

Egypt in a Multipolar World: Treading the Tightrope Between Great Powers

Ofir Winter, Adam Sharon / Nov. 10, 2024



[Ofir Winter](#) - Senior Researcher at INSS and a lecturer at the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Tel Aviv University



[Adam Sharon](#) - University of Oxford, intern at the INSS

As Donald Trump's return to the White House reshapes global power dynamics, this article examines Egypt's sophisticated diplomatic strategy, highlighted by its recent entry into BRICS in early 2024. It explores how Egypt manages its "uncomfortable but indispensable" relationship with the United States while fostering ties with China and Russia, showing how cultural and religious legacies influence these alliances.

Between Uncle Sam and the Russian Bear

Linking Africa, Asia, and Europe, Egypt has long been a significant player in regional geopolitics. Its control of the Suez Canal, political and cultural influence in the Arab world, and peace treaty with Israel position it as a key strategic partner for global powers. As the world has shifted in recent years from a unipolar American-dominated order to a more complex multipolar system, Egypt has adapted its foreign policy to navigate the changing tides.

The story of Egypt's current foreign policy approach has its origins in the Arab Spring. The overthrow of then-long-time President Hosni Mubarak in 2011 and the subsequent election of the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Mohamed Morsi in 2012 marked a turning point in the country's relations with the West, particularly vis-à-vis the United States.

The Obama administration's alleged support for the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power was seen by many in Egypt's political and military establishment as an improper attempt to interfere in its internal affairs and as a betrayal of the long-standing alliance between Washington and Cairo.^[1] This perception was further reinforced when the United States criticized the military's overthrow of Morsi in 2013.^[2] Consequently, these developments led Egypt to reassess its almost exclusive reliance on US support and seek a more diversified foreign policy approach.

Under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who came to power following Morsi's removal, Egypt formed its new foreign policy doctrine, which prioritizes diversifying sources of support and reducing dependence on any particular country while also striving to shape more balanced and equal partnerships with the global powers.^[3] Along with this policy shift, Egypt has maintained

its strategic ties with the United States. Egypt's foreign minister between 2013–2014, Nabil Fahmi, defined the current relations with the United States as “uncomfortable but indispensable.”[\[4\]](#)

Despite persistent concerns over human rights violations, the United States continues to provide Egypt with \$1.3 billion in annual military aid—a practice dating back to the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty—with cumulative assistance approaching \$90 billion over the decades.[\[5\]](#) Throughout el-Sisi's decade in power, this aid has supported Egypt's campaign against Salafi-jihadist terrorism, a shared American–Egyptian objective. Furthermore, the aid, coupled with US influence in international financial institutions like the IMF—which approved a \$5 billion loan to Egypt in March 2024—remains crucial for the country's economic stability.[\[6\]](#)

Nevertheless, during President Sisi's time in office, Egypt has also significantly expanded its relations with Russia. For example, Egypt relied on Moscow for 20% of its arms imports between 2019 and 2023.[\[7\]](#) Additionally, Russia is involved in key Egyptian projects, including the construction of an industrial zone in the Suez Canal area[\[8\]](#) and the development of the El Dabaa nuclear power reactor, which is set to provide almost 10% of the country's energy consumption in 2030.[\[9\]](#) Such initiatives cost billions of dollars and are partially financed by Russian loans.

Since 2014, both Egypt and Russia have demonstrated a convergence of interests in Libya, with the two countries supporting the secular, anti-Islamist forces led by General Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Libyan National Army in the eastern part of the country. This joint support stems from their shared concern over the potential strengthening of radical Islamist groups in Libya. In addition, both nations seek to promote their economic and strategic interests in the area, while Egypt has prioritized preventing the success of the Islamist model that gained traction in some countries following the Arab Spring.[\[10\]](#)

At the same time, Cairo has not completely distanced itself from the United States as evidenced in its decision to suspend the purchase of Russian Su-35 fighter jets in 2018 following strong opposition from Washington.[\[11\]](#)

Enter the Chinese Dragon: Politics, Economics, and Religious Heritage

While Egypt views the United States and Russia as strategic military partners, it sees China first and foremost as an important economic partner. Accordingly, an opinion poll by the Washington Institute from April 2023 suggests that 60% of Egyptians view China as an economic partner rather than a friend or security partner. In contrast, 48% and 34% view Russia and the United States, respectively, as such.[\[12\]](#)

The economic relationship between Egypt and China has been growing steadily, with China emerging as Egypt's primary trading partner. For instance, Egypt's imports from China rose from about \$8 billion in 2017 to \$14.4 billion in 2022 while Cairo's exports to Beijing nearly tripled during that time.[\[13\]](#) However, this trend slightly reversed in 2023, as the trade exchange between both countries decreased to \$13.9.[\[14\]](#)

Furthermore, China has become a major source of investment in Egypt, with Chinese investments in Egypt growing by 317% from 2017 to 2022.[\[15\]](#) Egypt aims to continue this trend and aims to attract additional Chinese investments for national development projects, such as the New Administrative Capital and the Suez Canal Economic Zone, under Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. Recent agreements have secured over \$15 billion in Chinese investments in Egypt, including in the green fuel production and manufacturing sectors.[\[16\]](#)

The Sino–Egyptian partnership also extends to military cooperation, with the two countries holding a joint naval exercise in the Mediterranean Sea in August 2024.^[17] In addition, they have had ongoing negotiations for J-10C fighter jets^[18] and spy satellites.^[19] By maintaining close ties with the Chinese army and by diversifying its sources of weapons and armaments, Egypt reduces its dependence on a single external power, or at least signals to the United States that it has alternative options.

While relations between Cairo and Washington remain strained by the Nasserist legacy—which casts the United States as a Western colonialist power that supports Israel while promoting its own regional hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East—Sino–Egyptian ties are positively framed as a continuation of historic physical and spiritual connections between these two ancient civilizations. According to Egyptian officials, this relationship is deepened by shared cultural exchanges stretching from pre-Islamic times through the Islamic period, during which religious ideas, goods, and scientific knowledge flowed bidirectionally along the Silk Road.^[20]

Moreover, contemporary China’s presence in Egypt is not only expressed in material terms of “hard power” but extends also into the cultural sphere of “soft power.” For example, the Confucius Institute was established at Cairo University in 2007 and provides Egyptian scholars with training in Chinese and exposure to the Middle Kingdom’s culture.^[21]

From Egypt’s perspective, China is a particularly attractive partner due to its non-interference policy in domestic affairs and its alternative development model. Unlike the Western liberal model, the Chinese approach places greater emphasis on stability and economic progress and less on freedom and democracy.^[22] Evidently, the countries’ close economic relationship is influencing Egypt’s foreign policy positions, such as backing China’s Xinjiang policy in the UN^[23] and supporting its claim over Taiwan.^[24]

Currently, there are no signs that the Chinese–Egyptian cooperation is slowing down. Last May, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the “comprehensive strategic partnership” between the two countries, Presidents el-Sisi and Xi announced 2024 as the “Year of Egyptian–Chinese Partnership,” which will witness various diplomatic, economic and cultural activities between both nations. Cairo and Beijing also announced a roadmap for the development of their relations in the next five years.

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, Egypt aims to maximize its benefits by maintaining a flexible, non-exclusive, relationship with the three great powers.

Egyptian Strategy and the War in Ukraine

The outbreak of the Ukraine war in 2022 presented both challenges and opportunities for Egypt’s foreign policy of diversification. Cairo adopted a publicly neutral stance, reflecting its shared interests with both the United States and Russia. This neutrality allowed it to offer mediation services to both sides,^[25] thus aligning with its historical stance of “positive neutrality” between the East and the West during the Cold War.^[26]

However, the war intensified Egypt’s economic challenges. The conflict disrupted grain supplies from Russia and Ukraine to Egypt,^[27] while it negatively affected tourism,^[28] a crucial source of foreign currency for Cairo. In response, Egypt turned to its Arab Gulf allies—particularly, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar—for economic support.^[29] This move reflects another aspect of Egypt’s diversification strategy: strengthening ties with wealthy regional partners to reduce dependence on global powers. For example, in February 2024, Egypt announced a \$24 billion Emirati investment in the Northern coast of the country.^[30]

Furthermore, the Ukraine war highlighted Egypt’s unwavering commitment to its diversification policy. Unlike other world leaders, President el-Sisi did not boycott Putin and

was reportedly willing to assist him covertly. Leaked US intelligence documents indicate that Egypt had initially planned to export rockets at Russia's request to support Moscow's war effort but had ultimately decided against it under US pressure.^[31] However, when Washington later asked Egypt to supply weapons to Ukraine, Cairo once again refused to take sides, emphasizing its determination to remain neutral and avoid aligning itself fully with a single great power.^[32]

BRICS—Diversification 2.0

Egypt's decision to join BRICS, officially activated in early 2024, marks the latest development in its multipolar strategy.^[33] Founded in 2009 by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, BRICS aims to promote economic, trade, energy and investment cooperation among its members and advocate for a more balanced global order. The group represents about 45% of the world's population, a third of the global GDP, and nearly half of global energy production.^[34] In recent years, BRICS has been expanding its membership to include more developing countries, with Egypt being one of the newest members.

Egypt's move to join BRICS is primarily motivated by economic considerations, which gain increasing weight in shaping its foreign policy. Facing severe economic strain—the Egyptian pound has lost 75% of its value since 2022, external debt stands at 96% of GDP,^[35] and the annual inflation rate reached 26.4% last September^[36]—Egypt hopes BRICS membership will provide new economic opportunities.

Financially, Egypt wishes to attract more investments from BRICS countries and expand its trade opportunities with large emerging markets within the organization.^[37] Furthermore, Egypt aims to use its BRICS membership to reduce the country's heavy reliance on the US dollar in international trade and ease its foreign currency pressures.^[38] Cairo also hopes that BRICS will grant non-Western nations more leverage in Western-led international financial organizations and enable it access to alternative funding sources beyond the IMF and World Bank, such as the New Development Bank, potentially with fewer conditions.^[39]

Politically, Egypt supports the goal of BRICS to shape what is described as a more just, inclusive, and balanced financial multipolar world order, which is less dominated —by the West. By joining the organization, Egypt aims to diversify its international alliances, gain a stronger voice in global affairs through participation in the group's summits, and enhance its standing among major emerging economies. In October 2024, at the BRICS Plus Summit in Russia's Kazan—which marked Egypt's first participation in the forum since joining the organization—President el-Sisi expressed support for the bloc's commitment to enhancing multilateral cooperation and amplifying the voices of developing countries globally.^[40]

As Egypt further integrates into the BRICS and aligns with its vision, it is important to note that it is not abandoning its Western ties nor choosing Eastern allies at their expense. In line with its diversification strategy, it prefers the principle of “profit for all parties” rather than a Western–Eastern zero-sum game.^[41] Accordingly, in May 2024, Egypt secured over \$15 billion in economic support from Western institutions, including the IMF, World Bank, and the European Union.^[42]

In conclusion, Egypt's foreign policy in the multipolar era can be characterized as a careful balancing act. It has not neglected its pro-Western orientation entirely but rather aims to maintain its traditional alliance with the United States while cultivating relationships with other global and regional powers. This strategy of multi-alignment allows Egypt to maximize its economic and political options, but it also requires careful diplomacy to avoid alienating any major partner.

Where it is still too early to assess how Donald Trump's election as President of the United States will affect tensions among global powers, Egypt's ability to navigate these shifting relationships will be crucial for its economic wellbeing and political stability. Moreover, Egypt's position within the evolving world order will play a significant role in shaping regional dynamics across the Middle East and Africa.

The authors thank Tuvia Gering for his insightful comments

[1] Hany Ghoraba, "Obama and the Muslim Brotherhood," *Ahram Online*, October 19, 2021, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/50/434179/AIAhram-Weekly/Obama-and-the-Muslim-Brotherhood-.aspx>.

[2] "Obama Urges Military to Return Egypt to Democracy," *Washington Post*, July 3, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/obama-urges-military-to-return-egypt-to-democracy/2013/07/03/2569e168-e436-11e2-80eb-3145e2994a55_story.html.

[3] Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, "Egypt's Strategic Balancing Act Between the US and Russia," April 5, 2020, <https://jiss.org.il/en/berman-albo-egypts-strategic-balancing-act-between-the-us-and-russia/>.

[4] Ofir Winter, "Book Review: The Diplomat's Son Who Became One of the Founders of Al-Sisi's Foreign Policy," *Journal for Interdisciplinary Middle Eastern Studies* 8, no. 1 (2022): 87–91, <https://campuscore.ariel.ac.il/wp/jimes/wp-content/uploads/sites/147/2022/07/JIMES-8-1-2022-English-7-Winter-Book-Review-LR.pdf>.

[5] Vivian Salama, "U.S. to Shift Millions in Military Aid From Egypt to Taiwan," *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/policy/u-s-to-shift-millions-in-military-aid-from-egypt-to-taiwan-a416c2e0>; "U.S. Relations With Egypt," *U.S. Department of State*, last modified April 29, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-egypt/>.

[6] Aidan Lewis, "Egypt Signs Expanded \$8 Billion Loan Deal With IMF," *Reuters*, March 6, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/egypt-signs-expanded-8-billion-loan-deal-with-imf-2024-03-06/>.

[7] Pieter D. Wezeman, Katarina Djokic, Mathew George, Zain Hussain, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2023," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, March 2024, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/fs_2403_at_2023.pdf.

[8] "Egypt and Russia Sign 50-Year Industrial Zone Agreement," *Reuters*, May 23, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/egypt-and-russia-sign-50-year-industrial-zone-agreement-idUSL5N1SU5SI/>.

[9] "Putin, Sisi Mark New Phase of Egypt's Russian-Built Nuclear Plant," *Reuters*, January 23, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/putin-sisi-mark-new-phase-egypts-russian-built-nuclear-plant-2024-01-23/>.

[10] Sarah Feuer, Ofir Winter, Ari Heistein, and Bar Loopo, "State Collapse in Libya: Prospects and Implications," *Strategic Assessment* 20, no. 4 (January 2018): 45–56.

[11] Ali Dizboni and Karim El-Baz, "Understanding the Egyptian Military's Perspective on the Su-35 Deal," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 15, 2021.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/understanding-egyptian-militarys-perspective-su-35-deal>.

[12] Mohamed Abdelaziz, "Egyptians Still Lukewarm on Mass Street Protests; U.S. Trails Russia and China as Overall Partner, But Edges Out Both as Security Partner," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 5, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egyptians-still-lukewarm-mass-street-protests-us-trails-russia-and-china-overall>.

[13] Mohamed Maher and Mohamed Farid, "The Growth of Chinese Influence in Egypt: Signs and Consequences," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 27, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/growth-chinese-influence-egypt-signs-and-consequences>.

[14] Dina Lamlum, "Egyptian-Chinese Relations: Shared Visions and a History Rich with Achievements," SHAF, October 19, 2024, <https://t.ly/KHIQk> (in Arabic).

[15] John Calabrese, "China-Egypt Relations: Fast Lane for Now," *ThinkChina*, July 16, 2024, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/china-egypt-relations-fast-lane-now>.

[16] "Egypt and China Agree to Swap Debts... and New Investments Worth More Than \$15 Billion," *CNN*, October 22, 2023, <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2023/10/22/debt-swap-agreement-egypt-china-investments> (in Arabic).

[17] "China, Egypt Hold Joint Naval Exercise in Mediterranean Sea," *Global Times*, August 21, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202408/1318457.shtml#:~:text=The%20joint%20exercise%20took%20place,replenishment%20positioning%2C%20the%20PLA%20Navy>.

[18] "Chinese J-10 and J-31 Fighters Offered to Egypt as Alternative to US Jets," *Army Recognition Group*, July 22, 2024, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/aerospace-news/2024/chinese-j-10-and-j-31-fighters-offered-to-egypt-as-alternative-to-us-fighter-jets>.

[19] "China-Funded Prototype Satellites Delivered to Egypt," *XinhuaNet*, June 27, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230627/5ad2da2279134124988a375e02b73e60/c.html>.

[20] "China-Egypt Cultural Exchange Event Held to Promote Heritage Protection," *XinhuaNet*, July 5, 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240705/946569fd9df9490484354c26dc02c4fa/c.html>.

[21] Mohamed Maher and Mohamed Farid, "The Growth of Chinese Influence in Egypt: Signs and Consequences," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 27, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/growth-chinese-influence-egypt-signs-and-consequences>.

[22] Ofir Winter and Doron Ella, "The Chinese Development Model: A Cure for Egyptian Woes?" *Institute for National Security Studies*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-chinese-development-model-a-cure-for-egyptian-woes/>.

[23] Catherine Putz, "2020 Edition: Which Countries Are for or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?" *The Diplomat*, October 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/2020-edition-which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>.

[24] "The Joint Statement Between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the People's Republic of China," *Egyptian State Information Service*, May 29, 2024,

<https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/193044/The-Joint-Statement-between-the-Arab-Republic-of-Egypt-and-the-People%E2%80%99s-Republic-of-China?lang=en-us>.

[25] “Egypt Says Arab Countries Are Willing to Mediate Between Russia, Ukraine,” *Reuters*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/egypt-says-arab-countries-are-willing-mediate-between-russia-ukraine-2022-04-04/>.

[26] Domenic Biamonte, “Positive Neutrality: Nasser’s Most Consequential Policy,” *HiPo* 4, (2021): 48–54, <https://arcabc.ca/islandora/object/lc%3A4768/datastream/PDF/view>.

[27] Sarah El Safty, “Egypt Relies on Competitive Russian Wheat as Imports Dipped in 2022-Data,” *Reuters*, January 12, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/currencies/egypt-relied-on-competitive-russian-wheat-as-imports-dipped-in-2022-data-idUSKBN2TR0ZI/#:~:text=The%20war%20in%20Ukraine%20disrupted,away%20from%20Black%20Sea%20supplies>.

[28] Mohamed Said, “Egypt, Turkey Consider Coordination to Boost Tourism,” *Al-Monitor*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/egypt-turkey-consider-coordination-boost-tourism>.

[29] Marc Espanol, “Gulf States Give Egypt \$22 Billion to Mitigate Fallout From Ukraine War,” *Al-Monitor*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/gulf-states-give-egypt-22-billion-mitigate-fallout-ukraine-war>.

[30] Pesha Magid, “Egypt, UAE Talks Continuing Over Ras El Hekma Land Deal,” *Reuters*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/egypt-uae-talks-continuing-over-ras-el-hekma-land-deal-2024-05-28/>.

[31] Evan Hill, Missy Ryan, Siobhan O’Grady and Samuel Oakford, “Egypt Secretly Planned to Supply Rockets to Russia, Leaked U.S. Document Says,” *Washington Post*, April 10, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/10/egypt-weapons-russia/>.

[32] Jared Malsin and Summer Said, “Egypt Resists U.S. Calls to Arm Ukraine,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/egypt-resists-u-s-calls-to-arm-ukraine-5ac5d509>.

[33] Thayer Mansour, “Egypt’s BRICS Membership Officially Activated Under Russian Leadership,” *New Arab*, January 2, 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/egypts-brics-membership-officially-activated>.

[34] Chang Nam, “BRICS Enlargement: What Are the Geoeconomic Implications?” *EconPol Forum* 25, no.1 (2024): 03-04, https://www.econpol.eu/sites/default/files/2024-01/econpol-forum-2024-1-brics-enlargement_0.pdf.

[35] Noah Berman, “Can Egypt’s Economic Overhaul Stave Off Crisis?” *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 17, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/can-egypts-economic-overhaul-stave-crisis>.

[36] “Egypt’s Headline Inflation Inches Up to 26.4% in September,” *Reuters*, October 9, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/egypts-headline-inflation-inches-up-264-september-2024-10-09/>.

[37] “Egypt’s Joining BRICS: A lifeline From the Dollar’s Dominance and Reviving the Economy With These Advantages,” *Cairo24*, August 24, 2023, https://www.cairo24.com/1853844#google_vignette (in Arabic).

[38] Muhammed Khalid, “Explainer: Four Key Benefits for Egypt as a Member of BRICS,” *Ahram Online*, August 23, 2023, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/507128.aspx>.

[39] Heidi El Shafei, “BRICS Plus: Africa Between Challenges and Mutual Gains,” *Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies*, September 17, 2023, <https://ecss.com.eg/36753/> (in Arabic).

[40] “Sisi Participates in BRICS Plus Summit in Russia’s Kazan,” *Egypt Today*, October 24, 2024, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/135602/Sisi-participates-in-BRICS-Plus-summit-in-Russia%E2%80%99s-Kazan>.

[41] Abdul Latif Al-Manawi, “BRICS: The Beginning or the End?” *Al-Masry Al Youm*, August 24, 2023, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2964611> (in Arabic).

[42] Patrick Werr and Aidan Lewis, “Upturn in Egypt’s Economic Fortunes Tempered by Caution on Reform,” *Reuters*, May 16, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/upturn-egypts-economic-fortunes-tempered-by-caution-reform-2024-05-16/>.

.....

<https://nexus.haifa.ac.il/egypt-in-a-multipolar-world-treading-the-tightrope-between-great-powers/>