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## **Foundations and principles of Egypt's foreign policy**

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# Foundations and principles of Egypt's foreign policy

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**Abstract.** The article examines the determinants, foundations, principles, and priorities of the foreign policy of the Arab Republic of Egypt under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Based on geopolitics and cultural and historical heritage, Egypt asserts its special place and role in the sphere of public diplomacy. The Islamic factor, the geographical location of the state, the peculiarities of its history, its colonial past and relations with such powers as the United States, the USSR/Russia, Great Britain and France, the presence of the Suez Canal and the problem of the distribution of the Nile's water resources are the determinants that predetermine the main directions of its foreign policy. The main principles of Egypt's foreign policy are a traditional set of provisions characteristic of many states, adjusted for the geopolitical situation and specific features of development. The geopolitical characteristics of the ARE, its identity and national security objectives necessitate the existence of various "circles" of national interests. The "Arab circle" encompasses a broader understanding of national security based on the security of its Arab and African periphery. The "African circle" is defined by the desire to strengthen relations with countries on the continent in the economic and cultural spheres, taking into account the particular importance of the Nile Basin states as the "strategic depth" of the ARE. For Egypt, the "Islamic circle" means seeking and developing solutions to the problems of the Islamic world, spreading the values of moderation and tolerance in Islam, and encouraging interfaith dialogue. The "Asian circle" includes strengthening relations with leading Asian powers in order to become part of the coming "Asian century". The "European circle" concerns relations with the European Union. Within the framework of the "international circle", Egypt is building relations with the world's leading powers.

## INTRODUCTION

The presidency of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is characterized by the return of the country's traditional foreign policy after the difficult final stage of H.Mubarak's rule, the "Arab Spring" and the short, but significantly changing, rule of M.Morsi.

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's rise to power is described in the official Egyptian chronicle as the "June 30 Revolution", associated with the military's removal of M.Morsi and his supporters from power [1]. Furthermore, the Egyptian Constitution notes the "Revolution of January 25-June 30", which is comparable to the 1919 revolution that liberated the country from British rule and the 1952 revolution that overthrew the monarchy [2].

At the same time, the military coup, during which the democratically elected government was removed, drew condemnation from the international community, and resolving this issue became one of the first problems faced by the military that came to power. The question of the legitimacy of the ARE government was resolved during the 2014 presidential elections [3].

However, international recognition became only one of the problems in the country's foreign policy. The new leadership of the ARE implemented drastic changes in foreign policy, affecting, first and foremost, relations with countries in the region and the approach to a new interpretation of the role of the Islamic factor.

According to Italian expert A.Meringolo, the actions of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime are driven by the need to consolidate society and ensure the survival of the political elite. The drastic changes in foreign policy were driven by a desire to mobilize public support and protect the regime from criticism, including from abroad, by labeling opponents both domestically and internationally as a threat to national security [4].

In this regard, using the examples of Mohamed Morsi and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, it can be added that in both cases, Egypt's national interests were supplanted by those of the ruling regime. While Mohamed Morsi expressed the views of the Muslim Brotherhood, including in foreign policy, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi represented the position of the

country's military-political elite. Since these interests were largely divergent, Egypt's foreign policy course underwent significant adjustments in a short period of time.

## DISCUSSION

Based on geopolitics and cultural and historical heritage, Egypt's public diplomacy asserts the country's special place and role. According to Russian researcher A.Poida, the geographical location of the state, the peculiarities of its history, its colonial past and relations with such powers as the United States, the USSR/Russia, Great Britain, and France, the presence of the Suez Canal, and the issue of distributing the Nile River's water resources are the factors that determine the main directions of its foreign policy [5].

It seems that the Islamic factor should also be included among the determinants of the ARE's foreign policy, which is particularly relevant in light of the confrontation between the army and Islamists and the violent removal and subsequent court ruling on the life imprisonment of former President M.Morsi.

The confrontation between Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's government and the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies has moved to the regional level and has affected relations with other states in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as with the Palestinian movement Hamas [6].

Meanwhile, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's government has formulated the foundations of the country's foreign policy. According to Egyptian Prime Minister M.Madbouli, the foreign policy goals currently include the following areas:

- maintaining a balanced policy with all global powers;
- ensuring security and stability in the Persian Gulf region;
- ensuring national security in the regional and African arenas;
- activating the role of the Cairo International Centre for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Peacebuilding [7].

## RESEARCH RESULTS

The principles of Egypt's modern foreign policy include the following:

- maintaining peace and stability at the regional and international levels;
- mutual respect between countries, observance of the principles of international law, respect between international treaties and international organisations, strengthening solidarity between states and promoting UN reform;
- active attention to the economic dimension of international relations;
- a balanced foreign policy linked to strategic goals and interests, and based on independent decision-making;
- priority to Arab countries as the main direction of foreign policy, in close connection with the Islamic and African directions, as well as with an emphasis on the association of Egypt with the countries of the Nile basin;
- the relationship between Egypt's foreign and domestic policies, in which foreign policy should be aimed at promoting the creation of a modern democratic system that ensures full equality of citizens before the law, combined with the fight against terrorism, and mobilizing political and economic support by attracting foreign investment and tourism to improve the standard of living of Egyptian citizens [8].

### ***The main principles of Egypt's foreign policy Egypt***

It appears that the basic principles of Egypt's foreign policy represent a traditional set of provisions, typical of many states, adjusted for the geopolitical situation and development characteristics.

The foreign policy objectives of the ARE are as follows:

- protecting Egypt's national security and supreme interests;
- achieving comprehensive development in its various dimensions, which means achieving the goal of protecting the country's national security and supreme interests;
- strengthening security, stability, striving for a "just peace" in the Middle East and ridding the region of weapons of mass destruction;
- countering terrorism at the international level through the implementation of a comprehensive strategy and striving to make it a top regional and international priority;
- strengthening international economic relations, ensuring cooperation and exchange of experience in the field of development, as well as attracting resources to achieve common interests between various international structures;
- strengthening relations with leading powers to ensure Egypt's national interests [9].

**Egypt's "circles" of national interests.** According to official Cairo, the geopolitical characteristics of Egypt, its identity and the tasks of ensuring national security necessitate the existence of various "circles" of national interests.

**The "Arab Circle"** encompasses a broader understanding of national security based on the security of its Arab and African peripheries. It also encompasses strengthening Arab solidarity, which concerns the ability of all Arab states to more effectively counter external challenges and threats, such as terrorism, and supporting stability in the Arab states after the Arab Spring.

An important dimension is assistance in crisis prevention and resolution. In this area, Cairo's historical commitments are compounded by immediate national security concerns. Egypt seeks to participate actively in joint international projects to resolve these crises, primarily under the auspices of the UN, where the ARE ranks third among the largest donor countries to peacekeeping operations [10].

The principle of peaceful settlement is combined with the traditional strategy of helping Arab countries overcome crises, including on such pressing issues as Palestine [11].

Egypt views the potential disintegration of the region's nation-states as a threat, as this would create a fertile environment for terrorism and undermine the position of Arab states. Cairo advocates for the preservation of territorial integrity and a peaceful resolution of the conflicts in Syria and Yemen.

In Syria, Cairo opposes any foreign intervention or military solutions. The country's proactive stance is demonstrated by its initiatives for a peaceful resolution, as well as its support for local ceasefire agreements brokered by Russia [12].

At the same time, characteristic of the current course of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is that Egypt rejects the possibility of participation of radical Islamist groups in the peace process.

In Yemen, the Egyptian armed forces took part in military strikes against the main opposition force to the government, the Houthis, in cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, based on their interests in ensuring security in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and the Persian Gulf [13].

Egypt's Libyan policy occupies a special place. Libya directly borders Egypt, and Cairo views the armed conflict there on several levels, positioning itself as a central actor in supporting efforts to restore Libyan statehood and the fight against terrorism. For Egypt, resolving the Libyan crisis concerns the overall security situation, as well as the security of border areas and countering the activities of terrorist organizations. Protecting state borders also includes ensuring "strategic depth" by helping strengthen security in Libya's border areas [14].

In the armed conflict, Egypt supports the Libyan National Army and its commander, Khalifa Haftar, hoping with his help to unite Libya [15] and prevent the formation of a state that shares the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood and relies on external assistance from Turkey and Qatar, which at one time acted as allies of M.Morsi.

**The "African Circle"** is defined by its desire to strengthen its relations with the countries of the continent in the economic and cultural spheres, taking into account the special importance of the Nile basin states as the "strategic depth" of Egypt, working with all African peoples in their movement towards democratization, achieving comprehensive development and activating multilateral partnerships.

The central issue is the water resources of the Nile River and Ethiopia's construction of the largest dam in the region, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. For Egypt, the water resources of the Nile are the main source of hydropower, agriculture and domestic needs. Therefore, in many ways, access to these water resources means the survival of the country's population [16].

Egypt and Sudan are in favour of maintaining the current regime for the use of transboundary water resources, while Ethiopia, with the completion of the dam's construction and commissioning, will gain control over water flow and, accordingly, the ability to change the water use regime. The situation surrounding the construction of the Ethiopian dam is still far from being resolved, and Cairo is counting on international assistance in resolving this issue [17].

For Egypt, **the "Islamic Circle"** means finding and developing solutions to the problems of the Islamic world, spreading the values of moderation and tolerance of Islam and encouraging interfaith dialogue [18].

It appears that limiting interests within the "Islamic circle" by promoting moderation, tolerance and dialogue primarily reflects the position of Egypt's current leadership, representing the country's military-political elite, which came to power against the backdrop of opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideology both domestically and internationally.

Egypt's traditionally active position on Palestine and other pressing issues reflecting the problems of the development of the Islamic world and conflict resolution is reflected in the general formulation of the search for their solutions.

**The “Asian Circle”** includes strengthening relations with leading Asian powers in order to become part of the emerging “Asian Century”.

**The “European Circle”** refers to relations within the framework of the Association Agreement with the EU [19], which entered into force in 2004, and the European Neighbourhood Policy Action Plan, according to which cooperation is carried out in the framework of economic modernisation, energy sustainability and environmental protection, as well as social development and social protection. The cooperation is also focused on issues of governance, strengthening stability, building a modern democratic state [20], and the principles proposed in the Barcelona Process of Euro-Mediterranean Participation [21], according to which a comprehensive partnership is established between the participants of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership by strengthening political dialogue on a regular basis, developing economic and financial cooperation and increasing emphasis on the social, cultural and human dimensions, which are the three aspects of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership [22].

**The “International Circle”** within which Egypt’s relations with the world’s leading powers are structured. Cairo seeks to achieve balance after the revolutionary period by developing its relations with Western partners such as the US, EU, Japan, Russia, China, and other leading powers, as well as rapidly developing countries. This cooperation aims to open up new opportunities while maintaining the principle of balance between the leading centers of power [23].

**Features and changes in Egypt’s foreign policy.** In our opinion, one of the features of Egypt’s international position and foreign policy is the contradiction between the ideas about its role in the region and the world, reflected in its principles, goals and directions, and the place that the country occupies in the system of regional and international relations.

While Article 1 of the Constitution of Egypt affirms the country as part of the Arab nation and the Muslim world, belonging to Africa and Asia, making a “contribution to the development of human civilization” [24], and the principles and goals affirm Egypt as a strong regional state, in practice the country is far from being able to, for example, lead any regional alliance. In those alliances in which Egypt participates, it occupies a subordinate position. Unlike what was possible during the reigns of G.A.Nasser, A.Sadat, and, to some extent, H.Mubarak, under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt is unable to lead any regional initiatives, occupying a de facto subordinate position in the Saudi-led coalition.

As researcher H.Darwishes notes, the primacy of a particular power is reflected in the formal designation of a particular alliance, for example, Saudi Arabia and its allies, Turkey and Qatar and their allies, Iran and its allies, etc. [25]. After the “Arab Spring”, Egypt participated in coalitions, but never led them.

The changes in foreign policy introduced by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi affected bilateral relations and predetermined Egypt’s new place in regional and international processes.

First and foremost, the changes affected Egypt’s role in the regional balance of power. A significant improvement in relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates can be noted. Both Gulf monarchies actively supported the removal of Morsi and the rise of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Riyadh welcomed the exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood from Egyptian political life, and in 2016, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi publicly promised to “return” the disputed islands of Sanafer and Tiran to Saudi Arabia, which had given them to Egypt at the height of the 1956 Suez Crisis for use as military bases [26]. Egypt took direct part in the military operation of the Saudi Arabia-led coalition in Yemen, and again, as it did before M.Morsi, criticized Tehran’s policies, calling on it to stop its policies aimed against the security of the Arab region [27].

At the same time, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Egypt still maintain some disagreements, particularly regarding the Syrian conflict. Cairo and Riyadh differ in their assessments of Russia’s participation and the possibility of involving Islamic radicals in the peace process. Egypt has also effectively withdrawn from the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, leaving its ally to resolve the conflict on its own [28].

However, on the most important issue for the ruling the Sisi regime, the positions of the two countries remain close: both Cairo and Riyadh regard the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization [29]. Changes have affected relations between Egypt and Russia. Since 2014, the two countries have improved cooperation in virtually all areas, including arms supplies and cooperation in ensuring regional security. Egypt has become one of the largest regional buyers of Russian arms, significantly modernizing its air force and air defense systems. A new area of cooperation has emerged in the field of nuclear energy: the two countries agreed to build a nuclear power plant in Dabaa, northeast of Cairo. Furthermore, Russia and Egypt hold similar positions on the conflicts in Libya and Syria [30].

As noted by ARE expert H.Abugabal, despite the popularity of comparisons between Egyptian-Russian cooperation under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and the period of Gamal Abdel Nasser, there are no signs of a fundamental change in the country’s foreign policy vector. Rather, the cooperation aims to make Cairo’s policy more balanced and less dependent on Washington as a traditional arms supplier [31].

This view is also supported by the strengthening of military-technical cooperation between Egypt and France. During the presidency of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, assets were purchased for the Egyptian Air Force and Navy, including aircraft carriers [32].

One of the main reasons for the desire to restructure relations with the leading powers was the sharp decline in US influence in the Middle East. Nevertheless, Cairo remains one of Washington's major arms buyers and partners in the Middle East.

Military supplies form the basis of bilateral cooperation, and the Donald Trump administration (2016-2020) emphasized Egypt's contribution to the fight against terrorism, while the Obama administration prioritized democratization processes, where Cairo was noted to have significant shortcomings. The Trump administration's discussion of designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization could serve as a significant factor in strengthening bilateral relations, given how acutely the threat posed by this movement is perceived by Egypt's political elite.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the analysis allows us to formulate the following conclusions:

1. The general principles of Egypt's foreign policy are based on its determinants, including geopolitics and the Islamic factor, its membership of the Arab world and Africa, the presence of the Suez Canal and its membership of the Nile River basin, as well as the dynamics of its relations with the great powers.

The main directions of foreign policy are divided into Arab, African, Islamic, Asian, European and international, which give an idea of the priorities of the country's foreign policy strategy.

2. The foreign policy of the Arab Republic of Egypt under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is determined by the interests of the ruling elite. In this regard, the change in the country's leadership has led to fundamental changes in its foreign policy.

Relations with the leading countries in the region have changed: there has been a rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, relations with Turkey and Qatar have become confrontational, and tensions with Iran have increased. Given the weakening of US influence in the region, Cairo began to build more balanced relations with other major powers, primarily Russia and France.

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