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## **RUSSIA AND EGYPT MOVE TOWARD DEAL ON AIR BASES**

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In an apparent snub to the Trump administration, Russia said on Thursday that it had reached a preliminary agreement with Cairo that would allow its military jets to use Egyptian air bases and airspace.

The draft agreement, released by Moscow and confirmed by an Egyptian military official, would mark the latest extension of Russian power in the Middle East, in this case through cooperation with one of Washington's closest Arab allies. Critics said it is also the latest sign of America's diminishing international influence as President Trump has pulled back its military and diplomatic footprint around the world.

The United States has provided Egypt more than \$70 billion in military aid over the years, and supporters of the aid program often argue that one of its main benefits to Washington is allowing the American military to use Egyptian airspace and air bases.

Egypt has been receiving about \$1.3 billion a year in United States military aid since the late 1980s. Earlier this year, the Trump administration cut or withheld \$291 million in aid because of concerns over President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's human rights record and his ties to North Korea. Sameh Shoukry, Egypt's foreign minister, called the move a misjudgment.

Under the terms of the preliminary agreement with Russia, Egypt would gain only the reciprocal right to use Russian bases. It was unclear early Thursday how the United States would respond to the agreement.

Russia has been pushing to expand its influence in the Middle East, which had diminished with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War and the expansion of America's military presence.

Most prominently, Russia has carried out an aggressive air campaign in Syria that has fortified the

rule of President Bashar al-Assad against the militant Islamists and American-backed rebels challenging him, cementing his position as a client of Moscow.

At the same time, the United States has reduced its support for Syrian rebels, backed off its onetime goal of removing Mr. Assad from power and taken a back seat to Moscow in the Syrian peace process.

The diminished role in Syria coincides with a stark reduction in Americas diplomatic force at the State Department. More than 100 senior Foreign Service officers have left the State Department since January, and critical diplomatic posts remain open. In the Middle East, for example, the Trump administration has no assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs or ambassadors to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt or Qatar.

In the conflict with North Korea, considered by many to be the greatest immediate threat to the United States, the administration has yet to nominate an assistant secretary of state for East Asia or an ambassador to South Korea.

Separate events on Thursday demonstrated how rapidly Americas foreign relationships can shift, even among close allies. As Moscow extended military ties with Cairo, in Britain Prime Minister Theresa May rebuked Mr. Trump for retweeting inflammatory videos from a British far-right group and pressure mounted on her government to cancel his invitation for a state visit.

Many of Russias moves have dovetailed with the priorities of Mr. Sisis government.

Egypt under Mr. Sisi, a former general who took power in the military ouster of an Islamist president in 2013, has also sometimes shown sympathy for Mr. Assad as a fellow strongman defending the status quo and fighting political Islam. Cairos position toward Syria has even put it in rare disagreement with its Persian Gulf patrons, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which view the fight against the Assad government as a proxy war against their biggest regional ally, Iran.

In Libya, both Cairo and Moscow have backed the forces of Gen. Khalifa Hifter in his ongoing battle for control of the country. That has put Egypt at odds with the United States and other Western powers, which have backed a unity government in an attempt to end the fighting.

General Hifter has sometimes appeared to model himself after Mr. Sisi, battling militant Islamists for control of the city of Benghazi and portraying his conflicts with the unity government as part of his fight against political Islam.

Mr. Sisi has also sought to cultivate closer direct ties to Russia and the Russian military as a partial hedge against the dependence of Egypts military on American aid, equipment and maintenance.

Former President Barack Obama temporarily suspended United States military aid to Egypt after Mr. Sisis government killed more than a thousand opponents in a series of mass shootings in the summer of 2013. Mr. Sisi responded by upgrading cooperation with Moscow. In the process, he has revived ties that ended when President Anwar Sadat shifted Egypts allegiance to Washington almost 40 years ago.

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Kaynak/Source: