



By: *Sharmila Devi*

Xi's visit to Egypt highlights growing multipolarity as democracy falls off agenda



As President Donald Trump runs amok on the global stage, a meeting between China's **Xi Jinping** and Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Cairo pointed to ever-growing global multipolarity in which the championing of democracy and human rights is shoved aside.

The meeting last week gave China a chance to show off its rising influence and security footprint in the region. Egypt, meanwhile, demonstrated the growing diversity of its global ties with a partner who has no qualms about Cairo's authoritarianism and violations of human rights.

The US administration has shown little patience nor delicacy as it grapples with a number of crises in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa – some of its own making – that are vital to Cairo's immediate concerns over security amid sharp questions about the US-led regional order.

As the US-Israeli war enters its seventh month, Iranian defiance means global shipping and energy supplies remain impeded in the Strait of Hormuz and disrupted in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and Red Sea.

Conflict threatens to escalate with Yemen's Iran-backed **Houthis attacking Saudi Arabia**, which is threatening strong retaliation.

Adding to Cairo's concerns is the civil war to its south in Sudan, while to its east Israeli intransigence in Gaza is preventing a durable resolution, let alone any reconstruction.

Like many other previously firm US allies that are now questioning Washington's security commitments, Cairo is assessing its options and deciding that diversification of partners might be wise insurance.

A partner in the form of Beijing with little interest in asking pesky questions about human rights and democracy is also easier to deal with. Beijing's rhetoric is also strong on pride and self-determination, and this falls on receptive ears in a region long used to Western bullying and imposition.

This does not mean the US will be replaced any time soon as a key partner for Egypt, which remains among the largest recipients of US military aid alongside Israel and Ukraine.

But Egypt's strategic location and control of the Suez Canal linking the Mediterranean and Red Sea, alongside its market potential with a population of around 100 million people, make it a tempting target for Chinese expansionism.

“Masters of their own destiny”

During his three-day visit to Egypt last week, Xi called on “the people of the Middle East” to be “masters of their own destiny”, they should “oppose external interference” and consider reshaping the region's security order.

China, meanwhile, “stands ready to work with countries in the region to safeguard the security of international shipping lanes, advance development cooperation... and eliminate the breeding grounds for conflict.”

These shipping lanes are of considerable concern around the world. When Houthi attacks in the Red Sea forced ships to reroute, Egypt's Suez Canal toll revenues fell dramatically from more than \$10 billion in 2023 to under \$4 billion in 2024. This year's Iran war has exacerbated Egyptian losses.

Beijing is promising to help with economic and military aid that countries such as Egypt hope will not entail “debt trap diplomacy”. China is accused of exerting undue influence through its Belt and Road Initiative programme of massive investment in infrastructure to link more than 150 countries in Asia, Africa and Europe.

The investment is being integrated with plans that try to bypass the Strait of Hormuz

In Egypt, however, **Chinese investment** is focusing more on AI, manufacturing, ports and renewable energy, particularly around Ain

Sokhna in the Suez region.

The investment is also being integrated with plans that try to bypass the Strait of Hormuz, such as the Saudi logistics corridor known as the Europe-Egypt-NEOM-GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) route.

It is a mix of sea and truck crossings from NEOM port on the Saudi side of the Red Sea that ship across to Egypt, then truck north to the Mediterranean before shipping again to Europe.

In tandem with the economic investment are deepening Chinese-Egyptian military ties that are raising Western concerns. In August, China sent J-16 fighter jets for a **joint exercise** against Egypt's French-made Rafales, allowing Beijing to closely observe NATO hardware.

Few people are watching

Another test to Egyptian ties with the US is looming. Chinese tech company **Huawei**, which is blocked from the US over national security concerns, has submitted a bid to build AI data centres and supply chips to Egypt. US companies are being pressured by the US administration to put forward a counteroffer, according to Bloomberg.



The EU is also looking away from Egyptian authoritarianism to normalise relations to further its own interests, particularly in blocking migration across the Mediterranean

Huawei's bid also included a partnership with iFlytek Co, Bloomberg reported. The company has been on a US blacklist since 2019 for its

role in surveilling Muslim minorities in Xinjiang.

Such concerns are not shared in Egypt, where Egypt's human rights record has worsened under Sisi, who led a military coup to overthrow Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013. His rule has been extended to 2030 and may last longer should he succeed in constitutional wrangling.

The EU is also looking away from Egyptian authoritarianism to normalise relations to further its own interests, particularly in blocking migration across the Mediterranean. In June, the **EU approved** a €20 million assistance measure to support the Egyptian armed forces in part "to ensure maritime security".

Meanwhile, **Human Rights Watch** says "enforced disappearance, torture and extrajudicial executions by security forces continue unabated in near-complete impunity" in Egypt. But few people are watching.