

The Mutual Pivot to Asia in US-Egypt Relations

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The current geopolitical inflection point in international relations puts into question the significance of the Middle East in US foreign policy over the next few decades. Egypt, the most populous nation in the Middle East and strategically located at the northeast tip of Africa, is betting its significance to the United States can withstand this shift to a multipolar order. While many of the factors binding Egypt-US relations today also shaped the Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak regimes' reliance on American backing, the Obama administration's support for the people in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution set off alarms for prospective Middle East autocrats. Exclusive reliance on US patronage for political survival is no longer a secure bet.

Since coming to power in 2014, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's top foreign policy priority has been to diversify Egypt's foreign relations and military purchases. After strengthening ties with and securing foreign aid from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Sisi expanded Egypt's military purchases to France and Russia, while also welcoming China's investments in his ambitious infrastructure plans.

Simultaneously, the US government's "pivot to Asia," announced under the Obama administration but begun in earnest under President Joe Biden, further incentivized Sisi to diversify Egypt's economic and military relations.¹ Hence a mutual pivot East, for different reasons.

Four factors are most likely to impact the contours of Egypt-US relations during this new era of global competition. First, Egypt's substantial and decades-long dependence on US military aid is likely to remain steady so long as Israel retains its special favored-nation status in US foreign policy. Second, Egypt's control of the Suez Canal secures its geopolitical significance since maritime shipping remains a substantial means of global trade. Third, rapidly worsening economic conditions for the most populous nation in the Middle East could trigger mass uprisings, increased undocumented migration to Europe, and political conflict in a volatile region. Finally, China's increased interest in trade and infrastructure investments in Egypt as part of its expanding interests in Africa is likely to erode America's ability to influence the Egyptian government's policies.

Notably peripheral in the bilateral relations calculus are human rights and the promotion of democracy. The dual failures of the Arab Spring and America's military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq leave little appetite among Americans for exporting democracy to the Middle East. Whatever pledges Biden has made to put human rights at the heart of his foreign policy, they are likely intended to condemn communist China, which is eclipsing the Middle East's significance in Washington.² The Middle East is now a secondary or tertiary foreign policy priority.

America's Pivot Away from the Middle East

The Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy unequivocally identifies China as the top global priority. Having declared victory in the Global War on Terror, Biden announced "a consequential new period of American foreign policy that will demand more of the United States in the Indo-Pacific than has been asked of us since the Second World War. No region will be of more significance to the world and to everyday

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- 1 Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>; Elise Labott, "Can Biden Finally Put the Middle East in Check and Pivot Already?," *Foreign Policy*, March 2, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/02/biden-middle-east-china-pivot-clinton-obama/>.
 - 2 Simon Lewis and Humeyra Pamuk, "Biden Put Rights at Heart of US Foreign Policy. Then He Pulled Punches," *Reuters*, Sept. 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/biden-put-rights-heart-us-foreign-policy-then-he-pulled-punches-2021-09-13/>.

Americans than the Indo-Pacific.”³ As a result, the US is seeking to contain the rise of China through military alliances in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific. The US “will seek greater strategic stability through measures that reduce the risk of unintended military escalation, enhance crisis communications, build mutual transparency, and ultimately engage Beijing on more formal arms control efforts.”⁴

Not until the final pages of the National Security Strategy is the importance of the Middle East acknowledged, and only in connection with America’s “ironclad commitment” to Israel’s security. In a turnabout from the past two decades, Biden states that the US “will not use our military to change regimes or remake societies, but instead limit the use of force to circumstances where it is necessary to protect our national security interests and consistent with international law, while enabling our partners to defend their territory from external and terrorist threats.”⁵ The strategy’s emphasis on building integrated air and maritime defense structures signals that only countries that further those goals will remain relevant. That the promotion of human rights and the values enshrined in the United Nations charter is the final point in the strategy is further evidence of America’s shift away from democracy promotion after the Arab Spring.

Although there is no specific mention of Egypt in the National Security Strategy, control of the Suez Canal, a shared border with Israel, and having the largest population in the region all make Egypt too important for the United States to ignore. Moreover, the Egyptian military is the most powerful institution in the country and maintains strong strategic relations with the United States.⁶ These factors keep Egypt relevant, though not a priority, in US foreign policy.

Egypt’s Strategic Location and Military Dependence on the US

When Egypt signed a peace treaty in 1979 with Israel—America’s strongest ally outside of Europe—its relevance was secured in US foreign policy for decades to come. Since then, Egypt has received military aid from the

3 “National Security Strategy 2022,” The White House, October 2022, p. 38, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf>.

4 *Ibid.*, 25.

5 *Ibid.*, 43.

6 “Strengthening the US-Egyptian Relationship, Council on Foreign Relations, May 30, 2002, <https://www.cfr.org/report/strengthening-us-egyptian-relationship>.

United States that surpasses \$1 billion per year.⁷ The latest aid package of \$1.4 billion in 2023 (\$1.3 billion in military assistance) brought total US aid to Egypt since 1946 to \$87 billion.⁸ Military aid thus constitutes a significant portion of the Egyptian military's annual budget. Pursuant to US law, the aid can only be spent on purchases of US military equipment, arms, and training, thereby maintaining relations between the Egyptian and American militaries.⁹

While the Israel-Egypt peace deal was the impetus for establishing the large annual military aid package, the United States' significant economic interests in the global arms market also incentivize large foreign military aid packages. According to a 2020 survey, 42 of the world's 100 largest defense firms are based in the United States, including seven of the top ten.¹⁰ Successive administrations have thus understood that foreign aid packages boost American arms sales, which are essential for keeping the nation's defense industry competitive and innovative.

The Middle East has long been a key driver of the global weapons trade, to a disproportionate degree relative to its population. Some states in this heavily militarized region are major arms purchasers, empowered by partnerships with foreign allies and wealth derived from vast energy reserves. For example, from 2015 to 2019, the Middle East accounted for an estimated 35 percent of global arms imports.¹¹ Notably, the United States has been the single largest arms supplier to the Middle East by volume and value for decades.¹² Between 1950 and 2017, the Middle East accounted for over \$379 billion in US foreign military sales agreements.¹³ Russia and France were the second and third largest arms suppliers, at 19.3

7 Jeremy M. Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, updated May 2, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33003/122>.

8 "Fact Sheet – U.S. Military Assistance to Egypt: Separating Fact from Fiction," Project on Middle East Democracy, July 30, 2020, <https://pomed.org/publication/fact-sheet-u-s-military-assistance-to-egypt-separating-fact-from-fiction/>; Edward Wong and Vivian Yee, "U.S. to Move Forward on Military Aid to Egypt Despite Lawmakers' Concerns," *New York Times*, September 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/14/us/politics/egypt-military-aid-biden.html>.

9 Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations."

10 Clayton Thomas et al., "Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, updated November 23, 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44984/7>.

11 *Ibid.*, 1–2.

12 *Ibid.*, 2.

13 *Ibid.*

percent and 11.4 percent respectively, of all Middle East arms imports between 2015 and 2019.¹⁴ Meanwhile, China accounted for a mere 2.5 percent of arms imported into the region between 2000 and 2019.¹⁵ Thus, China's regional impact is primarily in the economic sphere.

The Egyptian Army is the second largest in the Middle East, making it a critical regional ally and global arms importer. Most of Egypt's arms purchases are paid with US foreign military financing (FMF) grants offered in the annual military aid package. FMF grants must be spent on US defense equipment, services, and training, which explains why 47 percent of Egyptian arms acquisitions came from the United States between 2010 and 2014.¹⁶

However, the Obama administration's policies toward Egypt angered its military generals. The United States' failure to stand by former General Hosni Mubarak during the 2011 Revolution, its acceptance of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi's presidential victory, and its freeze on a substantial portion of aircraft, tank, and missile sales to Egypt for two years after the military deposed Morsi in 2013 rang alarm bells within the military. Sisi responded by diversifying Egypt's military suppliers for the stated purpose of decreasing reliance on the United States.¹⁷ Egypt's arms purchases from the US dropped to 15 percent of its total purchases from 2015 to 2019, while they simultaneously increased from France and Russia to 35 percent and 34 percent, respectively.¹⁸ The tens of billions of dollars in aid to Egypt from the Gulf countries since 2013 increased the percentage of the military budget that could be spent on non-US military equipment.¹⁹ As a result, between 2018 and 2022, Egypt

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 7.

16 Ibid., 15.

17 Bradley Bowman et al., "Egypt's Transition Away from American Weapons Is a National Security Issue," *Defense News*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/05/25/egypts-transition-away-from-american-weapons-is-a-national-security-issue/>; "Policy of 'Diversification' Allows Egypt Not to Be Hostage to US Pressures," *The Arab Weekly*, February 22, 2022, <https://theArabweekly.com/policy-diversification-allows-egypt-not-be-hostage-us-pressures>.

18 Thomas et al., "Arms Sales in the Middle East," 15.

19 Nadeen Ebrahim, "Gulf States Have Given Billions in Aid to Egypt. Now They Want to See Returns," *CNN*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/01/business/egypt-gulf-states-aid-mime-intl/index.html>; Khalil al-Anani, "Gulf Countries' Aid to Egypt: It Is Politics, Not the Economy, Stupid!," Arab Center Washington DC, May 5, 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/gulf-countries-aid-to-egypt-it-is-politics-not-the-economy-stupid/>.

was the sixth largest arms importer globally, with Russia, Italy, and France being its principal suppliers.²⁰

Despite this diversification of arms purchases, the decades-long pipeline of US ammunition, spare parts, and maintenance makes Egypt's military dependent on the United States for sustained military operations. A grave economic crisis, combined with record levels of external debt, may give Sisi no choice but to rely primarily on US aid for future military supplies. But as Egypt increasingly relies on China and the Gulf states for foreign investments, US influence is waning in the economic sphere.

Egypt's Economic Crisis Attracts Chinese Investment and Influence

Twelve years after the historic January 25, 2011 Revolution, the most pervasive grievance among Egyptians arises from the country's deteriorating economic conditions.²¹ Skyrocketing inflation, the devaluation of the Egyptian pound, and stagnant wages have sliced the average Egyptian household's purchasing power in half.²² As a result, the World Bank classifies 60 percent of Egyptians as poor or vulnerable.²³ All the while, Egypt's hundreds of thousands of college graduates each year struggle to find gainful employment in the formal sector that matches their skills. To be sure, political instability arising from the Arab Spring initially triggered an economic decline. But government mismanagement and Sisi's ambitious infrastructure projects have caused the national debt to reach an unprecedented \$165 billion.²⁴

Since the military forcibly removed President Mohamed Morsi in 2013, the Egyptian economy has been propped up by over \$100 billion in grants from the Gulf countries. This aid includes Central Bank deposits, fuel assistance, and other forms of aid, most of which are provided with

20 Jeremy M. Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations."

21 Michel Martin and Aya Batrawy, "Egypt Faces a Deepening Economic Crisis. Is the Government Taking Steps to Fix It?" *National Public Radio*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/28/1166422786/egypt-the-middle-east-s-biggest-country-is-facing-a-deepening-economic-crisis>; Samy Magdy, "In Egypt, Government and Poor Struggle with Troubled Economy," *Associated Press*, March 1, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/egypt-economic-crisis-inflation-russia-ukraine-war-0bf22bb11d5b7fe2060eac52279b9df3>.

22 Cathrin Schaer, "Economic Crisis: Is Egypt the 'New Lebanon?'" *Deutsche Welle*, January 20, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/economic-crisis-is-egypt-the-new-lebanon/a-64469810>.

23 Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations," 5.

24 Yezid Sayigh, "Egypt Is Missing Its IMF Loan Program Targets," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 6, 2023, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/90134>.

few conditions.²⁵ Additionally, Egypt has received over \$13 billion from International Monetary Fund (IMF) grants conditioned on macroeconomic reforms.²⁶ But rather than using these and other funds to strengthen the economy, President Sisi went on a spending spree, expanding the Suez Canal, building a new administrative capital on the outskirts of Cairo, and purchasing billions of dollars' worth of military equipment.

By 2022, Egypt had a debt service provision of \$28 billion, which exceeded the total value of exports and amounted to four times the annual revenues from the Suez Canal.²⁷ As a result, the country's annual debt service consumes nearly half of the state budget, among the highest ratios in the world, which led Moody's to downgrade Egypt's sovereign credit rating from B2 to B3 in 2023.²⁸ Egypt is also the second largest IMF debtor after Argentina, which, combined with other external debt, has produced a budget financing gap of \$17 billion over the next four years.²⁹ Sisi is presumably relying on his Gulf allies and China to assist in covering this shortfall. The assistance is sure to increase China's influence in Egypt's domestic and foreign policy over time.

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- 25 Jonathan Fenton-Harvey, "Why Unconditional Gulf Financing for Egypt is Dwindling," *The New Arab*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/why-unconditional-gulf-financing-egypt-dwindling>.
- 26 "Egypt: History of Lending Commitments as of February 28, 2021," International Monetary Fund, February 28, 2021, <https://www.imf.org/external/np/fin/tad/extarr2.aspx?memberKey1=275&date1key=2021-02-28>; "IMF Executive Board Approves 46-month US \$3 Billion Extended Arrangement for Egypt," International Monetary Fund, December 16, 2022, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/12/16/pr22441-egypt-imf-executive-board-approves-46-month-usd3b-extended-arrangement>; Richard Thompson, "GCC States Pledge to Invest \$12bn in Egyptian Economy," *Middle East Business Intelligence*, March, 14, 2015, <https://www.meed.com/gcc-states-pledge-to-invest-12bn-in-egyptian-economy/>.
- 27 Mahmoud Hassan, "Creditors Are Standing on Egypt's Doorstep," *Middle East Monitor*, April 3, 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230403-creditors-are-standing-on-egypts-doorstep/>; "Egypt's Suez Canal Revenue Hits \$7 Billion Record Peak," *Reuters*, July 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/egypts-suez-canal-revenue-hits-7-bln-record-peak-2022-07-04/>.
- 28 Vansh Agarwal, "Moody's Cuts Egypt Rating to B3, Changes Outlook to Stable," *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/moodys-cuts-egypt-rating-b3-changes-outlook-stable-2023-02-07/>.
- 29 Lee Ying Shan, "Egypt's Pound Is Among the Worst Performing Currencies in 2023. And It's Expected to Plummet Further," *CNBC*, April 4, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/04/05/the-egyptian-pound-is-amongst-the-worst-performing-currencies-in-2023.html>.

Meanwhile, Egypt's foreign exchange reserve stands at just \$34.35 billion, of which \$28 billion are deposits made by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.³⁰ The Gulf states' outsized influence in Egypt is driven by their own domestic politics. The monarchies' largesse was initially driven by their desire to prevent the Arab Spring from spreading to their countries and stop the Muslim Brotherhood's electoral success in Egypt from expanding regionally. Having accomplished these goals, the Gulf nations are not as motivated to give Egypt unconditional loans. Indeed, recent influxes of Gulf funds have been limited to purchases of Egyptian state-owned assets or private companies.³¹

China has also leveraged the precarity of Egypt's economy to expand its sphere of influence in Africa. For example, in 2014 Egypt signed a strategic partnership agreement with China that pledged cooperation on defense, technology, and the economy.³² Two years later, 20 more bilateral agreements were signed that increased China's investments in Egypt by more than 300 percent.³³ Most recently, in 2023 China committed to investing \$2 billion in iron and steel plants in the Suez Canal Economic Zone.³⁴ Another entry point into Egypt's economy is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to develop new trade linkages, cultivate export markets, boost Chinese incomes, and export China's excess productive capacity.³⁵ Almost 139 countries—accounting for nearly two-thirds of

30 "Egypt's Foreign Reserves Surge to over \$34Bn in February," *Arab News*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2263416/business-economy>.

31 "Gulf States Play Hardball over Sending Billions to Rescue Egypt," *Middle East Monitor*, February 25, 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230225-gulf-states-play-hardball-over-sending-billions-to-rescue-egypt/>; "Cash-Strapped Egypt Prompts Unprecedented Gulf Acquisition of Stakes in Major State-Companies," *Middle East Monitor*, February 16, 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230216-cash-strapped-egypt-prompts-unprecedented-gulf-acquisition-of-stakes-in-major-state-companies/>.

32 "China, Egypt Sign Strategic Partnership Agreement," *The Economic Times*, December 24, 2014, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/business/china-egypt-sign-strategic-partnership-agreement/articleshow/45629765.cms?from=mdr>.

33 Mohamed Maher and Mohamed Farid, "The Growth of Chinese Influence in Egypt: Signs and Consequences," *Fikra Forum*, April 27, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/growth-chinese-influence-egypt-signs-and-consequences>.

34 "China's Xinxing to Invest \$2 Bln in Suez Canal Economic Zone—Egyptian Cabinet," *Reuters*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/chinas-xinxing-invest-2-bln-suez-canal-economic-zone-egyptian-cabinet-2023-03-23/>.

35 Jacob J. Lew et al., "China's Belt and Road: Implications for the United States," Council on Foreign Relations, updated March 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/task-force-report/chinas-belt-and-road-implications-for-the-united-states/>.

the world's population and 40 percent of global GDP—have signed on to BRI projects.³⁶ Seventeen of those countries are in the Middle East and North Africa, including Egypt.

Consequently, China was Egypt's largest trading partner for eight consecutive years after 2013. In the first 11 months in 2022, China exported over \$13 billion worth of goods to Egypt, and Egypt exported \$1.7 billion to China.³⁷ Egyptian industry is heavily reliant on Chinese imports for machinery, electrical appliances, boilers, and mechanical tools. Meanwhile, Egypt ranked as merely the 54th largest US trading partner in 2022 at \$9.4 billion, even though it is the largest export market for US goods in Africa.³⁸

China is also investing in major infrastructure and construction projects in Sisi's New Administrative Capital and the coastal city of al-Alamein. The China Fortune Land Development Company, for example, invested \$20 billion in 2016 toward construction of the new capital.³⁹ In 2015, China State Construction Engineering Corporation signed a \$15 billion deal to build the Iconic Tower building in the new capital.⁴⁰ In comparison, US foreign direct investment in Egypt has been approximately \$11 billion a year since 2016, largely limited to the oil and natural gas sectors.⁴¹ As Egypt's fourth largest creditor and largest trading partner, China has effectively purchased influence in Egypt's economic future alongside the Gulf nations. The impact on US-Egypt relations is twofold: a confinement of US influence to military and security policy as they relate to Israel and the Suez Canal, and a loss of leverage for improving Egypt's human rights record.

36 David Sacks, "Countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative: Who's In and Who's Out," Council on Foreign Relations, March 24, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/countries-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-whos-and-whos-out>.

37 "Egypt's Exports to China Rises by Nearly 21% in 2022," *Arab News*, updated March 12, 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2267171/business-economy>.

38 Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations."

39 Kieron Monks, "Egypt Is Getting a New Capital – Courtesy of China," *CNN*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/egypt-new-capital/index.html>.

40 Grady McGregor, "China Emerges as Lead Funder for Egypt's New Administrative City," *Al-Monitor*, December 20, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/12/china-emerges-lead-funder-egypts-new-administrative-city>.

41 "Egypt - International Trade and Investment Country Facts," Bureau of Economic Analysis, undated, <https://apps.bea.gov/international/factsheet/factsheet.html#410>.

A Pivot Away from Human Rights

Mainstream narratives on US human rights policy in the Middle East posit security and human rights as competing, rather than complementary, foreign policy interests. Put another way, “Confronting partner governments over their political shortcomings risks triggering hostility that would jeopardize the security benefits that such governments provide to Washington. Yet giving them a free pass on democracy and rights issues undercuts the credibility of US appeals to values, bolstering the damaging perception that America only pushes for democracy against its adversaries or in strategically irrelevant countries.”⁴² The record of successive US administrations clearly demonstrates that purported security benefits always supersede stated commitments to human rights.

Former President George W. Bush, for example, declared a goal of democracy promotion, but its implementation translated into a military occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq and superficial electoral reforms in Egypt.⁴³ The resulting civil wars and political violence caused the Obama administration to prioritize stability over political and human rights. Despite initially supporting the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, President Obama refused to label the military’s forced removal of Egypt’s democratically elected president in 2013 a coup to avoid triggering US legal prohibitions on military aid.⁴⁴ Congress, in contrast, enforced its human rights agenda through appropriations measures that withheld certain portions of Egypt’s foreign military funds unless the executive branch could certify Egypt’s progress on various metrics related to human rights.⁴⁵ However, these laws grant the executive branch the authority to waive such restrictions on national security grounds, which successive secretaries of state have routinely done. By the time Donald Trump became US

42 Thomas Carothers and Benjamin Press, “Navigating the Democracy Security Dilemma in US Foreign Policy: Lessons from Egypt, India, and Turkey,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 04, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/04/navigating-democracy-security-dilemma-in-US-foreign-policy-lessons-from-egypt-india-and-turkey-pub-85701>.

43 Sahar F. Aziz, “Revolution Without Reform? A Critique of Egypt’s Election Laws,” *George Washington International Law Review* 45 (2012): 101–180, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2026475>.

44 Christopher M. Blanchard, “Congress and the Middle East, 2011–2020: Selected Case Studies,” Congressional Research Service, May 21, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46796/6>.

45 *Ibid.*, 28.

president, the changes in human rights policy were more in rhetoric than policy. While Trump made no secret of his disregard for human rights when executing multibillion-dollar arms deals with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Biden is continuing business as usual with Middle East nations whose human rights records remain abysmal.⁴⁶

In attempting to fulfill his pledge to put human rights at the heart of his foreign policy, Biden withheld \$130 million in security aid from Egypt in 2021 and 2022 over its human rights record.⁴⁷ A separate tranche of \$75 million was released in 2022 after the State Department made the contested conclusion that Egypt had met the congressional requirement of exhibiting “clear and consistent progress in releasing political prisoners and providing detainees with due process of law.”⁴⁸ Human rights groups criticized this decision on the grounds that Sisi’s prisoner releases were offset by new arrests of political prisoners. The split decision on military aid to Egypt continues the standard US practice of applying pressure on Egypt over its poor human rights record while rewarding incremental steps by this Middle East ally.

Meanwhile, the growing influence of China and the Gulf nations is likely to make US policy irrelevant in this realm. Not only do all these countries possess poor human rights records but they also intentionally exclude individual rights or political freedom from their foreign policy calculus. Thus, whatever pressure the Biden administration is willing to place on Egypt to comply with human rights laws is likely to fall on deaf ears in Cairo, unless the national security waivers for military aid are not granted.

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- 46 Wajahat Ali, “Why Is Trump Still Ignoring Saudi Arabia’s Brutal Human Rights Abuses?” *NBC News*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/why-trump-still-ignoring-saudi-arabia-s-brutal-human-rights-ncna989806>.; “Trump’s First International Tour Raises Red Flags for Human Rights in Middle East,” Amnesty International, May 19, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/05/trumps-first-international-tour-raises-red-flags-for-human-rights-in-middle-east/>.; Nick Shifrin, “Biden faces criticism for not doing more on human rights during Middle East trip,” *PBS Newshour*, July 19, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/biden-faces-criticism-for-not-doing-more-on-human-rights-during-middle-east-trip#audio>.; Sahar Aziz, “Sure, the US Cares about Human Rights — When It Benefits Us,” *The Hill*, June 28, 2023, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4070170-sure-the-us-cares-about-human-rights-when-it-benefits-us/>.
- 47 Missy Ryan, “U.S. Blocks \$130 Million in Aid to Egypt over Human Rights,” *Washington Post*, September 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/09/14/us-blocks-130-million-aid-egypt-over-human-rights/>.
- 48 Wong and Yee, “U.S. to Move Forward.”

Despite minor variations across US administrations, human rights have never truly been a top priority in US Middle East policy. Absent domestic pressure on American elected officials, the pivot to Asia risks making human rights even less relevant in global politics. That China and the Gulf states do not care about the human rights records of their allies—much less their own—further emboldens the Egyptian government to ignore its human rights obligations.

Conclusion

Evolving global political realities are sure to change US-Egypt relations.⁴⁹ As President Biden deprioritizes the Middle East in his focus on great power competition with China and Russia, President Sisi is deprioritizing the US in his domestic and foreign policy.⁵⁰ In turn, the US will streamline its engagement with Egypt to securing the Israeli border, retaining Egypt's dependence on US military equipment through foreign aid, and preventing the collapse of the Egyptian economy through IMF and World Bank loans conditioned on neoliberal economic reforms. Democracy and human rights will remain marginal, except as a strategic tool for shunning President Sisi for any actions that threaten Israel's security or US military dominance in the Middle East.

Looking ahead, domestic developments that threaten Egypt's political stability, and consequently its economy, are likely to be more influenced by China and the Gulf nations than the United States. While this may prove inconsequential for the US pivot to Asia in the short term, Egypt may become firmly set within China's expanding sphere of influence in a multipolar world order gradually replacing American global hegemony. And if past is prologue, merely replacing one great power for another does little to empower the people of the Middle East to establish an indigenous democratic system that values their lives and dignity.

49 Brian Katulis and Peter Juul, "Strategic Reengagement in the Middle East," Center for American Progress, December 16, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/strategic-reengagement-in-the-middle-east/>.

50 Natasha Bertrand and Lara Seligman, "Biden Deprioritizes the Middle East," *Politico*, February 22, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/02/22/biden-middle-east-foreign-policy-470589>.