

POLICY BRIEF – October 3, 2017
Momentous Change in the Nile Basin

By Basel Ammane

The Nile Basin is among numerous areas around the world that experience water scarcity. Many of the countries that are in it fail to meet the minimum of 2,740 litres per person per day needed to avoid being listed as a country with chronic water scarcity.¹ To make matters worse, the collective population of these countries is expected to rise to around 647 million by 2030, a 52 percent increase from what it was in 2010 according to the UN Population Division.² Fortunately, however, there does not seem to be sufficient evidence to establish a strong relationship of one-way causality between water scarcity and conflict. In fact, a comprehensive study of the matter at Oregon State University in 2001 concluded that incidents of cooperation far outnumbered those of conflict among countries that shared a water resource and experienced water scarcity.³ This paints a substantially different picture from that portrayed by the dramatic rhetoric expressing quasi-certainty about the occurrence of water wars one typically encounters in sensationalistic pieces. What's more, the record has shown that the typical response to water scarcity has been one of cooperation and innovation. Having said that, increasing inter-annual variability in the flow of the waters of the river and the consequent increase in instances of floods and droughts⁴, coupled with a rise in the willingness and ability of upstream countries to challenge Egypt's hegemonic status in addition to the demographic changes mentioned earlier will certainly test the basin countries' capacity for cooperation, innovation and adaptation. This will ultimately be crucial in determining the state of relations among them and the future of their populations with respect to water.

Historical Overview

The historical trajectory of the basin is one of initial Egyptian monopoly over the building of hard infrastructure on the dam that was gradually eroded by a rising Sudan which was later joined by some upstream countries in pursuit of the fruits of development via projects on the river. This coincided with increased cooperation initiatives among riparians

that culminated in the establishment of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI).

Egypt was the first country in the basin to reap the benefits of the construction of water projects. Moreover, colonial powers in control of the basin in the late 19th and early 20th centuries signed numerous agreements that barred Ethiopia from pursuing any developmental projects on the river.⁵ Direct colonial control of the river came to an end with the signing of an agreement between Egypt and Britain in 1929. It still guaranteed Egypt the lion's share of the water, while accounting for Sudan's rising needs and perpetuating the exclusion of upper riparian countries.⁶

Dam building activity rose substantially between the 30s and the 60s across the basin with Sudan and other upstream countries seeking to benefit from the river's waters.⁷ The need to secure funding for the High Aswan Dam in Egypt prompted the signing of an agreement in 1959 to split the river's waters between Egypt and Sudan. It increased Sudan's share of the water given its rising needs, but maintained Egypt's status as the water hegemon of the basin.⁸ The period between the late 50s and early 90s witnessed the establishment of multiple institutions for the purpose of fostering cooperation among riparian countries. These include a joint technical commission between Sudan and Egypt in 1959,⁹ the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development in 1986,¹⁰ and a cooperation agreement in 1992 between Sudan and Ethiopia.¹¹ The trend of signing cooperative agreements between riparians continued to gain traction with the signing of a Framework for General Cooperation between Egypt and Ethiopia in 1993,¹² and later culminating in the establishment of the Nile Basin Initiative in 1999.¹³ Most recently, the construction of the Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD) in Ethiopia has caused a great deal of controversy given its size, predicted impact and the likely challenge it will mount to Egypt's historical hegemony in the basin. This is arguably the most pressing geopolitical dispute facing the basin today.

Relations between Egypt and Ethiopia

The state of the relationship between Egypt and Ethiopia is an important indicator of the potential stability or lack thereof in the basin. Given the complexity of state interaction whereby cooperation

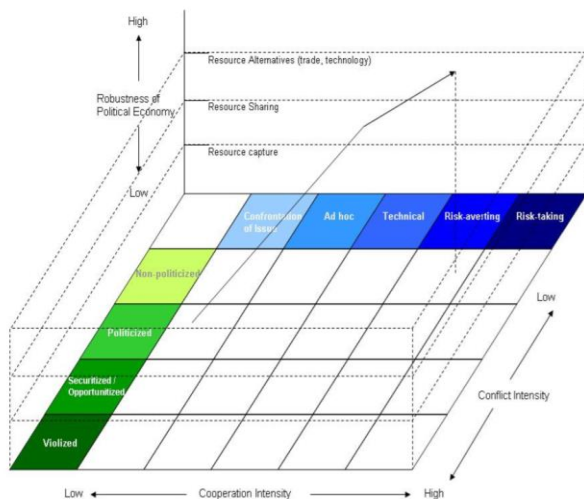


Figure obtained from (Mirumachi & Allan, 2007)

and conflict can occur simultaneously, a good way of assessing basin relations is to conceive of these relations as involving different degrees of conflict and cooperation at the same time, while accounting for the state of the political economy of the countries involved.¹⁴

In terms of their political economies, all basin countries have developing economies that either firmly depend on or aspire to exploit the Nile's waters in building their agricultural sectors or power-generation capacity. As such, they can only aspire in the short-to-medium run to move from the resource capture to the *resource-sharing stage*.

A rhetoric of securitization characterized the relationship between Egypt and Ethiopia over fear the former has that the building of dams, chiefly the GERD, by the latter would result in significant decline in the flow of water. Examples of such rhetoric include the declaration in 1979 of Egypt's late president Anwar Al-Sadat that "the only matter that could take Egypt to war again is water"¹⁵ and former President Morsi's declaration in 2013 that "all options are on the table" when it comes dealing with threats to the country's water security.¹⁶ Since then, threats of military action have given way to more conciliatory steps such as the signing of a "declaration of principles" agreement in 2015 which singled Egypt's acceptance of the building of the GERD and provided what Egypt minister of water resources has called "a mechanism for the resolution of disputes as they occur."¹⁷ Despite this change, Egyptian officials continue to issue declarations that

raise issues related to the dam. One of the latest has been the Egyptian Foreign Minister's expression of concern over the time lag in the Ethiopian government's submitting of GERD studies.¹⁸ The upshot of this shift has been a decline in conflict intensity as *politicized* rhetoric came to replace the *securitized*.

The signing of the Framework for General Cooperation between Egypt and Ethiopia in 1993 represents one of the earliest attempts to foster technical cooperation between the two countries. More recently, however, the two countries have recognized the necessity of expanding that cooperation in order to resolve their disputes. In June of 2014, the countries announced their intentions to return to negotiating the technical specifications of the GERD based on an agreed-upon set of principles following a stalemate period.¹⁹ The establishment of a tripartite committee that included Sudan as well was announced soon after that.²⁰ Since then, the committee has held numerous meetings on the 7th of which (held in mid-2015) the countries managed to settle their differences with regard to which firms were to be contracted to conduct studies that would assess the potential impact of the dam on downstream countries.²¹ At a more recent meeting in April of 2017, the committee approved the schedule and mechanism for exchanging data about dam systems on the river.²² All of this progress indicates that cooperation has become fairly entrenched, and the aim of steering the GERD toward furthering benefit-sharing between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan puts the cooperation level at *risk-aversion*.

So far, the three countries have held fourteen rounds of consultation, the latest of which was on May 16th.²³ Despite this, these negotiations continue to be plagued by disagreements, uncertainties and challenges. One prominent point of disagreement is the duration and timing of the filling of the reservoir behind the GERD. This will be an important factor in determining the impact on Egyptian access to Nile waters. An example that demonstrates uncertainty is the confusion caused by local Egyptian media reports that claimed that Ethiopia began the process of filling the reservoir without notifying Egypt. It was later clarified that dam-building activity resulted in the formation of a lake.²⁴ Finally, a particularly formidable challenge lies in the need to foster stronger coordination in the management of the GERD, Sudanese dams and High Aswan Dam to ensure benefits for all parties.²⁵

Peering into the Future

As it gradually acquiesces to Ethiopian demands, Egypt will want to ensure that the loss in terms of its share is minimal and dissuade other upstream countries from undertaking similar projects to the GERD. Given all the uncertainty associated with the impact of the GERD on downstream countries, Egypt is likely to continue to resist committing itself to a new agreement that greatly reduces its share of water that was guaranteed under the 1959 agreement. This is why the initial steps many upstream countries took towards reaching such an agreement in 2010 in Entebbe triggered Egypt's freezing of its membership

¹ Dannreuther, R. (2015). *International security the contemporary agenda*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. p.162

² The State of the River Nile Basin. (n.d). Retrieved September 25, 2017, from <http://nileis.nilebasin.org/system/files/Nile%20SoB%20Report%20Chapter%209%20-%20Summary.pdf>

³ Dannreuther, R. *International security the contemporary agenda*, p.165

⁴ Nile faces greater variability. (n.d.). Retrieved September 25, 2017, from <https://sustainability.mit.edu/article/nile-faces-greater-variability>

⁵ Conniff, K., Molden, D., Peden, D., & Awulachew, S. B. (2012). Nile water and agriculture. *The Nile River Basin: Water, Agriculture, Governance and Livelihoods*, 5. p.11.

⁶ Ibid, p. 20.

⁷ Conniff, K., Molden, D., Peden, D., & Awulachew, S. B. (2012). Nile water and agriculture. *The Nile River Basin: Water, Agriculture, Governance and Livelihoods*, 5. p. 13, 20-21.

⁸ Abdo, M. (2004). The Nile Question: The Accords on the Water of the Nile and Their Implications on. *PERCEPTIONS-JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS*, 9(2), 47-57. (49)

⁹ Waterbury, J. (2002). *The Nile Basin: National determinants of collective action*. Yale University Press. p. 133-134.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.147.

¹¹ Ibid, p.138.

¹² Abdo, M. *The Nile Question: The Accords on the Water of the Nile and Their Implications on*.

¹³ Conniff, K., Molden, D., Peden, D., & Awulachew, S. B. Nile water and agriculture. p.12.

¹⁴ Mirumachi, N., & Allan, J. A. (2007, November). Revisiting transboundary water governance: power, conflict, cooperation and the political economy. In *International Conference on Adaptive and Integrated Water Management*.

¹⁵ Halime, F. (2012, October 12). Secret document: Egypt could take military action over Nile. Retrieved September 25, 2017, from <http://www.egyptindependent.com/secret-document-egypt-could-take-military-action-over-nile/>

¹⁶ Egyptian warning over Ethiopia Nile dam. (2013, June 10). Retrieved September 25, 2017, from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-22850124>

in the NBI. In any case, the bridging of the gap between Egypt and Ethiopia will be critical in boosting the status of the NBI as an effective instrument capable of dealing with basin-wide challenges.

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¹⁷ Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan sign accord on Nile dam. (n.d.). Retrieved September 25, 2017, from

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/egypt-ethiopia-sudan-sign-accord-nile-dam-150323193458534.html>

¹⁸ Egypt's FM Shoukry expresses concern over delays in Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam studies. (n.d.). Retrieved September 25, 2017, from

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/277566/Egypt/Politics-/Egypys-FM-Shoukry-expresses-concern-over-delays-in.aspx>

¹⁹ Egypt cautiously optimistic on coming Renaissance Dam talks. (2014, July 08). Retrieved September 25, 2017, from <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/egypt-cautious-optimism-renaissance-dam-talks-ethiopia-sudan.html>

²⁰ Ethiopian Dam tripartite committee to meet soon in Cairo. (n.d.). Retrieved September 25, 2017, from

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/105252/Egypt/Politics-/Ethiopian-Dam-tripartite-committee-to-meet-soon-in.aspx>

²¹ (n.d.). Retrieved September 25, 2017, from <http://sudanagriculture.net/Pages/FoodSecurity/NewsDetails.aspx?lang=EN&Cat=0&I=104447&DId=0&CId=0&CMSId=5000913&id=2408828>

²² El-Said, M. (2017, April 26). Tripartite National Committee on the Renaissance Dam finalises its meeting. Retrieved September 25, 2017, from <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2017/04/26/tripartite-national-committee-renaissance-dam-finalises-meeting/>

²³ Egypt looks to Europe to help solve Renaissance Dam crisis. (2017, September 10). Retrieved September 25, 2017, from

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/09/egypt-germany-agreement-fight-immigration-nile-crisis.html>

²⁴ Egypt, D. N. (2017, July 16). Ethiopia asserts commitment to coordinate with Egypt through GERD negotiations. Retrieved September 25, 2017, from

<https://dailynewsegypt.com/2017/07/16/ethiopia-asserts-commitment-coordinate-egypt-gerd-negotiations/>

²⁵ Nile Valley Water Conflict: Can Egypt live with Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam? (2016, June 09). Retrieved September 25, 2017, from <https://www.juancole.com/2016/06/conflict-ethiopias-renaissance.html>