

## The Geopolitics of Egypt's Change

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**D**espite the tragic events unfolding in Libya, it sure appears that the Arab world is on its way to shedding the exceptionalism that has dogged its political regimes for much of the last half century. Peoples' uprisings and revolutions and intellectuals' respectful calls for political openings are sweeping across a large swath of strategic lands and pointing



toward new, yet unclear, geopolitical orientations in the future Middle East. But despite the impact each and every battle for

change from autocracy will have on this future, it is Egypt's that will define how the Middle East and the Arab world will conduct its geopolitical business in the years to come.

The millions of young adults who stormed Egypt's public spaces to bring down Hosni Mubarak's regime carried a domestic political, economic, and social agenda that included nothing of the important international issues borne for decades by the deposed leader and his predecessors. Absent from Tahrir and other squares were stances on relations with the United States and Israel, on the Arab-Israeli dispute, the plight of the Palestinians, and the moribund peace process, and a plethora of hot-button issues

that defined how Egypt is such an important international player. Not that they had no strong positions on these issues – indeed they are proponents of justice, moderation, and fairness in international affairs - but the young and tech-savvy demonstrators were more concerned with ending proven internal evils of governance than asserting a future external agenda.

What constitutes Egypt's specific strategic posture and role, and what its new leaders have to contend with in the near future, are issues that have busied its past leaderships with no clear or satisfactory results. First, the new Egyptian political and economic leadership will have to find a working formula that can both resolve the country's problems with its East African partners in the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) about the division of the Nile River waters and assure the sustainability of its water-dependent agricultural sector. Indeed, the current Nile water dispute is Egypt's premier national security threat because more than 90% of Egypt's 82 million people live on and benefit from the river. Nine other countries in the NBI (Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Eritrea) have interests in the Nile and, except for Sudan, do not think that they have been given their right to it. In its last years, the Mubarak regime saw a direct challenge to Egypt's large share of the Nile waters but failed to find a solid agreement that could prevent future conflicts. It is not likely that the new leaders will find the going any easier.

Second, the new leaders will not be able to avoid the entanglement their predecessors had with the historical relationship with the Palestine issue. It seems unlikely that they will be any better in forging a reconciliation between Palestinian FATAH and HAMAS, but will surely be expected to play a role in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, whether and whenever it re-starts. On the other hand, it is likely that Egypt's foreign policy will be more assertive in defending Palestinian interests and rights, now that they overthrew a regime that was bound by necessity to abide by American demands for more moderation in what was expected from Israel about the issues of settlements, borders, Jerusalem, and a final peace deal.

Third, and when the dust of protest and revolution settles in Cairo, the new Egyptian leadership will have to restore its country's old stature as preeminent player in Arab and world affairs. Aside from its role in the Palestine question, Egypt has had a role in the Arabian Gulf where it was considered to be a reserve force for Gulf protection; in Iraq where it was seen as potential balancer for Iran; in Lebanon where it provided strategic depth to forces of moderation; in Sudan where it tried to act as peacemaker between the north and south; and in North Africa where extremist Islamist elements such as al-Qaeda of the Arabian Maghreb threaten stability.

Internationally, Egypt had played a strategic role in alignment politics. Considered stable and receiving military largesse from the United States, Egypt could be relied upon

for ensuring a pro-American stance in the Arab and Islamic worlds. In the 1970s, Egypt was a strategic prize won by the



United States when then-President Anwar al-Sadat headed west on his quest to transform Egypt politically and economically. But over the years, Egyptian assertiveness changed into a general trend of lethargy born from the sensitivity of Egypt's relationship with its American benefactor. Egyptian foreign policy became too predictable at the expense of the country's former image as effective actor in its environment and among its friends. Today, and whatever the shape of its political system after constitutional and other changes, Egypt's new leaders will have to re-assert its old role and halt its complacency.

Fourth, and finally, and despite the sacrosanct nature of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty of 1979, there may be a need for revisiting the provisions that prohibit Egypt from exercising its full sovereignty over its Sinai Peninsula. It does not seem likely, and may not be wise, that the new Egyptian leaders will demand a complete overhaul of the treaty. But they may want to re-negotiate those elements of the treaty that prevent Egyptian authorities to properly

control military affairs in the peninsula, such as the provision that limits the number of Egyptian troops in the territory.

The new Egypt is busy trying to order its internal affairs and may not want to get entangled with re-drawing or re-arranging its geopolitical map. But the fact remains that domestic politics and international affairs are two sides of the same coin of governance and will soon have to be addressed effectively together.

*Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International*

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Egypt-US military exercise image:

[http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/41521234/ns/world\\_news-mideast-n\\_africa/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/41521234/ns/world_news-mideast-n_africa/)

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