

# EGYPTIAN PRESIDENT VISIT TO INDIA STRENGTHENS PARTNERSHIP

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Egyptian President Abdel Fateh Al Sisi was on a visit to India from 24 to 26 January 2023. Al Sisi was in India as chief guest for the 74th Republic Day celebrations held in New Delhi. The visit coincided with both countries celebrating 75 years of establishment of diplomatic relations. It was the first time that India had invited a leader from Egypt for the ceremony. The Egyptian President had close discussions with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on bilateral, regional and global issues. A number of agreements on crucial areas were also signed between the two sides.

The visit of Egyptian president underlines the growing importance of Cairo for New Delhi. There are several factors that highlight this intent. First, India and Egypt share a civilisational connect. Their relationship can be traced back to the ancient times. Similarly, Egypt's strategic location at the crossroads of Africa, Asia and Europe gives it immense value. It also controls the Suez Canal, the only direct channel of global trade between waters connecting Europe with the Indo-Pacific. Approximately 12 per cent of global trade traverses through the Suez Canal.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, Egypt has been one of India's important trading partners in the West Asia and Africa region. The current bilateral trade between India and Egypt is around US\$ 7.26 billion.<sup>2</sup> There has been a significant interest of Indian industry in developing commercial relations with the country. Over 50 Indian companies are present in the country and the total Indian investment is over US\$ 3 billion.<sup>3</sup> They are present in diverse sectors, such as agriculture, automobile, energy and chemicals.

Egypt is also perceived as a gateway to Africa due to its strong trading links and free trade agreements across the continent. The country offers fresh opportunities to Indian private sector and industry to expand its presence in the continent. Moreover, India and Egypt are development partners within the South–South cooperation framework. Both countries also share the common viewpoint of supporting African countries' development aspirations. During its presidency of the African Union, Egypt took some steps towards expanding development cooperation and investment with other countries on the continent. The possibilities of both India and Egypt working towards triangular development cooperation with other African countries are immense.

Finally, Egypt is an important partner of India in the multilateral arena. Both countries are the founding members of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) and recognise the need for reform in multilateral institutions. India and Egypt are together as a member and dialogue partner respectively of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Similarly, they are both dialogue partners of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). They also have an opportunity to cooperate on matters related to global economic governance at the G20. As the President of G20, India has invited Egypt as a guest country for the summit to be held in September 2023.

The recent visit marks the third visit of President Al Sisi to India. He had visited India earlier during the 3rd India–Africa Forum hosted by India in 2015 and subsequently for a state visit in 2016. The importance given to his visit to India is reflected by the fact that he was accompanied

by a high-powered delegation comprising of five ministers and senior officials. The visit is path-breaking as India and Egypt decided to elevate the relationship to a 'strategic partnership' and enhance political, security and economic cooperation.

There is no doubt that both India and Egypt share similar views on a number of security issues, terrorism and cybersecurity in particular. Egypt, like India, has faced the scourge of terrorism for long. It has evolved a holistic approach to counter terrorism. This encompasses not only security solutions but also, examining the economic, cultural and ideological roots of the problem. Therefore, it was not surprising that the two leaders called for zero tolerance on terrorism. Cybersecurity is another area in which the views of the two leaders converged. A recent report suggests that in the year 2022, India was one of the most targeted countries in terms of cyber-attacks on government sector in the world.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Egypt has been identified as one of the 20 largest countries vulnerable to cyber-attacks. Looking at this scenario, it is important that both India and Egypt join hands to deal with this emerging challenge.

The two leaders also discussed cooperation in food and health security. The COVID-19 pandemic and the recent Ukraine conflict have impacted food and health security in countries across the world, including Egypt and India. Egypt, one of the largest importers of wheat from Russia and Ukraine, had procured wheat from India after conflict broke out between the two countries. Both India and Egypt had supported each other during the COVID-19 pandemic. India had supplied COVID vaccines to Egypt. Similarly, Cairo had sent medical supplies, including oxygen cylinders, to India.

President Al Sisi and Prime Minister Modi agreed to expand cooperation in the security sector. Defence cooperation between the two countries is not new. India has been training Egyptian armed forces officers since the 1960s. Some of the recent engagements include exchange of visits, joint exercises and defence exhibitions. During Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's visit to Egypt in September 2022, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defence cooperation was signed by the two sides. President Al Sisi's visit will hopefully lead to greater synergies in this crucial sector.

The two leaders also had wide-ranging discussion on economic matters. Egypt may allocate land to Indian industry in the Suez Canal Economic Zone (SCEZ). The two sides decided to expand the bilateral trade to US\$ 12 billion in the next five years.<sup>5</sup> However, to achieve this target, India and Egypt will have to address the impediments in expanding trade. The visit ended with an exchange of five MOUs in the crucial areas of cybersecurity, information technology, culture, youth matters and broadcasting.

In conclusion, the visit of President of Egypt to India has elevated the relationship to a strategic partnership. The spate of agreements and warm chemistry between the leaders augurs well for future relations between the two leading powers in Africa and Asia, respectively.

*Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.*

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