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**NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY**

**NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE**

**YOU DON'T NEED TO WIN IT ALL TO HAVE IT ALL  
ANWAR SADAT AND THE OCTOBER WAR**

**CORE COURSE 1 ESSAY**

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# Report Documentation Page

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Until October, 1973 President Anwar Sadat was just another actor under the patronage of the Soviet Union on the regional Arab stage. Approximately one month later he was a player on the world stage of international politics, an achievement recognized by his contemporary, Henry Kissinger, as strategically brilliant. How did Sadat make the leap? What were his objectives and how did he reach them? This essay will look for answers by analyzing Sadat's circumstances and performance as he prepared for the October War using a number of the constructs of the design for national security strategy originated by Professor Terry Deibel.

Sadat's career prior to becoming President of Egypt would not seem to presage his destiny. As a career army officer, Sadat had been a key participant in the military coup led by Nasser that overthrew King Farouk in 1952. However, under Nasser Sadat held a number of unexceptional governmental posts, many of them dealing with public and foreign relations. He was appointed Vice-President by Nasser in 1969, it was thought because Nasser trusted his old friend more than anyone else, rather than for his abilities. He became President at the age of 52, in 1970, upon Nasser's death. His assumption of the presidency under the terms of the national constitution was reaffirmed in the month following Nasser's death by an overwhelming majority of voters (90%) in a national presidential referendum.

In the lead up to the October War both his words and his actions indicate that Sadat's assumptions about the international system, and Egypt's role in it, operated simultaneously on at least three levels. First, and dominating, was the over-arching Cold War bi-polar split between the United States and the Soviet Union. On this level, Egypt was allied with the Soviet Union in a very unequal relationship that clearly rankled Sadat. And not only was Egypt's relationship with the Soviet Union

unhappily lopsided, the Soviet Union was in Sadat's opinion the weaker of the two bi-polar players ("the United States holds 99 percent of the cards in this game") In other words, Egypt was not backing the winner

This situation was exacerbated by Sadat's distrust of his ally the Soviet Union to act in the best interests of Egypt Conversely, he did anticipate that the United States would act in the best interests of its client state, Israel Finally, he believed that both super powers were at least for the present content with the status quo with regard to the occupied territories Sadat had hoped that this situation might change after the 1972 United States presidential election but he was disappointed His perceptions on this issue were reinforced in February, 1973, when his foreign minister reported back to Sadat after a meeting with American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that "the United States regrettably could do nothing to help so long as we were the defeated party and Israel maintained her superiority "

The second level was the Middle East, in which the international scene was dominated by the enemy, Israel, in opposition to the Arab world Although Egypt was not a major player on the bi-polar stage, in the Arab world Sadat had no doubts about Egypt's role as the clear leader He saw it as "God's will" that he had "close personal relations with the leaders of the Arab world "

Finally, Sadat was also politically sensitive to the third world and its potential to affect the psychological balance of power To this end, Sadat ensured that Egypt both was an influential player in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and maintained close ties to the Organization of African Unity (OAU)

In the context of this multi-tiered world view, what did Sadat see as Egypt's national interests

and what, if any, were the threats to those interests?

After the devastating political and military losses of the 1967 Six Day War, the focus of the Arab world, and thus by Sadat's definition, the Egyptian focus, not surprisingly was Israel - in the most pejorative sense - no negotiations, no recognition, and no settlement. The unified but entirely negative Arab policy toward Israel seemed to block the possibility of Egypt moving in any way but militarily against Israel. But Egypt did not have the military strength to regain its occupied territory by force. As a result, it was definitely in the Egyptian national interest to somehow come to grips with Israel.

The threat posed by Israel was more psychological than physical, but none the less crippling and deadly for that, perhaps more so. At the time, Israel was concerned at most with consolidating territorial gains and defending its expanded borders with no immediate intention of overextending itself by waging another expansionist war. Still, the official position of the Israeli leadership was fundamentally incompatible with the Arab/Egyptian demand that all the occupied areas be returned. Diplomatic efforts to change the situation had therefore been unsuccessful.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of diplomatic solutions, the prospects for peaceful change in the Middle East receded further, as the uneven balance of power appeared to the Arabs to grow and strengthen in Israel's favor. I think it is safe to say that the perceived threat of Israel acted as the central organizing principle of Sadat's national security strategy, just as the Soviet threat drove the American cold war strategy.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the threat to peace and national pride posed by Israel, Sadat was increasingly

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<sup>1</sup> O'Neill, p 30

<sup>2</sup> Deibel, p 81

uneasy about Egypt's relationship with the Soviet Union and its implications for Egypt's autonomy. In his autobiography Sadat accuses the Soviet ambassador of arrogantly assuming "a position comparable to that of the British High Commissioner in the days of British occupation of Egypt," a telling characterization from a man who had twice been jailed for anti-British activities. In that same passage, Sadat goes on to stress his desire to "put the Soviet Union in its place," by implication to give Egypt more flexibility in its dealings with the U S S R if not to free Egypt entirely from Soviet domination.

Domestically, Sadat saw his country threatened by a faltering and weak economy in which defence expenditures drained one quarter of national income. Poor relations with the United States cut off the possibility of relief from American foreign aid. Soviet foreign aid was increasingly unsatisfactory, especially in the realm of military hardware (Sadat complains at length about both the nature of the equipment and its late delivery). But the most severe domestic handicap facing Sadat was the still debilitating effect on the national psyche resulting from the perceived humiliation and dishonor of the loss of the 1967 war. In discussing the October War Sadat highlighted the importance he attached to curing this national melancholia, stating that (if his plan were successful) "first to go would be the humiliation we had endured since the 1967 defeat."

Something had to change - maybe everything could be changed. I believe Sadat developed the following objectives on the basis of his country's national interests and the perceived threats to those interests:

-- Egypt had to redress the unequal balance of power in the region away from Israel and somehow redefine the rules of the diplomatic game - in Sadat's words, "to shatter the Israeli

theory of security,"

- Egypt had to change her super- power horse in mid-race, and
- Egypt had to regain her lost national pride

The key point is that Sadat's objectives were consistent with his resources. Total victory over Israel was out of the question, even in an allied Arab scenario. By discarding that potential objective unknown to his adversaries (and allies?) in favor of a more limited aim, Sadat opened up a new range of options and expanded the utility of his tools of statecraft, demonstrating the potential "power of the weak."

To accomplish his goals, Sadat chose to use the tools of military force (albeit limited compared to his enemy's strength), bilateral diplomacy with each super power, multilateral diplomacy (including coercive economic statecraft), and "public diplomacy" aimed at building consensus among the military and the general public. These tools previously used individually had not been successful in achieving Egypt's foreign policy objectives. As orchestrated by Sadat in the period leading up to the October War and immediately afterward, they were

The centerpiece of Sadat's strategy to realize his goals was the 1973 October War itself. Egypt had once already gone to war with Israel after the 1967 War, on the Suez Canal, under Nasser in March, 1969. This costly war of attrition "though technically a failure" paid off in a sense, since the escalation of violence attracted international and, significantly, American attention.<sup>3</sup> Sadat's shrewdly executed October War can be seen as an adept variation on the theme. (Although the October War was technically a joint Egyptian-Syrian operation, conception and execution of the

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<sup>3</sup> Vatikiotis, p 410

strategy are generally accepted as Sadat's creations )

Sadat carefully began to set the scene more than one year in advance of the war when he expelled the Soviet military advisors from Egypt. Growing dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of Soviet aid and resentment of the Soviets' cavalier attitude toward Egypt probably made this a relatively easy decision. Sadat reckoned that Egypt would gain more than it lost by the expulsion, which, in the event, was far from a total break with Moscow. It had the long term effect of distancing Egypt from the Soviet Union and thus by definition in cold war terms theoretically moving Egypt closer to the United States. The expulsion was also a positive step toward regaining Egypt's pride - the country was declaring it could stand alone - in Sadat's words, "I wanted to tell the whole world that we are always our own masters." And finally, a hidden but calculated benefit, if we take Sadat at his word, was the misinterpretation of the expulsion by all the major players to mean that Egypt would not fight when just the opposite was planned. Sadat used this ploy on other occasions, including timing his attack during Ramadan, to mislead about his true intention to go to war.

Sadat literally moved closer to the United States almost immediately after expelling the Soviet advisors when Kissinger contacted him to ask for a high level bilateral meeting, even though the meeting was delayed until early the following year. The meeting when it finally took place in February, 1973, was not successful from the Egyptian point of view, but it did reinforce Sadat's perception that the Arab-Israeli balance of power had to be altered as a precondition to change in the region. On the positive side, a diplomatic conduit was established, and on a more equal footing than might have been expected, in that the United States had sought the meeting.

Sadat did not limit his diplomatic scene setting to the super powers. He was busy in the



months leading up to the October War cementing his relationships with the other leaders of the Arab world in order to present a united front. As noted previously, Sadat had cultivated personal relationships with his Arab contemporaries ("it was God's will") over many years and it paid off now. Sadat used his good relations with his Arab colleagues for more than window dressing however. He successfully convinced the oil producing countries to cut back production enough to scare Japan and the EEC into publicly endorsing Arab demands.

Lengthy debate in the United Nations at Egypt's instigation in the summer of 1973 resulted in adoption of a resolution favorable to the Arab position, albeit vetoed by the United States. Sadat upped the multilateral ante by taking his case not only to the United Nations, but also to the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and the Non-Aligned Countries (NAM). Sadat obtained resolutions favorable to the Arab cause from both the OAU and the NAM, and subsequently was gratified when during the October War "almost every state in Black Africa severed relations with Israel and the majority of Third World nations supported the Arab position" <sup>4</sup>

Domestically, Sadat took measures to reinforce the already existing public support for his policy of waging war on Israel. Just before the start of the war, he granted a general amnesty to imprisoned student and journalist dissidents. More importantly, Sadat involved the military in the strategic planning and execution of the war, creating among the forces an unusual depth of commitment to the fight. Early on in the planning he removed those high ranking officers who clearly did not support his strategy. Those remaining participated on all levels in the preparations to the extent that Sadat remarks in his autobiography that "the War Plan was laid down by the whole

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<sup>4</sup> O'Neill, p 31

of our armed forces "

The surprise execution of that war plan in the context of the international and domestic environments Sadat had constructed over the previous year was the successful culmination of Sadat's plan to achieve his objectives of changing the balance of power vis-a-vis Israel, moving Egypt away from the Soviet Union and toward the United States, and restoring national pride. When the dust settled the playing field had not been leveled but it had been tilted. Egypt had dented the invincible Israeli war machine. The United States' intervention and activities as peace broker, in Sadat's words, "marked the beginning of a relationship of mutual understanding." And finally, again in Sadat's words, the initial and successful Egyptian military action of the war "paved the way to achieve that victory which restored the self-confidence of our armed forces, our people, and our Arab nation." The United States to its credit, although it had misread Egypt's intentions, ultimately turned this new international order to its, and arguably the world's, advantage later with the Camp David Peace Accords.

When analyzing a successfully executed foreign policy, it is hard to avoid making comparisons with current events as an exercise in "lessons learned" (or at least available for study). In this connection, two observations come to mind. One contemporary parallel (inexact, but intriguing) concerns the failure of intelligence. The CIA is currently under fire for past failures blamed on over reliance on analysis and forecasting at the expense of the facts. Henry Kissinger cites a failure of intelligence as the principal reason the United States was taken by surprise by the October War, but he claims the policy makers had the facts and that "the breakdown was not administrative but intellectual." With reference to the ancient authority on strategy and tactics, Sun Tzu, Kissinger

cautions about the risks of misjudging the assumptions and objectives of one's adversary. Both criticisms though can be summed up by the topical catchphrase - if you snooze, you lose.

A second observation drawn from the contemporary scene concerns the apparent difference between Sadat's purposefully, almost single minded, planned and implemented policy and President Clinton's policy on Haiti, referred to by one analyst as "untidy improvisation," a characterization that can also be extended to Bosnia. In the aftermath of the cold war the United States is clearly struggling to define what it "wants to achieve in its international relations and to plan for the optimal use of its resources in pursuit of national interests." Contrast this indecision with the resolution and focus Sadat turned on the solution of his problem - in his mind, nothing less than the survival of his nation. During the cold war the perceived Soviet threat thrust this same mind set on American national strategists and policy makers and underlay the nation's foreign policy. The question arises - Can the United States find its way in the absence of a clearly defined threat to its survival?

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