

# A New Egypt On India's Radar

Will President Morsi's visit to India bring the two countries closer to each other?

Rajiv Bhatia



Mention Egypt and Indians think of the Nile, pyramids, actor Omar Sharif and Tahrir Square.

To Egyptians, India stands for Nehru-Nasser friendship, non-alignment, democracy, IT and Amitabh Bachchan. President Mohamed Morsi's recent state visit was a joint endeavour to begin bringing India and Egypt closer together, after an estrangement that lasted over two generations. This initiative will be fuelled by mutuality of interests rather than sentiments. Will it succeed?

It is best to candidly recognise the hazards ahead. Egypt is in transition. Morsi is yet to complete his first year in office. He has lost some of his sheen as the first democratically elected president. He faces a potent, though fractured, opposition of liberals, minority and women's groups. He has to tackle the more enthusiastic elements of his Islamist constituency.

Besides the military, though presently constrained, remains a powerful political factor. Acknowledging past difficulties and future challenges, he has expressed the hope that forthcoming parliamentary elections would bring 'stability' and 'reconciliation' among the people.

The president is probably striving to be a balancer, committed to the magical appeal of political Islam but willing to give it a modern touch. After all, he is a product of the University of Cairo and the University of Southern

California. Morsi would need to be more than a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and a true democrat, or else he faces criticism as 'a new Mubarak', after his predecessor who was felled by the Arab Spring two years back.

In this light, I was struck by the remark made by an Indian official prior to the visit. He observed that Morsi wished to learn from 'India's pluralism'. This potentially is the common ground. Pluralism, democracy and capacity building are the domains marked by complementarity of interests. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stressed it by lauding – and, therefore, encouraging – Morsi's goal to lead Egypt towards 'social jus-

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justice, democracy and inclusive economic development'. Egypt's progress in this direction will no doubt catalyse growth in our bilateral cooperation.

For India, Egypt is important in geopolitical terms. Turning to it helps in addressing the criticism that South Block is able to accord only limited attention to Arab states, beyond the Gulf states. It restores balance not only



Seeking to break fresh ground for cooperation

in our West Asia policy but also in our Africa policy. Egypt and East Africa deserve more nurturing even as our relations with Nigeria and South Africa blossom well. Egypt also has Mediterranean and Asian dimensions to it.

Hence the inclination to view it as 'a bridge' between Asia and Africa and with southern Europe makes sense. After Sadat and Mubarak eras of pro-West policy, Morsi is adopting his own version of a 'Look East' policy to expand his diplomatic space. His recent visits to Saudi Arabia, China, Iran and South Asia confirm this reading.

On some regional and international issues, Egypt's views are particularly interesting. It wants NAM to become stronger, whereas India's diplomatic narrative refers to it much less. Keen to join the India, Brazil, South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum in the past, Egypt is now attracted by the big-

ger club – Brics. How the gulf between India and Egypt on the expansion of UN Security Council will be bridged, is far from clear.

Morsi claimed that there was 'no such thing as a Sunni-Shia conflict', advocating the view that Egypt wanted good relations both with Arab states and Iran. His quest in that direction is unlikely to make headway in a hurry. Jordan's King Abdullah II, critical of the Muslim Brotherhood, observed that President Morsi has showed 'little depth'. Above all, fashioning a new relationship with the US remains a major challenge for Cairo.

Close scrutiny of documents relating to the visit shows that both sides, having signed seven agreements, are drawing up promising plans. The new agreements indicate potential for cooperation in diverse fields including IT, small and medium enterprises and energy. Trade has

a chance to expand beyond today's \$5.5 billion mark. The presence of 50 Indian companies in Egypt should help in the expansion of two-way investments beyond the current level of \$2.5 billion.

A key factor in Morsi's success in India was the care he took to respect India's sensitivities during his visit to Pakistan. Foreign office in Islamabad made much of Egypt choosing Pakistan as 'the first South Asian country' for presidential visit, projecting it as 'a watershed and a landmark'. Empty words. Pakistani analysts have punctured this by stressing that Pakistan had 'very little to offer' on Egypt's expectations for economic cooperation. This is an area where India scored. Morsi's visit to Pakistan was 'symbolic' and to India substantive in nature.

In diplomacy grand designs often matter less than determined individuals. So, if the two leaders – Morsi and Manmohan Singh – are truly committed, they can take the relationship to 'an entirely different level of engagement and cooperation'. In this task, they may be helped by another common bond: they have proactive ambassadors in Delhi and Cairo.

Postscript: In October 1981, while visiting Cairo with Speaker Balram Jakhar to attend President Anwar Sadat's funeral, I enquired about his successor Mubarak's prospects. Much of the diplomatic community dismissed him as a mere transitional figure. That 'transition' lasted 30 years. Therefore, the current transition merits a close watch by our experts.

The writer, a former ambassador, is director general of Indian Council of World Affairs. Views are personal.