

## **The Role of Congress in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Case Study of U.S.-Egyptian Relations 1970-1981**

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### **Abstract**

*What role does Congress play in shaping US foreign policy? Although many argue that it plays a limited role, this paper challenges this view using the 1970s congressional processes that arguably produced one of the hallmarks of US foreign policy in the Middle East, the annual US aid package to Egypt. The paper shows that even though the executive branch drew the broad contours of the US-Egyptian relationship, Congress played an important role in shaping aid to Egypt. It highlights the genealogy of contemporary US-Egyptian relations and enhances our understanding of the role of Congress in foreign policy-making.*

### **I. Introduction**

On 22 September 2023, the US Department of Justice accused Senator Robert Menendez, then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, of taking bribes from Egyptian officials and business figures in exchange for influencing aid bills and congressional resolutions in Egypt's favor.<sup>1</sup> While the trial has yet to conclude, it brought public scrutiny to the decades-long aid relationship between the US and Egypt.

US aid to Egypt helps us understand the role of Congress in foreign policy-making and the conditions that shaped contemporary US relations with Egypt. Egypt presents a compelling case study for examining the former because, after Israel, Egypt receives more US foreign aid than any other country.<sup>2</sup> This aid has primarily consisted of military and economic packages aimed at ensuring the stability of the Egyptian government, notwithstanding its authoritarian practices, and protecting US security interests.<sup>3</sup> These interests include ensuring peace between Egypt and Israel, a key US

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Weiser, Tracey Tully, and William K. Rashbaum, "Menendez Accused of Brazen Bribery Plot, Taking Cash and Gold," *New York Times*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/22/nyregion/robert-menendez-indicted.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Erin A. Snider, *Marketing Democracy: The Political Economy of Democracy Aid in the Middle East*, no. 64 (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 110.

<sup>3</sup> Michele Dunne, "Integrating Democracy Promotion Into U.S. Middle East Policy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 1, 2004, 3.

ally in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Egypt has acted, at various times, as a pro-US counterweight to Iran and Iraq.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the US has sought to secure its security interests vis-à-vis Egypt through aid packages, which arguably contributed to the country's authoritarian stability.

Consistent with this assessment, Michelle Dunne points out that since the 1980s, the US viewed funding economic growth in Arab states as “a crucial component of maintaining stability in Arab countries.”<sup>6</sup> Steven Cook goes further and explains that the US sending aid to Egypt for economic and security purposes is fully institutionalized which in part explains authoritarian persistence in the country.<sup>7</sup> There is wide consensus that the contours of this relationship came into being during the 1970s. Amir Kamel, for instance, points out that current tenants of US-Egyptian relations, especially under the Hosni Mubarak regime, took shape under the presidency of Anwar Al-Sadat in the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> Although the dynamics of this relationship have remained largely unchanged for decades, a closer look at its genealogy in Congress suggests that the size and configuration of US aid to Egypt could have taken a different trajectory. An analysis of relevant congressional deliberations on these issues during the formative period of the 1970s underscores the pertinent role of legislative processes and debates in shaping aspects of this relationship we now take for granted.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Part II examines the role of congressional deliberations and actions on the evolution of the US aid package to Egypt between 1970 and 1973. During this period, Congress's view of Egypt through the lens of the Cold War limited aid until the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. The War, in many ways, paved the way to jumpstarting relations between Cairo and Washington after years of suspended diplomatic relations. Focusing on the period between 1974 and 1976, Part III shows how Congress wrestled with the executive branch over whether military aid to Egypt should exist and how to entice Egypt to make peace with Israel. Finally, Part III covers 1977 to 1979, when mass protests in Egypt, regional instability in the Middle East and East Africa, and new legislative-executive relations created suitable conditions

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<sup>4</sup> Snider, *Marketing Democracy*, 110.

<sup>5</sup> Jason Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the US-Egyptian Alliance* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Dunne, “*Integrating Democracy Promotion*,” 3.

<sup>7</sup> Steven A. Cook, “The Right Way to Promote Arab Reform,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 2 (2005): 91–102, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20034278>.

<sup>8</sup> Amir Magdy Kamel, *Floundering Stability: US Foreign Policy in Egypt* (University of Michigan Press, 2023), 3.

for Congress to develop the security-centered aid relationship we recognize today. Overall, analyzing the progression in congressional debates and deliberations over these three periods shows that Congress played an important role in shaping key features of US aid to Egypt. The paper shows that Congress helped define significant aspects of contemporary US-Egyptian relations, thereby contributing to our understanding of the role of Congress in US foreign policy.

## II. 1970 to 1973

How did Congress come to play an instrumental role in foreign policy? In the first half of the 20th century, most scholars agree that Congress limited its power in devising foreign policy given the premium placed on executive decision-making during wartime. The viewpoint shifted starting in the 1970s. As scholars recognized, the Vietnam War and President Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal increased public distrust of the office of the president and the executive's de facto monopoly on foreign policymaking.<sup>9</sup> In response, Congress became more assertive in its engagement with foreign policy files. Three bills demonstrate congressional assertiveness in foreign policy at that time.

The Case Act of 1972 states that the President (through the Secretary of State) must send Congress all international agreements within sixty days.<sup>10</sup> While this act had yet to put Congress at the forefront of policy creation, it did allow Congress to have a say in foreign affairs and check the executive branch before the implementation of agreements. Another example of Congress limiting executive power is The War Power Act. Influenced by the experience of the Vietnam War, Congress passed The War Power Act in 1974, which limited presidential power in undeclared wars<sup>11</sup> and stipulated that both Congress and the President would need to weigh in on whether to send troops into combat in undeclared wars.<sup>12</sup> The Trade Act of 1974 required the executive branch to consult Congress while negotiating trade deals and stated that trade could begin only once Congress passed an implementing bill.<sup>13</sup> Collectively, these acts exemplify key shifts in congressional thinking during the 1970s, namely Congress's

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<sup>9</sup> Colton C. Campbell, Nicol C. Rae, and John F. Stack, eds., *Congress and the Politics of Foreign Policy* (Pearson, 2003), 117.

<sup>10</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Lynne Rienner, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (2002), 82.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, "Congress and the Politics," 22.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, "Congress and the Politics," 22.

<sup>13</sup> Ehteshami, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 22.

interest in taking an active role in the making of foreign policy. Within this context, the US and Egypt revived their relations in the 1970s, with Congress deeply involved in debating and shaping the nature and structure of foreign aid to Egypt.

By the early 1970s, Washington and Cairo had no diplomatic relations after they severed them in the wake of the 1967 War. In 1970, Egypt underwent a significant change in leadership with the ascendancy of President Anwar Al-Sadat (1970-1981). Under the rule of Sadat's predecessor, President Gamal Abdel-Nasser (1954-1970), Egypt was officially a one-party state lacking in political rights with an economy managed primarily by central planning.<sup>14</sup> Relations with the United States had been strained even before 1967, partly due to President Nasser's efforts to maintain Egypt's neutrality in the Cold War and partly because Cairo became more confrontational with Washington's allies. Egypt's humiliating defeat in the 1967 War and deteriorating economic conditions<sup>15</sup> steered the political leadership toward shifting its foreign and economic policies — a shift that President Sadat would lead after President Nasser's death.<sup>16</sup>

Central to the shift was the embrace of economic liberalization and a concurrent move away from the USSR and toward the Western bloc, especially the United States. It took a while, however, before Washington would embrace this shift. Although Egypt attempted to catch Washington's attention and secure its support, Congress acted apprehensively toward the idea of supporting Egypt for much of the early 1970s. Central to that apprehension was Egypt's history of close relations with the Soviet Union— even if that relationship often fluctuated. Thus, during that period, Congress scrutinized Egyptian-Soviet relations and dealt with Egypt largely as a Soviet proxy. While the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War brought Washington and Cairo closer, the concern that improving relations would affect Israel's advantage in the balance of power in the Middle East guided congressional decision-making. The dual Soviet and “Arab” threat made for a skeptical Congress, one that seemed far from endorsing the deep partnership the US and Egypt would go on to build in the latter part of the decade.

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<sup>14</sup> Hesham Sallam, *Classless Politics: Islamist Movements, the Left, and Authoritarian Legacies in Egypt* (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2022), 23, <https://doi.org/10.7312/sall20324>.

<sup>15</sup> Sallam, *Classless Politics*, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Sallam, *Classless Politics*, 31.

*The Soviet Threat*

The threat of growing Soviet influence, even in the age of détente, shaped Congress's orientation toward US aid to Egypt. Congress's perception of Egypt as a Soviet proxy pushed it to limit aid, although Members of Congress (MCs) were interested in whether Egypt would switch loyalty to the US

In the early 1970s, Egypt had relied on Moscow for military and economic support. In March 1970, the Soviet Union (USSR) stationed a large number of troops in Cairo, and the USSR, China, and Egypt signed a trilateral trade deal.<sup>17</sup> Congress viewed these developments as evidence of Egypt serving as a Soviet proxy. For example, Representative Robert Michel stated that the USSR protected and supplied Arab states, resulting in a “new wave of terrorism.”<sup>18</sup> To counter the Soviet-Egyptian relationship, Congress viewed Israel with an equivalent lens. As Representative Phillip Burton put it, “Israel’s strength is America’s strength.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Congress saw limited potential in Egypt because of its Soviet connections and its longstanding conflict with Israel.

Accordingly, Congress sought to limit the Nixon administration’s attempts at developing a closer relationship with Egypt. Senator Harrison Williams Jr. criticized a December 23, 1969 news conference given by Secretary of State William Rogers.<sup>20</sup> In the conference, Secretary Rogers stated that the Nixon administration wanted to pursue friendly relations with all nations in “that war-torn area,” the Middle East, including Arab aggressors in the war. Senator Williams Jr. criticized the speech by pointing out how his New Jersey constituents, and several of his colleagues’ constituents in other states, wrote letters opposing this view and that they viewed this as an “erosion of American support for Israel.”<sup>21</sup> Senator Williams Jr. went on to state that Congress would do better at representing the views of the American people in

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<sup>17</sup> Snider, *Marketing Democracy*, 101.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Michel, U.S. Congress House of Representatives, “Congressional Remarks Vol. 116, Pt. 26 - Section: The Palestinian Line,” October 7, 1970, 289, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1970-pt26/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1970-pt26-5.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Phillip Burton, U.S. Congress House of Representatives, “Congressional Remarks Vol. 116, Pt. 11,” May 11, 1970, 178., <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1970-pt11/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1970-pt11-4.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Harrison Williams Jr., U.S. Congress Senate, “Congressional Remarks Vol. 116, Pt. 4 Section: Senator Williams Calls for Private Meeting Between Congressional Delegation and President Pompidou – Urges Cancellation of Jet Sale to Libya,” February 1970, 11, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1970-pt4/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1970-pt4-3.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, “Congressional Remarks Vol. 116.”

foreign policy because Congress unequivocally supports Israel and would limit relations with Arabs.<sup>22</sup> While this sentiment seemingly had bipartisan support,<sup>23</sup> Congress did not dismiss the prospects of Cairo shifting its alliances in favor of Washington.

For example, upon returning from a trip to Cairo following President Sadat's expulsion of Soviet advisors, a congressional delegation reported evidence of significant change in Egypt. Representative John Rarick said Egypt asserted their "freedom and independence" through this expulsion.<sup>24, 25</sup> Representative Rarick further described the expulsion as the "most significant development in the Middle East this year" and believed it could facilitate a path for peace with Israel.<sup>26</sup> Some, however, urged continued restraint, noting that Egypt continued to rely on the Soviet Union,<sup>27</sup> a sign that the Soviet threat prevailed in their assessment. Congress grew bolder in trying to limit the Nixon administration's outreach to Egypt and restricting military and economic aid, especially in the wake of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.

### *The 1973 Arab-Israeli War*

The advent of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War emboldened Congress to stage further interventions in relations with Egypt. Initially, Congress limited aid to Egypt to punish what it viewed as its aggression against Israel. This stance would later shift as Congress built personal contacts with Egyptian officials, paving the way for aid authorization to encourage Egyptian-Israeli peace. These trends are evident in congressional discourse and actions during this period.

Congress's perception of Egypt as a Soviet benefactor contributed to congressional fears regarding deepening US-Egyptian relations. In the lead-up to and during the 1973 War, Congress stated that Arabs needed to end the conflict on Israel's terms and called for the USSR to stop selling arms to Arab nations.<sup>28</sup> Congress, in other words, saw the path to peace as lined with ensuring Israeli –and by extension,

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<sup>22</sup> Williams, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 116."

<sup>23</sup> Williams, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 116."

<sup>24</sup> John Rarick, U.S. Congress House of Representatives, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 118, Pt. 19, Section: Arab Diplomacy-First Soviet Defeat," July 21, 1970, 50, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1972-pt19/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1972-pt19-5.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Rarick, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 118."

<sup>26</sup> Rarick, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 118."

<sup>27</sup> Rarick, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 118."

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Congress, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 116, Pt. 4."

American– hegemony, not as compromises with Arabs or the Soviet Union which it viewed as the main arms benefactor to a host of Arab countries.<sup>29</sup>

One notable instance of Congress limiting executive power in deepening US-Egyptian relations is the 1974 amendment to The Nuclear Agreement Controls Act (Public Law 93-485) to allow Congress to veto any international agreements involving nuclear technology.<sup>30</sup> In defending during legislative deliberation, MCs cited the concern that the Nixon administration had offered Egypt nuclear technology.<sup>31</sup> In fact, on June 14, 1974, President Nixon and President Sadat announced they had agreed to sign an accord that would give Egypt a nuclear reactor for “peaceful purposes.”<sup>32</sup>

The outbreak of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War sent shockwaves on Capitol Hill.<sup>33</sup> In a report summarizing Congressional activities for that year, the war is described as “the big event of the year.”<sup>34</sup> The war prompted Congress’s interest in deliberating over the potential for an alliance with Egypt, specifically whether aid to Cairo would encourage peace with Israel. President Sadat’s war policies and major shifts in Egyptian domestic politics largely shaped Congress’s approach to this file.

Sadat’s war strategy and domestic politics in the early 1970s aimed to cultivate a closer relationship with the US, which sidelined Cairo’s alliance with Moscow. In November of 1973, Representative Samuel Stratton of the Armed Services Committee visited Egypt in a development that showed growing interest among lawmakers in US-Egyptian relations. During the trip, he visited the People’s Assembly building to meet with “People’s Assembly Representatives” for a discussion group.<sup>35</sup> The Speaker of the People’s Assembly, Hafez Badawi, headed the discussion group. In his contributions to the discussion, Representative Stratton acknowledged he was one of the first congressmen that Egypt hosted in such a high-profile visit.<sup>36</sup> Reflecting Congress’s interest in asserting its foreign policy role, he described himself as a “delegate cast in the

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<sup>29</sup> U.S. Congress, “Congressional Remarks Vol. 116, Pt. 33.”

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Congress, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1975*, 93rd Cong., 50.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1975*, 50.

<sup>32</sup> Henry Tanner Special, “Nixon and Sadat Sign Sweeping Accord on Cooperation,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/06/15/archives/nixon-and-sadat-sign-sweeping-accord-on-cooperation-financial-help.html>.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Congress, “Congressional Remarks Vol. 119, Pt.,” 26.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1975*, 47.

<sup>35</sup> USINT Cairo to US Department of State. “Cairo 03685, Subject: CODEL Stratton.” November 1973, Declassified 30 June 2005, 2.

<sup>36</sup> USINT Cairo to US Department of State, “Cairo 03685,” 2.

role of a diplomat.”<sup>37</sup> According to State Department cables, Representative Stratton and Speaker Badawi discussed the political aftermath of the war, and the prospects for Egyptian-Israeli peace.<sup>38</sup> The only factor standing in the way of peace, Speaker Badawi stated in the discussion,<sup>39</sup> is Egypt’s regaining of the land it lost in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.<sup>40</sup>

The Foreign Assistance Act, which Congress and President Nixon signed into law in December 1973, paved the way for the provision of aid to Egypt. Even though the act did not earmark funds for Egypt at first — after all Congress still clung to Cold War views as demonstrated earlier—<sup>41</sup> it laid the groundwork that would later provide the legal basis for U.S. aid to Egypt. The aid authorized larger sums for foreign aid to help countries develop their (1) food and nutrition; (2) population planning and health; (3) education and human resources development; and (4) selected development problems.<sup>42</sup> Notably, this aid is a long way from the Egyptian-specific military and economic aid Congress would produce.

In the early 1970s, it was far from certain that Congress would embrace the US-Egyptian relationship we see today. Cold War tensions framed Congress’s perception of Egypt by designating Egypt as a Soviet proxy due to their history of close relations between Cairo and Moscow. Additionally, the 1973 Arab-Israeli War made reconciling differences with Egypt tough because of the threat the country seemingly posed to Washington’s closest ally in the region, Israel. Towards the end of 1973, however, congressional visits to Egypt and early conversations regarding developing Arab oil capacity hinted at the changes that would later come.

### III. 1974 to 1976

How did Congress check executive power in the making of foreign policy? In this part, I will lay out how Congress asserted its ability to shape foreign policy by limiting actions the executive branch tried to take. While both branches worked towards a peace agreement between Israel and Arab nations, their strategies sometimes differed. While Congress could no longer deny that some sort of relationship existed

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<sup>37</sup> USINT Cairo to US Department of State, “Cairo 03685,” 2.

<sup>38</sup> USINT Cairo to US Department of State, “Cairo 03685,” 1.

<sup>39</sup> USINT Cairo to US Department of State, “Cairo 03685,” 1.

<sup>40</sup> Sallam, *Classless Politics*, 30.

<sup>41</sup> Sallam, *Classless Politics*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Senate. 93rd Congress. “S. 1443, Foreign Assistance Act of 1973, Public Law 93-189.”

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/93rd-congress/senate-bill/1443>.



with Egypt, they had much to discuss regarding the nature of that relationship. Unlike the previous period, the number of congressional visits to Egypt exploded. Representative Margaret Heckler remarked in a meeting with the People's Assembly and President Sadat that this increase in visits "is a compliment to current Egyptian relations."<sup>43</sup> Documentation of these visits enhances our knowledge of congressional debates over aid. Two themes dominated these debates, namely: (1) what foreign aid to Egypt should look like and (2) how this affected executive-legislative contentions.

By way of context, it is worth noting that against the backdrop of these developments, Sadat worked to open the Egyptian economy to foreign investments, develop a façade of political liberalization, and distance Egypt from the USSR. The Open Door Policy (also known as the *Infitah*), which kicked off in 1974, sought to bring foreign investments into Egypt,<sup>44</sup> although the majority of these investments ended up going to oil, tourism, and nonindustrial sectors.<sup>45</sup> On the political front, Sadat reconfigured the ruling Arab Socialist Union (ASU) to forge a multi-party political arena with licensed opposition parties.<sup>46</sup> Although observers recognized that Sadat's ruling party dominated the political field, Washington nonetheless viewed his reforms as a vital shift in the country's politics. Meanwhile, as Egyptian-Soviet relations grew tense, Sadat canceled the Friendship Treaty between the two countries in 1976,<sup>47</sup> thereby signaling to the U.S. his seriousness to align his policies with the Western bloc. Even Sadat's domestic discourse reflected his anti-Soviet stance, as he often called his leftist opponents Soviet agents.<sup>48</sup> Congress took note of these changes, applauding Sadat's pro-U.S. shift.<sup>49</sup>

### *The Nature of Foreign Aid*

Congress deliberated actively on the nature of foreign aid to Egypt and was often at odds with the White House. By 1976, Congress extended some aid to Egypt,

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<sup>43</sup> American Embassy Cairo to American Embassy Rome. "Cairo 16013, Subject: CODEL Wolff: Meeting with People's Assembly Delegation." November 1976, Declassified 04 May 2006, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention*, 23.

<sup>45</sup> Hazem Kandil, *Soldiers, Spies, And Statesmen: Egypt's Road To Revolt*, Verso Books, 2014, 161.

<sup>46</sup> Sallam, *Classless Politics*, 46.

<sup>47</sup> Sallam, *Classless Politics*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> Kandil, *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen*, 106.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin Rosenthal, U.S. Congress House of Representatives, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 122, Pt. 12 Section: U.S.S.R. and Egypt," May 17, 1976, 155, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1976-pt12/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1976-pt12-1.pdf>.

albeit in minuscule amounts compared to the large aid package it would later receive.<sup>50</sup> Debates regarding aid spanned everything from concerns over Egypt's debt to the merits of pursuing military versus economic aid. This section reviews the debate on debt, which underscores that these discussions did not center exclusively on security and economic considerations. The debates on "military vs. economic aid" underscore how congressional deliberations defined the content of the configuration of U.S. support for Egypt during this formative phase.

One area of discussion dominating congressional debates over aid to Egypt focused on Egypt's outstanding debts to the United States. As of June 1976, both Egypt and Israel were indebted to the US, and Congress deliberated over a bill that would cut off aid to any country over a year in debt.<sup>51</sup> Representative Otto Passman, who opposed the bill, stated that if Congress prioritized peace in the Middle East, then they should not pass this bill because "some of our best friends including Israel and Egypt" would end up not receiving aid.<sup>52</sup> By mentioning Egypt alongside Israel, this statement highlights the growing importance of Egypt and how Congress saw aid as a reflection of this change. Ultimately, the bill never passed.<sup>53</sup>

Many other debates centered on the form of aid and whether aid should consist of military or economic packages. Congress pushed back when it came to the question of military aid. It was far from certain that Congress would eventually agree to appropriate funds for military aid to Egypt.<sup>54</sup>

The idea of military aid to Egypt raised red flags in Congress due to concern that it would undermine Israel's military advantage over Egypt. Some communities in

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<sup>50</sup> U.S. Congress, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 122, Pt. 17."

<sup>51</sup> U.S. Congress, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 122, Pt. 17."

<sup>52</sup> Otto Passman, U.S. Congress House of Representatives, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 122, Pt. 17 Section: Foreign Assistance and Related Programs Appropriation Bill 1977," June 25, 1976, 4, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1976-pt17/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1976-pt17-1.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Passman, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 122, Pt. 17 Section: Foreign Assistance and Related Programs."

<sup>54</sup> Military aid includes the sale (either through direct purchase or a loan) of military arms and other physical defense items (also known as foreign arms sales). (U.S. Congress, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1976*, 94th Cong. 51) Additionally, it can also include "security supporting assistance" which is military training, access to specialized knowledge, and less tangible military aid. ("Security Assistance." Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Defense Exports and Cooperation, 2023. <https://www.dasadec.army.mil/Security-Assistance/#:~:text=Security%20Assistance%20is%20a%20group,%2C%20cash%20sales%2C%20or%20lease.>)

Congress also felt that economic aid better reflected Egypt's needs, given the struggling state of its economy at the time. Among the key interlocutors in these debates was Senator Jacob Javits, a major advocate for Israel, and a former opponent of aid to Egypt, military or otherwise.<sup>55</sup> In a conversation with Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy, he explained that before visiting Egypt he did not support granting aid to the country.<sup>56</sup> But after meeting with members of the Egyptian public and touring Cairo, Senator Javits explained, he became open to granting Egypt economic assistance because he wanted to improve the lives of its people.<sup>57</sup> In the same conversation, he said he understood why Egypt sought military aid, expressing openness to picking up this discussion after the 1976 presidential election but not before.<sup>58</sup> It is worth noting that, despite Congress's reservations about sending military aid to Egypt, a growing number of them supported developing a friendly relationship with Cairo in some form.<sup>59</sup> These conversations highlight Congress' active interest in Egypt's foreign policies and domestic affairs, as it pondered the prospect of extending aid to the country.

The main military aid extended to Egypt during this period was through the Foreign Assistance Act, which went into effect in 1975.<sup>60</sup> This act authorized \$250 million for Egypt (\$324.5 million for Israel) in "security supporting assistance." The reasons given for granting Egypt aid included ensuring Egypt could defend its oil and recognizing its alliance with the US (at the expense of the USSR).<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile, Congress seemed more receptive to economic aid to Egypt, especially in light of visits by individual congressmen to Egypt. For example, upon meeting with the Egyptian People's Assembly and learning that Egypt only sold 20% of its normal cotton exports and struggled to provide food security for all its people, Senator George McGovern worked to pass an aid bill that would create a food stamp plan in Egypt.<sup>62</sup> Representatives James Scheuer and Margaret Heckler took on the issue

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<sup>55</sup> U.S. Congress, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 122, Pt. 12."

<sup>56</sup> U.S. Congress, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 122, Pt. 12."

<sup>57</sup> U.S. Congress, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 122, Pt. 12."

<sup>58</sup> American Embassy Cairo to SecState WashDC, "Cairo 5233 (Section 1 of 3), Subject CODEL Javits: MEMCON-Fonmin Fahmy/Senator Javits." April 1976, Declassified 04 May 2006.

<sup>59</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1976*, 167.

<sup>60</sup> U.S. Senate, 93rd Congress, "S. 3394, Foreign Assistance Act, Public Law 93-559." <https://www.congress.gov/bill/93rd-congress/senate-bill/3394>

<sup>61</sup> U.S. Senate, 93rd Congress. "S. 3394, Foreign Assistance Act, Public Law 93-559."

<sup>62</sup> American Embassy Cairo to SecState WashDC, "Cairo 2951, Subject CODEL McGovern Visit to Egypt," March 1975, Declassified 05 July 2006.

of family planning after witnessing firsthand the overcrowding of Egyptian cities.<sup>63</sup> They would go on to sponsor aid that provided funds for Egypt to build campaigns promoting family planning.<sup>64</sup> In other words, Congress engaged deeply with Egypt's domestic issues and tried to address them through aid packages.

However, even when it came to economic aid, Congress still held reservations. For example, when debating increasing Egypt's allotment of food aid, Representative Clarence Long Jr. pointed out that this may allow Egypt to shift its state budget away from domestic concerns and towards its military, thus endangering Israel.<sup>65</sup> When almost all members of the House Appropriations Committee visited Egypt, they discussed with Mansour Hassan,<sup>66</sup> a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the People's Assembly, about how Congress hesitated to continue granting aid until Egypt made progress toward a transition to a multiparty system.<sup>67</sup> Not only did MCs take an interest in Egypt, but they also appeared to recognize the implications of aid for democratization or regional security. Overall, Congress limited both military and economic aid to Egypt.

### *Executive-Legislative Conflict*

During this same period, Congress wrestled with the executive branch over terms of aid. The two sides sometimes had differing visions of what aid to Egypt looked like. Their differing views coincided with growing debates over the role of Congress in foreign policy.

In 1974, Congress passed the Nelson-Bingham Act, which stipulated that if the executive branch offered to sell any defense articles or training over \$25 million, the president must disclose the details to both houses of Congress and provide them with

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<sup>63</sup> American Embassy Cairo to American Embassy Rome, "Cairo 16013, Subject CODEL Wolff: Meeting with People's Assembly Delegation," November 1975, Declassified 04 May 2006. AND American Embassy Cairo to SecState WashDC, "Cairo 15990, Subject CODEL Wolff: Meeting with Prime Minister Mamduh Salim," November 1976, Declassified 04 May 2006.

<sup>64</sup> American Embassy Cairo to American Embassy Rome, "Cairo 16013," AND American Embassy Cairo to SecState WashDC, "Cairo 15990."

<sup>65</sup> Clarence Long Jr., U.S. Congress House of Representatives, "Congressional Remarks Vol. 122, Pt. 17 Section: Foreign Assistance and Related Programs Appropriations Bill, 1977," June 25, 1976, 10, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1976-pt17/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1976-pt17-1.pdf>.

<sup>66</sup> Hassan would later become Sadat's Minister of Information and (briefly) a presidential election contender in the aftermath of Hosni Mubarak's downfall in 2011.

<sup>67</sup> American Embassy Cairo to SecState WashDC, "Cairo 8422, Subject CODEL Obey Visit to Egypt," August 1975, Declassified 06 July 2006.

20 days to either approve further action or veto any further negotiations.<sup>68</sup> This act bolstered congressional powers in reviewed aid since military aid often exceeded \$25 million, such as the \$250 million Egypt received in military aid in 1975.<sup>69</sup>

Congressional debates over the Sinai Accords denoted another example of the contention between the two branches. Congress stated in a September 1975 report that the Sinai Accords “produced several conflicts” between themselves and the executive branch.<sup>70</sup> The president had offered US technicians to Egypt to implement an early warning system protecting against future invasions.<sup>71</sup> Congress disapproved of potentially putting US civilian technicians in harm’s way by serving in the Sinai — a peace treaty did not protect the region.<sup>72</sup> The issue came to a head when the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* published the details of the Sinai Interim Agreement (also known as Sinai II) before the White House officially publicized it.<sup>73</sup> While it remains unclear how the journalists got this information, at the time, the president accused Congress of leaking the information to stall progress.<sup>74</sup> This accusation exemplified how aid to Egypt created an arena of contention between the legislative and executive branches over the power to determine US foreign policy.

Several State Department cables also reflect the power of Congress in checking the executive branch. These cables discuss a 1976 offer of military aid given by President Gerald Ford Jr. to Sadat but inform officials in communication with Egypt to stress how this aid must garner congressional approval. US Ambassador to Egypt Hermann Eilts wrote that Congress would likely approve only limited military sales at that stage, and even if they did, he questioned whether Egypt and the executive branch could secure this approval in the long run.<sup>75</sup> In another cable, President Ford instructed Ambassador Eilts to tell President Sadat that he was doing all he could to convince

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<sup>68</sup> Sofia Plagakis, “Fact Sheet: Joint Resolutions of Disapproval Under the Arms Export Control Act (R47094),” Congressional Research Service, May 6, 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/R47094.pdf>.

<sup>69</sup> U.S. Senate, 93rd Congress. “S. 3394, Foreign Assistance Act, Public law 93-559.” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/93rd-congress/senate-bill/3394>.

<sup>70</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1976*, 50.

<sup>71</sup> U.S. Congress, “Congressional Remarks Vol. 121, Pt. 34,” 3.

<sup>72</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1976*, 50.

<sup>73</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1976*, 51.

<sup>74</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1976*, 51.

<sup>75</sup> SecState WashDC to American Embassy Rabat, “State 050355, Subject: Consultation With Congress Begins on US-Egypt Military Relationship,” March 1976, Declassified 04 May 2006.

Congress to pass a promised military aid bill.<sup>76</sup> The cables reveal that even as late as 1976, Congress remained deeply apprehensive about military aid to Egypt and the notion of consistent long-term aid was anything but certain.

From 1974 to 1976, Congress worked to shape the nature of U.S. aid to Egypt by limiting military aid and checking presidential decisions. While it granted some aid, such as economic aid in response to specific issues, the hesitant nature of this period meant that granting Egypt large sums of military and economic aid appeared far from inevitable.

#### **IV. 1977 to 1980**

As Congress established itself as a player in determining foreign aid, its position on aid to Egypt evolved between 1977 to 1980. As shown in Parts I and II, Congress debated the merits of aid to Egypt, especially military aid. By 1980, however, the U.S. firmly established Egypt as its number two aid recipient and much of this aid went toward security concerns. Three factors were key to this change; (1) the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty; (2) Congress's changing relationship with the executive branch; and (3) the imperative to ensure the stability of Egypt so that Egypt in turn supported regional (both in the Middle East and East Africa) stability that aligned with US interests.<sup>77</sup>

##### *The Peace Treaty*

The Egypt-Israel peace treaty brought new requests for Egyptian aid to the forefront of congressional debates by singling out Egypt, apart from other Arab countries, as a US partner. On September 5, 1978, the US, Egypt, and Israel began an important round of negotiations for the elusive peace treaty.<sup>78</sup> While President Jimmy Carter's administration led the negotiations, Congress took an active interest in their success. In March 1979, Egypt and Israel signed the peace treaty and Congress passed aid bills to support the outcome of the negotiations.<sup>79</sup> A congressional report released that year declared that the peace treaty was one of two of the most important events in the Middle East (the fall of the monarchy in Iran accounted for the other).<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> SecState WashDC to American Embassy Cairo, "State 209927, Subject: Letter From President Ford to President Sadat on Aid Legislation," September 1974, Declassified 30 June 2005.

<sup>77</sup> Snider, *Marketing Democracy*, 110.

<sup>78</sup> Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention*, 31.

<sup>79</sup> Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention*, 35.

<sup>80</sup> U.S. Congress, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1980*, 96th Cong. 72.

The International Security Assistance Act (H.R. 6884) authorized nearly \$2 billion in security-supporting assistance programs intended for economic development for Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Cyprus, and Lebanon (\$75 million for Egypt).<sup>81</sup> Previously, aid to these countries only totaled in the millions. This bill also created a specific task force for enhancing aid to Egypt.<sup>82</sup> The law stipulated that arms transfers to Egypt (and other Arab countries) may not “impair Israel’s deterrent strength.”<sup>83</sup> While the continued importance of Israel for Congress remains clear, the sheer increase in the amount of aid allocated to Egypt reflects Congress’s changing support in favor of aid to Egypt.

### *Executive-Legislative Relations*

The advent of the peace agreement created greater synergy between the executive and legislative branches on the question of US-Egyptian relations. While Congress continued to check executive action on the issue, per past behavior, it supported the Carter administration’s efforts to increase aid to Egypt.<sup>84</sup>

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter asked Congress for \$4.8 billion in military aid programs for Israel and Egypt.<sup>85</sup> In the early debate stages, Congress wondered how to “justify this number to their districts” when the U.S. still worked to recover from fluctuating oil prices.<sup>86</sup> The Senate amended the bill to add a clause stating that this bill had not approved specific weapons, which Congress must approve separately even if the Carter administration used this bill’s allocations for it.<sup>87</sup> In other words, while Congress supported some of the Carter administration’s requests, it continued asserting an active role in determining foreign aid. The Senate’s second amendment requested an annual report on Egyptian domestic conditions, stating that Congress could withhold remaining funds if they deemed Egyptian domestic conditions unsuitable.<sup>88</sup> This is only two years since the 1977 Bread Uprisings, in which the Egyptian government faced national protests against price hikes. Thus, Congress tried

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<sup>81</sup> U.S. House. 95th Congress, “H.R. 6884, International Security Assistance Act, Public Law 95-92,” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/95th-congress/house-bill/6884>. 4.

<sup>82</sup> U.S. House. 95th Congress, “H.R. 6884,” 4.

<sup>83</sup> U.S. House. 95th Congress, “H.R. 6884,” 4.

<sup>84</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1980*, 72.

<sup>85</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1980*, 77.

<sup>86</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1980*, 77.

<sup>87</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1980*, 78.

<sup>88</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1980*, 78.

to make aid contingent on continued economic stability in Egypt, and not purely on regional security concerns.<sup>89</sup> It also stated that the Carter administration now had ninety days to report to both houses of Congress when they had used the funds, how much of the funds, and for what purpose.<sup>90</sup> While passive, this continues to demonstrate how both houses of Congress kept an eye on executive power.<sup>91</sup>

### *Ensuring Stability*

Key to Congress's change of heart on aid to Egypt is securing domestic stability in Egypt, which Congress monitored closely. Stability in Egypt, in conjunction with supporting the peace treaty with Israel, built consensus inside Congress for the large amounts of economic and security aid Egypt has now received for decades.

Among the key events that shaped Congress's perspective is the 1977 Bread Uprisings. On January 17, 1977, the government cut price subsidies on key consumer goods, resulting in a 15 percent increase in the cost of living.<sup>92</sup> Mass demonstrations and acts of vandalism ensued throughout the country in what became the largest uprising witnessed during Sadat's rule.<sup>93</sup> Protestors in the Bread Uprisings expressed their resentment toward the corruption of the ruling elite and Sadat's economic policies.<sup>94</sup>

Congress was by no means passive in the US response to these developments. Ambassador Eilts detailed in a 1979 cable how he convinced President Sadat to allow Representative Stephen Solarz to meet with opposition leaders by saying Representative Solarz would emphasize US support for Sadat and that the US would continue backing him.<sup>95</sup> This incident reflected Congress's increasing commitment to the stability of the Sadat regime, viewed as essential to Egypt's stability.

In a congressional debate that followed the 1977 uprising, Representative Scheuer explained that he supports granting Egypt emergency economic assistance "to strengthen the government of President Sadat as an indication of US support during a

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<sup>89</sup> The Senate passed the amended bill 73 to 11 on 14 May 1979 and the House did shortly thereafter. (Ibid. 78)

<sup>90</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1980*, 78.

<sup>91</sup> On 20 July 1979 President Carter signed S1007 into law (Public Law 96-35) (U.S. Congress, *Congress and Foreign Policy 1980*, 78).

<sup>92</sup> Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention*, 25.

<sup>93</sup> Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention*, 25.

<sup>94</sup> Sallam, *Classless Politics*, 50.

<sup>95</sup> Amembassy Cairo to SecState WashDC, "Cairo 25887, Subject: CODEL Solarz," October 1979, Declassified 20 March 2014.



difficult time.”<sup>96</sup> He went on to state that Egypt has far more long-term problems, such as family planning, but they cannot deal with these issues until Sadat ensures political stability.

What did aid from Congress look like then in the wake of the 1977 Bread Uprisings? By the end of the year, Congress granted Egypt close to \$900 million in aid.<sup>97</sup> Much of the aid aimed to prevent further instability. The amount of aid going to Egypt totaled more than the sum of aid to Latin America and other African countries combined for that year.<sup>98</sup> The high amount of appropriated funds for Egyptian stability demonstrates how Congress saw this as central to U.S. interests.

Beyond Egyptian internal security, Congress also began to see Egypt as playing a pivotal role in ensuring regional stability and used aid packages to support Egypt in protecting US interests. In the Middle East, Congress considered aid to Egypt in the context of the pending peace agreement, oil interests, and later maintaining peace once established. To ensure Egypt’s security and motivate others in the region to maintain friendly ties with Egypt, Congress considered passing H.R. 10691 which gave economic support funds to many Middle Eastern nations to ensure stability.<sup>99</sup> H.R. 10691 did not pass because Congress decided tailoring aid to Egypt and Israel would better ensure stability in the region.<sup>100</sup> This argument even went so far as to say Egypt would help the US influence OPEC and that aid would ensure Egypt remained strong to do so.<sup>101</sup>

Egypt not only served a role in maintaining Middle Eastern stability but also East African stability. Several conversations between congressmen and Egyptian officials reveal why. Representative Edward Derwinski met with President Sadat in 1977 to discuss why the US relied on Egypt to protect Eritrea, Somalia, and Chad (which had US-backed governments at the time) from Soviet-backed Libya.<sup>102</sup> Sadat thanked Representative Derwinski for US aid which allowed Egypt to send troops to these countries.<sup>103</sup> He then requested more aid which he justified by saying Egypt was

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<sup>96</sup> U.S. Congress, “Congressional Remarks Vol. 123, Pt. 4,” 17 February 1977,” 27.

<sup>97</sup> Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention*, 27.

<sup>98</sup> Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention*, 27.

<sup>99</sup> U.S. Congress, “Congressional Remarks Vol. 123, Pt. 2.”

<sup>100</sup> U.S. Congress, “Congressional Remarks Vol. 123, Pt. 2.”

<sup>101</sup> U.S. Congress, “Congressional Remarks Vol. 123, Pt. 2.”

<sup>102</sup> American Embassy Cairo to SecState WashDC, “Cairo 13580 (Section 1 of 2), Subject: CODEL Derwinski – Talk with President Sadat,” August 1977, Declassified 22 May 2009.

<sup>103</sup> American Embassy Cairo to SecState WashDC, “Cairo 13580.”

the main benefactor of Eritrea and Somalia but could continue to do so without US support.<sup>104</sup> Representative Derwinski then mentioned that Congress discussed how these countries were “vital to US interests of access to resources” and that increasing Soviet involvement in the region warranted greater US attention.<sup>105</sup> This conversation established that the US granted aid to Egypt to support US interests in East Africa.

From this point forward, Congress increased the number of bills that authorized aid for Egypt. H.R. 7797 appropriated more than \$2 billion in “security supporting assistance” for Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.<sup>106</sup> This bill, S. 3075, earmarked \$750 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF) for Egypt, \$65 million of which they intended to assist Egypt with privatization efforts.<sup>107</sup> S. 1007 directed funds from the Arms Export Control Act to go to Egypt (and Israel) and that these funds should ensure regional stability to counter the effect of Arab sanctions against Egypt.<sup>108</sup> H.R. 4289 not only appropriated money for the ESF for Egypt but also foreign military credit sales.<sup>109</sup>

The period from 1977 to 1980 witnessed fundamental changes in Congress’s orientation toward aid to Egypt. Not only did Congress finally accept the idea of sending military aid to Egypt, but it also became the norm. Anti-regime protests in Egypt, regional instability, and the long-awaited peace treaty with Israel convinced Congress that aid necessarily protected US interests. Within this context, Washington conceived the longstanding annual aid package to Egypt.

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<sup>104</sup> American Embassy Cairo to SecState WashDC, “*Cairo 13580*.”

<sup>105</sup> American Embassy Cairo to SecState WashDC, “*Cairo 13580*.”

<sup>106</sup> U.S. House. 95th Congress, “H.R. 7797, An Act making appropriations for foreign assistance and related programs for the fiscal year ending September 30, 1978, and for other purposes., Public Law 95-148.”

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/95th-congress/house-bill/7797>

<sup>107</sup> U.S. House. 95th Congress, “H.R. 3075, An Act to amend the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and the Arms Export Control Act to authorize international security assistance programs for fiscal year 1979, and for other purposes., Public Law 95-384.” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/95th-congress/senate-bill/3075>

<sup>108</sup> U.S. Senate. 96th Congress, “S. 1007, An act to authorize supplemental international security assistance for the fiscal year 1979 in support of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, and for other purposes., and for other purposes., Public Law 96-35.” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/senate-bill/1007>

<sup>109</sup> U.S. House. 96th Congress, “H.R. 4289, Supplemental Appropriations Act, 1979, and for other purposes., Public Law 96-38.” <https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/house-bill/4289>.

## **V. Conclusion**

What role does Congress play in shaping US foreign policy? The case study of congressional deliberations over US aid to Egypt in the formative period of the 1970s demonstrates the extent to which Congress plays a role in determining the nature of foreign aid. The bills, hearings, remarks, reports, and cables analyzed above all reveal that Congress shaped important features of US aid to Egypt and that they modified these features over time to reflect changing circumstances. Thus, US aid to Egypt not only enhances our understanding of the role of Congress in affecting US foreign policy but also highlights the genealogy of modern US-Egyptian relations.

From 1970 to 1973 Congress was largely reluctant to grant Egypt any aid, especially military aid. Congress also demonstrated a desire to undertake an interventionist role in making foreign policy. In the next few years, from 1974 through 1976, Congress enhanced its role in shaping policies toward Egypt by sending congressional delegations to the country after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. These delegations, coupled with a growing enthusiasm in Washington for peace between Israel and Egypt, generated significant increases in aid bills for Egypt. However, Congress remained skeptical regarding the value of these aid bills and continued to limit them. This reluctance abated in 1977. A combination of popular protests in Egypt, regional instability, and a new alignment between President Carter and Congress helped carve out the aid packages familiar to observers today. These packages rely on extensive amounts of both military and economic aid to ensure the Egyptian government pursues a US-friendly agenda. The bills, hearings, remarks, reports, and cables analyzed throughout these three periods put into focus the complex processes through which Congress sought to affect US foreign policy.