

“EGYPT’S MORSI RESETS TIES WITH US”

General

The above titled article written by M K Bhadrakumar (a former diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service), was published in Asia Times, Hong Kong on 25 September 2012.

The article is a critical appreciation of the change in Egyptian posture that is upsetting for US regional strategy in the Middle East which is pronounced on three counts: [a] Egypt no longer follows US diktat unreservedly; [b] contrary to the past, Egypt now seeks strong relationships with China, Russia and Iran; and [c] now its new leadership has signalled a possibility to revise the 1978 Peace Treaty with Israel.

Context

The discussion of change in Egyptian posture ought to be viewed in a threefold focus: Firstly, the country’s status as a natural leader of the Arab World that is sum total of the demographic factor, geopolitical disposition and role in history. Secondly, its interface with Israel and vital importance for the West. Thirdly, the relevance of Suez Canal in the energy supplies and access for the US war machine. The erstwhile Egyptian status as a key US ally in the Middle East was directly related to these factors.

Salients

The author asserts that ‘Arab Spring’ in Egypt and resultant ousting of pro-US regime in the country precipitated a change in the regional strategic environment. Contrary to the widespread assumptions, Egypt under Morsi is drifting away from US influence and getting closer to countries that challenge US hegemony. Morsi has already visited China and Iran. He not only supports Iranian role to unknot the Syrian crisis but also wants to revise the 1978 Peace Treaty with Israel.

This paradigm shift in Egyptian posture has made the regional political and strategic dimensions uncertain. While Morsi has signalled intention to have good relations with Iran, there are many other issues for which an explanation is still awaited. Issues like: Egyptian stance on nuclear proliferation in the region, possibility of a

US/Israeli-led attack on Iran, US future policy in the Middle East and possible directions to review the 1978 Peace Treaty.

Thus, the implications of change in the Egyptian posture ought to be viewed as follows: First, Egypt's aspirations to have strong relations with Iran has made Iran a winner in the region. Second, after the US elections next month, Obama or Romney whoever sits in Oval Office, would have to deal with Iranian-Israeli dilemma. In case of Israel-Iran confrontation, they would not have any support from Egypt, rather it may ally itself with Iran. Third, Egypt's drift towards Iran and desire to revise the 1978 Peace Treaty with Israel has further isolated Israel in the region. Fourth, emergence of religious right of various stripes as political stakeholders across the region, especially in Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria and their willingness to utilise anti-US/Israel elements to further their own position could lead to another Arab Israel confrontation which all sides would want to avoid.

Appraisal

The article rightly argues that President Morsi is trying to draw a line between the old era and the new one, hence regional politics is shifting against Israel and US. In this context, the following aspects are noteworthy:

- With Egypt's new leadership, President Morsi is likely to advance a foreign policy with regional designs in an effort to focus on Egypt's interests in a way that is less amenable to interests of the West.
- If regional insecurities serve to further aggravate relations between Iran and Israel, with Egypt leaning towards Iran, it will inevitably call into question US support for Israel on the one hand, and US-Egypt relations on the other.
- For US, Egypt-Israel relations will be an important focal point, as Egypt has been an essential strategic asset in the effective maintenance of regional stability within the larger context of Arab-Israeli relations.
- Given the deepening of Syrian crisis and prevalent anti-Western and anti-American sentiments among Arab populations, a military intervention by the West would add another element to the region's complex and tumultuous landscape.

To sum up, regional upheaval looms dangerously in the near future, as violence in Syria escalate, Iranian nuclear ambitions remain defiant, and the spectre of an Israeli pre-emptive strike against Iran continues to linger. But, one thing is certain that the conceivable eruption of one or all of these regional problems will require Egypt's involvement. Given the Egypt's status as the leader of Arab world and its 33 years relationship with US under Hosni Mubarak, the current shift in Egyptian posture if persist, would have a capital impact on the future of Arab US / Israel relations.