Egypt and Turkey Aim at Balancing Things Out in the Mediterranean

The change of the ruling elite in the White House has prompted many countries in the East, including Egypt and Turkey, to revise their foreign policies to better adapt to this new reality.

After seven years of tensions, Ankara and Egypt are now sending signals that they are prepared to seek rapprochement. This is largely the result of a growing consensus that has been attained in those countries in recent months that the United States has become as much an ally for both Turkey and Egypt as a dangerous enemy.

Turkey does not hide its concern about the possibility of Washington providing tacit support to the forces opposing the centralized power of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. At the same time, both countries are well aware of the sympathies that members of the Democratic party share towards the so-called “Muslim Brotherhood” (banned in Russia), which became the bone of contention between Cairo and Ankara seven years ago because of Turkey’s active support of the former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi. Morsi came to power in 2012 due to support that the “Muslim Brotherhood” provided to him and was ousted a year later after mass protests and a military coup that resulted in Abdel Fattah al-Sisi becoming Egypt’s president in 2014. Ankara still believes that the military coup of 2013 was an illegal undertaking, while Erdogan himself considers the untimely demise of Morsi to be a crime, for which Cairo, in his opinion, should be held accountable.

However, the results of the recent summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council, where Egypt’s supposed allies - Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates - announced they would put an end to their boycott of Qatar, pushed Cairo in a corner. Qatar is an ally of Turkey these days, and when Abu Dhabi and Riyadh announced their decision without taking into consideration Cairo’s interests and without coordinating their actions with it, they forced Egypt into
rethinking its approach towards Turkey. As a matter of fact, this step has automatically shattered the anti-Turkish Arab bloc that Egypt was a part of. Now, after the summit, Egypt, which had no intention of resolving its disputes with Ankara, has found itself isolated in both political and economic terms. Riyadh used to pay a lion's share of the costs associated with attempts at deterring Turkey, but it has lost all appetite of carrying on this burden any longer because of both the financial difficulties that its faces, ongoing war in Yemen and the stance that Joe Biden took.

Turkey's reconciliation with the Gulf states allows it to strengthen its relations with Qatar, Kuwait and Oman, while de-escalating tensions with Riyadh. Those tensions reached a record high after the murder of the Saudi-born journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul. Turkey is also pleased that the UAE has also expressed its desire to normalize its relations with Ankara just as well.

A major driver for rapprochement between Egypt and Turkey are the developments of the situation in and around Libya, as Ankara has recently managed to eliminate the threat to Tripoli that was posed by the Egyptian-Emirati coalition. This resulted in Egypt realizing the futility of further military steps and abandoning its support of the head of the LNA, Khalifa Haftar. Moreover the confrontation in the Eastern Mediterranean is coming to naught with France playing a role in this process, and this confrontation stood in the way of further geological exploration of the region, with Egypt and Turkey being equally interested in such an endeavor.

Under these conditions, everyone agrees that it's easier to strike some sort of a deal than declaring an all-out war. Erdogan is certainly interested in getting Egypt on his side in the ongoing dispute with Greece over the demarcation of maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean, including his quest for obtaining sovereign rights over the valuable gas reserves. Despite the fact that Egypt signed a treaty with Athens for purely political reasons, Cairo still left a back door open for avenues of cooperation with Ankara in the region, taking into account Turkey's reservations about sea borders. At the same time, the parties are well aware that the agreements between Egypt, Greece and Cyprus partially contradict similar agreements that Turkey signed with Libya, which doesn't leave much room for a potential deal between Egypt and Turkey.

In spite of the fact that the two countries send each other positive diplomatic signals, Turkey and Egypt have a long way to go before fully mending their ties, especially in a situation where certain regional players would prefer to derail this rapprochement. There are other obstacles, including the ongoing conflict in Libya, where militants linked to the "Muslim Brotherhood" are still active, while Egypt regards those as terrorists. However, the Egyptians are clearly willing to look the other way this time around, since the "Muslim Brotherhood" doesn't have the same reach it enjoyed a decade ago, and Turkey's ongoing support wouldn't put it in a position to become a threat to the authorities in Cairo. As a general rule, there's no use making your policies a hostage of the old grudges.

In recent weeks, diplomats and negotiators have been particularly active, and not just Turkish and Egyptian ones. The new prime minister of Libya, Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, who is considered a protege of Erdogan, visited Cairo last February to discuss issues of concern with the Egyptians. And in mid-March, Turkey's foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced a round of Egyptian-Turkish diplomatic talks and intelligence consultations.

Head of Hamas' political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh has recently visited the Anadolu editorial office in Istanbul, to publicly welcome the Turkish-Egyptian rapprochement and express his confidence that any cooperation between Ankara and Cairo will be in the interests of the Palestinian people and their national cause.

Turkey and Egypt are, of course, two major players of the Middle East and the Islamic world. There are still unresolved differences between the two, but the parties have stopped resorting to harsh statements and are now looking for avenues for cooperation. At present, those signals they send each other allow us to be cautiously optimistic, even though it's clear that there's no way of solving all of the problems instantly, and that the process of sorting things out will take time. We are not talking about Egypt and Turkey becoming partners overnight, they will still be rivals, but their rivalry will unravel in a more or less civilized manner, with visible red lines put in place that will prevent their bilateral ties from degenerating.

Erdogan understands that the stronger Ankara is in geopolitical and economic terms, the more difficult it will be for Joseph Biden to undermine Turkish interests. The rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt is closely watched by Greece, as Cairo's withdrawal from the anti-Turkish axis deprives Athens of its most important ally in the battle for the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean, and may force it into seeking compromise with Turkey.

Therefore, the rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt can have serious consequences for the entire region, where renewed Turkish-Egyptian political, diplomatic and economic ties can create a new balance of power in the
Mediterranean.

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