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Time for turning to Russian arms

Ahmad Eleiba

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The warm reception Russian President Vladimir Putin received in Egypt, where he signed several agreements for joint cooperation, is symptomatic of the newfound friendship between Cairo and Moscow.

Presidents Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi and Putin discussed a wide range of regional security matters during their bilateral discussions. The talks, focused on the threat of terrorist groups operating in Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

Egyptian officials in agreement with the Russian view of terrorist organisations. Moscow has for some time put the Muslim Brotherhood on the list of groups supporting terror, something the Americans are reluctant to do.

Since mid-November 2013, tangible steps have been taken by Egyptian and Russian officials to bolster their military cooperation. Moscow has offered to sell sophisticated weapons to Egypt, including helicopters, MiG-29 fighter jets, air defence systems, and Kornet anti-tank missiles. During his visit to Cairo, Putin symbolised the mutual interest in military cooperation when he gave Al-Sisi an AK-47 automatic rifle as a gift.

Putin and Al-Sisi held a news conference in Cairo, in which both leaders spoke of the need to bolster military cooperation, but refrained from mentioning any specific details. The Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu was not among the visiting Russian delegation.

Military expert Talaat Musallam said that Cairo and Moscow signed cooperation protocols when Al-Sisi was still defence minister, and have a joint committee that looks into ways to promote bilateral ties.

While interested in bolstering their ties, Cairo and Moscow are careful not to alienate third parties, especially the Americans.

“Egypt is not talking about a shift in its arms procurement strategy, but rather about weapons diversification,” Musallam told Al-Ahram Weekly.

The Russians and Egyptians are planning further cooperation in matters of training and maintenance, Musallam added.

According to Musallam, what is particularly interesting about the military talks is that the Russians offered to sell the S-300 and S-400 air defence systems to Egypt.

Igor Korothenko, editor of the magazine National Defence, told the news agency Rossiya Segodnya that if Egypt buys the Russian air defence systems, it will be safe for decades to come. He added that countries following independent policies must be able to protect their own airspace against such threats as cruise missiles and strategic bombers.

Kamal Amer, former chief of Egypt’s military intelligence and current editor of Al-Defaa, an army-affiliated publication, said that 40 per cent of all Egyptian weapons are Russian-made and in need of regular maintenance and upgrading.

Russia was the first country to sell weapons to Cairo after the 1952 revolution, and remained Egypt’s main supplier of weapons until the 1973 war.

“Even during the 1973 war, our weapons included some that were made in China,” Amer said, asserting the need for Egypt to shop around for weapons.

According to Amer, growing cooperation between Cairo and Moscow is essential for diversifying the sources of weapons.

But Russia is not the only country with which the Egyptians are talking.

“We also got in touch with France with a view to purchasing the sophisticated Rafale fighter jets. We’re also having talks with the Chinese. None of this detracts from, nor conflict with, Egyptian-US ties,” Amer said.