

EGYPTIAN FOREIGN POLICY UNDER AL-SISI GOVERNMENT: PATHS TO DIVERSIFICATION OF PARTNERSHIPS

Charles Pereira Pennaforte¹
Mateus José da Silva Santos²



Introduction

The second half of 2023 was marked by an important process involving Egyptian external action at the regional and global levels. In August, within the framework of the XV BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, the Afro-Arab country was among the six states formally invited to join the multilateral initiative starting in 2024. The expansion of the emerging bloc, based on the possible presence of actors located in strategic regional spaces such as the Middle East and North Africa, has assumed importance in the face of the uncertainties that drive a complex scenario of hegemonic transition. For Cairo, such a measure represented, among other things, the consolidation of a process of diversification in its external partnerships, strengthening ties with new global actors (China and Russia), as well as other emerging powers.

In the complex symbiosis between the search for preservation of autonomy and domestic security, as well as attempts to mobilize material resources aimed at confronting macroeconomic challenges and building a new development process (Hinnebusch and Shama 2014), such a move constitutes an important analytical window into the transformations that have occurred in Egypt's foreign policy over the past years. Constituting, in the view of Gamal M. Selim (2020), the third major restructuring in Egypt's history as a Republic since 1953, the perspectives on a regional and global repositioning of Cairo in the face of systemic and domestic dynamics involve a set of factors,

¹ International Relations Departament, Universidade Federal de Pelotas. Pelotas, Brazil. E-mail: charlespennaforte@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5623-7689>.

² Instituto de Ciências Humanas (ICH), Universidade Federal de Pelotas. Pelotas, Brazil. E-mail: mateus_santos29@hotmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7726-6136>.

such as the conciliation between a discourse of full resumption of external action after years of domestic instability following the fall of Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011) and the instrumentalization of its geostrategic position between Africa and the Arab World, in the midst of increasing external vulnerability.

In this sense, this article analyzes the main domestic and systemic characteristics involved in the transformations of Egypt's international insertion over the past two decades, considering the mediation between the preservation of traditional lines of external action and the consolidation of new partnerships, offering geopolitical and geoeconomic alternatives in the face of escalating global tensions. At the intersection of World-Systems Analysis (WSA) and theoretical aspects of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), this study evaluates Egypt's potential to occupy a historical position of articulation between global and regional dynamics, considering its condition as a Bridge State between two continents. Through qualitative analysis, combining a review of specialized literature on contemporary Egypt and journalistic texts, a multilevel perspective is developed, seeking to answer the following questions: what is the nature of the process of diversifying Egypt's external relations? How do contemporary macroeconomic and geopolitical challenges limit or provide opportunities for the production of an autonomous type of insertion by Cairo?

This text is divided into three parts. First, the main theoretical-methodological assumptions guiding the development of this study are established. Then, an analysis of Egypt's international insertion trajectory since the beginning of the military-led Republic in the 1950s is carried out. Finally, the main elements constituting the domestic and systemic environment surrounding external diversification efforts in recent years are highlighted.

Theoretical-Methodological Pathways between Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and World-Systems Analysis (WSA)

In the diagnosis of the explanatory insufficiencies of the main theoretical currents of International Relations regarding the heterogeneity of behavior of States of the same stature in the international system, and in light of the emerging challenges with the formation of a bipolar order during the Cold War (Gonçalves and Pinheiro 2020), FPA emerged from the 1950s onwards in the face of the concern to understand foreign policy from the study of the decision-making process, considering the role of different actors, decision-making units, perceptions and ideas, as well as other domestic and systemic factors shaping the initiatives and reactions of the State in response

to international actors. In the midst of a relatively multifaceted development, in line with the more general transformations of field and the emergence of specific debates of the FPA, a set of new perspectives expanded theoretical diversity throughout the final decades of the 20th century.

Among the main changes, the abandonment of an excessively generalizing perspective from the first studies of comparative foreign policy gave way to more compact analyses, heterogeneous analyses in methods and objectives. Thus, contributions such as that of Charles Hermann's in "Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy" pointed to new alternative for reading the changes that occurred in the foreign policy of the same State, reinforcing both the importance of analyzing the decision-making process and evaluating its results through a dual historical look involving both domestic politics and the characteristics of the system and the institutional behavior of the country.

Having as its original landmarks the diagnoses of the occurrence of multiple changes in international politics at the end of the Cold War and the emergence of new theoretical challenges from that context for FPA, Charles Hermann (1990) established a model structured around the recognition of four levels or degrees of change in the foreign policy of the same State, as well as the existence of multiple domestic and systemic sources about such transformations. In what he classifies as adjustment, the author draws attention to changes in emphasis or efforts, preserving not only the objectives, but also the materialization strategies. Raising a qualitative dimension, the changes in the program constitute the second level. Despite being marked by the maintenance of objectives, these transformations directly affect the methods and means, influencing the definition of new international insertion strategies. Titled as changes or redefinitions of objectives, the third type involves the transformation in the purposes of external action. Finally, international changes or reorientations constitute the highest level of transformation, based on the "adoption of a new approach to world affairs" (Gonçalves and Pinheiro 2020, 221, our translation)³.

As vectors capable of influencing changes of different natures, Hermann identified four sources. In the first place, the leader can favor transformations in foreign policy by transforming his particular visions into guidelines or foundations for production of concrete governmental initiatives, having as possible roots the charisma, the capacity for influence or the exploitation of authoritarian command structures. Still examining the decision-making

3 In the original: "*adoção de nova abordagem em relação aos assuntos mundiais*" (Gonçalves and Pinheiro 2020, 221).

circles, the bureaucracy can be seen as another agent of change. Through factors like the level of information and intelligence, these transformations are driven by power struggles and influence within governmental structures. Besides the leader and bureaucracy, domestic restructuring constitutes a third source by highlighting the role of the correlation of political and social forces in defining State policies. Beyond national borders, external shocks reside at an exogenous level of change production, encompassing phenomena that drive concerns for decision-makers at a domestic level, becoming the basis for changes in intensity, strategy or objective.

As a theoretical-methodological tool, Charles Hermann's model draws attention to its different possibilities for inclusion in studies on the development trajectory of a State's foreign policy. Its emphasis on evaluating so-called self-correcting changes, those occurring within the same government, reinforces the relatively dynamic nature of the process of constructing external action, which is susceptible to a wide range of fluctuations. Applied to other contexts of more significant transformations in domestic politics, involving transitions of government or regime, this analytical proposal broadens the understanding of the specificities that constitute a given actor's external relations.

In affirming a multi-level analysis, considering the complex interactions between a changing world system, the direction of political and social struggle at the domestic level and behavior of decision-makers, the premises of WSA are adopted as a search framework that aims both at the challenge of interpreting the global situation and as an alternative for assessing the development of historical capitalism over the centuries. Seen as an "alternative and counter-hegemonic approach to the mainstream of international relations" (Voigt 2007, 101, our translation)⁴, WSA was forged as part of the critique of the model of analysis that has been dominant in the Social Sciences until then, in the critique of the so-called Modernization Theory and the perspective of producing answers about the nature of the transformations occurring in global geopolitics and geoeconomics from the end of the 1960s onwards.

Considering that "the economic, political, and military factors that contributed to the United States' hegemony are the same factors that will produce the imminent decline of the United States" (Wallerstein 2004, 21, our

⁴ In the original: "*abordagem alternativa e contra-hegemônica ao mainstream das relações internacionais*" (Voigt 2007, 101).

translation)⁵, the disintegration of the cycle led by Washington since the late 1960s has shown signs of deepening in the last two decades. In the growing disconnect between the unilateralist discourse of the main US foreign policy formulators and the pace of global transformations, the rise of new states such as China, the Russian Federation, and other emerging powers, as well as the crisis of multilateralism, reflect some of the meanings of the disintegration of an order marked until then by a high degree of systemic institutionalization and centered on the Atlantic space. Impasses related to the relations between Nation-States, governments, societies and the environment take on even deeper contours with the rise of right-wing and far-right movements, marked by discourses of opposition to the characteristics of liberal democracies and the phenomenon of globalization. Such directions of internal and external political struggles show other setbacks for constituent aspects of the old global order, such as the accentuation of the internationalization of the globe, the valorization of the ideals of representative democracy and capitalism, in its most different facets, as the dominant mode of socio-economic organization.

At the intersection between the perspective of hegemonic transition and the configuration of significant changes in the regional and domestic environments, it seeks to understand the paths involving Egypt's foreign relations diversification process, considering its impacts on the country's contemporary trajectory. To undertake this exercise, we move on to an analysis of the development of Egyptian foreign policy throughout the second half of the 20th century.

Egyptian Foreign Policy between Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak

On July 23, 1952, King Farouk I was overthrown through a political process led by the Free Officers Movement. With General Mohamed Naguib as its public figure, the new government, inserted in the context of a kind of dual authority by sharing power with the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), lived with uncertainties of different kinds. If this complex process of political construction culminated in the design of a horizon of multifaceted transformations, the consolidation of power after the first years of the Revolution demonstrated the continuous nature of the political formation of the

5 In the original: "*os fatores econômicos, políticos e militares que contribuíram para a hegemonia dos Estados Unidos são os mesmos fatores que produzirão o iminente declínio dos Estados Unidos*" (Wallerstein 2004, 21).

military movement. In this context, from the perspective of foreign policy, the Egyptian military did not necessarily organize an immediate process of international reorientation⁶. In the coexistence between qualitative changes, which constitute a change of program, and the possibility of redefining objectives, the country's two main international agendas involved advancing the old nationalist demands, especially the total withdrawal of the British from Egyptian territory, in addition to the search resources for the dual modernization involving the army and the country's socio-economic structures.

In this sense, preserving one of the horizons constituted in the long trajectory of resistance to British domination and seeking alternatives for the realization of the emerging class demands in the process of fighting against the most different forms of reproduction of social and economic inequality in the country, the initial moves of the new government were marked by the resumption of negotiations with the British, the expansion of relations with the US and the opening of a secret dialogue with Israel. In the first case, progress was only achieved through the fragmentation of agendas, culminating in an agreement recognizing Sudanese self-determination and a referendum on the country's future, as well as progress in the evacuation of troops from the Canal Zone starting in 1954.

Regarding Washington, the prospect of closer ties with the new Egyptian government was affirmed from its early steps. The reaffirmation of Egypt's strategic importance in outlining a policy to contain communism and the interest in regional stability influenced the US position, while the military's diagnosis of possible competition between the capitalist superpower and the British state in regional politics stimulated the policy of rapprochement established by the military (Takeyh 2000). In addition to the signing of technical cooperation agreements and CIA collaboration in building Egyptian intelligence, the anti-communist nature of the Egyptian regime and US support for the progress to the direct negotiations between Britain and Egypt pointed to the possibility of building solid relations between the two countries. However, Egypt's reluctance to participate in the construction of a regional security treaty and Washington's objections to providing military assistance to the new government in its challenge of modernizing the army, contributed to the end of the short period of understanding between the two countries.

⁶ This perspective is reinforced by Eberhard Kienle (2022). According to this author, two central issues that shaped Egypt's foreign relations during the final years of the Monarchy and the period following its overthrow in 1952 were the pursuit of so-called full political independence and the crafting of a relatively prominent role at the regional level.

The overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy was viewed favorably by Israeli authorities. According to Avi Shlaim (2004), the prevailing assessment in the political circles of the neighboring country was that the military would be occupied with domestic issues, seeking some form of regional stabilization. In the assessment of a window of opportunity for the constitution of a lasting agreement between the two countries, Egyptians and Israelis established, through secret diplomacy, bridges between 1952 and 1955 with the aim of advancing on different issues of interest such as economic cooperation, free navigation and even support from Tel Aviv. Even though there was understandings between Nasser and Moshe Sharett, aspects such as the more general divisions issues over Israel's regional policy among its main policymakers, the emergence of conspiratorial and provocative acts, including border zone conflicts, as well as mutual mistrust contributed to the relative failure of this series of talks (Yahel 2016).

Despite the challenge of building a new political-institutional order with the emergence of the Republic, Egypt's foreign policy in the early years of the new regime also encompassed other initiatives that, in general, had a direct impact on the arenas valued in the post-war period. Regarding the Arab world, Reem Abou El-Fadl (2019) states that the military did not marginalize regional action. In addition to establishing initiatives such as the organizing of diplomatic missions and constitution of a Conference of States in 1952, Egypt remained one of the most important actors in political-diplomatic and strategic support to liberation movements in the Maghreb. Among African and Muslim countries, proposals such as organizing an Islamic front and supporting movements fighting against colonialism and imperialism established conditions for dialogue in relations to Asian and African actors (Ismael 1968).

A process of restructuring Egypt's foreign policy coincided, to some extent, with Gamal Abdel Nasser's consolidation and the stabilization of the regime from the end of 1954. The resolution of one of the fundamental objectives of Egypt's foreign policy with the evacuation of troops from the Suez Canal and the limited progress in the search for strategic support from the US paved the way for more substantive changes in the country's international insertion. Ideologically, the first signs of transformation came with the publication of "The Philosophy of the Revolution" (1954). Drawing attention to the multifaceted nature of Egyptian identity and its impact on the defining of the main vectors of external action, Nasser consolidated a proposal to recognize three circles of influence: the Arab, the Muslim, and the African. If this affirmation did not represent a radical break with the past, the attribution of a certain leadership potential to Egypt in these three

spheres represent a rise in expectations regarding the exercise of “a role of growing importance in world affairs” (Hrbek 2010, 174, our translation)⁷.

At the regional level, the period between the second half of the 1950s and the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 was marked by the existence of relative Egyptian hegemony. Defined by Silvia Ferabolli (2013) as a phase of political centralization led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, this condition was based on the appreciation of the diagnosis of Egypt’s demographic, historical and cultural weight among Arab States, the strengthening of Arab nationalism as a domestic political force and ideological foundation in favour for a deeper movement of regional construction, as well as the growing appreciation of its geostrategic position in relation to the increased interest of the superpowers in the region. The production of a regional geopolitical arrangement based on Cairo’s leadership assumed certain particularities. First, the country found itself increasingly drawn into various domestic and regional conflicts, culminating in pressures in favour of advancing union projects, such as the integration with Syria from 1958, as well as the support offered to republican forces in the Yemeni War in the following decade. Second, Egypt was unable to produce a stable order. The absence of regional consensus was made explicit by the rivalry between nationalist regimes and parties, animosities between Nasser and States more aligned with the West, and the interference of Cold War power systems.

The consolidation of a new phase in Egypt’s foreign policy also involved global rearrangements. Concerning the movement of expanding the frontiers of bipolar conflict, the deterioration of relations between Egypt and the US coexisted with a process of rapprochement with Moscow. In addition to breaking the Western monopoly on the war trade with the Middle East, Soviet support for structuring projects such as the Aswan Dam and the counterweight exerted in the context of the Suez War (1956) transformed Cairo into a strategic ally in building bridges with the so-called Third World. However, these relations faced certain challenges due to the anti-communist nature of the Egyptian regime, Cairo’s role with the Non-Aligned Movement and changes at regional level, leading to processes of distancing. These oscillations, although did not culminate in a process of rupture, favored timid gravitational influence in Egyptian foreign policy, such as the prospect of improved relations with the US in the first half of the 1960s.

Constituting a kind of fourth circle of Egyptian projection (Hrbek 2010), the country’s participation in the process of political construction

⁷ In the original: “*um papel de crescente importância nos assuntos mundiais*” (Hrbek 2010, 174).

of the Third World as a historical subject involved different vectors such as the demand for Non-Alignment as a strategy for autonomous international insertion, direct participation in the construction of the Non-Aligned Movement and the defense of a maximalist integration project within the African continent. Based on principles such as the self-determination of the peoples, the defense of development, the fight against racism and the struggle for disarmament, Egyptian foreign policy during Nasser's time has the prospect of creating a new global order which, based on Cairo's external projection, could produce solutions to maintain the strategy of defending Arab socialism as the foundation for the country's modernization and the search for some level in face of regional and systemic constraints.

A new process of reorientations of Egyptian foreign policy occurred between the 1960s and 1970s (Dessouki 2008; Selim 2020). Nasser's physical death (1970) symbolically represented the last stage of the decline of Arab nationalism. The humiliating defeat in the Six-Day War (1967) strengthened the case for conservative regimes in the region, paving the way for the expansion of the West's presence (Vizentini 2012). In addition, the Egyptian State's difficulty in responding to the set of transformations observed in domestic society influenced the erosion of Arab socialism. In the midst of this, the rise of Anwar Al-Sadat initiated the so-called "de-Nasserization." In an attempt to move away from the legacy of his predecessor, the new Egyptian president sought to change the correlation of political forces at the domestic level, moving closer to the so-called liberals and Islamic groups, as well as producing substantive changes in the regional and global relations framework.

In this context, the three structural transformations in Egypt's international position involved a strategic rapprochement with the US, the establishment of a separate peace with Israel and an increased dependence on the Gulf Arab States (Selim 2020). Sadat caused a kind of geopolitical and geoeconomic turn in Egypt's trajectory, stimulating the development of two processes: economic liberalization (*Infitah*) and rapprochement with the so-called Western world.

From the perspective of foreign policy, the alignment with the West would be sustained on three aspects. According to Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (2008), the Sadat government sought, through the establishment of closer relations with the US, to increase the margins for negotiation with Israel, in exchange for the recovery of territories lost in the 1967 War, and the formation of a more stable regional environment. Additionally, the aim was to attract both military and economic aid as well as a rapprochement with the Gulf Arab states. Claiming a certain naturalness about Egypt leadership at the regional

level (Hinnebusch and Shama 2014), Sadat aimed to reduce the country's levels of participation in conflicts and initiatives costly to the state, focusing on what was considered to be the country's immediate national interests.

During Hosni Mubarak's government (1981-2011), foreign policy was marked by the emergence of various domestic and external challenges. In the context of adjustments to the guidelines established by Sadat, Egypt's foreign relations were marked by the need to confront isolation in the Arab World after the Camp David Accords, the harmful effects of Sadat's economic opening policy, a reduction of domestic tensions after waves of de-Nasserization, and the strengthening of Islamism in the political scene. Despite the rhetoric, Mubarak strengthened ties with the US, consolidating the country as a strategic ally. According to Gamal M. Selim (2020), Mubarak's foreign policy was based on at least two principles. First, consolidating the regional system launched with the normalization of relations between Egypt and Israel, as well as the transformation of Cairo into one of Washington's main allies in the region. Second, the preservation of a strategic alliance with the Arab States of the Persian Gulf, based on a principle of economic dependence on oil exporters and the construction of informal security alliances.

Although consolidating the reorientation process that began in the 1970s, Mubarak also sought to establish a more active regional role, involving direct participation in sub-regional integration initiatives, support for peace missions and developing more substantive concerns about regional security, especially in the Horn of Africa, given the importance of Nile politics. Regarding Arab states, in addition to resuming diplomatic relations with many of the subsystem's actors, Egypt maintained close relations with Gulf States, in an articulation that directly involved geopolitical and geo-economic considerations. If, from a security standpoint, Cairo was an essential part of the protection policies for the petromonarchies, The former's increased economic dependence on the latter entities reinforced the asymmetries in the regional structure, with a focus on the importance of economic cooperation exercised by rentier States and the capital remittances provided by the thousands of Egyptian workers who made up part of the labor force in those countries. Accompanying other Maghreb States, a process of economic and diplomatic rapprochement with the European Union took on importance in the 1990s with the formation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, a policy which, despite enabling some level of economic diversification, still fell far short of Egyptian expectations.

Between Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak, Egyptian foreign policy in the second half of the 20th century underwent different processes of change

that, despite their multiple intensities and natures, reflected the challenges of a country pressured by the challenge of economic survival and vulnerable to the more general transformations taking place at systemic, regional and domestic levels. More than a decade after the end of the Cold War, a new, non-linear stage in partnership diversification was inaugurated as a result of the deepening political and social contradictions involving Egypt, as well as impulses from different dimensions. In a kind of historical crossing, this movement was challenged by the complex changes that occurred after the 2008 crisis.

From Mubarak's time to Al-Sisi's "Egypt ha returned": meanings of a historical crossing

The main foundations of the international reorientation process promoted by Sadat and largely maintained by Mubarak were still limited in the mid-1990s. The normalization of relations with Israel did not evolve in the direction of regional stability, being directly impacted by the friction between Tel Aviv and its neighbors, as well as the effects of such issues on Egyptian public opinion. In relation to their Arab neighbors, fluctuations in oil and natural gas prices directly affected the Gulf States' ability to assist the Egyptian economy, reducing investments and economic aid. In addition, policies of labor nationalization in the Gulf (Saudization) directly affected the number of Egyptians who contributed to the country's macroeconomy through capital remittances.

More dependent on the West (Goldschmidt Jr. 2008; Hinnebusch and Shama 2014), Egypt found itself strategically vulnerable in face of US efforts to produce a new regional order from an exogenous perspective. In the midst of this, processes such as the Gulf War (1990-1991) and later, the attacks of September 11 (2001) and the War on Terror required a difficult balance on the part of the Egyptian government between reacting to US pressures and containing dissent in the domestic environment.

In this environment of tension between the regime's external and domestic bases, issues such as anti-terrorism agendas and anti-American rhetoric added to the intensification of the country's contradictions. In a multi-party parliamentary structure, authoritarianism and limited liberalization coexisted, reflecting processes such as the reaction to the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, government wear and tear in the face of the adverse socio-economic situation and international pressures. Additionally, significant

demographic growth, accompanied by rising unemployment, a decrease in arable land, and widening social inequalities created an explosive situation, calling into question the stability of a peculiar neoliberal order.

Considering these aspects, the first signs of change in Egyptian foreign policy were visible during Mubarak's government. Amid a reduction in US military and economic assistance, Egypt sought to establish a degree of external autonomy (Vizentini 2012). Despite not breaking with the basic lines of the triangular relationship and Egypt's dependence on the Gulf states (Selim 2020), a first trend of diversifying partnerships would emerge from the rapprochement with emerging States, active participation in the process of setting up the African Union process and regional political stabilization efforts, including North Africa and the Middle East (Vizentini 2012).

One of the main symptoms of this transformation can be seen in Sino-Egyptian relations. The first African country to officially recognize the People's Republic of China during Nasser's time (1956), Egypt became a strategic partner for Beijing at the end of the 1990s. According to Gustavo Rocha de Menezes (2013), Egypt represented around 5% of Beijing's total trade with Africa, and was the fifth-largest trading partner in 2010. Driven by imports of more than six billion dollars, these relations showed a significant deficit for Egypt's trade balance, reflecting the predominance of exports of lower value-added products by the Afro-Arab country (Gadallah 2016).

After weeks of mass protests in January 2011, Hosni Mubarak stepped down after thirty years in office. What became known as the Arab Spring in Egypt was a political transition process lasting just over a year and a half, overseen by institutional forces such as the army and judiciary, and driven by conflicts and uncertainties arising from the difficulties of establishing a new and stable regime. As a point of regional convulsion, this milestone in contemporary Arab World history was both an external shock and a domestic restructuring movement, driving a change in the correlation of forces in the system of regional States, with multiple consequences for the global insertion of the main actors. Combining conjunctural and structural factors, the production of a phase of domestic and regional political instability assumed the character of a transition crisis (Vizentini 2012), straining the complex relations between States and societies in transformation.

In controlling the political transition process, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) rehearsed a series of changes in foreign relations. According to Gamal M. Selim (2020), perspectives such as improved relations with Iran and the potential mediation between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine signaled possible ruptures in foreign policy. However, in the midst of

the uncertainties surrounding the institutional transition, the perspective of maintaining the military's protagonism in the political and economic sphere and the very nature of the process of overthrowing Mubarak within the Armed Forces contributed to the adoption of positions that were relatively consistent with the levels of structural constraints that marked Egypt's external actions.

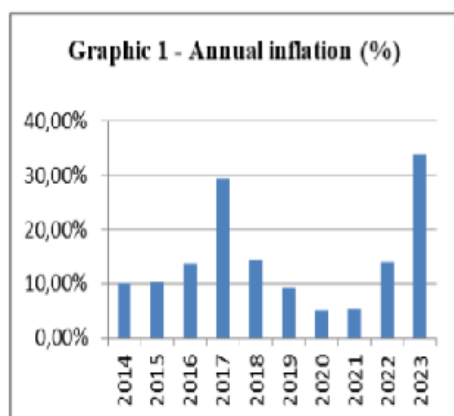
Victorious in an electoral process that confronted Mubarakists, liberals, Islamic political forces and so-called independent sectors (Ghotme and Sicard 2016), Mohamed Morsi's foreign policy generally reflected the conflicts between the Muslim Brotherhood's perspective of implementing significant changes in the running of the Egyptian State, gaining international recognition and the new government's attempts to accommodate the characteristics of the political transition process. Despite maintaining the general lines of the country's external action based on the triangular relationship and guarantees given to the Gulf States regarding the limits of the Muslim Brotherhood's institutional role in the regional environment (Selim 2020), Mohamed Morsi established a certain process of diversifying Egypt's external partnerships. Driven by economic and financial difficulties resulting from the distancing of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates from the new government, the Egyptian president established a kind of regional political turnaround, moving closer to Qatar, Turkey, and, to a lesser extent, Iran. On the global stage, as pointed out by Luiz Eduardo Fonseca de Carvalho Gonçalves (2017), it has established bridges with the BRICS, even suggesting a possible Egyptian entry into the emerging bloc, as well as seeking a greater role for the country in relation to the African continent.

A profound process of domestic restructuring was initiated in the face of a new phase of political convulsion in the country. According to Silvia Ferabolli (2013), a combination of the government's failures to act on Egypt's structural problems and the emergence of a destabilizing process involving political articulation between the liberal opposition, the media and mubarakist forces culminated in the production of a framework of political and institutional instability.

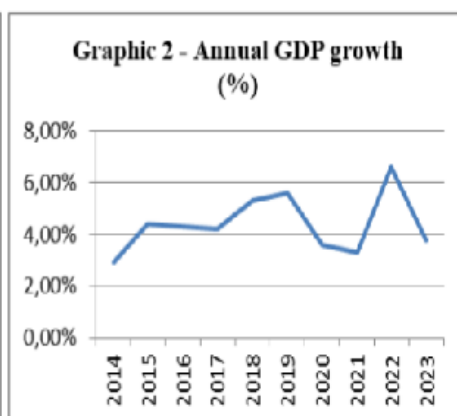
Morsi's downfall and the rise of Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi (2014-) ushered in a new era of uncertainty in Egypt. Beyond the dissent in the international community about the nature of the political process that would lead to the end of the country's first experience of civilian rule, domestic challenges involving the unstable relationship between the new government and the Muslim Brotherhood-led opposition and the preservation of the neoliberal order in the face of structural and cyclical problems in the Egyptian economy

further reinforced the importance of foreign relations as a vector for promoting internal stability.

Not necessarily constituting a return to the political-institutional foundations that organized the Egyptian republican regime until 2011 (Yefet and Lavie 2021), the new government claimed for itself the existence of four objectives that combined the search for economic growth, the transformation of the country within the framework of the development of contemporary capitalism, the protection of the State in face of what were considered as domestic and external threats, in addition to the improvement of the country's international position. From an economic standpoint, the country is going through a complex crisis, involving growth in external debt, trade deficits and inflation, as well as a significant devaluation of the Egyptian pound against the dollar (Piazza 2023). The following graphs bring together characteristics of the current Egyptian macroeconomic scenario:



Source: World Bank (2024a).



Source: World Bank (2024b).

Despite the end of the relative economic stagnation experienced at the beginning of the last decade, the advent of a phase of relative GDP growth coexists with the serious effects of Egypt's vulnerability, directly impacting the quality of life of the population. Amid such a scenario, attempts to raise external funds range from negotiating agreements with the IMF, instrumentalizing the country's geostrategic and geoeconomic position, guaranteeing injections of more than 100 billion dollars from the Arab States of the Gulf in ten years (Piazza 2023), in addition to deepening relations with emerging States, in movements such as the entry into the New Development Bank (NDB).

The economic scenario is directly linked to emerging challenges in domestic politics. As one of the bases of the process of action of the Egyptian State, the search for a complex balance between solidification of the neoliberal order and the elaboration of a kind of new social contract determines some of Cairo's main policies. From the perspective of relations with liberal elites and the military, the Al-Sisi government established a policy of advancing privatizations, putting pressure on the different forms of political organization of the workers, in addition to strengthening the security apparatus, seeking new investment sources for army modernization, and strengthening the economic position of the Armed Forces in the country (Ghotme and Sicard 2016; Achraimer 2023). Regarding broader sectors of society, the search for a more active role in dealing with problems such as unemployment coexists with controversial measures like increasing the price of electricity supply services. From the standpoint of domestic consolidation efforts, Al-Sisi has developed other legitimization strategies that have ranged from the renewal of religious discourse, an ideological alternative to the Muslim Brotherhood, to the valorization of a nationalist perspective, in the production of new forms of social control (Yefet and Lavie 2021).

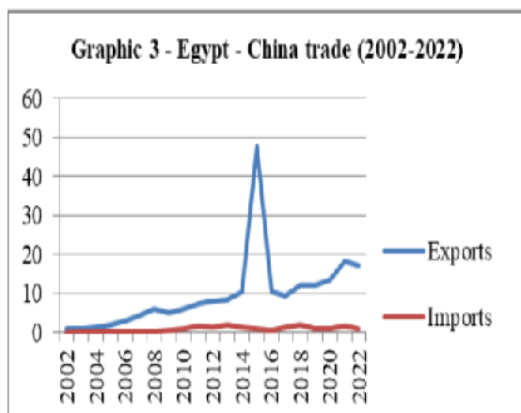
Driven by these uncertainties in the most different spheres and conditioned by the increased strategic competition in different arenas, such as the Arab World and the African continent itself, the Al-Sisi government consolidated a new stage in Egypt's international reorientation. Although specialized literature differs in relation to the time frame of such transformations, the sense of deepening in the process of regional and global repositioning of the Afro-Arab country was notable for the search for new attributes of international legitimacy, the struggle to overcome conjunctural adversities and the horizon of resuming a foreign policy classified as solid. According to Gamal M. Selim (2020), the defense of sovereignty and non-interference, the fight for the country's regional freedom of action and the search for balanced relations with global powers can be seen as three of the main vectors of such an undertaking.

From a regional relations perspective, the main Egyptian movements involved deepening ties with the Gulf Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia. In the reformation of a Riyadh-Cairo axis (Gonçalves 2017), Egypt was involved in the most different regional security arrangements undertaken by the House of Saud, in a pragmatic relationship involving the mobilization of financial resources in exchange for strategic support in different arenas. However, divergences between the two countries were recorded, such as the refusal to send troops in support of the Saudi intervention in Yemen (2015), as well as the production of a relative rapprochement between Al-Sisi and Bashar

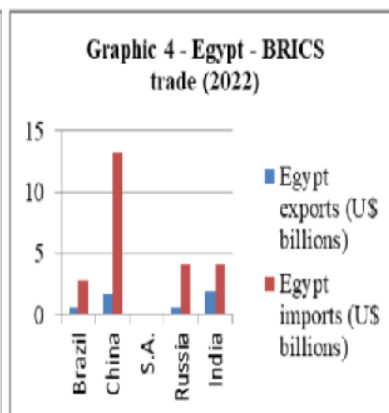
Al-Assad even before the change in the Saudi position on the Syrian crisis. On the African continent, Egypt's policy deepens the tendencies to regain a certain leading role in initiatives such as economic integration and the exercise of presidential diplomacy. Specific security considerations also drive Cairo's actions in different scenarios, such as support for Khalifa Haftar in the Libyan Civil War and the intensification of tensions with Ethiopia over control of Nile waters, culminating in a policy of strategic rapprochement with Somalia and Eritrea.

In the systemic framework, the tendencies towards a reduction in US influence and rapprochement with new global actors have deepened. In the first case, the production of an ambivalent relationship involved the mobilizations of a certain resentment from the military towards Washington's stance after the 2011 Revolution and the continuous criticism of human rights violations in Egypt following Al-Sisi's rise (Dessouki 2008; Gonçalves 2017). While the US security perspective towards the Middle East and a principle of building personal ties between Trump and the Egyptian president conditioned certain movements of rapprochement, the loss of US space in the framework of defining Egypt's position in the global political and economic architecture became evident. In relation to the European Union, oscillations between the two sides were recorded. Despite suspicions about the new Egyptian government, a certain pragmatism in trade relations has given the organization an important role in Egypt's foreign trade, as well as in political-strategic articulation on different agendas such as immigration and terrorism.

China and Russia are two of the main poles of diversification in Egypt's foreign relations. Regarding Beijing, its economic presence has become structural and structuring within the process of rapprochement between Cairo and emerging countries, as can be seen from the subsequent graphs.



Source: By the author, based on data published by John's Hopkins China – Africa Research Initiative (2024).



Source: By the author, based on data from Al-Ahram (2023).

Individually one of Egypt's largest trading partners, China's position was strengthened with by the inclusion of the Afro-Arab country in the Belt and Road Initiative and its support for infrastructure projects, such as the construction of the country's new capital and the expansion prospects for the Suez Canal, including participation in the formation of a Special Economic Zone. According to Christian Achraimer (2023), Al-Sisi's rise did not represent an obstacle to relations between the two countries. Also taking on a geopolitical dimension, ties with Beijing were important in Egypt's process of joining the BRICS in 2024. From the perspective of the Asian superpower, an increase in influence over Egypt also expands its presence in a strategic zone between North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

Considered one of the most innovative elements of Al-Sisi's foreign policy (Gonçalves 2017), relations with Moscow have taken on a strategic character. Whether through the expansion of Russian presence in Egypt's Imports of war materials or support for projects related to the expansion of nuclear energy use, the Kremlin has become much closer to Cairo in the last decade. This position has become indispensable in the context of the Ukraine War. Although it does not necessarily align with Russia regarding votes in the multilateral sphere, the pursuit of maintaining solid ties with Putin, in a context in which food and energy insecurity has risen across the globe, is articulated within the perspective of tackling macroeconomic difficulties at a domestic level.

Amid governmental discourses about a full resumption of Egypt's external action (Halawa 2021), contemporary attempts to reaffirm the cou-

ntry's status as a regional power stimulate a deepening of historical efforts to reposition itself regional and global in recent decades. Also fueled by the perspective of using its geostrategic position as a means to obtain resources to deal with domestic contradictions and difficulties, Al-Sisi's country has developed a diplomacy based on trying to strike a balance between the different poles of power at the global level. In this process, autonomy and dependence coexist in a complex way in the face of the growing strategic competition effects in Africa and the Middle East.

Conclusion

As a Bridge State, Egypt has become an important geostrategic actor in the context of the transformations occurring between Africa and the Arab World, in line with systemic changes. Since the rise of the military in 1952, the country has undergone relevant reorientations in its external insertion, a process that brought different factors such as the conciliation and mobilization of different identities, changes in development strategies, reactions to the change that occurred at the regional and global levels, the rise of new leaderships, and changes in the framework of domestic politics.

This diversity of historical variables, contemplated in the light of Charles Hermann's model (1990), exposes the complexities involved in the process of defining different perspectives of the country's international insertion. If, from the perspective of producing an external reorientation, the consolidation of the Revolution with Nasser's rise and the full withdrawal of the British military paved the way for the development of the Non-Aligned Movement, in addition to the search for a more assertive policy in Africa and the Arab World. The transformations that occurred between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the following decade established new perspectives based on the definition of a strategic alignment with Washington and other movements ranging from the normalization of relations with Tel Aviv to the abandonment of leadership strategies in the multiple regions where Egypt is inserted.

Amid the accelerating decline of the US, the affirmation of new global actors based on growing importance of the so-called emerging world and the failure of the exogenous perspective of regional production in the Middle East, symptoms of changes in Egyptian foreign policy became evident since the last years of Mubarak's government. In connection with the challenges of preserving autonomy and security, as well as attracting resources to meet

growing socio-economic demands, Egyptian diplomacy has established new partnerships, particularly with China, India, Brazil, and Russia, while also expanding dialogue with other important commercial actors, such as the European Union.

This perspective of regional and global repositioning was maintained, to a certain extent, even in the face of the fluctuations caused by the Arab Spring. Under Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, the consolidation of new partnerships was related not only to changes at the systemic level, but also from a multi-level perspective, to political-institutional and individual or societal processes. Faced with the reorganization of the Republic based on a new phase of military tutelage, the reactivation of Egypt's geopolitical weight in different arenas boosted the instrumentalization of foreign policy as a factor in the establishment of the very institutional survival of the reshaped power structure forged after Morsi's fall. In relation to this process and in addition to the weight exerted by the executive power in the decision-making structure involving foreign relations, the different class demands arising from a heterogeneous coalition composed of military, liberal elites, salafists and other sectors dissatisfied with the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood's short experience of government.

Although this movement does not reverse the country's vulnerability to fluctuations in international politics and economics, the search for alternatives based on rapprochement with the so-called emerging world increases the capacity to confront the shadow of socio-political instability. Associated with this movement, the revival of a certain proactivity on different regional levels contributes to elevating Egypt's importance in dialogue between African and Arab spaces amidst international transformations, making it possible to extract resources in face of a context of significant macroeconomic difficulties that increase the uncertainties of the country's present and future.

REFERENCES

- Achrainer, Christian. 2023. *Egyptian Foreign Relations Under Al-Sisi: External Alignments Since 2013*. Routledge.
- Al-Ahram [Online]. 2023. "Factbox: Egypt's trade Exchange with members of BRICS bloc". August 25. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/507185.aspx>.
- World Bank. 2024a. Inflación, precios al consumidor (% anual) – Egipto, República Árabe de. Washington: Grupo Banco Mundial. <https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/FP.CPI.TOTL.ZG?locations=EG>.

- World Bank. 2024b. Crecimiento del PIB. (%anual) – Egipto, República Árabe de. Washington: Grupo Banco Mundial. <https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=EG>.
- Dessouki, Ali E. Hillal. 2008. “Regional Leadership: Balancing off Costs and Dividends in the Foreign Policy of Egypt”. In *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization*, edited by Ali E. Dessouki and B. Korany. The American University in Cairo Press.
- El-Fadl, Reem Abou. 2019. *Foreign Policy as Nation Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ferabolli, Silvia. 2013. *Relações Internacionais do Mundo Árabe: os desafios para a realização da utopia pan-arabista*. Juruá.
- Gadallah, Yasser M. 2016. “An Analysis of the evolution of sino-egyptian economic relations”. In *Toward Well – Oiled Relations? China’s presence in the Middle East following the Arab Spring*, edited by Niv Horesh. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ghotme, Rafat, and Nadia García Sicard. 2016. “Neomubarakismo: Al-Sisi y la nueva cara del autoritarismo en Egipto”. *Colombia Internacional* 86:137-162. <https://doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint86.2016.05>.
- Goldschmidt Jr, Arthur. 2008. *A Brief History of Egypt*. Facts on File.
- Gonçalves, Luis Eduardo Fonseca de Carvalho. 2017. *Egipto: revolução e contrarrevolução (2011-2015)*. FUNAG.
- Gonçalves, Fernanda Nanci, and Letícia Pinheiro. 2020. *Análise de Política Externa: o que estudar e por quê?*. Intersaberes.
- Halawa, Hafsa. 2021. “Burning Ambition: Egypt’s return to regional leadership and how Europe should respond”. *European Council On Foreign Relations*, October 11, 2021. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/burning-ambition-egypts-return-to-regional-leadership-and-how-europe-should-respond/>.
- Hermann, Charles F. 1990. “When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy”. *International Studies Quarterly* 34 (1): 03-21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600403>.
- Hinnebusch, Raymond, and Nael Shama. 2014. “The Foreign Policy of Egypt”. In *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, edited by Raymond Hinnebusch and Nael Shama. Boulder. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Hrbek, I. 2010. “A África Setentrional e o Chifre da África”. In *História Geral da África, VIII: África desde 1935*, edited by Ali A Mazrui and Christophe Wondji. UNESCO.
- Ismael, Tareq Y. 1968. “Religion and U.A.R. African Policy”. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 6 (1): 49-57. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/158676>.
- John’s Hopkins China – Africa Research Initiative. China’s Exports to African Countries. Ago. 2023. <https://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade>.
- Kienle, Eberhard. 2022. *Egypt: A Fragile Power*. Routledge.

- Menezes, Gustavo Rocha de. 2013. *As novas relações sino-africanas: desenvolvimento e implicações para o Brasil*. FUNAG.
- Nasser, Gamal Abdel. 1963. *A Revolução no Mundo Árabe*. São Paulo: EDARLI.
- Piazza, Bárbara Azaola. 2023. "A Decade of al-Sisi in Power: Between Economic Crisis, Repression and the Search for International Recognition". *IEMed. European Institute of the Mediterranean*. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/a-decade-of-al-sisi-in-power-between-economic-crisis-repression-and-the-search-for-international-recognition/>.
- Selim, Gamal M. 2020. "Egyptian Foreign Policy after the 2011 revolution: the dynamics of continuity and change". *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49 (1): 1 – 22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2020.1747983>.
- Shlaim, Avi. 2004. *A Muralha de Ferro: Israel e o Mundo Árabe*. Fissus.
- Takeyh, Ray. 2000. *The origins of the Eisenhower Doctrine: the US, Britain and Nasser's Egypt, 1953-57*. Macmillan Press LTD.
- Vizentini, Paulo Fagundes. 2012. *A primavera árabe: entre a nova democracia e a velha geopolítica*. Leitura XXI.
- Voigt, Márcio Roberto. 2007. "A Análise dos Sistemas-Mundo e a política internacional: uma abordagem alternativa das relações internacionais". *Textos de Economia* 10 (2): 101-118. <https://doi.org/10.5007/%25x>.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2004. *O declínio do poder americano: os Estados Unidos em um mundo caótico*. Contraponto.
- Yahel, Ido. 2016. "Covert Diplomacy Between Israel and Egypt During Nasser Rule: 1952 – 1970". *SAGE Open* 6 (4): 1 – 11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016667449>.
- Yefet, Bosmat, and Limor Lavie. 2021. "Legitimation in post-revolutionary Egypt: Al-Sisi and the renewal of authoritarianism". *Digest of Middle East Studies* 30 (3): 170-185. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12244>.

ABSTRACT

A decade after the beginning of Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi's government, Egypt is living with a complex domestic framework, involving the emerging challenges of political and institutional consolidation following the winds of the Arab Spring, the economic and social consequences of increasing external vulnerability, as well as reintegration efforts in different regional and global arenas. In the midst of such circumstances, changes in the development of its foreign policy reconcile a discourse of full resumption of external action from the last decade with the search for the instrumentalization of its geostrategic position between Africa and the Arab world in favor of new external investments and reversal of the adverse macroeconomic picture, characterized by the devaluation of the Egyptian pound, growth in inflation and trade deficit. This process, however, has roots in the efforts to diversify foreign relations, an aspect observed since the final years of the Mubarak government, through the changes that

occurred at the domestic level since 2011. Therefore, this article analyzes the main characteristics that involve the process of global and regional repositioning of Egypt since the last decade. At the intersection between World-Systems Analysis (ASM) and Foreign Policy Analysis (EPA), the potential of Egypt to occupy a historical position of articulation between global and regional dynamics is assessed, considering its condition as a Bridge State between two continents. Through qualitative analysis, combining the exploration of a process of review of specialized literature in contemporary Egypt and journalistic texts, we seek to answer the following questions: what is the nature of the process of diversification of external relations undertaken by Egypt? How do the contemporary macroeconomic and geopolitical challenges limit or provide opportunities for the production of a type of autonomist insertion by Cairo? It is argued that, amid the acceleration of the decline of US hegemony, Egypt cultivates an international insertion strategy of an autonomist nature, approaching the so-called emerging world, resuming its insertion in traditional regional axes of action, in a process that does not necessarily go through the abandonment of its ties with the so-called Western World.

KEYWORDS

Egypt. Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi. Arab Spring.

Received on December 23, 2024

Accepted on January 25 2025⁸

Translated by Rebeca Martins de Lima

8 How to cite: Pennaforte, Charles Pereira, and Mateus José da Silva Santos. 2024. "Egyptian foreign policy under Al-Sisi Government: paths to diversification of partnerships". *Brazilian Journal of African Studies* 9 (18), 39-60. <https://doi.org/10.22456/2448-3923.144853>.