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MiG-35s for Egypt: A Veritable Change of Direction?

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According to a number of media reports published in late April 2014, Egypt is soon to sign a large arms deal with Russia for the purchase of 24 MiG-35 fighter jets. Reports of contacts between Egypt and Russia have surfaced in recent months, particularly in November 2013 following the visit to Cairo by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu, and in February 2014, when then-Egyptian Defense Minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi visited Moscow.

These earlier reports spoke of a much larger arms deal that would include air and coastal defense systems, Mi-35 attack helicopters, and fighter jets (actually the MiG-29). In addition, it was reported that the deals would be financed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The MiG-35 was presented for the first time at an air show in India in 2007. It emerged from the older MiG-29 series, and its developers define it as a 4++ generation jet fighter. The advances in this model over its predecessor (MiG-29M/M2) include a modern information system, compatibility with Russian and Western weapon systems, and a variety of integrated self-defense systems. The MiG-35 is intended as a multi-role aircraft with good capabilities in both air-to-air missions and precision attacks on ground targets in all types of weather. It will be equipped with Zhuk-AE radar, which is an active electronically scanned array (AESA) radar that is more advanced than the radar used in the MiG-29M/M2. Its engines will also be more advanced. The aircraft has not yet entered production, and the signing of the first contract for supply of the aircraft to the Russian air force has been postponed to 2016.

Egypt receives \$1.3 billion a year in US aid, and since 1979, the Egyptian military has purchased primarily American equipment. At the same time, Cairo has in fact bought some weaponry or other defense equipment from other countries, including Russia (from which it purchased upgrades to its outdated air-defense systems). Moreover, relations with the United States have cooled since the start of the Arab Spring in Egypt. In August 2011, the United States canceled its participation in the bi-annual Bright Star military exercise because of the political situation in Egypt after President Mubarak's ouster. And while in 2012, it continued to transfer in full the annual aid to Egypt, this situation changed after President Morsi was deposed in early July 2013. Although the United

States supplied Egypt with four F-16s that month (from a deal signed in 2010 that included forty aircraft), the administration later announced that it was delaying shipment of four other F-16s. In October 2013, the US government announced its decision to “recalibrate” defense aid to Egypt and suspend part of it because of the US law prohibiting provision of weapons to regimes that came to power through a military coup. Inter alia, it was decided to stop delivery of the F-16, Apache helicopters, air defense systems, and the Abrams tank; once again the US canceled its participation in Bright Star. However, in April 2014, Washington gave permission for the Apaches to be delivered to Egypt – which followed the delivery of the first of four Ambassador fast missile craft to the Egyptian navy in November 2013, as planned.

The difficulty in receiving weapons from the United States could explain why Egypt approached Russia. Furthermore, it clearly shows that the Egyptian leadership is dissatisfied with US Middle East policy. At the same time, the reports on the latest deal raise a number of questions.

First, on the technical side, beyond the fact that the MiG-35 is a model that has not yet entered production, the Russian technology culture is totally different from that of the United States. The Egyptian military, and the air force in particular, has undergone a complex, lengthy, and expensive transition since the 1980s from Soviet technology and a Soviet combat doctrine to American technology and doctrine. While Egypt continues to use a number of Russian-manufactured systems (in particular, air defense systems), the purchase of modern Russian aircraft will require a new logistical system that is separate from the system used for aircraft of American manufacture. This involves not only procurement of the planes, but also of new, unfamiliar weapon systems (including air-to-air missiles, air-to-ground missiles, and the like), and each such weapon system requires its own maintenance and training system. This is a long and expensive process, and the logic of embarking on it is questionable.

Second, since the start of the events of 2011, Egypt’s economy has declined, and it is doubtful whether Egypt has the ability to enter into expensive weapons deals. While it has been reported that the deals will be financed by Saudi Arabia or the UAE, there is room for doubt. Both of these countries have serious grievances against the United States and its policy in the region, and Saudi provision of aid to Egypt when the United States is threatening to stop its aid could well be perceived as defiance of the United States. Nonetheless, this is a far cry from Saudi willingness to fund a deal between Egypt and Russia, which is also a source of contention for Riyadh (especially because of Russia’s support for the Bashar Assad regime).

Third, although there is anger at the United States (and at President Obama in particular) and a desire to defy it, it is doubtful that Egypt would actually be prepared to cut off ties and give up US defense aid and weapons purchases from the United States. And finally, as of this time, reports of the arms deal (first published in Israel) have not been confirmed

by Russian or Egyptian sources, nor have the prominent media outlets in Europe and the United States covered the story.

The Russian Dimension

Although the arms deal under discussion has much economic value in its own right, the clear Russian interest is in the political-strategic realm. This deal is a component of Russia's overall effort to rehabilitate its status in the Middle East, which was greatly undermined during the Arab Spring – in Russia's view, with active Western assistance, as part of the ongoing global conflict. Thus, Russia has increased efforts in the past year at rapprochement with Middle East countries, both those with which it had cooperative relations in the past and others as well. In the meantime, it is clear that Moscow has returned to "arms supply diplomacy." There have been negotiations with Iraq for some time on comprehensive defense procurement; in talks with Lebanon and Jordan, Russia has even discussed the possibility of supplying Jordan with a nuclear reactor; a large arms deal was discussed between Russia and Saudi Arabia, despite basic disagreements between the two countries; and there has been talk of Saudi funding of possible purchases from Russia by other countries in the region.

Russia's conduct in the Middle East has recently displayed certain changes because of the Ukrainian crisis, which is at the center of the international agenda and the main arena for the superpower conflict. At the same time, Russia has designated the Middle East as another front in its global struggle against the West, partly to balance pressures on it in Eastern Europe. In this context, increased Russian activity in Syria and possibly also in Iran is especially notable. In addition, Russia is expanding its operations elsewhere in the region and thus demonstrating its challenge of the West. Russia thus has a definite interest in the arms deal with Egypt, as it could significantly upgrade its international standing and serve as a worthy example for the other countries in the region for expanding cooperation.

Conclusion

If the arms deal between Egypt and Russia is completed, it will represent a significant event in the Middle East strategic picture, another sign of reduced United States involvement in the region. For Russia, this would be a meaningful strategic achievement in its global struggle against the West. For Israel, one or two squadrons of aircraft such as the MiG-29 would not have much tactical significance. At the same time, the strategic significance could be decisive if the conflict between Russia and the West escalates and Russia gains an additional foothold in Egypt.

However, the deal has not yet been signed, and there are many obstacles to its conclusion – technical, operational, economic, and most of all, political and strategic. The United States still has numerous tools to put pressure on Egypt and prevent the deal from taking place. Therefore, reports should be seen more as an alarm for decision makers in Washington than as the herald of a substantive strategic change.