Sadat's American Strategy

SADAT'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON

Sadat’s visit to Washington in March of this year is now commonly regarded as a dramatic turning point in U.S.-Egyptian relations. His visit is supposed to have established Egypt’s credentials as America’s bulwark against communism in Africa. The failure of Egyptian Foreign Minister Fathy to ameliorate the strain in Cairo-Moscow ties during his June meeting with the Soviet leaders further confirmed the fact that Egypt had entered a new phase in its international relations. In a scant few years, Egypt has moved from the acknowledged spearhead of Russian influence in the Middle East and North Africa to the ostensible standard bearer of America’s struggle against communist domination of the third world.

The first point to note is that the remarkable about-face in Egyptian policy engineered by Sadat—away from Russia and towards the United States—is not as recent a phenomenon as it might seem. It was not initiated during Sadat’s Washington visit, nor even during his previous visit in the Fall of 1976 when he addressed a joint session of Congress, nor in May, 1976, when Sadat cancelled the Soviet-Egyptian Friendship treaty signed in July, 1971, nor even when Cairo and Washington renewed diplomatic ties in December, 1973, nor even during the events of October, 1973—but on July 18, 1972, when Sadat ordered the expulsion of the Russians from Egypt. This was the great turning point in Egypt’s relationship with the two great powers. All subsequent events, including the Yom Kippur War itself, only confirmed and advanced the reorientation in policy.

The Egyptian break with the Russians grew out of Sadat’s conclusion that the Russian presence was more of a liability than an asset, tending to congeal matters into a state of “no war—no peace.” The Russians, it will be recalled, had been invited early in 1970 to help protect Egypt’s skies against Israel’s deep-penetration air raids. However, the Russians were not prepared to underwrite an Egyptian offensive across the Canal. Such a move would have gone beyond the defensive role assumed by the Soviet Union and might well have provoked an immediate American response; and Moscow had no intention of becoming embroiled in a nuclear confrontation with the United States. Soviet restraint was also evident in the matter of supplies, which never matched Egyptian demands, particularly in the range of offensive weapons. In effect, the Russian presence operated as a constraint on Egypt’s freedom of maneuver in the military sphere. Sadat found himself increasingly in a deepening political-military dilemma. On the one hand, a political solution designed to gain a return by peaceful means of Egyptian territories lost in the six-Day War was dependent on access to Washington. This, however, was barred by the Russian presence in Egypt. By the same token, the military option was precluded since the Russians, effectively vetoed it. The vicious circle could only be broken by eliminating the Russians from the Egyptian scene, and this Sadat proceeded to do on July 18, 1972.
The rapprochement with the United States followed as a matter of course. The Yom Kippur War, despite America's tremendous aid to Israel, only served to accelerate this process. Indeed, the U.S. power-play on October 24-25, 1973, when American forces were placed on a worldwide alert in reaction to the Soviet threat to intervene in the fighting between the Egyptian and Israeli forces, can be interpreted as a move to prevent Russian reentry into Egypt. In effect, the American response had preserved Egypt's independence and sovereignty from the Russian bear hug. After the dust of the Yom Kippur War had settled, the long-range implications of Egypt's new policy posture became clear. Henry Kissinger's visit to Cairo in the immediate aftermath of the War only highlighted the new diplomatic potential that was open to Egypt. Sadat's aim was, and is, to detach Israel from the United States as America's Cold War ally in the Middle East. Essentially, Sadat's program is directed to correcting Nasser's mistake in policy orientation and to restoring the Middle East to the status quo ante of the early 1950s before the Cold War had superimposed itself on the region.

Nasser had aligned himself with the Soviet bloc in pursuing his aim of destroying Israel. The Czech-Egyptian arms deal of 1954-55 had caused him to rely more and more on Soviet weaponry and Soviet diplomatic support in pursuit of his goals. His goals, it should be noted, were not limited to Israel but were also directed at eliminating the remnants of imperial power in the region (namely, that of Great Britain and France) and of instituting a pattern of pan-Arab control, under Nasser's domination, throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Nasser delineated his imperial design in his book, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, where he referred to the three concentric circles of the Arab world, the Moslem world, and the African world, with Egypt in each case being the epicenter. Despite Nasser's own inglorious showing in the Suez War of 1956, Britain and France were eliminated from the scene thanks to America's stance in that conflict, and Nasser's pan-Arab imperial course was set.

But Nasser's total alignment with the Soviet Union, in effect, imposed the Cold War on the Middle East. If hereafter America had been lukewarm in its support of Israel, henceforth its attitude would be influenced by recognition of the fact that Israel's antagonist was spearheading the drive of Soviet penetration and domination of the area. Nasser's total commitment to the communist camp willy-nilly produced a commensurate American commitment to the security of Israel. Polarization of the Middle East conflict in terms of Cold War alignments reached its apogee in the Six-Day War when President Johnson deterred any thought of Russian intervention on behalf of the Arabs, if any such thought ever existed. And Israel, for its part, prevented Nasser from extending his hegemony (and that of the Soviet Union) over the rest of the Arab world.

As a client of Moscow, Nasser received, in Washington's eyes, full compensation for his policies. However, the SixDay War was still not the highwater mark of direct great-power involvement in the Arab-Israel dispute. This point was reached in the early months of 1970 when the Soviet Union stationed forces in Egypt, and one side of a direct great-power confrontation was in position. The potential for nuclear confrontation was real and great. But, as noted, this very potential for direct confrontation produced a freezing of the situation. By August, 1970, a cease-

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in the War of Attrition was insti-
tuted, and, in turn, stability on the
military front led to immobility on the
diplomatic front.
Sadat, who had by this time suc-
cceeded Nasser, was determined to re-
introduce fluidity into the situation
and to open new options. His dismis-
sal of the Russians and his subsequent
launching of the Yom Kipur War were
designed to unnerve the situation
and introduce a new dynamism into
the drive to regain the conquered ter-
ritories and ultimately settle the ques-
tion of Israel—and in this drive Wash-
ington was of far greater importance
than Moscow. In contrast to the situa-
tion under Nasser, the European im-
perial powers were no longer a factor
in the Middle East. Only the United
States was supporting Israel—and this
because of the Cold War. Eliminate the
Cold War from the region and U.S.
support for Israel would be neutralized.
From Sadat's viewpoint, this was a step
which was long overdue. Nasser's pol-
icies since 1957 had unnecessarily sharpen-
ed the Cold War conflict in the Mid-
dle East and understated whatever
chances there might have been for iso-
lating Israel.

All of Sadat's moves since July, 1972,
must be seen in the light of his over-
arching aim of regaining for Egypt the
confidence, the friendship, and, indeed,
the support of the United States. The
Yom Kipur War effectively broke the
ice and ushered in a new era of diplo-
matic maneuverability. And, in turn,
diplomatic ties between Cairo and
Washington, which had been severed
since June, 1967, were now renewed.
This step, agreed upon by Kissinger and
Sadat in their November, 1973, meeting
in Cairo, was only the first of a series
of steps which signified a new degree
of American interest in, and concern
over, Egypt. Thus the United States
undertook to clear the Suez Canal for
shipping and to aid in the rehabilita-
tion of the cities along its shoreline.
Similarly, Washington moved to bol-
ster the Egyptian economy by extend-
ing substantial food grants. Securing
the release of the Third Army and the
withdrawal of Israeli forces from Egypt
proper: the conclusion of the interim
agreement and the stationing of Amer-
icans in Sinai; the cancellation of the
Soviet-Egyptian friendship treaty, the
denial of Egyptian bases to Soviet war-
ships; Sadat's visits to Washington—all
served to highlight a growing identity
of interests between Cairo and Wash-
ington. America's growing involvement
in Egypt signified increasing reliance
upon Egypt to secure American inter-
est-strategic, economic and other—in
the area. Thus, what might normally
have been regarded as a sign of Sadat's
inherent weakness, namely, the Decem-
ber food riots in Cairo, only served to
fally American support for Sadat and
confirmed Sadat's role as America's
mainstay in the Arab world.

Soviet penetration into southern and
northeastern Africa and Russian in-
volvement with Libya's Qadhafi, has
allowed Sadat to assume the mantle
of America's front ally in Africa. The
Libyan situation, especially, offers Sa-
dat some grand opportunities which
he may yet decide to exploit. Sadat
has asked Washington for weapons.
Given the situation with reference to
Israel, the U.S. administration, and es-
pecially the Congress, are not inclined
to give Sadat everything he wants. But
in the event of even a minor conflict
with Libya, Egypt will be engaged, to all
intents and purposes, in a confronta-
tion with a nation armed with Soviet
weapons and in fact serving as a lackey
of Soviet designs in Africa. Any E.U.
administration would be hard put to
refuse arms to a state directly threat-
ened by Soviet weaponry. Thus, from

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being a mere friend of the United States, Egypt may seek to become an active ally of the United States and even attempt to overshadow Israel's role in this capacity. Indeed, if Sadat is intent on neutralizing Washington in the Arab-Israeli dispute, then there is no more effective strategy for Egypt but to become a client of U.S. arms. In effect, Egypt will be attempting to place the United States in a position vis-à-vis the Arab-Israel conflict similar to the position in which the U.S. has found itself vis-à-vis the Cyprus dispute, where both Turkey and Greece are formal allies, so that any outbreak of hostilities would probably stay America's hand.

Given this state of affairs, Israel should not be surprised by a whole series of possible moves by Sadat designed to prove to Washington how steadfast an ally of the American cause Egypt has become. Besides challenging Soviet-dominated Libya, as noted, Egypt can be expected to accommodate the United States by appearing to take the role of mediator in holding back the price of oil; it can offer American oil companies further exploitation rights in the Red Sea and Egypt proper; it can encourage the dispatch of Arab forces to combat communist-inspired aggression, such as Morocco's involvement in aid of Zaire's Mobutu; and it may yet make available port and other facilities to the U.S. Sixth Fleet patrolling the Mediterranean. It would not even be surprising if Sadat, in the name of an American ally, instituted visits to Washington as annual affairs on as less regular a basis than those of the Prime Minister of Israel and America's European allies.

Israel will be hard pressed to meet the challenge which Sadat, appearing as America's newly won and foremost ally in the Middle East, presents. Israel's anxiety is, of course, not prompted by vainglory, but rather by the concern that the U.S. commitment to Israel might be undermined. America could be immobilized because of commitments to both Israel and Egypt even while other Arab frontline states would be receiving unlimited supplies of Russian weapons. Thus, there is a danger in the event of a new outbreak of hostilities in the Middle East orchestrated from Moscow, American policy may be paralyzed at the critical moment.

Israel's primary focus in the coming months and years must inevitably be the Congress, which under U.S. law is qualified to delay, and even block, the sale of arms to foreign states. Moreover, members of Congress are less prone to be seduced by the blandishments of a new-found friendship. Since a total ban on the sale of arms to Egypt might be difficult to maintain, particularly if fighting breaks out between Egypt and Libya, there might be greater wisdom in linking America's sale of arms to Egypt to genuine progress in establishing peace in the Middle East conflict. The illustration of Congressional policy towards Turkey in the Cyprus dispute, where arms sales have been tied to progress on a settlement, comes readily to mind.

Sadat has recently been caught in a new situation between Egypt and Israel to that between the United States and Communist China over the years. But it should be noted that the absence of formal diplomatic ties between those states, and even their failure to settle the outstanding difference over the status of Taiwan, have not precluded extensive trade deals and visits by heads of state, foreign ministers, aircrafts, journalists, and the like. Before advancing arms to Egypt the United States should ask for similar signs of normalization of relations between

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Egypt and Israel. Certainly Egypt should abandon its trade boycott against Israel and desist from promoting and endorsing the adoption of resolutions in international organizations which threaten or challenge Israel's right to exist. Moreover, in supporting the Palestinians' right to self-determination, Sadat should be asked to spell out in clear and unambiguous terms where he stands with regard to the Palestinians' demand for a secular democratic state in all of Palestine and how he squares this with his assertion that he acknowledges the right of Israel to exist as a sovereign entity in the Middle East. Israel's challenge to Sadat's policy of rapprochement with the United States need not be a frontal one to deny him the right of being a friend of the United States, but Israel is entitled to ask the United States to test Sadat's good intentions. If peace is Sadat's goal then it should find expression in more than mere idle rhetoric. And, of course, the United States might be reminded of Sadat's vulnerability and of the dangers of some new hand gaining control of the Egyptian rudder. In this regard it might not be amiss to remind Washington that, given the volatile nature of Arab politics, there is no assurance that Sadat will not change course when it suits him or, indeed, that Sadat will be around long enough to sustain any course at all.

1) These observations were written prior to the Egyptian-Libyan clashes in July.