



<https://doi.org/10.48269/2451-0610-ksm-2023-1-006>

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Global, regional and internal factors of Egypt's stance towards Russo-Ukrainian war

Introduction

A full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war broke out in early 2022, throwing many countries of the Global South into a kind of confusion. This is because their governments knew that with the outbreak of this conflict, the post-Cold War era was over, and the world had entered a period of turbulence from which a new international order could emerge. Many countries of the Global South tried to distance themselves from this conflict, as they did not want to unequivocally take sides, primarily since taking the side of Ukraine would have meant de facto taking the side of the United States and other Western states. One such country was Egypt.

Even before the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the foreign policy of the Arab Republic of Egypt had undergone significant shifts compared to the period before 2013. That is especially true of relations with the United States and the Russian Federation (balancing strategy) and the key players of the Arabian Peninsula – Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – on

which Egypt has become even more financially dependent. This balancing act (though still with the pro-American bias) and dependence on the wealthy Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states thus determines Cairo's foreign policy, which, in its actions in the international arena, must consider the sometimes conflicting interests of its partners.

Consequently, from the very beginning of the full-scale war that erupted in February 2022, Cairo presented itself as a neutral actor, which favoured Russia more than Ukraine and its Western partners. Especially the United States, for which this armed conflict in Eastern Europe can be perceived as 'proxy war' between Washington and Moscow. Thus, on the one hand, Egypt condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine but, at the same time, it refrained from joining Western sanctions against Russia. The Egyptian government declared its commitment to peacefully resolving the conflict and offered to mediate between Russia and Ukraine. That did not change the fact that Egypt's position on the war in Ukraine was complex. That is because the country has close economic ties with Russia and increasingly depends on it to purchase military equipment, investments and grain imports. Accordingly, in the first months since the war broke out, Cairo has tried to strike a balance, as evidenced by the fact that it voted for a UN General Assembly resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, it did not join Western sanctions against the Russian Federation.¹

The paper aims to explain the origins of Egypt's foreign policy toward the Russian-Ukrainian war, analysing both systemic (global and regional levels) and internal determinants. The primary hypothesis says that Egypt's policy towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict results from Egypt's relations with the United States, the Russian Federation and regional powers, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with the Egyptian leaders – seeking to balance between global actors (Washington and Moscow) – are trying to pragmatically put their policy in line with those of major regional powers with which Cairo has close relations while taking into account interests of their nation, i.e. food security. Cairo's attitude to the Russian-Ukrainian war exemplifies such a policy. However, it also highlighted the limits of a balancing policy when one global actor (the US) is more powerful than another (Russia).

¹ J. Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations", *Congressional Research Service*, 2.03.2023, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf> [accessed: 4.06.2023].

Global and regional factors

The main systemic context for analyzing Egypt's policy toward the Russian-Ukrainian war is the assumption of a declining role for the United States in the world, and therefore, in the MENA region, which has led to an intensification of the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran (and – over some time – Turkey), as well as generating more significant activity of the Russian Federation in the Middle East, the best example of which is its participation in the civil war in Syria on the side of Bashar al-Assad, which coincided with Cairo's position towards the Syrian regime after 2013.²

When discussing the declining role of the United States in the world, it should be noted that the country remains the world's largest military power. However, its relative power is less dominant than in the 1990s or 2000s. In doing so, the concept of relative power – one of the main categories of structural realism – refers to the comparison of capabilities in power distribution among states within the international system. According to this concept, states are driven by the desire to survive and maintain security in a world of anarchy, which is served by maximizing their relative advantage over others. In doing so, states recognize that their security and survival are influenced by the relationship of their power to other states rather than their absolute power. In discussing the relative power of the United States, therefore, it is essential to take into account the fact that the United States remains in many respects a global superpower, with significant – albeit gradually diminishing – advantages in economics, military, technology, innovation, research, higher education and cultural influence.

Whether the relative power of the United States is declining is a topic of ongoing debate among scholars and analysts. Several factors have contributed to the discussion of a potential decline in US relative power. The rise of emerging economies, particularly China, has shifted the global economic landscape. While the United States remains the largest economy in nominal terms, China's rapid economic growth and investment expansion have led some observers to conclude that Washington's economic dominance over China is no longer as great as it once was. The United States has also faced numerous military challenges in regions of the world, including the MENA region and East Asia. These challenges, coupled with long-term involvement in conflicts such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, have questioned the sustainability of US

² M. Lipa, "Polityka Egiptu wobec wojny domowej w Syrii po 2013 roku", [in:] *Dziesięciolecie tragedii: wewnętrzne i zewnętrzne uwarunkowania wojny domowej w Syrii 2011–2021*, eds. K. Kościelniak, K. Rak, Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2022, pp. 125–140.

military supremacy and its willingness to interfere in global affairs. In addition, some argue that the United States' soft power and ability to shape global norms and values have also eroded. The United States has also been criticised for withdrawing from some international agreements, which has raised concerns about its role as a global leader.³

Thus, when analyzing Cairo's stance toward the Russian-Ukrainian war, it is necessary to pay attention to the changes that have taken place in the structure of the international system in the first two decades of the 21st century, both at the global and regional levels, and then relate them to Egypt's foreign policy actions toward two antagonists, one of which is directly involved in the war in Ukraine (Russia), and the other is actively supporting the Ukrainians in their struggle for territorial integrity (the United States).

While Russia's rise to global superpower status is out of the question for the foreseeable future (China, Russia's main ally, is the only country that stands a chance of doing so), undermining the United States' global position as world hegemon is becoming increasingly possible. The beneficiary of this process – as mentioned earlier – will most likely be China, whose influence on Egypt is not analyzed in this article, which does not change the fact that it is Beijing that stands to benefit most from the Russian-Ukrainian war in order to consolidate its status as the leader of the Global South, of which the MENA region is also a part. At the regional level, there are, in turn, several rivalries of varying intensity that have intensified with the transformation of the international system in a direction other than unipolarity: the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, which has recently been eased thanks to Chinese mediation, the Turkish-Arab-Israeli rivalry (also eased in recent years due to the warming of Arab-Turkish relations); and even a potential Saudi-Emirati rivalry.⁴

³ More on this debate in: P. van Hoof, "US Decline: Structural Trends or Poor Choices?", *Atlantisch Perspectief*, vol. 46, no. 6, 2022, pp. 4–8; N. Kitchen, M. Cox, "Power, structural power, and American decline", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 6, 2019, pp. 734–752.

⁴ S.G. Almotairi, "China's Emergence as a Potential Superpower and the World Order", *Margalla Papers*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2021, pp. 35–46; J. Barnes-Dacey, E. Geranmayeh, H. Lovatt, "Middle East Battle Lines", *ECFR Policy Brief*, May 2018, https://ecfr.eu/archive/page/-/The_Middle_Easts_New_Battle_Lines.pdf [accessed: 4.06.2023]; H. Baycar, "China-U.S. Rivalry Enters a New Phase in the Middle East", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 18.05.2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/89789> [accessed: 4.06.2023]; Ch.W. Dunne, "The UAE-Saudi Arabia Rivalry Becomes a Rift", *Arab Center Washington DC*, 6.07.2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-uae-saudi-arabia-rivalry-becomes-a-rift> [accessed: 9.07.2023].

Egypt towards Russia after the Arab Spring

Since the military coup in Egypt that took place in mid-2013, the Russian Federation had shown great interest in its initiator and leader (Abdel Fattah al-Sisi), giving him unequivocal support when he ran for the presidency in spring 2014, for which the latter reciprocated to Moscow in the form of Cairo's policy towards Damascus and the civil war in Syria, which was in line with Russia's line. On the Egyptian side, moreover, the primary motivation for intensifying relations with Russia was the desire for a stable partnership with one of the emerging global actors (competing with the United States and allied with China), which was assumed to bring additional military and economic benefits in the context of the progressive 'diversification' of Egyptian foreign policy. The first official meeting between representatives of the two countries, which took place after the overthrow of Muhammad Mursi, took place in Cairo even before Sisi became president of the Arab Republic of Egypt, i.e. in the fall of 2013. It was attended by the foreign and defence ministers of both countries, as well as Sisi (then as defence minister) and Sergei Shoygu.⁵

That was the first in a series of diplomatic meetings that have been held repeatedly in subsequent years (including at the level of heads of state), resulting in a deepening of strategic relations. The first example of strengthening these relations was the signing of a preliminary agreement in September 2014 on Egypt's planned purchase of \$3.5 billion worth of Russian military equipment. The provisions of this agreement were confirmed in February 2015 during Vladimir Putin's visit to Egypt, which can be seen as a revisit since Sisi visited Russia twice in 2014 – as defence minister (in February) and as Egyptian president (in August). The main topics of these talks were Egypt's purchase of Russian military equipment, the development of a free trade zone in Egypt (preferential for Russia), the sale of Russian agricultural goods to Egypt, and Russian investments in the Suez Canal zone. One of the main achievements of Putin's visit to Egypt in early 2015 was signing military contracts for Egypt's future purchase of Russian fighter jets and combat helicopters.⁶

Egyptian-Russian cooperation was tested in late October 2015 when there was a tragic terrorist attack on a Russian passenger plane that went down on Egyptian soil. The so-called Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack. However, the leaders of Egypt and Russia managed to overcome this

⁵ M. Lipa, "Egipt wobec głównych osi rywalizacji międzynarodowej na Bliskim Wschodzie po Arabskiej Wiośnie", *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe*, nr 3, 2018, pp. 51–66.

⁶ *Ibid.*

crisis, as evidenced by the fact that a month later – at the end of November 2015 – a preliminary agreement was signed under which the air forces of each signatory country would be allowed to use the airspace and military air bases of the partner. That was in line with the Russian Federation's new naval doctrine, which focused on restoring a permanent Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean and strengthening Russia's strategic position in the Black Sea basin. Another agreement in this regard was signed by the two countries' defence ministers in November 2017, with another important meeting held in December 2017 in Cairo. At that time, the catalogue of joint military and economic ventures was supplemented by a plan to build a nuclear power plant in the north of Egypt. The issue had been discussed since 2014, but it was not until late 2017 that the project details were presented and the relevant agreements were signed. The project is expected to cost \$30 billion, with 85% of the investment to be covered by a Russian loan. Construction of the power plant was expected to be completed in 2026, although the deadline can be expected to be extended.⁷

Thus, it is clear that the last decade has seen a significant evolution in the Russian Federation's policy in the MENA region, exemplified by Moscow's unambiguously pro-regime policy and several other actions that challenge the hegemonic position of the United States. These actions include Russia's involvement in the Libyan conflict, as well as, in particular, the intensification of relations with Cairo about issues of strategic importance, i.e. not only economic cooperation but also defence and energy cooperation, which made it possible to describe Egyptian-Russian relations as very close, although not yet strategic, as these were still reserved for the US.

Egypt towards the United States after the Arab Spring

During the Barack Obama presidency, the American administration condemned the coup in Egypt and criticized human rights violations. As a consequence, Cairo started to pursue good relations with Russia, which – like during the Cold War in the context of US-Soviet rivalry – began to grow into a US competitor in the region. Unlike the US, Russia welcomed the overthrow of the Islamist president and joined the 'diplomatic offensive' that was counterbalanced during the presidency of Donald Trump – formally began in January 2017.

The Obama administration has been criticized for not doing enough to stop Russia's growing presence in the Middle East. The momentum for that

⁷ S. El-Wardany, E. Mazneva, A.L. Wahba, "Putin and Sisi Finalize \$30 Billion Nuclear Plant Deal", *Bloomberg*, 11.12.2017, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-10/putin-sisi-set-to-finalize-30-billion-nuclear-deal-boost-ties [accessed: 16.07.2023].

was when the Russian Federation joined the Syrian war. This happened at the expense of relations with Ankara. However, due to deteriorating relations between Ankara and Washington (as well as NATO), the Turkish government pragmatically accepted Russia's military activity in the Black Sea and the Levant. The question was how much Russia would be able to financially bear the costs of its new policy in the Middle East – both in the Levant and towards Egypt. Regardless of the answer to this question, the US-Egypt relations have deteriorated after the mid-2013 coup and Obama did not want to hide it.

US government, willing to 'punish' its Arab ally, decided to suspend both military assistance (\$1.3 billion per year), as well as previously planned joint military exercises.⁸ That only strengthened the pro-Russian course of Cairo. This means that 'sanctions' of this type have proved ineffective since Egypt holds a kind of 'pivotal potential' in terms of establishing favourable alliances with stronger actors. The Egyptian government has proved again that it can conduct hyper realistic foreign policy and exploit tensions between global actors.

It was only the change of the head of state in Washington that allowed to break the deadlock in mutual relations, although the first steps in this direction were taken at the end of Obama's presidency. Trump began to shun President Sisi's criticism of his actions in Egypt (human rights violation and political cleansing aimed at moderate Islamists), focusing on security issues and strategic cooperation.⁹ Due to the number of regional issues, such as the civil war in Libya or the conflict on the Sinai Peninsula (with jihadist militias), the Americans resumed – after 2014, when Egypt did not receive the planned military support – military assistance. Trump knows that Egypt plays an important role in securing the western border of Israel and the border crossing between Egypt and Gaza, which is of great importance for the security of Israel. As a result, the Egyptian army received from the United States another combat aircraft (F-16), Harpoon missiles, as well as modern tanks.¹⁰

However, the real revival of diplomatic relations did not occur until 2017, when both presidents, Trump and Sisi, began to communicate regularly, having several meetings on various occasions and conducting a number of telephone conversations. These talks concerned matters related to the

⁸ J. Sharp, *op. cit.*

⁹ B. Barfi, *Egypt's New Realism. Challenges under Sisi*, Washington, DC: The Washington Institute, 2018, pp. 87–90.

¹⁰ P. McLeary, "U.S. Resuming F-16, Tank Shipments to Egypt", *Foreign Policy*, 31.03.2015, www.foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/31/us-f-16-arms-abrams-shipments-egypt [accessed: 16.07.2023].

development of economic cooperation and security. Specifically, they concerned the same issues that the leaders of both countries dealt with before the Arab Spring (such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the war on terrorism), as well as the new issues – i.e. the internal conflict in Libya. This was followed by the civil war in Syria, which made reaching an agreement between Cairo and Washington harder. On the Syrian issue, the Egypt supported the Russian stance, once again balancing between the Russian Federation and the United States. The American administration – understanding that previous policy towards Egypt has proved ineffective – begun restoring the status quo. A good start was the efforts to resume joint military manoeuvres (Bright Star), conducted since 1980. They actually resumed in late summer of 2017.¹¹

Sisi's first visit to Washington during Trump's presidency took place in April 2017. During the year, the American president did not mention Egypt's internal political problems, focusing on common international security challenges. The meeting could be considered a 'new opening' that was disturbed in December 2017 – along with the decision to move the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which put the Egyptian government in a difficult position. Although the reaction of Cairo was moderate, the Egyptians could not but distance themselves from this move. This was reflected in the reporting of this issue to the UN Security Council, which was eventually vetoed by the Americans.¹²

Washington has begun to take some measures in order to reverse Egypt's pro-Russian direction. Vice President Mike Pence's visit to Egypt was supposed to be the first step to achieve this goal. It was originally planned for December 2017, but due to the events mentioned above, it was necessary to move it to January 2018. It was the highest-level visit led by a US official to the region since Trump announced his declaration on Jerusalem. During this visit, Pence assured Sisi that the United States would support a two-state solution if the two sides agreed to it. In his meeting with Sisi, Pence also pledged US backing Egypt's fight against terrorism and said that the ties between the two countries had never been stronger after a period of 'drifting apart'. However, the US parliament still had some reservations concerning the financing of the Egyptian army to the same extent as it was before 2014. This is evidenced by

¹¹ A. Eleiba, "US-Egyptian Bright Star Manoeuvres Start Today", *Abram Online*, 8.09.2018, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/311097/Egypt/Politics-/USEgyptian-Bright-Star-manoevres-start-today.aspx> [accessed: 16.07.2023].

¹² A. Elhadidi, "Egypt's Shifting Foreign Policy Priorities", *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Spring 2018, www.thecairoreview.com/essays/egypts-shifting-foreign-policy-priorities [accessed: 16.07.2023].

the fact that in August 2017 the sum of military aid was reduced by \$200 million. However, this was accompanied by unambiguous signals – coming from the White House – of support for Egypt and President Sisi from Trump.¹³

Relations between Egypt and the United States became strained in 2018 since Donald Trump's government became increasingly critical of Egypt's human rights record and, as a result, suspended some military aid to the country. The Joe Biden administration has reinstated some military aid but has continued to raise concerns about human rights violations. Egypt and the United States have cooperated on many levels despite these tensions.¹⁴ However, relations cooled again in the context of the war in Ukraine when it emerged that Egyptian authorities may have wanted to sell GRAD launcher combat missiles to Russia. When the matter came to light, Cairo denied that and then pledged to sell the weapons to the Ukrainians.¹⁵

Egypt – Saudi Arabia – UAE triangle

Egypt's relations with major GCC players Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates determine the foreign policy of Cairo, which is economically and politically dependent on Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. This dependence increased after 2013, making it necessary for the Egyptian regime (in order to survive economic problems) to cultivate relations with these countries. As a result, Egypt's policy toward the Russian-Ukrainian war is a product of these countries' positions toward Russia, Ukraine and the United States.

Egyptian-Saudi and Egyptian-Emirati relations improved significantly after 2013 and were characterized by close cooperation on political, economic and security issues. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi provided significant political support to Egypt after the ouster of President Mohamed Mursi in 2013. As a result, both the Saudi and Emirati governments saw the political changes in Egypt as a way to counter the rise of Islamist movements in the region. They supported the Egyptian government's efforts to increase political stability. In addition, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are critical financial supporters of Egypt, as evidenced by the fact that the two oil monarchies regularly provide

¹³ *Ibid.*; B. Barfi, *op. cit.*, pp. 87–90.

¹⁴ J. Sharp, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ E. Hill, M. Ryan, S. O'Grady, S. Oakford, "Egypt secretly planned to supply rockets to Russia, leaked U.S. document says", *The Washington Post*, 10.04.2023, www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/10/egypt-weapons-russia [accessed: 16.07.2023]; "Egypt agreed to supply arms to Ukraine after US talks: Report", *Al-Jazeera*, 18.04.2023, www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/18/egypt-agreed-to-supply-arms-to-ukraine-after-us-talks-report [accessed: 16.07.2023].

Egypt with financial and investment assistance to address economic challenges and support development projects in Egypt. The countries have also entered into various economic cooperation agreements to boost trade and investment, as evidenced by the two countries' close cooperation on joint development projects, including infrastructure initiatives and energy-related ventures. They have also cooperated on security issues, particularly in combating terrorism and addressing regional security threats. As Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE coordinate efforts to combat extremist groups and maintain regional stability, they also hold similar positions on regional issues such as the conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya.¹⁶

Egypt and Saudi Arabia have signed many agreements on economic cooperation, tourism and investment since 2020. They have also held a number of high-level meetings, including a visit by the Saudi heir to the throne, Mohammed bin Salman, to Egypt in February 2020. Relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been strengthened by shared concerns over the political situation in Libya and the rise in popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood and its vision of political Islam. In 2020, Egypt and Saudi Arabia (as well as the United Arab Emirates and Russia) also provided military support to Khalifa Haftar, a Libyan general fighting the Government of National Unity (GNA). Although there are sometimes tensions between Cairo and Riyadh, it does not take long for Egypt and Saudi Arabia to agree on critical issues.¹⁷

The two countries also share a strategy of distancing themselves from Washington, particularly evident during Biden's presidency, with whom the Saudis are not on good terms. US-Saudi relations have been strained in recent years due to several factors, including the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen and Saudi Arabia's poor human rights record. In 2019, Saudi agents killed Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist who had been critical of the Saudi government, at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The international community widely condemned the killing, and the United States imposed sanctions on some Saudi officials. Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen has

¹⁶ D. Butter, "Egypt and the Gulf. Allies and Rivals", *Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme*, April 2020, www.chathamhouse.org/2020/04/egypt-and-gulf [accessed: 16.07.2023].

¹⁷ A. Adly, "Will Saudi-Egyptian geopolitical partnership push for economic integration? Increasing interdependencies", *Middle East Directions*, no. 2, February 2019, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/61125/MED_2019_02.pdf?sequence=1&is-Allowed=y [accessed: 16.07.2023]; Y. Farouk, "More Than Money: Post Mubarak Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf", *Gulf Research Center Paper*, April 2014, www.files.ethz.ch/isn/179860/Egypt_Money_new_29-4-14_2576.pdf [accessed: 16.07.2023].

also been a source of tension between the United States and Saudi Arabia. The war has caused a humanitarian crisis in Yemen, and the United States has been criticized for supporting the Saudi-led coalition. Finally, the state of human rights in Saudi Arabia has also been a source of tension with the US. The Saudi government has been accused of human rights violations, including the imprisonment of dissidents and torture. Despite these tensions, the US and Saudi Arabia continue cooperating on many issues, including the fight against terrorism in the Middle East. In 2022, President Biden visited Saudi Arabia and met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in what was seen as an attempt to reset relations between the two countries, which is of great importance to Washington, especially in the face of the Russian-Ukrainian war. If only because Saudi Arabia has a strong influence on global energy commodity prices and cooperates with Russia under the OPEC PLUS format.¹⁸

Setting aside the aforementioned economic cooperation, Egypt and the UAE are linked by increasingly close security cooperation, as evidenced by the fact that the two countries conduct regular military exercises to enhance military and intelligence cooperation. In this regard, Egypt and the UAE have often coordinated their positions on regional issues in the past and have been aligned on issues related to the conflicts in Libya and Syria and *vis-à-vis* Qatar during the 2017–2021 blockade of Qatar. It can be said that Egypt and the UAE have jointly sought to consolidate their influence in the Middle East (sometimes even at the expense of Riyadh), supporting allies and intervening in conflicts to shape regional dynamics jointly. The increasingly close cooperation between Cairo and Abu Dhabi is evidenced by the fact that Egypt and the UAE have signed a number of agreements on economic cooperation, tourism and investment in recent years. They also held a number of high-level meetings, including a visit by UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan to Egypt in February 2020.¹⁹

Regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war, the United Arab Emirates had taken a relatively neutral stance on the Russian-Ukrainian war, with some pro-Russian bias, as was pointed out by Jean-Pierre Filiu when he wrote that UAE enabled „key financial transactions in support of the Russian military campaign, all the while becoming a coveted haven for oligarchs who find

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; J. Sharp, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ D. Butter, *op. cit.*; N. Belmonte, “UAE and Egypt celebrate half a century of bilateral relations”, *Atalayar*, 26.10.2022, www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/uae-and-egypt-celebrate-half-century-bilateral-relations/20221026180540158820.html [accessed: 16.07.2023].

themselves targeted by Western sanctions.”²⁰ Of course, Abu Dhabi has abstained from voting on UN resolutions condemning the Russian invasion and has not imposed sanctions on Russia. However, the United Arab Emirates supported Ukraine’s territorial integrity and offered to help mediate the conflict. The UAE’s stance on the war is likely due to several factors. The country has close economic ties with Russia and depends on Russia for military equipment. The United Arab Emirates is also the GCC, which has condemned the Russian invasion but, at the same time, has called for a negotiated solution favourable to both sides in the conflict, putting the organization at odds with anti-Putin US policy.²¹

Internal factors: economic stagnation and food security

Egypt is a country whose population surpassed one hundred million in 2020, the result of dynamic population growth that generates ongoing demographic pressure on the Egyptian economy and its ability to ensure food security. The country has been facing severe economic troubles for many years, which the Russian-Ukrainian war has reinforced, as it has not only affected food security but also contributed to rising food prices, particularly for grain.

In the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, Egypt faced severe economic challenges that affected its economy and financial stability. At that time, a sweeping economic reform program was initiated to address long-standing problems such as the budget deficit, high public debt and currency shortages. The reforms included subsidy cuts, reduced public spending and currency devaluation, which initially led to higher inflation and an increase in the cost of living. As a result of the economic reforms and currency devaluation, inflation skyrocketed in Egypt. The higher cost of goods and services eroded purchasing power and negatively affected the standard of living of many Egyptians. The main factors contributing to this increase were the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the global economic downturn. The pandemic disrupted global supply chains, leading to higher prices for goods and services. The war in Ukraine – on the other hand – led to the increasing food prices and caused energy prices to rise, further contributing to inflation, which exceeded 30% in 2023. In Egypt, the economic slowdown

²⁰ J.P. Filiu, “The UAE is on team Russia in war against Ukraine”, *Le Monde*, 2.04.2023, www.lemonde.fr/en/russia/article/2023/04/02/uae-is-on-team-russia-in-war-against-ukraine_6021450_140.html [accessed: 16.07.2023].

²¹ *Ibid.*

was accompanied by a decline in the value of the Egyptian pound, which pushed up the price of imported goods. Egypt has also struggled with high unemployment, especially among the youth, which, combined with a rapidly growing population, poses serious social, economic and political challenges.²²

Egypt also faces serious food security challenges due to rapid population growth, limited arable land, water scarcity and dependence on food imports. Its rapidly growing population pressures the country's resources, including food production and distribution. Much of Egypt's land is desert, and arable land is limited to the Nile Delta and the Nile Valley. The scarcity of arable land and water scarcity make it challenging to increase agricultural productivity. Egypt, therefore relies heavily on food imports to meet its domestic needs. Dependence on international food import markets exposes Egypt to price fluctuations and supply disruptions, making the country vulnerable to economic turbulence.²³

Egypt is thus one of the largest importers of wheat in the world. Due to limited arable land and water resources, the country heavily depends on wheat imports to meet domestic demand for this staple food item. Wheat is a crucial part of the Egyptian diet and is used in producing various food products such as bread and pasta. Wheat imports to Egypt come from Russia, Ukraine, France and the United States, among others, and more recently from India. The price and availability of wheat on the international market could affect Egypt's economy, given its heavy reliance on imports. Fluctuations in global wheat prices or disruptions in supply chains could affect food costs and potentially impact food security in the country, which is an existential problem for Egypt.²⁴

Egypt is a significant importer of wheat from both Russia and Ukraine. Both countries are major wheat exporters, and Egypt depends on these supply routes to meet its domestic demand for this staple food product. In 2019–2022, these countries accounted for the bulk of Egypt's wheat imports (66–87%), with Ukrainian wheat accounting for 20–30% of imports, while Russian wheat accounted for up to 67% (in the years 2021–2022). Russian wheat exports have

²² “How deep are Egypt's economic troubles?”, *Reuters*, 3.03.2023, www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-deep-are-egypts-economic-troubles-2023-03-03 [accessed: 23.07.2023]; R. Fabiani, M.W. Hanna, “Egypt in the Balance?”, *International Crisis Group*, 31.05.2023, www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/egypt/egypt-in-the-balance [accessed: 23.07.2023].

²³ A. Mazloum, A. Rizk, N. Muhab, Z. Asal, “Addressing Food Insecurity in Egypt: Towards Sustaining Food Access for All”, *Policy Policy Paper – The AUC School of Global Affairs and Public Policy*, June 2021, https://documents.aucegypt.edu/Docs/GAPP/Public%20Policy%20Hub%20Webpage/27_Policy%20Paper_Addresssing%20Food%20Insecurity%20in%20Egypt.pdf [accessed: 23.07.2023].

²⁴ *Ibid.*

been growing in recent years, making the Russian Federation a significant player in the global wheat market, with the fact that Russian wheat was offered at attractive prices also crucial for Egypt. Ukraine, like Russia, provides convenient access to chip wheat to Egypt from its Black Sea ports (via the Mediterranean). That makes Kyiv an attractive exporter as well. The Russian-Ukrainian war has significantly disrupted Ukraine's wheat exports, leading to a sharp increase in the grain price, generating several negative consequences for the Egyptian economy and society. First, it has led to increased food costs, straining household budgets. Second, it made it more difficult for the government to provide subsidized food to people experiencing poverty. Third, the war also disrupted the supply of other food products, such as cooking oil and sugar. Not surprisingly, the Russian-Ukrainian war has become a food security concern for Egypt and an additional factor in the deepening economic recession.²⁵

Conclusion

Summarizing Egypt's position towards the Russo-Ukrainian war, it should be noted that it is conditioned by several factors, the most important of which are political and external. Egypt, distancing itself from its global ally (the US) by maintaining a neutral stance toward the war, seeks to diversify its foreign policy, directing it toward balancing the global centres of world politics. That aligns with the policies of Egypt's main regional partners, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with which Cairo must reckon. However, there is also a non-political factor of an internal nature – food security threatened by the war, which also prompts Egypt to pursue policies that favour Egypt's primary importer of wheat, the Russian Federation. That is accompanied by severe economic problems, manifesting primarily in high inflation.

²⁵ M. Tanchum, "The Russia-Ukraine War has Turned Egypt's Food Crisis into an Existential Threat to the Economy", *Middle East Institute*, 3.03.2022, www.mei.edu/publications/russia-ukraine-war-has-turned-egypts-food-crisis-existential-threat-economy [accessed: 23.07.2023]; K. Abay, F. Abdelradi, C. Breisinger, X. Diao, P. Dorosh, K. Pauw, J. Randriamamonjy, M. Raouf, J. Thurlow, "Egypt: Impacts of the Ukraine and Global Crises on Poverty and Food Security", *International Food Policy Research Institute*, 14.08.2022, <https://cgispace.cgiar.org/bitstream/handle/10568/125312/136532.pdf?sequence=1> [accessed: 23.07.2023]; M. Gadallah, N. Mamdouh, "The Socioeconomic Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Crisis on Vulnerable Families and Children in Egypt. Mitigating Food Security and Nutrition Concerns", UNICEF, June 2023, www.unicef.org/egypt/reports/socioeconomic-impact-russia-ukraine-crisis-vulnerable-families-and-children-egypt [accessed: 23.07.2023].

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Abstract

The paper aims to explain the origins of Egypt's foreign policy toward the Russian-Ukrainian war. The major hypothesis says that Egypt's policy towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict results from Egypt's relations with the United States, the Russian Federation and regional powers, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with the Egyptian leaders trying to pragmatically put their policy in line with those of major regional powers with which Cairo has close relations while taking into account interests of their nation.

Key words: Egypt, United States, Russia-Ukraine war, foreign policy, food security