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Egypt and Iran, new twin pillars

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi
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Egypt and Iran this week took a giant step toward overcoming their diplomatic estrangement, brought together by the exigencies of a global movement and, even more so, a complex regional calculus that has a long history of being shaped by foreign powers.

In a sign of changing times, the Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi used the opportunity of his participation in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Tehran to put on full display of the delicate yet significant nuances of a "new Egypt" that has unshackled itself from foreign domination and moves according to its own incandescent atmosphere.

At the landmark summit's opening day, the speeches by Morsi and his Iranian hosts such as by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, reflected a symbiosis that explains why the NAM torch was passed from Morsi's hands to Ahmadinejad, in light of the common themes of decrying unjust global structures, support for Palestinians, a Middle East nuclear weapons-free zone, etc.

Simultaneously, this was punctuated, yet by no means punctured, by visible disagreements over Syria, as Morsi used the occasion to declare his solidarity with the "Syrian people" against the "oppressive" regime, thus warranting a walk out by the Syrian foreign minister, who likely hoped to see a greater emphasis by Morsi on mediation .

But, not all hope is lost and in the same speech Morsi referred to that plan, which he unveiled at a recent meeting of Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Mecca, even though so far only Tehran has officially endorsed it; regarding Turkey, a last minute decision to send a special

envoy may have saved Turkey from a major self-inflicted wound (see [Turkey peculiarly absent at summit](#), Asia Times Online, August 28, 2012).

Judging by their warm brotherly hugs at the summit and their bilateral talks on the summit's side-line, Morsi and Ahmadinejad clearly have a good chemistry between them and it would only make sense to see Ahmadinejad in Cairo before his presidency's termination next June.

Although some top Cairo officials have denied that a full restoration of diplomatic relations with Tehran is imminent, after this summit they will be hard pressed to justify their opposition - after all, Iran and Saudi Arabia have their own fair share of issues and yet have managed to keep the diplomatic ship afloat, so why not Egypt?

By all indications, we are now witnessing a subtle "turn to the east" by Egypt that is reflected in Morsi's China trip prior to his Iran visit, despite an invitation by the White House. Rebuffing Washington's and Tel Aviv's pressure not to attend the summit, Morsi like UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon showed independent judgment, just as both men used the summit's podium to raise issues that irritate Iran, such as the nuclear issue, Israel, human rights and Morsi's support for the opposition in Syria.

Yet, the next move on Syria will not be a no-fly zone but rather a concerted regional effort at conflict-mediation, in order to complement the current effort of UN special envoy to Syria Lakhdar Brahimi. Only by joining hands can Tehran and Cairo make a tangible difference in brining the warring parties to a meaningful dialogue, together with input by other important regional and extra-regional players, such as Saudi Arabia, which sent a prince to the summit as a sign of good will toward Iran, basking in the reward of proving its international solidarity to the coercive Western powers.

Beyond regional issues, however, a good many international matters pertaining to UN reform, global economic injustice and hierarchy, and South-South cooperation, also bind Egypt and Iran today, sufficient reason to anticipate their full cooperation in the international organizations in the coming years. Morsi clearly shares Iran's view of Israel's nuclear arsenal as a threat to itself and the rest of the Arab world and, henceforth, we should witness a common effort with Iran to bring international pressures on Israel to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty and to open its nuclear sites to inspections.

Assuming that Cairo under Morsi manages to continue charting a new foreign policy orientation that dictates cooperation with a like-minded Tehran, we may legitimately speak of a "new twin pillars" of stability in the Middle East, akin to the Iran and Saudi "twin pillars" prior to the Islamic Revolution.

Indeed, by pulling their resources together, as the two biggest Middle Eastern states can achieve much in the direction of "reshaping the political landscape" to paraphrase a recent commentary by the China News Agency.

Lest we forget, this is a rough landscape with minefields of competing loyalties and overlapping (religious, ideological, material) interests that do not always fit each other or allow consistent

policies, but rather zigzags and tactical maneuvers in place of settled long-term strategies.

Consequently, it is hardly surprising that Cairo and Tehran may discover certain side-effects pushing them away from each other precisely at a time when they are pulled together, simply because of their constant balancing act and the Egyptian coordination of their Iran policy with their Washington or Saudi policies, requiring a "near distancing." For now, however, as a result of the landmark summit that has "blown" a new life to NAM, to paraphrase ayatollah Khamenei, the breath of fresh Iran-Egypt diplomacy is inescapable, much as it should not be mistaken for a complete harmony.