. Their role in the country has become autonomous and extensive, which means they are able to shape foreign policy and develop new alliances, including pursuing relationships they deem strategic.

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Sisi is wary of relying solely on the US for military aid, given the looming threat that military aid may be cut owing to human rights violations.²² Reports that Egypt was bribing US senator Bob Menendez have led to calls to further reduce military assistance to the country. Menendez's replacement as the head of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations has said he would hold back \$245 million in military funds.²³ Some have suggested Egypt's attempt to maximise assistance from both the US and Russia may reflect a re-emergence of the non-alignment policies practised by newly decolonised countries during the Cold War; however, the current policy orientation is not based on solidarity with other postcolonial actors.

Russia's support for Sisi, who represents the return of the Egyptian military to power, is consistent with its approach to the Arab Spring uprisings, which increasingly became a counter-revolutionary policy.²⁴ Russia has continued to emphasise the importance of security

19 Khalil Al-Anani, "The Fallout of Sisi's Gambit with Russia", Arab Center Washington DC, April 14, 2023; Essam El-Din, "The Russians Are Coming"; Jared Malsin and Summer Said, "Egypt Resists US Calls to Arm Ukraine", *The Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2023.

20 Vuksanović, "Moscow's Continent", 6-7.

21 Leonid M Issaev, "Russia and Egypt: Opportunities in Bilateral Relations and the Limits of Cooperation", Al Sharq Strategic Research, January 26, 2017.

22 Ellen Knickmeyer, "The US Says Egypt's Human Rights Picture Hasn't Improved, but It's Withholding Less Aid Regardless", *Associated Press*, September 15, 2023.

23 "With Menendez Out as Committee Chair, US Aid to Egypt Held Back", *The New Arab*, October 4, 2023.

24 Leonid Issaev, "Russia and the Arab Spring: From Understanding to Condemnation", *Manara Magazine*, May 10, 2021.

and stability, adopting a policy of strengthening the state and its centralised institutions. Its position has been to advocate stability at any cost, which aligns with Sisi's domestic and international policies. He has imposed stringent counter-terrorism laws that give the Egyptian state a *carte blanche* in dealing with people deemed security threats.²⁵

Pathway to the Middle East and Africa

In addition to Egypt's and Russia's aspirations to boost their multilateral relations, Russia views Egypt as a pathway to the Middle East and Africa. Through closer ties with Egypt, Russia can become more directly involved in theatres ranging from the eastern Mediterranean to North Africa and the Horn of Africa. Egypt is, accordingly, a strategic location for Russia to project and extend power into regions where its activity has grown in intensity.

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Russia works closely with Egypt, for example, on regional forums and uses Cairo as a hub. Putin and Sisi co-hosted the first Russia–Africa Summit in October 2019 in Sochi, Russia, where 43 other African state representatives were present. At the meeting, Putin said that Africa was a geopolitical priority for Russia.²⁶ Sisi was also at the second Russia–Africa summit in St Petersburg in July 2023, where Russia offered African states debt relief and grain shipments. While only 17 heads of state were present, nearly 30 sent their second-in-command. The summit, originally planned for October 2022 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia was postponed owing to sanctions against Russia. Therefore, the forum was crucial for Russia to push back against its image as isolated. Instead, it sought to highlight that it was able to establish new relations with new actors and not only those with which it has traditionally cooperated. Yet, despite Russia's growing toehold and the interest in industries on which the forum focused (such as energy, logistics, transport, agriculture, finance and healthcare), many African actors are not entirely convinced that a Russian intervention is in their best interest.²⁷

25 Marina David Ottoway, "Al-Sisi's Egypt: The State Triumphant", in *The Return of Egypt: Internal Challenges and Regional Game*, ed. Stefano M Torelli (Milan: Institute for International Political Studies, 2015), 15–28; Human Rights Watch, "[Egypt: Intensifying Crackdown Under Counterterrorism Guise](#)", July 15, 2018; Amnesty International, "[Draconian Amendments to Egyptian Laws Spell Further Disaster for Human Rights](#)", April 19, 2017; Cairo Institute for Human Rights, "[Egypt: Weaponizing Counter Terrorism Laws to Silence Human Rights Defenders](#)", June 28, 2021.

26 Moussa Soumahoro et al., "Russia-Africa Summit: What Was in It for Africa?", *ISS Peace and Security Council Report* 160 (2023).

27 President of Russia, "[Plenary Session of the Russia-Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum](#)", July 27, 2023; Henry Meyer, "[Putin Enters Contest for Africa After Humbling US in Mideast](#)", *Bloomberg*, October 23, 2019.

Areas of alignment and disagreement

Russia and Egypt are generally aligned on post-Arab Spring Middle East issues and the need for a return to stability. In October 2016, Egypt voted in favour of a Russian-backed resolution on Syria at the UN Security Council.²⁸ Egypt, similarly, has emphasised that the Syrian military, under President Bashar al-Assad, should remain intact. This position is based on the argument that rebuilding a professional and disciplined military will be complicated and messy, citing the Iraqi experience after the US invasion in 2003. Some analysts have suggested that the disbanding of the Iraqi army led to the rise of non-state armed groups in that country.²⁹ Egypt and Russia accordingly both supported the presence of a strong military to prevent the rise of non-state actors. Syria's reintegration into the League of Arab States in May 2023 was a win for Russian policy in the Middle East. It illustrated a de facto acceptance of Assad, challenging Western states' insistence on refusing to deal with him.³⁰

Russia's position on Libya also mirrored Egypt's, leading to increased cooperation between the two countries. In March 2017, Russian Special Forces deployed to an airbase near the Salloum border area in western Egypt, and Russian aircraft reportedly used Marsa Matrouh, situated on Egypt's Mediterranean coast, to carry out operations in Libya.³¹ An agreement signed in 2017 allowed the two states to use one another's airbases and airspaces, signalling a significant shift in Egyptian policy.³² While the agreement's language is reciprocal, it will likely be one-way, as it is unclear in what capacity Egypt would need access to Russian bases or airspaces.

However, the countries have clashed on other issues. For example, in July 2021 Egypt criticised Russia's language regarding its dispute with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).³³ The hydroelectric dam has been built on the Blue Nile, the source of 85% of the Nile's waters, and could double Ethiopia's electricity output. Downstream countries Egypt and Sudan have opposed its construction. Egypt depends entirely on the Nile for fresh water and to power its own hydroelectric power plant, the Aswan High Dam, and views the GERD as a violation of its national security. Moscow insisted that the issue be handled in a diplomatic forum and has tried to position itself as a possible mediator in the conflict. Egypt's frustrations have only intensified since, as Russia has continued to supply arms to Ethiopia, most recently the Krasukha-4 electronic warfare system, which was displayed at an Ethiopian military parade in October 2023.³⁴

28 Mada Masr, "Egypt Votes for Rival UNSC Resolutions on Syria from Russia and France", October 9, 2016.

29 Mark Thompson, "How Disbanding the Iraqi Army Fueled ISIS", *Time*, May 28, 2015.

30 Giorgio Cafiero and Emily Milliken, "Analysis: How Important Is Syria's Return to the Arab League?", *Al Jazeera*, May 19, 2023.

31 Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali and Lin Noueihed, "Exclusive: Russia Appears to Deploy Forces in Egypt, Eyes on Libya Role – Sources", *Reuters*, March 13, 2017.

32 David D Kirkpatrick, "In Snub to US, Russia and Egypt Move Toward Deal on Air Bases", *The New York Times*, November 30, 2017.

33 Samuel Ramani, "Russia and the GERD: An Uneasy Balancing Act", Middle East Institute, August 16, 2021; Amr Emam, "Egypt Disappointed by Russian Stance on Nile Dam Dispute", *Al-Monitor*, July 16, 2021.

34 Dylan Malyasov, "Ethiopia Unveils New Russian-made Electronic Warfare System", Defence Blog, October 28, 2023.

For its part, Egypt found itself in a difficult position after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Immediately after the invasion, Cairo made an ambiguous statement in favour of dialogue between Russia and Ukraine and called on the two countries to find a diplomatic solution to de-escalate the conflict.³⁵ This vague language triggered widespread criticism from G7 and EU representatives in Cairo.³⁶ Egypt subsequently voted in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution criticising the invasion by Russian forces and demanding their immediate withdrawal from Ukrainian territory.³⁷ Egypt also participated in the African Peace Initiative in June 2023, which entailed visits by African leaders to both Ukraine and Russia. The 10-point proposal led by South Africa discusses mutual recognition of sovereignty, de-escalation and negotiations, humanitarian support and the resumption of grain exports, which were interrupted by the war and have led to a rise in food prices in Egypt and elsewhere in Africa.³⁸

Despite its efforts at neutrality and support for an end to the war, Egypt has continued collaborating with Russia. The war seemingly does not affect their relations and Egypt has insisted on a position of positive neutrality. Furthermore, Egypt has stressed its 'outright rejection of using economic sanctions outside the framework outlined by the mechanisms of the multilateral world order', citing humanitarian concerns over the use of sanctions.³⁹ It seems to be using multilateral diplomacy as a way to resist Western pressure to isolate Moscow. While Egypt does not want to endanger its lucrative relationship with Russia, it also does not want to distance itself completely from the West.

Meanwhile, the US's support for Israel's war in Gaza has led to a further decline in its credibility in the Middle East.⁴⁰ The US has continued to back Israel and provide it with weapons despite evidence of unlawful conduct during the war, including its killing of tens of thousands of civilians (among them many children) and targeting of civilian infrastructure. The US has vetoed numerous UN Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire and abstained from Resolution 2728, which called for a temporary ceasefire for the month of Ramadan. The council rejected an amendment proposed by Russia for a permanent ceasefire.⁴¹ The US's posture has allowed Russia to present itself as an alternative without its having to do much.⁴² Many in the Global South have pointed to a double standard in the US's rhetoric of human rights and liberal values, which they perceive as not being applied equally in Israel's case.⁴³

Since the beginning of the war in Gaza, Russia has been increasingly perceived as siding with Hamas and the group's main backer, Iran (which has been sending weapons to Russia

35 Egypt, State Information Service, "Egypt and Russian-Ukrainian War", March 31, 2023.

36 US Embassy in Egypt, "G7 Ambassadors: We Must Stand with Ukraine", March 1, 2022.

37 Egypt, SIS, "Egypt and Russian-Ukrainian".

38 Mayeni Jones, "Africa's Ukraine-Russia Peace Mission: What Was Achieved?", *BBC News*, June 19, 2023.

39 Egypt, SIS, "Egypt and Russian-Ukrainian".

40 Paul Adrian Raymond, "Will Unconditional US Support for Israel Harm Its Ties with the Arab World?", *Al Jazeera*, October 27, 2022.

41 UN News, "Gaza: Security Council Passes Resolution Demanding 'an Immediate Ceasefire' During Ramadan", March 25, 2024.

42 Hanna Notte, "Putin Is Getting What He Wants", *The New York Times*, October 26, 2023.

43 Neil MacFarquhar, "Developing World Sees Double Standard in West's Actions", *The New York Times*, October 23, 2023.

for use in Ukraine).⁴⁴ Egypt has sought to adopt a more neutral stance, acting as a mediator in ceasefire talks or even negotiations for a longer-term settlement. It views its relations with the numerous actors in the conflict – the US, Israel and Hamas – as an asset in this regard. This appears to have paid off: in September 2024 the Biden administration announced that it would no longer withhold a portion of the US’s military assistance to Egypt, citing Cairo’s centrality in Israel/Palestine and US national security priorities. Since September 2021 Washington has withheld \$130 million of military aid owing to Egypt’s lack of progress on human rights.⁴⁵

Cairo has firmly rejected any proposal to ‘transfer’ Palestinians to the Sinai Peninsula, a move that many suggest would recall the mass forced displacement of the Nakba in 1948 and constitute ethnic cleansing. Given Egypt’s proximity to Gaza, its lack of intervention is perceived as enabling Israel to carry out massacres of Palestinians. Although Egypt has criticised Israel for the high civilian death toll in Gaza, it maintains their alliance, which is itself generally conducted quietly. There are disagreements between Israel and Egypt over the former’s seizure of the Philadelphi Corridor, in which the Rafah crossing from Egypt to Gaza is located. Israel seeks to retain control of this area while Egypt argues that an Israeli military presence violates the terms of the Egyptian–Israeli peace agreement.⁴⁶

However, Cairo’s posture vis-à-vis Palestine and Israel is significantly riskier than that with Russia and Ukraine, given its proximity to the war and the fact that its border with Gaza was – until May 2024 – the only one that Israel did not control. This means that people in Egypt have paid close attention to the government’s actions and policies during this critical period. Its perceived neutrality may risk antagonising its population, leading to domestic instability.

The bilateral relationship between Egypt and Russia thus appears to be driven by pragmatism rather than ideology. The current revitalisation of their relationship results from the convergence in their positions on critical issues, which both states have used to their benefit. Yet, the two actors have also demonstrated considerable flexibility and have continued to cooperate despite Egypt’s attempts at neutrality on issues that are highly polarising globally, such as Israel/Palestine and Russia/Ukraine.

Military deals and Egypt’s attempts at neutrality

Egypt has sought to diversify its sources of military hardware, much like its approach to diplomacy on the international level. As a result, it has tried to move away from the perception that it is primarily dependent on the US for military aid. The US’s conditioning of aid to Egypt on an improvement in its human rights record does not appear to have

44 Milàn Czerny, “Israel and Russia: The End of a Friendship?”, *Carnegie Politika*, November 21, 2023.

45 Humeyra Pamuk, Simon Lewis and Patricia Zengerle, “Biden Administration Set to Deny \$130 mln in Military Aid to Egypt, US Officials Say”, *Reuters*, January 29, 2022.

46 Peter Beaumont, “What is the Philadelphi Corridor, and Why Is It So Important to Israel?”, *The Guardian*, September 3, 2024.

yielded intended results. The US seems to have little leverage on this issue, as Egypt has indicated that it would rather find alternative arms sources than offer political openings or cease its harsh crackdowns on rights activists.⁴⁷ In March 2024, Egypt passed new legislation allowing the military to become further entrenched in civilian life and take over civilian infrastructure.⁴⁸

Arms procurement

The US had been Egypt's leading supplier of arms since the 1970s, when Egypt expelled its Soviet advisers and aligned itself with the US – a move that entailed making peace with Israel after four wars. This political and economic decision was part of a strategic reconfiguration of its role in the global order.⁴⁹ Following the Camp David Accords, signed in 1978 between Egypt and Israel, Egypt became the second-largest recipient of US aid after Israel, receiving around \$2 billion per year, most of which went to the military.⁵⁰

This arrangement remained intact until the US's icy reception of Sisi after the coup. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), between 2000 and 2009, 75% of Egypt's arms deals were with the US. In contrast, the US only accounted for 23% of Egypt's military procurement in the subsequent decade.⁵¹ Egypt signed 75 deals with suppliers from 15 countries during the latter period.⁵² The SIPRI data shows that Russia was the source of 20–40% of Egypt's military imports between 2013 and 2023.

Since 2014 Egypt has reached new military agreements with Russia, France, Germany, China and Italy, buying advanced weapons systems at highly lucrative prices.⁵³ The purchases include types of weapons the US had previously refused to sell to Egypt, owing to the US's official policy of 'qualitative military edge' (QME). This policy, adopted by the US after the 1973 war between Egypt and Israel, seeks to ensure that Israel's military has technological superiority in the region.⁵⁴ US military partnerships in the Middle East are calibrated against this principle: they are required to either downgrade weapons sold to Arab states or upgrade Israeli weapons. For example, the US has refused to sell Arab states F-35 fighter jets due to QME and attempts to make an exception for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were blocked.⁵⁵ Unlike numerous Gulf states and Israel, Egypt's requests for F-15 fighter aircraft have been turned down by the US.⁵⁶

47 Bradley Bowman, Jared Thompson and Ryan Brobst, "Egypt's Transition Away from American Weapons Is a National Security Issue", *Defense News*, May 25, 2021.

48 Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: New Laws Entrench Military Power Over Civilians", March 5, 2024.

49 Ibrahim A. Karawan, "Sadat and the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Revisited", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2, no. 2 (1994): 249–266.

50 "Factbox: Most US Aid to Egypt Goes to Military", *Reuters*, January 29, 2011.

51 Alexandra Kuimova, "Understanding Egyptian Military Expenditure" (Background Paper, SIPRI, Stockholm, October 2020).

52 Kuimova, "Understanding Egyptian Military Expenditure", Annex 2, 20–23.

53 Kuimova, "Understanding Egyptian Military Expenditure", 13–14.

54 David M Witty, "Egyptian Armed Forces Communications Agreement with the US and Israel's Qualitative Military Edge", MECRA, October 2, 2019.

55 Elisabeth Gosselin-Malo, "Emirati F-35 Prospects Languish Amid High-Stakes Chinese, US Courting", *Defense News*, May 1, 2024.

56 David M Witty, "The US–Egypt Military Relationship: Complexities, Contradictions and Challenges" (Policy Focus 176, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington DC, 2022), 94.

As a result of its extensive investment in new military systems, Egypt became the third-largest arms importer in the world between 2016 and 2020 (and the second largest in the Middle East, after Saudi Arabia).⁵⁷ It remained among the top-10 arms importers from 2018 to 2022, becoming Russia's third largest military recipient after India and China – Russian arms exports to Egypt grew by 44%.⁵⁸ Despite this surge in weapons sales to Egypt, Russia's share of global arms exports declined by more than 50% during this period.⁵⁹ Some transactions have also not gone through: for example, the US thwarted a deal in which Egypt was to buy dozens of Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets from Russia in 2022. Some sources suggest the jets may eventually be transferred to Iran.⁶⁰

As analysts have pointed out, Egypt's most significant security challenge has been the insurgency waged in the Sinai Peninsula, rather than a confrontation with a foreign power. It does not need this military infrastructure, which the country's military leadership uses for posturing and prestige.⁶¹ Accordingly, the procurement of military hardware can be understood as one of Sisi's 'vanity projects', which include developing a new capital city, expanding the Suez Canal and building a nuclear reactor.⁶² These vanity projects have not resulted in material benefits for Egyptians and have been carried out with little oversight or public input. For example, procuring new military hardware is not included in Egypt's official defence budget.⁶³

The first major weapons deal between Egypt and Russia was worth \$3.5 billion and signed in 2014. This package included air defence systems with surface-to-air missiles and 50 MiG-29 combat aircraft with 225 air-to-air missiles.⁶⁴ Five years later, Egypt signed another agreement of around \$2 billion to buy 24 Su-35 fighter jets from Russia.⁶⁵ In addition to the jets themselves, the deal is thought to include training packages, leading to a longer-term connection between the two militaries. The US responded to this news by stating it could impose sanctions if the deal went ahead, as its Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act includes imports of military equipment from Russia. In the case of Turkey, which is a NATO ally, its purchase of a Russian air defence system in 2019 ultimately led to its exclusion from an F-35 warplane programme by Washington.⁶⁶

Yet, despite this pressure, Cairo has not scaled back its military relationship with Moscow. The two countries participated in a joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Alexandria in December 2021.⁶⁷ Egypt's unwillingness to alter its engagement with Russia posed new

57 Peter Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020" (Fact Sheet, SIPRI, Stockholm, March 2021).

58 SIPRI, "Surge in Arms Imports to Europe, While US Dominance of the Global Arms Trade Increases", March 13, 2023.

59 SIPRI, "European Arms Imports Nearly Double, US and French Exports Rise, and Russian Exports Fall Sharply", March 11, 2024.

60 Paul Iddon, "Iran Reportedly Receives Russian Jets, but They Aren't the Long-Sought-After Su-35 Flanker", *Forbes*, September 3, 2023.

61 Marina Ottaway, "Egypt and the Allure of Military Power", The Wilson Center, Viewpoints Series, June 21, 2022.

62 Maged Mandour, "Sisi's Vanity Projects", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 6, 2019.

63 Ottaway, "Egypt and the Allure"; Kuimova, "Understanding Egyptian Military Expenditure", 1.

64 "Russia, Egypt Seal Preliminary Arms Deal Worth \$3.5 Billion: Agency", *Reuters*, September 17, 2014.

65 "Egypt Signs \$2 bln Deal to Buy Russian Fighter Jets – Kommersant", *Reuters*, March 18, 2019.

66 Terry Atlas, "Turkey Snubs NATO with Russian Arms Deal", *Arms Control Today*, October 2017.

67 Egypt, SIS, "Joint Egyptian-Russian Naval Exercise 'Friendship Bridge-4'", February 13, 2022.

tensions after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. According to US intelligence documents leaked on the Discord app in April 2023, Egypt ordered the production of 40 000 rockets to supply to Russia. The president sought to keep it quiet 'to avoid problems with the West'.⁶⁸ Reports suggested that the rationale for this move may have been 'weapons for wheat' – ie, Egypt would exchange the weapons for Russian wheat, meaning that it would not have to use its scarce foreign currency for the payment.⁶⁹

However, a senior Egyptian official denied that the information in the leaked documents was accurate.⁷⁰ Shortly after the leak, reports in the US claimed that Egypt did not follow through on the plan. Instead, following intense pressure from the US, Sisi agreed to shelve the deal and approved the sale of artillery to the US, which in turn were to be transferred to Ukraine.⁷¹

Even after the controversy about Egypt potentially supplying arms to Russia, in November 2023 Cairo still accepted a proposal to resell to Moscow 150 rotorcraft engines that had been bought from Russia previously. Russia is expected to use these in its war in Ukraine.⁷² Russia appears to have sought similar agreements with Pakistan, Belarus and Brazil, which all entail the return of weapons previously bought from Moscow. These negotiations and the discussions about Egypt supplying Russia with weapons suggest that the military relationship between the two countries is not unidirectional, even if it is somewhat skewed towards Russia as the supplier of arms and other military expertise.

Diversified relations

These arrangements also suggest that, as with Egypt's diversified approach to its diplomatic relations, its weapons procurement or production is not based on an alignment with any single global leader, including Russia. Instead, it has been trying to increase its suppliers. Indeed, Cairo's zigzagging over issues relating to its relationship with Moscow (including Russia's aggression in Ukraine) due to pressure from the West seems to indicate a lack of commitment to any hegemon on the international stage. Egypt has tried to maintain its collaboration with Russia without alienating the US or the EU. Instead, it has sought to make itself useful to the strategic interests of numerous actors, particularly by depicting itself as a bulwark of stability in an increasingly destabilised region.

Yet, Cairo's approach, characterised by malleability under pressure, may alienate its allies and cause them to view it as undependable. This approach of diversifying relations aligns with Sisi's general policy of using the international space mainly to reinforce domestic priorities, particularly ensuring military supply does not come with strings attached, which

68 Evan Hill et al., '[Egypt Secretly Planned to Supply Rockets to Russia, Leaked US Document Says](#)', *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2023.

69 Khalil Al-Anani, '[The Fallout of Sisi's Gambit with Russia](#)', Arab Center Washington DC, April 14, 2023.

70 '[Egypt Denies Leak About Supplying Russia with 40,000 Rockets](#)', *Al Jazeera*, April 12, 2023.

71 Missy Ryan, Evan Hill and Siobhán O'Grady, '[Egypt Nearly Supplied Rockets to Russia, Agreed to Arm Ukraine Instead, Leak Shows](#)', *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2023.

72 Thomas Grove and Summer Said, '[Russia Turns to Longtime Arms Customers to Boost War Arsenal](#)', *The Wall Street Journal*, November 8, 2023.

can limit the government's room for manoeuvre. Sisi's main priority remains ensuring that his rule at home is not threatened. This is all the more acute owing to the economic collapse and currency crisis in Egypt in the past three years.

Russian–Egyptian trade, tourism and technology exchange

While Russia and Egypt have increased their trade relations in recent years, the disruptions to Egypt's wheat supply have been a source of friction. Russian tourism – also a key source of much-needed foreign currency for Egypt – picked up again after a long hiatus owing to security concerns. Egypt also relies on Russia for certain forms of technology, including the construction of its first nuclear reactors and other infrastructure.

While Russia and Egypt have increased their trade relations in recent years, the disruptions to Egypt's wheat supply have been a source of friction

Bilateral trade

Egypt is Russia's largest bilateral trade partner in Africa, accounting for 40% of its trade with the continent.⁷³ Russian exports to Africa doubled in 2023, although these still only amounted to 5% of Russia's overall trade.⁷⁴

The value of Egyptian imports from Russia was \$4.96 billion in 2023, representing 6% of Egypt's imports. This follows imports from China (16%), the US (6.6%) and Saudi Arabia (6.3%).⁷⁵ Russia's main export to Egypt is grain, while its imports from Egypt are mostly commodities such as fruit and vegetables. The two countries have deliberately sought to boost trade, as both currencies have taken a knock and they have searched for new business and investment opportunities.⁷⁶

Tourism

On the economic front, Sisi and Putin's main point of contention has been Russian tourism in Egypt. In 2015, the Islamic State affiliate based in the Sinai Peninsula, Wilayat

73 Russia-Africa Second Summit, "Outcomes of the First Russia".

74 "Russia Began to Supply More Goods to Africa than to the Americas", (translated), *RBC*, April 19, 2024.

75 The data is based on the UN COMTRADE database on international trade. See Trading Economics, "Egypt Imports from Russia", <https://tradingeconomics.com/egypt/imports/russia>.

76 Ahmad Elleithy, "Egypt, Russia Find Opportunity in Crisis", *Al-Monitor*, March 3, 2023.

Sinai, downed a Russian MetroJet plane, killing all 224 people on board. Egypt's initial response was to deny that the incident was linked to terrorism, even after the group had claimed responsibility for the attack and said its operatives had placed an improvised explosive device on board.⁷⁷ Moscow responded by imposing security restrictions on travel to Egyptian Red Sea resorts, which many Russians (and, previously, Ukrainians and other Europeans) traditionally frequented. These resorts are an important source of foreign currency for Egypt. It took many years of negotiations before tourism resumed; Russia only allowed flights back to these resorts six years after the incident.⁷⁸

However, in light of the Ukraine war, Russian tourists are no longer welcome in Europe, which has led to a surge in Russian tourism to Egypt. There was a 40% increase in the number of Russian tourists in Egypt in 2023 compared to 2022 (more than 1.4 million in total).⁷⁹ Russians constituted the second largest tourist group in Egypt after Germans. While there have been efforts to attract even more tourists in 2024, regional instability surrounding Israel/Palestine may undermine this trajectory.

With the increase in Russian tourists, plans were made to enable them to use an alternative payment system known as Mir (developed by Russia in response to international sanctions) in Egypt. This was a way for Russia to challenge the US's control over the global economy and show that there is not worldwide consensus regarding the sanctions against Russia. However, the plan was frozen as Egypt feared US sanctions, which target any financial institution handling Russian transactions.⁸⁰

Nuclear energy

Another critical aspect of the Egyptian-Russian relationship is the agreement to build a nuclear power plant, consisting of four reactors, on Egypt's north coast, at Al Dabaa (about 170km west of Alexandria). The first reactor is projected to be completed in 2028, and all four by 2030. The project is aimed at energy generation and is expected to operate according to international safeguards. Rosatom will provide nuclear fuel for the power plant's lifetime and receive nuclear waste from the site. It is also providing 85% of the funding through a \$25 billion loan, which is repayable over 22 years at a highly favourable interest rate of 3% per year. The Egyptian government expects to raise the remaining 15% (around \$5 billion).⁸¹

Raising this money will likely be a major challenge in light of Egypt's spiralling debt crisis. Its Ministry of Electricity and Renewable Energy suggested the funds would be generated by selling energy from the nuclear power plant. However, given the terms of the agreement,

77 Nash Jenkins, "Egypt Concedes that Terrorists Caused Sinai Plane Crash", *Time*, February 25, 2016.

78 "Egypt, Russia Agree to Resume Flights to Red Sea Resorts", *Al-Monitor*, April 23, 2021.

79 "Russian Tourist Traffic to Egypt Jumps 40% to 1.4 mln in 2023", *Interfax*, March 22, 2024.

80 Cathrin Schaer, "Egypt's Difficult Balancing Act Between the West and Russia", *DW*, February 11, 2022; Mohamed Sabry, "Egypt Freezes Russian MIR Payments to Avoid US Sanctions", *Al-Monitor*, October 8, 2022.

81 "Russia Lends Egypt \$25 Billion for Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant", *Al-Monitor*, February 23, 2020.

this is unlikely to work, which may strain Egyptian–Russian relations after the Rosatom disbursements cease in 2028.⁸² The language surrounding the project has overlooked financing issues, concerns of Egyptian dependency on Russia and even the fundamental question of whether the plant is needed. Instead, the state has emphasised the ‘nuclear dream’ and ‘historic agreement’.

The language surrounding the project has overlooked financing issues, concerns of Egyptian dependency on Russia and even the fundamental question of whether the plant is needed

Russia arguably perceives the deal as a way to demonstrate its technical and professional skills and potentially pave the way for more nuclear energy deals. In Africa, it has also signed a deal with Nigeria. This is likely highly strategic, given that dozens of countries have pledged to triple nuclear energy production by 2050, as part of rebranding nuclear as clean energy.⁸³ Rosatom holds around 70% of the global export market for building new nuclear power plants.⁸⁴ In the Middle East, Russia also built the Iranian nuclear reactor, which went critical in 2011, and the two countries have been in talks to construct additional nuclear facilities and deal with financing issues.⁸⁵

In the case of Egypt, little information is available about the tender process and the awarding of the tender to Rosatom. Some reports have said this may be the most expensive nuclear power plant in history; Egypt’s first set of nuclear reactors is significantly more costly than the Iranian reactor and the reactor in the UAE, built by South Korea.⁸⁶ The tender process was not made public or carried out transparently. Some sources suggest the decision was fundamentally political⁸⁷ while, according to an Egyptian MP in the energy committee, Sisi and Putin’s personal relationship contributed to the rapid implementation of the project.⁸⁸

Currently, it is not clear if the agreement to construct the nuclear power plant will proceed because of the war in Ukraine, to which Russian resources have been diverted. It has already faced at least two years’ delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and construction

82 Marina Lorenzini, “Why Egypt’s New Nuclear Plant Is a Long-Term Win for Russia”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 20, 2023.

83 US Department of Energy, “At COP28, Countries Launch Declaration to Triple Nuclear Energy Capacity by 2050, Recognizing the Key Role of Nuclear Energy in Reaching Net Zero”, December 1, 2023.

84 Lorenzini, “Why Egypt’s New Nuclear”.

85 “Construction of Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant in Iran Continues, Debt Issues Resolved – Novak”, *Interfax*, May 17, 2023.

86 “Egypt’s \$25bn Russian Nuclear Loan Raises Questions of Economics and Transparency”, *Middle East Economic Survey*, May 27, 2016.

87 Walaa Hussein, “Russia to build Egyptian Nuclear Reactor”, *Al-Monitor*, September 4, 2015.

88 Essam El-Din, “The Russians Are Coming”.

is behind schedule.⁸⁹ In September 2022, South Korean contractors were awarded a \$2.25 billion deal to construct turbine buildings for the power plant.⁹⁰ However, Egypt and Russia insist that the project is continuing as it should, even suggesting that it may be completed ahead of schedule.⁹¹ In January 2024, they announced the beginning of the last phase of the plant's construction – laying the foundation of the fourth unit at the plant.⁹² The two countries have carefully aligned their positions and statements regarding the nuclear plant, emphasising that the project is a partnership.⁹³

Other deals

Another significant Russian investment was the upgrading of Egypt's railways in 2018. The deal entails 1 300 passenger carriages.⁹⁴ Part of the motivation for the deal was the decayed state of Egypt's rail infrastructure, leading to numerous fatal accidents.⁹⁵ Meanwhile, a special industrial zone was slated for Russia inside Egypt based on a 2018 agreement, but this was cancelled by Russia in October 2023 without any reasons given for this move.⁹⁶ The objective of the industrial zone had been to facilitate Russian access to markets in the Middle East and Africa, with businesses receiving preferential tax treatment.

Russia's seeming exit from this deal disappointed Egypt, which had previously expressed frustration with Russia's decision to quit the Black Sea grain deal that had allowed many African states to import 33 million tonnes of Ukrainian grain. Egypt used its platform at the Russia-Africa summit of 2023 to urge the revival of the deal, while Kenya described its cancellation as a 'stab in the back'.⁹⁷ Sisi focused his speech on food security, supply chains and high energy prices on the continent, stating:⁹⁸

I underscore the importance of finding prompt solutions to provide food and grain at prices that would help Africa overcome this crisis while exploring innovative financing mechanisms to support agricultural and food systems in Africa. I look forward to reaching a consensual solution with regard to the Grain Deal that would take into consideration the demands and interests of all parties and curb rising grain prices.

89 "Dabaa Delayed", *Enterprise*, July 14, 2021.

90 "Russia, South Korea Cooperate on Egypt's Dabaa Nuclear Plant", *Al-Monitor*, September 1, 2022.

91 Gamal Essam El-Din, "Construction on Egypt's Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant Returns to Schedule After Delay", *Ahram Online*, April 19, 2023; Darrell Proctor, "Russia Says Construction of Egypt's First Nuclear Plant Ahead of Schedule", *Power Magazine*, November 20, 2022.

92 President of Russia, "On January 23, Vladimir Putin and President of Egypt Abdel Fattah el-Sisi Will Take Part, Via Videoconference, in the Official Ceremony for Pouring the First Concrete into the Foundation of Power Unit #4 at Egypt's El-Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant", January 23, 2024; Egypt, SIS, "El-Sisi, Putin Witness Pouring Concrete into the Foundation of Power Unit 4 at El-Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant", January 23, 2024.

93 Rosatom, "Manufacturing of Equipment for the First Egyptian NPP Starts in Russia", June 2, 2022.

94 Laila Mohammed, "Upgrade on Track as Russian Trains Join Egypt Rail Fleet", *Arab News*, August 13, 2020.

95 Horriya Marzouk, "Egypt's Trains Are a Death Trap. But How Did We Get Here?", *The New Arab*, May 21, 2021.

96 "Russian War Delays Major Industrial Zone in Egypt", *Al-Monitor*, March 20, 2022; "Russia Cancels Massive Industrial Zone Project in Egypt", *Ahram Online*, October 12, 2023.

97 Andrew Roth, "Egypt Calls on Vladimir Putin to Revive Black Sea Grain Deal", *The Guardian*, July 28, 2023.

98 Egypt, SIS, "President El-Sisi's Speech at the 2nd Africa-Russia Summit", July 18, 2023.

Around 80% of Egypt's wheat imports had come from Russia and Ukraine, which meant that the Ukraine war left households in Egypt in a vulnerable position.⁹⁹ Egypt responded by buying more wheat from Russia directly, bypassing tenders, which officials claimed enabled better negotiation terms.¹⁰⁰

The broader economic crisis in Egypt has exacerbated the situation, leading to deferred payments on wheat. Egypt's currency, the Egyptian pound, has lost a significant percentage of its value. The country has struggled with skyrocketing prices and a loss of trust in the currency, leading many people to panic and buy US dollars on the black market.¹⁰¹ Cairo's traditional donors, the oil-producing Gulf states, have indicated their frustration with its military leadership. They are particularly frustrated with the military's involvement in the economy, which has bred mismanagement and corruption and undercut the private sector.¹⁰² In March 2024, Egypt signed an \$8 billion loan with the International Monetary Fund, which has alleviated the crisis slightly.¹⁰³

In 2024, Egypt also officially joined the BRICS economic bloc, while Russia became the group's leader. BRICS seems to represent a worldview that transcends US hegemony and aligns with Russia's perspective of multipolarity. Egypt view BRICS as a potential avenue to resolve its wheat crisis.¹⁰⁴ While Egypt has depicted its ascension to BRICS as a way out of its economic woes, potentially boosting investment and increasing the inflow of foreign currency, critics have suggested that the forum is being treated as a panacea.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

Egypt and Russia have forged closer diplomatic, military and economic ties in the past decade. However, this remains a flexible alliance. Both countries are willing to work around rivalries and tensions, maintaining their interests in trade, investment, tourism, energy and military and defence collaboration, such as arms deals and military exercises. In that sense, the two recognise their relationship as predominantly transactional, even as it has developed and deepened, particularly over the past five years.

Cairo and Moscow view their relationship favourably and have previously used the language of a strategic partnership, particularly given their emphasis on security and stability in the Middle East.¹⁰⁶ However, their relationship mostly reflects a convergence of interests. Its

99 Jessica Barnes, "The Ukraine War, Grain Trade and Bread in Egypt", Middle East Research and Information Project, February 22, 2023.

100 "Egypt, Reliant on Imports, Buys More Russian Wheat", *Al Jazeera*, September 5, 2023.

101 International Crisis Group, "Egypt in the Balance?", May 31, 2023.

102 Yezid Sayigh, *Owners of the Republic: An Anatomy of Egypt's Military Economy*, Report (Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, November 18, 2019).

103 Aidan Lewis, "Egypt Signs Expanded \$8 Billion Loan Deal with IMF", *Reuters*, March 6, 2024.

104 Mohammed Ajam, "Egypt Proposes Hosting a Global Grain Storage Center at BRICS Summit", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, August 26, 2023.

105 Patrick Werr, "Egypt Hopes BRICS Entry Will Lure Foreign Cash, but Analysts Counsel Patience", *Reuters*, August 29, 2023.

106 Rosatom, "Egypt and Russia: Strategic Partnership", Newsletter #220, August 2019.

cornerstone is the reinforcement of the state and state sovereignty, which has implications for the resurgence of authoritarianism. They also emphasise security and counterterrorism, expressed through a self-proclaimed desire to restore 'order'. Both actors emphasise order in the Middle East and Africa, as well as internally, in light of economic crises that may lead to internal unrest.

The flexibility of Egyptian-Russian relations is also reflected in the lack of a discernible rupture between them after the latter's invasion of Ukraine, despite Egypt's being directly affected by it – something Western states were quick to highlight.¹⁰⁷ Despite Western states' attempts to pressure Egypt to limit its cooperation with Russia, it has not done so. However, it has also been reluctant to be depicted as a Russian ally, despite their growing relationship. Instead, it has insisted that its approach is that of neutrality.

As this paper has outlined, this approach is not without risk: especially in the face of intensifying violence and polarisation in both the Middle East and globally, Cairo's attempt at neutrality may be a liability rather than an asset.

107 US Embassy in Egypt, "G7 Ambassadors"; European Commission, "[Statement by President von der Leyen with Egyptian President El-Sisi](#)", June 15, 2022.

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Cover image

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi during talks in the Grand Kremlin Palace on August 26, 2015 in Moscow, Russia. The Egyptian President was on a three-day state visit to Russia, his third official visit since taking office (Sasha Mordovets/Getty Images)

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