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The Russians Are Back in Town

11/14/2013

Move over America, an old bedfellow might be returning to Egypt: Russia.

On Thursday, top Russian and Egyptian officials began talks in Cairo, signaling a potential dramatic foreign policy shift following the U.S. decision to partially cut military aid in response to the ousting of democratically elected, but controversial Islamist president Mohamed Morsi.

But Egypt and Russia are far from strangers. For twenty years, the two countries were the closest of allies. (Ahran Online published a series of photos of famous Egyptian and Russian figures smiling and posing together over the years -- everyone from Communist Party leader Nikita Khrushchev at an Aswan Dam construction celebration to dolled-up Egyptian actress Nadia Lutfi and Soviet actress Larisa Golubkina laughing together in Moscow.)

But in the early 1970s, President Anwar Sadat ordered 20,000 Soviet military advisers out of Egypt and amid a U.S. brokered peace deal with Israel, decided to shift Egypt's foreign policy with eyes on aligning with the United States. Since then the U.S. government has provided around \$1.3 billion in military aid every year to Egypt, up until the recent aid cut.

In a press conference on Thursday, Egyptian foreign minister Nabil Fahmy was asked by reporters whether Russia would replace the United States as Egypt's main ally. Fahmy simply replied: "Russia's weight is too heavy to be a substitute for anyone."

Fahmy is set to meet with his counterpart, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, as well as Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt's defense minister and widely regarded military leader who led Mohamed Morsi's removal from power.

The talks between the high-profile leaders reportedly include potential arms deals, amounting to as high as \$2 billion, reports the BBC. Following the partial military aid cut, Egypt is hoping to acquire military equipment like fighter jets, anti-tank missiles, and air-defense systems, with particular focus on battling rising insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula (though the U.S. has not severed any aid bolstering counter-terrorism efforts in Sinai).

"Russia and Egypt are determined to forge a closer partnership and mutually beneficial cooperation," Lavrov said in an interview with Egypt's Al-Ahram newspaper.

The now frosty relationship between the United States and Egypt is met with an even more hostile dialogue between the United States and Russia as the war in Syria rages on.

Tuesday, Russia -- one of Assad's biggest supporters -- and the United States once again failed to come up with a date for Syria peace talks, split over whether or not Syria's ally Iran should be included.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Defense Department signaled it abandoned previous plans to buy more cargo helicopters for the Afghan Air Force from Russian state-owned arms exporter Rosoboronexport - the same arms agency selling weaponry to Syria's Assad regime.

The Russian convoy's two-day Cairo visit coincides with the end of the now three-month nightly curfew and state of emergency imposed mid-August when hundreds of pro-Morsi supporters were killed when their sit-ins were violently cleared by security forces. It was the worst mass killing in modern Egyptian history, and has yet to be thoroughly investigated by the government. Also taking place during the Russian visit is the sentencing of 12 pro-Morsi supporters to 17 years in prison for taking part in a student protest that turned violent.

Following the ouster of Morsi -- slammed for granting himself sweeping powers and spearheading an Islamist agenda -- Russia's foreign ministry urged restraint by security forces. But on Wednesday, foreign minister Lavrov told Al-Ahram: "We are quite confident that Egypt will overcome its current crises, and put into consideration the interests of all political, ethnic and religious blocs within society."