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# COUNTRIES AND REGIONS IN GLOBAL DIMENSIONS

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## CHIMING IN WITH THE GLOBAL ZEITGEIST: EGYPT'S LOOKING-EAST POLICY AND ITS UNDERCURRENT OF DICHOTOMY

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*Despite its relatively long record of relationship with Eastern nations, Egypt has belatedly embarked upon a Look East orientation in the post-Mubarak era. Egypt's new Look East policy, in contrast to Cairo's erstwhile political and military connections with the East, is primarily aimed at gaining some immediate economic and financial rewards from fostering closer ties, particularly with a number of resourceful and rising Asian powers. Moreover, the Egyptian approach is in tune with certain critical politico-economic objectives of these Asian stakeholders, giving Egypt a significant role in serving as a bridge of sorts to connect the East with a larger African continent. Another more important salient feature of this Look East approach is that the growing nexus between Cairo and the political capitals of major Eastern countries would benefit Egypt substantially in long run only if the Middle Eastern nation could make the most of its geopolitical and demographic advantages by skillfully managing its somewhat complex relationship with powerful Western powers, especially the United States.*

**Keywords:** *Egypt, Look East policy, diplomacy, geopolitics, trade, arms, culture.*

### **Introduction: A Veteran yet Underachieved Latecomer**

Egypt has a relatively long history of interactions with Asian nations. The modern record of Egyptian involvement in Asia dates back at least to the early 1950s, when the Arab country was unexpectedly propelled onto the international stage as a result of its advocacy for a quick settlement of the internal conflict on the Korean Peninsula which had been critically exacerbated by the Korean War of 1950–1953. In particular, Egypt, in close cooperation with India, played a mediating role on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in order to resolve the Korean conundrum. Moreover, Egypt became the first Arab and African country to officially recognize the communist regime of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1956, though the Middle Eastern state was then in the process of developing close and cordial relations with the Democratic People's Re-

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public of Korea (DPRK) as well (Garver 2016: 108). As a result, Egyptian leaders were among the first Middle Eastern dignitaries and top political authorities who managed to hold a number of high-level meetings with their Asian counterparts and arrange reciprocal visits.

However, despite Egypt's long-standing involvement in Asian affairs, the Look East approach in a sense that some other countries in the region have embraced and longed for over the past three decades is a relatively new orientation in Egyptian foreign policy. Unlike many other Middle Eastern and North African countries, Egypt had already gained some experiences in dealing with Eastern nations since the 1950s. The Arab country also enjoyed huge other potentials to engage in a whole host of mutually symbiotic relationships with Asian nations. But it took a long time for the Egyptian government to eventually embark upon a Look East orientation and then to adopt some relevant policies and measures in order to achieve some of its new objectives in Asian countries. As it turned out, neither was the Egyptian government very determined to pursue its new policy goals in the East, nor did its Look East orientation embraced more inclusive strategies and a broader vision, similar to what some other Middle Eastern countries are currently pursuing ardently with regard to a strikingly changing and rising Asia (Azad 2022).

As a corollary to that, Egypt emerged as something of a latecomer among its fellow Middle Eastern countries, some of which had long followed a rather timely and all-encompassing approach of looking East. Inevitably, the 'first come, first served' rule left the Egyptians in a less favourable position to quickly realize their newfound foreign policy goals in Asia. What, then, has really undermined Egypt's eagerness to adopt a serious policy of looking-East in advance in tandem with its long record of interactions with many countries across the Asian continent? What has pushed the Egyptian government to belatedly come up with a policy of looking-East? What does essentially characterize the Egyptian looking-East drive in the first place, and how does it really differ from Cairo's previous experience of dealing with Asian nations? What about Egypt's counterparts in the East? Are the Eastern nations, by and large, receptive to an Egyptian looking-East orientation? How could they help the Egyptians to achieve their recent objectives in the East? A last but not least important question is that whether Egypt's Look East approach poses a serious challenge to Cairo's somewhat special relationships with a number of powerful countries in the West over the past four decades? In the following sections, the present study seeks to find persuasive answers to such compelling questions.

### **Framework of Analysis: Globalization Sets in Motion Egypt's Eastern Proclivities**

Before certain politico-cultural repercussions of globalization swept through the Egyptian society in 2011, the state in Egypt, as a major mediator of globalization, had for several decades responded rather positively to globalization, primarily in economic terms. Indeed, Egypt historically possessed a great deal of material and human potential, making it a good candidate for economic catching-up with many industrialized and developed countries in Europe and Asia. Be the mid-1940s, for instance, the North African nation was as economically developed as Greece, and in the early 1950s, gross national per capita in Egypt was twice that of Thailand (Henry and Springborg 2010: 25). Egypt, however, chose to close its doors to the myriad benefits of foreign trade and investment for more than two decades after the Mideast country came virtually under the total control of the Free Officers Movement in 1952. Led by Gamal Abdel Nasser,

Egypt soon relentlessly pursued a pan-Arab agenda politically and a socialist approach economically, squandering its precious resources on starry-eyed idealism and visionary political objectives both at home and abroad (Moore and Lewis 2009: 37).

Meanwhile, by the mid-1970s, constant regional political humiliation as well as economic flatlining forced Egypt to essentially abandon its unproductive model of economic nationalism after Anwar Sadat adopted a kind of open door policy widely known as *al-infithah*. Moreover, in order to boost its national economy and project itself as an attractive destination for foreign capital and technology, the Egyptian government under Hosni Mubarak took more drastic economic and financial measures from the second half of the 1980s onward (Beinin 2009a). On the same wavelength with some new financial and economic trends of globalization implemented in many developed and developing countries, neoliberal economic policies and structural adjustment programs were imposed upon the Egyptian society, although the government often continued to procrastinate with certain fundamental reforms partly because of various economic aids and material rewards which Egypt was receiving from the West in the wake of its political and security cooperation with some powerful Western countries, especially the United States (Wurzel 2009).

A bigger problem was that various privatization initiatives and economic reform policies implemented under Hosni Mubarak had primarily benefited the ruling elites as well as their close relatives and friends. Such lopsided effects of economic reforms and the subsequent rise of crony capitalism associated with the Mubarak government gradually provided grist to the mills of social unrest and economic uncertainty which presaged the end of his long authoritarian regime. As a matter of fact, the exposure of Egyptian citizens, especially many people among the impressionable and unsuspecting young generation, to various new trends of globalization had already generated many sanguine, yet legitimate, political and economic expectations which the uncompromising political regime and top-heavy economic reforms controlled by Mubarak failed to fulfil (Bowker 2012). As a result, the political system which came to power after Mubarak vowed to meet many of these relatively reasonable demands by rekindling Egypt's former Look East orientation and developing greater commercial interactions with as many rich and resourceful Asian nations as possible.

The former Egyptian President, Mohamed Morsi, may be generally credited as the architect of Egypt's new looking-East orientation. Morsi won the presidential election in June 2012 with a stronger popular mandate after his affiliated Islamist political group, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), had also increased its number of seats in parliament a few months earlier. Both Morsi and the FJP were supported by the Muslim Brotherhood, which was and still is a pivotal political force in Egypt and the oldest Islamist political bloc in the Arab world. With Morsi in the saddle and the Muslim Brotherhood on the march, the commanding heights of Egyptian domestic and especially foreign policy unexpectedly fell into the hands of those who wanted to fundamentally reorient Egypt's relationship with the outside world. Symbolized by Morsi's decision to pay a state visit to China as his first official trip outside the Middle East region, the East, rather than the West, was predicated by many observers to be the main destination of the new historic transformation in Egyptian foreign policy (Zambelis 2012).

Traditionally, socialist and left-wing forces like the FJP and Morsi had showed a great propensity for developing closer ties between Egypt and Eastern nations, includ-

ing the Russians. They were at least in favor of allying with non-Western centers of power and influence, even if their method of charting a different course in foreign policy was often gradual and incremental. Embodied in Gamal Abdel Nasser's 'positive neutralism,' this Egyptian inclination in foreign policy was to eventually rid the country of threatening foreign presence and interference (Cook 2017: 61). After some three and a half decades of inconsistency, if not say deviation, from this sacrosanct principle, Morsi and his supporters came to develop a new direction in Egyptian foreign policy, favoring closer ties with the East and some other non-Western parts of the world. Ultimately, such a critical transformation in foreign policy by Morsi and his powerful proponents would reflect the larger nationalist and populist impulses that had just forced Hosni Mubarak to resign in February 2011 after holding the dominant office of the Egyptian presidency since October 1981.

The Egyptian foreign policy under Morsi's presidency was, therefore, a departure from the post-Camp David Accords system that had dominated the Middle Eastern country's foreign and domestic policy from 1978 until Mubarak's ouster in 2011. Under this alliance system, which was by and large a marriage of convenience, Egypt switched its international allegiance from the Soviet Union to the United States. In return for such a major shift in Egypt's grand strategy towards the international system, the Americans provided the Egyptians with tremendous political support as well as more than \$60 billion in various military, technological, financial, and economic aid over the course of more than three decades. Of course, Egypt did not really compromise its national dignity and independence, but its close collaboration with the West was critical to securing certain vital interests of the United States in the greater Middle East region, including the security of Israel and an uninterrupted and sufficient supply of oil from the Persian Gulf region (Brownlee 2012).

However, before the visionary politicians led by the Muslim Brotherhood could make a serious dent in the whole edifice of Egypt's domestic and foreign policy, the country's then army chief, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, deposed Morsi and his Islamist government in a relatively bloodless coup d'état in July 2013. In addition to the immediate suspension of the 2012 constitution, the FJP was also banned and dissolved in 2014. The whole episode was actually a swing of the pendulum back to the old system that had been run by presidents Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. Egypt under el-Sisi swiftly abandoned its Morsi-style approach to the outside world, in part because the entire Egyptian political and economic establishment had become heavily addicted to various privileges and benefits which it had received over the years through close cooperation with the United States and its Middle Eastern allies. Moreover, the political system dominated by el-Sisi soon realized that Egypt's regional and international freedom had long been constrained by a litany of restrictions, and it was simply in Cairo's best interests to remain loyal to the US-led order in the region.

Meanwhile, el-Sisi did not completely abandon Egypt's orientation, or in fact reorientation, towards the East. His government had to reevaluate the looking-East approach by giving prominence to its economic and commercial objectives. Morsi's Looking-East drive was supposed to be more comprehensive, encompassing almost all politico-strategic, military, economic, and cultural components. But under el-Sisi, economic and trade issues were to trump ideological and geopolitical matters in Egypt's relations with Eastern states. In this sense, el-Sisi somehow differed from the old system which he

rushed to revive after overthrowing the Morsi government (Spegele and Bradley 2012). Under Sadat and especially Mubarak, Egypt's relations with the East were mostly about politico-ideological as well as military interactions. But el-Sisi prioritized trade and commercial incentives because his country's increasingly deteriorating economic situation could be alleviated considerably by attracting more rich and resourceful Asian companies and investors to Egypt (Halime 2012). In order to achieve such a critical task, non-economic forces were also expected to smooth the way for a higher volume of commercial interactions between Egypt and Eastern countries.

Over the past decade, therefore, Egypt under el-Sisi has been striving to strike a rather delicate balance between its major partners in the West and the East. After all, Egypt's new looking-East orientation is likely to challenge the nature and scope of relatively symbiotic relationship that Cairo has enjoyed with a number of powerful Western countries, particularly the United States, since the 1980s. Some major Eastern countries such as China and Russia, have been in favor of developing closer political and economic ties with Egypt, while top officials in Cairo have been walking on eggshells trying to make the most of their growing interactions with the East without uttering any off-putting statements or taking any bold measures that might antagonize the West. Indeed, the issue is not about managing a neat Manichaean dichotomy between the East and the West alone; the Egyptians have also tried to thread the needle with regard to their contrasting Eastern partners, so as to simultaneously benefit from better relations with China and Japan or with Russia and South Korea (Akiyama 2023).

### **Mutually Intended: Capitalizing on the Political Springboard**

Long before the Egyptian government under Morsi began to breathe new life into its former ties with Eastern nations, political relations had served as an effective instrument for acquiring the Middle Eastern country's various economic and technological needs. At a time when Egypt enjoyed close ties with Europe as an important supplier of raw materials, the political modus operandi allowed the relatively resourceful North African nation to maintain its critical commercial relations with the world economy, even if the country still remained largely underdeveloped compared to some of its peers in Asia and other parts of the world. Political tie-up did not help Egypt to improve its economic infrastructure and trade performance alone; it also saved the Egyptians from certain politico-ideological dangers which had afflicted some other nations. For example, when Egypt and the Soviet Union experienced unprecedented bilateral interactions, the political miracle of their partnership was that the Russians supplied the Middle Eastern country with many crucial industrial goods, including military technologies, but the Egyptians still refused to become a communist nation or a satellite state for Moscow (Grinin and Korotayev 2015: 125).

After all, Egypt has historically strived to benefit from its calculated relationship with both the Western and Eastern powers without making any serious attempt to play the West and the East off against each other. For example, when Egypt was lured into a strategic alliance with the West in the late 1970s, Cairo did its best to maintain a semblance of friendly relations with the Soviet Union. In the same way, when various disagreements over Egypt's corruption and human rights record led to a dangerous deterioration in relations between the United States and the Middle Eastern country, the Egyptian government did not quickly turn its back on the West by clasping to the bosom of

the East (Leila 2017). Of course, Egypt approached a number of non-Western powers, Russia in particular, and this move ultimately resulted in the signing of a ‘strategic partnership’ treaty between Cairo and Moscow in October 2018, but the Egyptian tactic was largely to buy time before the Egyptians could regain their important position in Washington and be recompensed in various ways by the Trump administration.

As it turned out, Egypt's looking-East orientation has by and large been in line with this general pattern. Excluding the Morsi presidency, the Egyptian looking-East orientation is not intended to compromise Cairo's beneficial relations with the West. Similarly, the looking-East policy in Egypt is very careful not to give the impression that Cairo is prioritizing one major power at the expense of another. Cairo succeeded in elevating its old ties with China to the level of ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ in 2014, but such an advance in bilateral relations with the rising Asian power did not really imply that Beijing could soon take the political place of Moscow for Egypt, regardless of the fact that the Chinese had emerged as Cairo's largest economic partner since 2012 (Wood 2018). Egypt has demonstrated a rather similar behavior towards India. The two nations were once at the forefront of the Eastern struggle against Western colonialism, and such a consistent companionship was to be further enhanced by a relatively close cooperation between Cairo and New Delhi within the NAM. But none of the two countries are now really stuck in the memories of those days, as pragmatism, rather than former idealism, is the mainspring of their current attitudes towards the international system (Tudoroiu 2011; Hall 2022).

By comparison, Egypt's looking-East approach to other important Asian players happened to be somewhat straightforward and less complicated. Egypt's improved relations with Japan and South Korea since 2016 have been about gaining certain commercial benefits, although both Tokyo and Seoul still need the North African country's understanding and cooperation regarding the North Korean nuclear controversy and the implementation of relevant international sanctions levied against Pyongyang (Murakami 2023). El-Sisi paid official visits to Japan and South Korea in early 2016. In addition to upgrading Cairo's relations with Seoul to the level of ‘a comprehensive strategic partnership,’ he also became the first Arab and second African leader to deliver a speech to Japan's parliament, known as the Diet (Azad 2017).

In September 2018, el-Sisi found another opportunity to ask for larger Korean investments in Egypt during a meeting with South Korean President, Moon Jae-in, on the sidelines of the 73<sup>rd</sup> United Nations General Assembly in New York (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019: 181). Egypt also became the only North African country that Moon Jae-in visited once as South Korea's head of state, in January 2022. In addition, in late April 2023, the Japanese Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, first visited Egypt as part of his high-profile tour of four African countries, including Ghana and Kenya as well as Mozambique, in an effort to counterbalance China's growing influence in Africa and advance Japan's so-called ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ strategy (*Japan Times* 2023). It was also the first time since 2014 that a Japanese leader visited several African countries, signifying Tokyo's fierce one-upmanship with its two East Asian competitors, China and South Korea, in North Africa and beyond (Ninivaggi 2023).

Concerning other parts of Asia, Egypt under el-Sisi acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in September 2016, paving the way for better relations with the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),

many of whom were already interested in closer ties with the Arab country. In fact, Egypt joined Morocco as the first North African countries to accede the TAC, which already had 35 signatories from around the world. A confluence of such major developments in Egypt's relations with the larger Asian continent therefore shows that from the beginning the el-Sisi-led Egyptian government virtually had a mandate to maintain a kind of balanced and future-oriented approach towards the East without jeopardizing its sedimented interests in the West (Springborg 2014).

Meanwhile, Egypt has certain advantages that can significantly boost its looking-East objectives among influential and resourceful Eastern countries. As a leading Arab country, Egypt has long been a major target of various critical policies and strategies pursued by Eastern powers in the Greater Middle East region. Such critical asset was actually an important factor long before Egypt upped the ante by joining a politically calculated and economically rewarding alliance with the West in the late 1970s. Once Egypt got involved in the Camp David Accords and, in sharp contrast to most of its Arab counterparts, recognized Israel as a sovereign state in the Middle East, moreover, its potential contribution to peace and stability in the region persuaded many Asian countries to often hold the Arab country in high esteem. Since some of these Eastern stakeholders were either unable or unwilling to contribute anything substantial to the peace and stability of the pivotal Mideast region, they wanted to be acknowledged as responsible beneficiaries by simply appreciating the role played by the Egyptians (Wenping and Metwally 2017).

In addition to its influential political role in the Middle East, Egypt also matters as a geopolitical issue for many Eastern nations. Because of its critical geographical location, Egypt can serve the East virtually as a gateway to a broader African continent that extends far beyond the greater Middle East region (Azam 2023). Over the past decades, therefore, almost all major Eastern powers have carved out various ambitious plans to strengthen their politico-economic presence in Africa (Large 2008; French 2014). Egypt can contribute substantially to these crucial objectives by acting as a bridge between Asian countries and Africa. Part of its significance obviously stems from the Suez Canal which has long made the Egypt's location far more advantageous than that of other North African countries. It is no coincidence that the Suez Canal lies at the heart of China's maritime Silk Road, turning Beijing into the largest foreign investor in the strategic waterway. By promising immediate political support and long-term commercial benefits, the Chinese need Egypt's serious involvement in this mega-plan in order to implement their relevant projects in the region (Hosny 2019).

### **Soft and Subterranean: Gearing toward Larger Arms Deals**

Egypt's foreign and security policies towards the outside world, including its looking-East orientation, have long been greatly influenced by the military. In fact, since the 1952 coup d'état which replaced the Egyptian monarchy with a republic, the military has played an indispensable role in almost every aspect of the Mideast country's domestic and foreign affairs. On top of that, the military has often portrayed themselves as Egypt's ultimate savior, promising to bring stability and prosperity to the Egyptian society (Stacher 2012: 60). Such impression of, and positive attitudes towards, the Egyptian military's capacity and function proved very instrumental in rallying a great number of the disenchanting citizens behind the armed forces in the run-up to the overthrow of the

Morsi government by the el-Sisi-led generals in July 2013 (Cook 2017: 241). It was largely for the same reason that el-Sisi could soon establish his power and influence among many ordinary and middle-class Egyptians, who bestowed upon him enough charm and charisma to be re-elected in the presidential elections for a second term in March 2018 and for a third term in December 2023. However, many opposition forces inside and outside the country, as well as various human rights groups, dismissed the entire electoral process as a 'sham' and 'farce', accusing the Egyptian authorities of 'trampling over even the minimum requirements for free and fair elections' (Human Rights Watch 2018).

As an implication of the military's overarching status and role, therefore, Egypt has long become one of the world's largest arms importers. Under el-Sisi's leadership, Egypt's demand for foreign munitions has grown exponentially, turning the Arab country virtually into one of the largest buyers of arms and defense products in the Middle East. Of course, different reports have published different data and statistics on Egypt's military deals, but it is generally estimated that the Middle Eastern country has signed arms transfer agreements worth billions of dollars over the past decade, a great part of which bankrolled by loans requested from global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and loans and financial credits asked from some wealthy Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The major exporters of arms and military products to Egypt are the United States, Western European countries, and Russia, all of which supply a lion's share of various conventional and advanced weapons that Cairo often procures (Congressional Research Service 2016: 11–13).

However, despite the crucial role of the West as the principle supplier of Egypt's arms imports, the East is becoming increasingly attractive to Egyptian military orders. Russia has certainly been a major supplier of arms to Egypt for several decades, and history has proved that whenever Cairo encountered serious obstacles in purchasing sufficient military equipment from the West, it could swiftly turn to Moscow for arms assistance (Burns 1985: 8). In addition to Russia, a number of Asian countries are now striving to improve their share of Egypt's arms requirements, and Egypt's looking-East policy is very conducive to this new trend. It is no coincidence that Egypt has become the second largest buyer of Chinese drones after Pakistan, purchasing some one-fifth of all drones exported by China. Moreover, since 2016, Egyptian and Chinese officials have reportedly held several meetings to promote their military and defense cooperation, but they have yet to agree over any substantial arms transfers from Beijing to Cairo (Reimann 2019). The Egyptian government has obviously been under increasing pressure from the United States and some European countries not to engage in larger volumes of military deals with China, otherwise Cairo would risk similar pressure as it experienced over a North Korea-related incident a few years ago.

The development dates back to August 2016, when Egyptian customs officials, acting on a tip-off from the United States, boarded the *Jie Shun*, a bulk freighter sailing under the Cambodian flag through the Suez Canal, carrying more than 30,000 PG-7 rocket-propelled grenades. The cargo, estimated to be worth \$23 million, had actually been purchased by some Egyptian businessmen on behalf of the Egyptian military, a tactic the two countries have previously used to engage in some clandestine arms deals by taking advantage of private businesses and front companies such as the North Korean Ocean Maritime Management Company (OMM). The whole episode, reported by the



*Washington Post* more than a year later, also propelled the Trump administration to freeze or delay, albeit temporarily, millions of dollars in military and economic aid to Egypt (Warrick 2017; Najjar 2017).

As a matter of fact, Egyptians and their counterparts from the communist regime of North Korea have been engaged in various politico-diplomatic, military, and economic fields for more than four decades. Egypt is one of the three Arab states (including Syria and the Palestinian National Authority) that has a functioning embassy in Pyongyang, while it is also one of the five Arab countries (the other states include Algeria, Libya, Syria, and Kuwait) that hosts a North Korean embassy in its political capital. Egypt and North Korea have a long history of military cooperation dating back to the 1970s when Pyongyang sent its military technicians and pilots to help Cairo in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, but the Americans now demanded certain concrete actions from the Egyptian government in order to further punish Pyongyang for its provocative missile and nuclear programs (Azad 2018).

Therefore, in order to save face and not to lose the various benefits of good relations with Washington, Egypt announced through its Defense Minister, Sidki Sobhi, who was on an official visit to Seoul in September 2017, that it had severed all military ties with North Korea. But the problem was that the Egyptian government simply did not confirm Sobhi's proclamation, and several Egyptian news outlets which posted his comments soon edited out the very statement he had made in the political capital of South Korea, Seoul. Not only did the Egyptians refrain from severing their military relations with North Korea, as demanded by the United States, but they also moved to increase their level of military and defense cooperation with South Korea, despite the fact that Washington probably had few, if any, reservations about such type of bilateral interaction involving Cairo and Seoul (Suter 2017).

As a matter of fact, Egypt and South Korea had started negotiating the export of Korean K-9 howitzers to the North African country sometime in 2010, but the talks had stalled, largely due to the ensuing political turmoil in Cairo, which eventually led to the rise of el-Sisi. In September 2017, Sidki Sobhi was therefore given a crucial mandate by the Egyptian government to resume the relevant bilateral arms negotiations with South Korea, after a number of K-9 howitzers had been brought to Egypt for performance evaluation tests earlier. In addition to negotiations on the K-9 howitzer issue, Egypt and South Korea continued to discuss several ways of expanding their military and defense ties, including the feasibility of joint-venture programs between their respective arms industries (*Yonhap News Agency* 2022a).

As a consequence, after more than a decade of on-again-off-again bilateral talks, Egypt and South Korea managed to reach the pinnacle of their arms deals in early February 2022, with a whopping \$1.65 billion contract to sell the Hanwha Defense-manufactured K-9 howitzers to the Middle Eastern country. The bankable deal, which turned out to be the largest single export of K-9s to another nation, gave a significant boost to the South Korea's defense industry, after the ambitious East Asian country was able to peddle its K-9 howitzers to a number of other nations, including Australia, Norway, Finland, Estonia, Turkey, Poland, and India (Jung 2023). The lucrative deal also allowed South Korea to sell its K-9 howitzers to an African country for the first time, and set the Korean defense industry in motion to find more new customers across the African continent for the howitzers and other Korean-made defense products. Such ob-

jective did not seem to be far-fetched because the arms deal with the Egyptians involved the transfer of technology to – and the production of – K-9 howitzer in Egypt, paving the way for the North African country to act as a kind of outpost of sorts to peddle Korean weapons to other nations across Africa (*Yonhap News Agency* 2022b).

### **Economy in the Limelight: Expecting ‘Miracle on the Ground’**

Despite its huge potential in various fields, Egypt has hardly been a successful model in terms of transforming the economic situation of its average citizen. In the early 1960s, for instance, both Egypt and South Korea had roughly the same per capita income, but today the small East Asian country's per capita income is about ten times that of Egypt. According to the World Bank's most recent data, the GDP per capita of South Korea and Egypt in 2021 were \$34,998 and \$3,699, respectively. Of course, successive Egyptian governments have developed their own economic and development plans, dating back to the mid-1970s when Anwar Sadat's policy of *al-infitah* (economic opening) aimed to increase the role of the private sector by a gradual replacement of the state-led development strategy (Gray 1998; Rutherford 2013: ix). The economic reform agenda gained momentum under Mubarak in the early 1990s, when the government pushed for greater liberalization and privatization of state-owned enterprises. Since 2004, Mubarak accelerated the pace of his economic transformation by implementing various neoliberal measures. These economic prescriptions proved to be a bitter medicine for a society like Egypt's, triggering more public demonstrations and strikes which eventually forced the Mubarak regime out of power in early 2011 (Beinin 2009b; Gardner 2011).

Egypt's worsening economic upheavals and its simmering financial crisis, therefore, played a crucial role in pushing the Middle Eastern country to look East in the post-Mubarak era (Elhadidi 2018). As a nation of more than 100 million people, the 14<sup>th</sup> most populous country in the world and the most populous one in the entire Middle East and North Africa region, Egypt was already importing about 60–70 per cent of its food, while its struggling economy had to constantly bear with considerably large trade deficits as well. Under such dire economic circumstances, what Egypt could normally expect from the West was a reluctant offer of expensive loans and an unyielding package of neoliberal shock-therapy. Loans or any kind of financial assistance from other countries and international institutions were obviously not going to be offered to the Egyptians on a silver platter either (Rivlin 2010). As a case in point, Egypt under el-Sisi apparently needed to sign an agreement with Saudi Arabia on maritime disputes in order to receive some generous Saudi loans and credits. The deal, which was ultimately approved by the Egyptian parliament in June 2017 despite huge public outcry, required Cairo to officially cede sovereignty over two Red Sea islands, Tiran and Sanafir, to Saudi Arabia.

Although the el-Sisi government still had to make a hard deal to secure a \$12 billion loan from the IMF in exchange for carrying out some far-reaching economic reforms, Egypt's looking-East orientation was towards less painful and more consequential economic assistance from Asian countries. Financial aid and economic assistance from the East were conventionally devoid of any political strings attached, but the Egyptian government now wanted that the new chapter in bilateral relations with Asian countries to bring about more symbiotic economic connections and longer-term benefits for a greater number of its citizens (Wood 2018).

Of all the Asian countries, however, none could better fulfill Egypt's new looking-East objectives other than China. The rising Asian power had become Cairo's largest trading partner since 2012, and Xi Jinping's attachment to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and especially the Maritime Silk Road, dovetailed neatly enough with what the Egyptian government desired from its new approach toward Asia. Through offering loans and direct involvement, the resourceful Chinese were more willing to participate in a broad range of state-led massive projects in Egypt, especially the New Administrative Capital and its Central Business District initiated by the el-Sisi government (El-Menawy 2018). China has simply prioritized countries like Egypt in terms of its broader engagement with the African continent, persuading its businesses to invest greater amounts of their capital and technology in Egyptian projects in various sectors (Ziso 2017: 109).

As it turned out, more than 1,500 Chinese companies came to operate in Egypt in a whole host of economic sectors, including manufacturing, telecommunications, and infrastructure development projects (*Al-Monitor* 2023). From assisting Egypt with its electricity transformation to participating in the North African country's service sector, the Chinese inevitably increase their share of market penetration and thereby widen the already growing trade deficit between the two countries in favor of Beijing, although the East Asian power has simultaneously remained one of Egypt's largest external creditors, all of which have saddled the Egyptians with more than \$150 billion in foreign debt. Egypt has certainly strived to export even its stray dogs and live donkeys to China, but Cairo still has a long way to go to make a serious dent in the large edifice of its trade imbalance with Beijing, let alone managing to repay all its debts to the Chinese any time soon (*Global Times* 2021).

Despite the fact that probably only China could play a determining role in materializing what some Egyptian officials anticipated to be a 'miracle on the ground,' nevertheless, other major economic powers in Asia, such as Japan, South Korea and India, were in a position to lend Egypt a helping hand. In fact, Egypt has long been the preferred country in North Africa with which the Koreans could engage in substantial interaction. As South Korea's third largest trading partner on the African continent after South Africa and Liberia, the Arab country has over the years attracted major Korean companies, from Samsung and LG to Hyundai and GS, to actively participate in its various economic projects, ranging from consumer goods to subway systems (*Korea Herald* 2021). Consequently, South Korea's outbound shipments to Egypt increased to \$1.59 billion in 2019, but decreased by 22 percent to \$1.21 billion in 2020 due to some complications caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and other economic issues. In addition, South Korea and Egypt have raised the possibility of signing a free trade agreement to expand the scope and scale of their current commercial interactions (Kim 2022).

In South Asia, India is considered to be a major destination for Egyptian exports in long run, making it vital for Cairo to foster better political-economic relations with New Delhi. Egypt has also tried to gain Indian support for joining the BRICS bloc, although such a quest was rather futile given the poor performance of the Egyptian economy and the lack of enough sympathy from most of BRICS members. Still, India, like other major commercial countries of the East is expected to play an instrumental role in the long-term development of the Suez Canal special economic zone, transforming it from a mere maritime route with limited revenues into a financially rewarding logistics and services hub for international commerce. More than half of China's exports to Europe pass through the

Suez Canal, and it has been suggested that the critical passageway could play a similar role for a rising export power like India (Parashar 2013).

Meanwhile, Egypt's new looking-East push has not been only about working with more powerful countries and thriving economies in Asia. As the case of Telecom Orascom in North Korea has already shown, the Egyptians have been willing to engage with other less developed and less resourceful parts of the East. In 2008, Orascom, an Egyptian telecommunications company, worked with the communist regime of Pyongyang to set up Koryolink, North Korea's only mobile phone network. As part of the profitable deal, Orascom secured a 75-percent stake, with the remaining 25 per cent owned by North Korea. Despite the reported problems that ensued between the Egyptian company and its host country, the business partnership was another example of long-term overt and covert dealings between Cairo and Pyongyang (Gale 2016).

Another more interesting example is Egypt's increasingly growing partnership with some ASEAN countries like Vietnam and Indonesia, which are tempting even if they are unable for now to contribute substantially to various development projects in the Suez Canal or other part of the Mideast country. Since the post-Mubarak era, Egypt has even had to compete with its smaller regional rivals in North Africa, such as Tunisia and Morocco, by forging closer economic ties with ASEAN countries in order to prove that the North African country has a lot of untapped human and natural resources for international trade and business. Finally, Egypt's large population could make it a rather lucrative consumer market for various cheap goods produced by some ambitious ASEAN members, like Vietnam. Therefore, by attracting more foreign investors from the ASEAN region, Egypt could promote itself as a potentially rewarding destination for more affluent and accomplished businesses from other parts of Asia (Leila 2017).

### **Untrammelled: Bringing Cultural Magnetism into Play**

Apart from geopolitics and natural endowments, Egypt's cultural attributes could be exploited to oil the wheels of its new looking-East drive in one way or another. In fact, the claim of some scholars that the genesis of Chinese civilization can be traced back to ancient Egypt could actually persuade a large number of interested people across Asia to tie themselves to the Middle Eastern country far beyond some token cultural exchanges (ElSayed 2015; Lewis 2016). Moreover, Egypt has long been a top choice for many curious and passionate Asians who are interested in learning the Arabic language and delving into Islamic studies. As a case in point, one of the early ambassadors of Taiwan to Saudi Arabia was educated at Egypt's Cairo University. In the same way, today Cairo is home to thousands of Chinese Uyghurs who move to Egypt to learn Arabic, engage in Islamic studies, and experience life in a thoroughly Muslim society. There are also a good number of well-known Asian politicians, managers, and scholars who have studied in Egypt and now play an instrumental role in promoting closer connections between their country and the Egyptians in various fields (Laffan 1999; Hoffman 2021).

Currently, however, tourism is the most prominent aspect of Egypt's cultural interactions with some other parts of the world, including many Asian countries. Tourism is now one of the main pillars of the Egyptian economy, contributing some \$30 billion to the country's GNP and supporting roughly 2.5 million jobs, or 9.5 per cent of the total employment in Egypt. This service sector is also the fastest growing industry in North

Africa, and its share in Egypt's total exports is more than 27 per cent (Maged 2019). The nationality of tourists and foreign visitors to the Middle Eastern country is also undergoing significant changes. For many years, European and Arab tourists made up the majority of the people visiting Egypt for leisure and recreational purposes (Fagan 2004; Sattin 2011). The tourism industry in Egypt still depends on this group of foreign travelers for a bulk of its revenues, but Asian tourists are increasingly becoming an important contributor of foreign exchange for Egypt. Large numbers of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian tourists now visit every corner of Egypt and are increasingly establishing themselves among the highest-spending foreign travellers in the country (Kim 2017; Li and Zhengdan 2023).

Recognizing the growing role of Asian travellers as one of the most promising markets for Egyptian tourism in the long run, Egypt's looking-East policy has therefore been cognizant of how this sector could boost its material gains from Asia. After the post-Mubarak's political turmoil, which took a heavy toll on the Egyptian tourism industry for a number of years, the el-Sisi government has paid particular attention to diversifying the country's tourist markets by promoting the industry in Asian countries. Egypt's tourism industry is certainly on the rebound after several years of struggling due to domestic political chaos as well as the global pandemic of the mysterious coronavirus, but the Egyptian government has become even more determined to find more creative ways to encourage a greater number of wealthy Asians to include Egypt in their overseas travel itineraries. In addition to signing agreements with several Asian countries to establish new air routes to Egyptian cities, the Egyptian government has in recent years attempted to persuade a greater number of Asian investors to invest their hard cash and technical know-how in upgrading tourism infrastructures in Egypt's major recreational hotspots (Saied 2019; Ehrl and Hinck 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Egypt happened to be a pioneer of the Look East orientation in the wider Middle East and North Africa region, establishing early cordial relations with several Eastern nations from the 1950s onwards. These early interactions between Egypt and Eastern nations were mostly about ideological, political, and military matters, although such critical areas of bilateral relations could certainly justify beneficial economic and financial ties between the two sides in the long run. The crux of the problem was that succeeding governments in the Middle Eastern country made little, if any, strategic calculation about the huge economic potential that Egypt could gain from a rapidly rising East. More importantly, Egyptian leaders gradually became rather comfortable in the cocoon of the security alliance that Cairo had formed with the United States since the late 1970s. As a result, the Egyptians became addicted to the post-Camp David system by prioritizing the various political and financial rewards that Cairo could receive from maintaining relatively close cooperation with major Western countries and their friends and allies in the Middle East region and beyond.

By the time the Egyptian government embarked in earnest on a looking-East policy in recent years, therefore, the Mideast country had already missed out on many of the opportunities which the Egyptians could exploit from their relations with Eastern nations over the course of some six decades. Indeed, it was a combination of Egypt's worsening economic problems and the prospect of greater opportunities from better

relations with a rapidly rising East that convinced a new generation of Egyptian leaders to revive their country's relations with Asian nations. By and large, Egypt's new looking-East approach has thereby strived to shed its former politico-ideological tendencies in favor of achieving immediate economic and financial benefits by cultivating greater exchanges with the East. Despite prioritizing its economic and technological needs, Egypt has still tried to foster some sort of symbiotic relationship with Eastern countries in some other mutually beneficial areas, including arms deals and cultural interactions.

Finally, the success of Egypt's looking-East policy will largely depend on how Cairo can handle skillfully its increasingly growing partnership with Eastern nations without alienating some powerful Western countries, the United States in particular, with which Egypt has maintained significant political and security ties since the late 1970s. Egypt certainly has many geopolitical, demographic, and cultural advantages that can be used to win over many rich and resourceful Eastern nations that might be willing to share their hardly-gained capital and technological capabilities with the Egyptians. A major challenge, however, is that the East is hardly a unified coalition, as some Eastern countries, such as Japan and South Korea, are close friends and allies of the United States, while other Eastern nations, like Russia and China, are regarded as rivals and adversaries of the West. They are all in favor of either maintaining or fostering closer connections with Egypt, and it would inevitably be a daunting task for the Egyptians to find a perfect strategic equilibrium between them and at the same time reap all the relevant rewards.

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