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Russia-Egypt Arms Deal: Major Breakthrough as US Middle East Policy Faces another Set Back

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Russian President Vladimir Putin met Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Russia, on August 12, 2014. It was his first official visit to the Russian Federation as President. And Vladimir Putin was the first leader to invite him for a visit outside the Arab world since his swearing-in as head of state. The agenda included introduction to a selection of Russian military hardware for sale. (1)

The two leaders agreed to expand cooperation in the field of arms exports to Egypt in addition to studying the establishment of a logistics center Masri on the Black Sea coast. The United States suspended some of its weapons deliveries since the overthrow of former Egyptian President, Mohamed Morsi, in July 2013 in the wake of Sisi's crackdown on the former Islamic government.

On September 17 it was reported that Russia and Egypt have reached a preliminary deal for Cairo to buy arms worth \$3.5 billion from Moscow. Alexander Fomin, the head of the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, said the deal was reached during an arms trade

exhibition in South Africa. (2)

Western sanctions: no impact on Russian military industry

Russia is the world's second-largest arms exporter after the US.

The head of Rosoboronexport, a state body that deals with arms exports, said the value of the agency's order book was high in spite of Western sanctions against Moscow over Ukraine. *"Today our orders portfolio stands at \$38.7 billion. This is one of the strongest figures Rosoboronexport has had in recent years,"* Anatoly Isaykin told a news conference at the same arms expo.

The company he heads signed 1,202 orders last year and fulfilled deliveries to 60 countries. Among the major importers of Russian weapons and military equipment were India, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Venezuela, Algeria and Malaysia. There is great interest from foreign buyers in air defence systems, MiG-29 or the new Su-35 fighter as well as the inexpensive and Yak-130 training plane, combat and transport helicopters and anti-tank missiles.

The United States and European Union have targeted the Russia's arms industry as part of sanctions against Moscow for what they call its role in fuelling separatist unrest in Ukraine. But Russia is one of the few countries in the world that is nearly self-sufficient in its defense production, according to IHS Jane's expert Guy Anderson. (3)

In the short-term, the arms ban is unlikely to have a significant impact on Russia's military might. *"The embargo in itself doesn't change anything in Russian military capabilities right now,"* Siemon Wezeman, senior researcher with SIPRI said. (4)

European Union's new set of sanctions imposed against Russia will have no serious impact on Russian arms exports, a senior official with the state-owned high-tech corporation Rostec said on September 12. (5)

"According to our forecasts and conclusions, as well as according to our tasks within the frames of the import substitution [program], we are not expecting a serious impact" as a result of the new sanctions, Sergei Goreslavsky, a deputy director general of *Rostec*, said. *Rostec* is a Russian industrial company consisting of 663 organizations located in 60 regions of the Russian Federation. Company products are delivered to markets in more than 70 countries.

Russia-Egypt: great prospects for military cooperation

Since 1979, the United States has provided Egypt with nearly \$70 billion in funding, more than half of which has gone to purchase US - made military equipment. At \$1.3 billion per year, U.S. security-assistance grants accounted for 80 percent of the Egyptian military's annual procurement budget. In addition to standardizing Cairo's arsenal and enhancing interoperability with U.S. forces, the arms sales gave Washington a significant degree of policy leverage. In October 2013 Washington took an important decision. In a dramatic shift toward a major Arab ally, the Obama administration announced a suspension of significant military aid to Egypt over the bloody

crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood – the people with views very near to the Islamic State militants America is fighting in Iraq at present. The move, involving hundreds of millions in U.S. assistance to the Egyptian military, is the culmination of months of debate within the administration about how to respond to the July 3 ouster of former President Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first elected leader prone to outright authoritarian rule.

Egypt has since long sought to diversify its arms suppliers in order not to be dependent on Washington. It is looking for new combat aircraft from another supplier than the United States to replace its ageing Soviet and Chinese systems.

In particular, it badly needs attack helicopters to fight the burgeoning Islamist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula. The American Apaches constitute a problem. Routine maintenance schedules typically ground more than a third of its existing force of thirty-five rotary wing aircraft. Complicating matters, Egyptian defense sources note that State Department travel warnings and the sporadic and temporary evacuations of "nonessential" U.S. personnel from Egypt over the past three years have interrupted the crucial ongoing maintenance provided by American contractors.

Russian Mi-35 attack helicopters and/or Mi-17 multipurpose helicopters are reported to be part of the just concluded deal. Egypt already has nearly 100 of these rotary wing aircraft and the older Soviet-era Mi-8 helicopters, which have troop-transport, cargo, signals-intelligence, and attack variants, the latter equipped with 23 mm guns and the capacity to carry 500 kg bombs and antitank guided missiles. Some of these systems are operating in Sinai.

The US also has to face another concern. Saudi Arabia is willing to use its largesse to signal displeasure with Washington. Along with the United Arab Emirates, Riyadh is underwriting Egypt's purchase of Russian arms. This contribution follows the kingdom's December announcement that it would provide the Lebanese Armed Forces - most of whose procurement budget was previously underwritten by Washington -- with \$3 billion to acquire French weapons. Riyadh's decision to fund \$5 billion in Russian and French weapons for traditional U.S. clients is an unmistakable sign of Saudi discontent with U.S. policy on sensitive regional issues, particularly Iran, Syria, and Egypt. Moreover, Saudi funding of Egyptian weapons procurements has nullified Washington's policy of tying military aid to political reform. In any event, given that Egypt's current leadership views the conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood and the burgeoning jihadist insurgency in Sinai as existential threats, U.S. efforts to leverage weapons sales for more inclusive governance are unlikely to succeed.

Former Egyptian ambassador to Russia and ubiquitous media figure Raouf Saad has argued that the two governments share a common view of terrorism, and that Moscow's close relationship with Ethiopia will help Cairo address concerns regarding the construction of the Renaissance Dam on the Nile. (6)

Egyptian military officials have also noted that Russia's absence of conditions on weapons sales makes it a more reliable partner than Washington, which has withheld weapons pending political reform.

Egypt and Russia have a history of being strategic allies. The emerging relationship reminds of the era of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the great Egyptian leader who led the country after the army overthrew the monarchy in 1952. Nasser forged close ties with the Soviet Union that continued until the 1970s. The military cooperation was very close those days allowing the country to defend its independence in world politics.

The deal concluded between Russia and Egypt on September 17 portends a gradual reduction in Washington's ability to control the quality and quantity of weapons that Cairo receives and to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge in the region. Closer agricultural and military trade ties between Cairo and Moscow are unlikely to play well in Washington amid the effective freeze in East-West relations brought on by the Ukraine crisis. Russia has responded to the diplomatic isolation from the United States and its EU allies by striking a massive gas deal with China and inviting Latin American countries to sell their agricultural goods to Russia on preferential terms. The agreement with Cairo is an illustrative example the West's sanctions against Russian military industrial sector are inefficient. The deal in question means a major breakthrough of Russia in the Middle East and a clear success of Russian policy.

Endnotes:

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2G4lzwILzI>
2. <http://www.rg.ru/2014/09/17/egipet-anons.html>
3. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vh9gGnULB8E>
4. <http://geographicalmedia.com/siemon-wezeman>
5. <http://en.itar-tass.com/economy/749235>
6. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-arms-deal-with-russia-potential-strategic-costs>