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SADAT'S OCTOBER WAR -- A ROAD TO PEACE

CORE COURSE (1) ESSAY

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Once the frog reached the middle of the Nile, the scorpion plunged his sting into the frog's back. The dying frog asked the scorpion to explain his act. Surely he knew that now both of them would die, so killing the frog was totally irrational as regards the scorpion's own best interests. "I know," the scorpion replied. "You will die from my venom and I will drown. It doesn't make any sense at all. But it doesn't have to make sense. This is the Middle East!"¹

Through his foresighted statecraft Anwar el-Sadat, President of Egypt, started the October War, a conflict Egypt could not "win" in the conventional sense, but which would rescue his nation from an untenable position it occupied by 1973

- a continuing hostility with Israel because Israel's past wartime successes both stiffened her resolve to insist on settlement terms that her neighbors could not accept, and robbed Egypt (and others) of the flexibility they needed to come to terms with the Israelis,
- an ineffective and dependent relationship with the Soviet Union, and
- potential unrest at home because of economic disequilibrium stemming from enormous military expenditures and loss of Suez canal revenues

To his great credit, Sadat, though he was operating from a position of extreme weakness, rectified these problems to the advantage not only of Egypt, but her region and the rest of the world. The steps he took defied conventional logic. He deliberately cut himself off from the only superpower that would sell him arms, while he began a war he knew he could not win militarily. In doing so he opened the door for the successful intervention of the United States, which he correctly identified as the only authority capable of balancing regional power by bringing both Egypt and Israel to the negotiating table. Sadat's success stemmed from his correct identification of the real issues at stake and his recognition of Egypt's real priorities.

The Context

The Six-Day War of 1967 had largely broken the Egyptian military machine and deadlocked formal negotiating attitudes on both the Arab side (refusal to negotiate with, recognize, or come to a settlement with Israel) and the Israeli side (defuse the Arab demographic time bomb in the newly-acquired occupied territories and the perceived military threat from all sides by a security belt of paramilitary settlements and maintain military superiority against all regional powers) For both Egypt and Israel the security interest at stake was *national survival* itself

Egypt's internal situation was bleak. As Sadat told his National Security Council,

. our economy has fallen below zero We have commitments (to the banks, and so on) which we should but cannot meet by the end of the year . we shan't have enough bread in the pantry! I cannot ask the Arabs for a single dollar more.,²

Moreover, Egypt was suffering from a national inferiority complex that stemmed from her disgraceful military and territorial losses to Israel in previous wars These humiliations prevented Egyptians (and Israelis) from reaching accords needed for Egypt's (and Sadat's) survival To Sadat, the road out of this morass was clear only Egyptian action could heal the Egyptian psyche

Externally, Egypt was also plagued by its image problem Results of previous wars had given Israel the reputation of invincibility and Egypt the aura of the loser, even in the analyses of her purported superpower patron In fact, that patronage was one-sided,

serving Soviet interests in keeping their political penetration of the Middle East open, short of armed conflict with the United States. This made Egypt the hostage, rather than the beneficiary, of the relationship. Nevertheless, Egypt did enjoy some international support, most notably in its role as one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement, in the Organization of African Unity, and the Islamic Conference. However, in terms of addressing Egypt's highest national security priorities -- survival and the need therefore to break the impasse with the Israelis -- the hortatory nature of these institutions made Egypt's support in international circuits, in practical terms, useless.

Acting in Egypt's National Interest

Sadat identified *peace* between Israel and Egypt as the key to Egypt's survival and the Soviet connection as one of the main thromboses. The Soviets proved to be undependable both as to the supply of armaments Egypt needed if peaceful means for a settlement failed, and in their ability to deliver a settlement with the Israelis. He ended Egypt's total dependence on the Soviets in a series of acts, the first of which was to expel nearly 15,000 Soviet military specialists, who took with them a large amount of sophisticated equipment. To "expert" Egypt watchers this signalled a reduction in Egypt's capacity to wage a successful war and hence a reduction in the likelihood that Sadat would start a war. However, the policy of increased independence from the Soviets lost little of practical value to Egypt while it addressed another vital Egyptian security interest: Egyptian self respect. Sadat correctly assessed that no one else would respect Egypt if

Egyptians did not respect themselves. Respect for Egypt, he reasoned, would open the deadlock that had stymied progress toward a Middle East peace. He put the Soviets in their place in order to demonstrate that Egyptians are their own masters. Ultimately, this also enabled the United States to become a stalemate breaker rather than only Israel's superpower protector.

Enlarging the U.S. role was a key step because Sadat must have judged that the current balance of power between the U.S. and USSR meant that the United States, rather than the Soviet Union, was the only extra-regional power that could bring the Israelis and Egyptians to terms. He clearly recognized the United States was willing and capable of action more than the Soviet Union.³ Nevertheless, Sadat did not entirely break with the Soviet Union. Rather, he used what remained of Egypt's relation with them to continue the sporadic supply of arms, without making the mistake of pinning his strategy on Soviet cooperation.

Sadat also recognized that not even the United States could act in Egypt's behalf while Egypt remained an international loser. The implication of this was clear: to cease being the defeated party and to negate the assumption of Israel's superiority, Egypt would have to take military action to break the stereotype. In this respect Sadat's perception of the balance of power was layered. Globally there were only two superpowers and the United States was probably the stronger (at least in the Middle East context). Regionally, Israel basked in an unreal glory that had to be shattered to redress the balance so that

Egypt (as leader of the Arab cause) could at last bring about a settlement between the two regional camps. Without decisive Egyptian action and success, his country and its allies would remain subject to continuing Soviet manipulation, internal instability, and confrontation with an immovable Israel buttressed by the United States.

Sadat's objective was a simple one. He had to demonstrate Egypt's ability to threaten Israel's very existence. The means he chose was a surprise attack that followed open preparations which included mobilization, large expenditures on defensive (and offensive) capabilities, even announcement of his plans within his own government (which one must presume to have been penetrated by Israeli intelligence). Sadat's greatest weapon was Egypt's presumed weakness. Like the scorpion in the old story, no one believed Sadat would take the risk of another defeat at the hands of the "invincible" Israelis. That belief blinded Egypt watchers to the true significance of the unfolding events prior to the onset of the October War. Moreover, one could argue that the mere crossing of the Suez Canal and the initial quick victories, as well as the Israelis' need to plead for U.S. assistance to "Save Israel" would have been enough to constitute a "win" for Sadat's policy. It would have demonstrated Egypt's ability to mount a credible threat against Israel, and Israel's military reputation would henceforth reflect only the United States' ability to prop her up in any future contest against Arab might.

The policy tools Sadat used did not begin and end with his military. His general amnesty calmed the home front. He took great care to enlist support of other Arab nations,

the Islamic Council, the Organization of African Unity, and the Non-Aligned Movement. However, all of these groups were of only marginal utility to him in implementing his military policy. Another diplomatic initiative was enlisting the cooperation of the other credible Arab power confronting Israel, Syria. This was an important part of Sadat's plan for several reasons. With the Syrians on board his chances of obtaining Soviet assistance probably improved. Moreover, the Syrians provided a second front that mitigated a great deal of the pressure Egyptian elements would have to face after the initial moments of the attack. The other efforts on the diplomatic front were of mixed importance. The Soviets proved no help at all, and in fact were a hindrance as they time and again sought to impose a ceasefire before Egypt had gained its military/psychological objectives. The other objective of his diplomatic venture, enlisting the United States, was of necessity one that had to be employed *ex post facto*, for the American role was an aftermath one that depended on Egypt's shattering Israel's regional dominance.

Evaluation

Sadat gambled and won, but he came very close to losing. Historic judgement of a gambler is usually based on whether or not the risk succeeded. The ceasefire came before Israel could totally negate Egypt's quick but ephemeral victories over Israeli armor. There had been some snags along the way, such as when his war minister failed to inform all his military chiefs of the impending military campaign, but Sadat was easily able to replace that incompetent and overcome the temporary setback to his timetable.

On a quite different level one could argue that Sadat's resort to a surprise war succeeded almost inevitably. It was only a matter of time before Arab leaders came to see that Soviet support in the struggle against Israel would never be enough to permit the Arabs to vanquish their enemy. The United States would never allow this and it is doubtful whether the Soviets were willing to risk war with the United States over the Middle East. Moreover, by backing losers and by convincing the Arabs that they were losers the Soviets had for decades guaranteed themselves a sphere of influence in the Middle East that might have vanished had the Arabs definitively defeated Israel.

In its overall meaning for national security strategy Sadat's resort to a war he could not "win" underscores the ability of a determined leader to resort to force even when wiser heads would counsel against it. More important, it shows that leaders of smaller states can contribute significantly to ending international deadlock. Ideas that while they are not necessarily a paradigm shift, go beyond the often very conventional thinking that often characterizes the "status quo" approach to maintaining the balance of power.

The decision to enter a war he could not win also has great relevance in policy makers' evaluation of the relevance of the deterrent effect of seemingly overwhelming power. Such power is a reliable policy tool only to the extent that those at whom it is aimed fear a conventional military defeat. When the "deterred" has a different policy objective up his sleeve, the overwhelming power may actually have to be put into effect. In this case Sadat was both brilliant and lucky; the scorpion had a life vest.

- 1 This is part of an old Middle East joke
2. Anwar el-Sadat, *In Search of Identity An Autobiography* New York. Harper and Row, 1978, p 245
- 3 It was the United States, not the Soviet Union, that landed supply aircraft practically on the battlefield to negate Israel's early losses of tanks and other materiel. Moreover, the U S. even began supplying Israel with state-of-the-art weapons still in the test stage. These facts strongly impressed Sadat (*Ibid.*, pp 260-1)