Disputes over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)

Type of conflict: Sub
Intensity: 1

Conflict Locality: Eastern Africa

Time: 2011 – ongoing

Countries: Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan

Resources: Water

Conflict Summary
There has long been a conflict over water rights among the riparian countries of the Eastern Nile Basin (Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia). The dispute escalated in 2011 when Ethiopia began construction of a major new dam, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), in the absence of any agreement with downstream Egypt. A series of talks since then have largely failed to produce a consensus among the concerned countries, with tensions rising again after Ethiopia announced its intention to begin filling the dam in July 2020.
Conceptual Model

Climate Change

Social and Economic Drivers

Demographic Change

Infrastructure Development

Environmental Change

Intermediary Mechanisms

Fragility and Conflict Risks

Increased Water Scarcity

Change in Access / Availability of Natural Resources

Interstate Tensions

Politics

Context Factors

Water-stressed Area

Food Insecurity

History of Conflict

Water
Conflict History

The Eastern Nile Basin comprises Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. The crucial leverage regarding Egypt’s water security lies with the Blue Nile countries Ethiopia and Sudan, as the Blue Nile is the main contributor to the Nile River’s flow downstream. In fact, about 85% of the overall Nile flow originates on Ethiopian territory (Swain, 2011). Ethiopia’s determination to build a major new dam, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), for hydropower purposes has been the flashpoint of current conflicts in the Eastern Nile Basin (Gebreluel, 2014).

Geopolitical importance

The Eastern Nile Basin is of critical geopolitical importance to the Nile’s overall hydro-political regime. The Blue Nile is Ethiopia’s largest river, with high potential for hydropower and irrigation. Ethiopia argues that developing this resource is crucial to its economic development, and to overcoming poverty and famine, that have plagued the country in the past. Ethiopia has the basin’s most suitable locations for hydropower production, and its damming of the Blue Nile would significantly increase Sudan’s potential for irrigated agriculture. Ethiopia has never ‘consumed’ significant shares of the Nile’s water so far, as its previous political and economic fragility in combination with a lack of external financial support, due to persistent Egyptian opposition to projects upstream, prevented it from implementing large-scale projects. This has now changed due to political consolidation over the past two decades and the advent of alternative sources of external finance (to the traditional multilateral development banks), not least from China (IDS, 2013; Gebreluel, 2014).

Non-cooperative parallel developments

Ethiopia and Sudan are currently developing and implementing water infrastructure developments unilaterally - as Egypt has done in the past and continues to do. These parallel developments appear to be elements of a bigger hydro-political strategy wherein the riparian countries aim to increase their water utilisation to put facts on the ground (and underpin legal claims based on those uses) and increase their bargaining position for renegotiations of volumetric water allocations. However, this threatens the basin’s long-term sustainability (as water use expands beyond what is environmentally feasible) and suboptimal in terms of capital allocation (as higher water use upstream may make downstream projects uneconomical (Swain, 2011).

The 1959 Agreement: an asymmetrical water-sharing arrangement

As stipulated by an Agreement of 1959 (see: Nile Main Conflict), Egypt and Sudan presented for several decades a common position vis-à-vis other riparians regarding the utilisation and management of Nile waters. Despite the fact that newly independent Sudan in the late 1950s was literally forced by a dominant Egypt into a highly asymmetrical water-sharing arrangement, Sudan has rarely challenged this arrangement. However, Sudan’s future water requirements will likely exceed its water quota as defined in the 1959 Agreement. This represents a new challenge to the basin’s current hydro-political regime and status quo, as it may drive Sudan’s interest in renegotiating its current quota (Link et al., 2012; Whittington et al., 2014).

Ethiopia’s challenge to the 1959 Agreement

The unilateral decision taken by Ethiopia - which never recognised the 1959 agreement but had previously not been able to challenge it in fact - to build the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in 2011
represents a major political challenge to the 1959 Agreement. It signifies that Egypt’s de facto veto power on major upstream dams has been broken, and it clearly demonstrates the political will of Ethiopia to develop its water infrastructure even in the absence of a comprehensive basin agreement. Political instability in Egypt played an important role as the announcement of the project coincided with the resignation of President Mubarak during the Arab Spring. Ethiopia’s interests in developing its water resources are driven by its growing population and high demand for socio-economic development (Gebreluel, 2014).

The GERD potential benefits and disadvantages
The GERD has the potential to act both as driver for conflict, but also for cooperation. It provides clear benefits to all three riparian, such as flood control, reduced flood damages and sediment control. Moreover, with GERD, Ethiopia opts for a “hydropower” expansion strategy on the Blue Nile, and not an “irrigation strategy”. This is good news for Egypt and Sudan as hydropower means little actual water withdrawal. However, it also entails potential negative effects on Egypt, if not carefully managed (see also Security implications of growing water scarcity in Egypt). The filling regime and operational methods of GERD will affect Egypt, in particular through its impact on the operation of its Aswan High Dam (AHD) which aims at mitigating the high variability of the Nile River flow. The filling time is estimated to take about 10 years, during which the Blue Nile water flows would be reduced. The 10 year filling time of GERD will likely contribute to fastened salinisation in Egypt. If it were to take place during a sequence of years in which the Blue Nile flow and the AHD reservoir itself was low, Egypt might not be able to withdraw sufficient water supplies to meet all of its agricultural needs. Moreover, after the completion of the GERD, Egypt could run short of water if the operation of the GERD was not carefully coordinated with that of the AHD. Lastly, over-year storage facilities upstream in Ethiopia will allow Sudan to increase its water use. While this means new opportunities to develop extended irrigation-based agriculture for the Sudanese, it represents also a new threat for Egypt’s current Nile water utilisation (Whittington et al., 2014).

Resolution Efforts
After announcing the dam’s construction, and with a view to the increasing tensions, the Ethiopian government invited both Egypt and Sudan to form an International Panel of Experts (IPoE) to solicit understanding of the benefits, costs and impacts of the GERD. The IPoE report recommended two studies to assess the environmental and socio-economic impacts of GERD and was interpreted by both the Egyptian and the Ethiopian government as a vindication of their respective positions. Despite several tripartite meetings between November 2013 and January 2014, no agreement was reached on the implementation of the IPoE recommendations and controversies were evolving around the constitution of a trilateral committee. The change of government in Egypt led to a more conciliatory approach (Von Lossow & Roll, 2015).

Egypt’s new stance
Egypt’s original goal was to have the project purely and simply cancelled. Given the advancement of the dam construction - the GERD being, as of March 2015, 40 percent complete, according to Ethiopia - Egypt had good reason to reconsider its position (Nazret, 2015). Tripartite negotiations resumed three weeks after Al-Sisi took office in June 2014. Between August and October 2014, a tripartite National Committee (TNC) was constituted, consisting of national experts. Rules of procedure of the TNC and Terms of
References for two studies were agreed and an international tender organised. Al-Sisi’s government seems to deal with the dam more as a matter of fact issue. Upon signing a framework agreement in March 2015, Al-Sisi and former Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn hailed the agreement as a ‘new chapter in relations between Egypt and Ethiopia … based on openness and mutual understanding and cooperation’ (Nazret, 2015).

Towards a political agreement
A political requirement will be to agree on rules for filling the GERD reservoir and on operating rules for the GERD, especially during periods of drought. All three countries have a vested interest in a properly operated dam. Egypt wants control and guarantees for its share of Nile waters. Ethiopia needs regional customers for its hydropower to ensure the economic feasibility of the GERD. Sudan’s agricultural and hydropower interests align with those of Ethiopia while it has a strong interest in not alienating its ‘big brother’ and northern neighbour, Egypt, with whom it shares a long and partly contested border (Whittington et al., 2014). The situation seemed to improve in the beginning of 2015 when tripartite negotiations were held in order to determine principles of cooperation. In March 2015, a ‘Declaration of Principles’ was signed by the leaders of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia, setting the foundations for an initial cooperation (Sudan Tribune, 2015a).

Significant hurdles still remain
However, an agreement was still far from reach. Since 2015, technical reports on the potential impacts of the dam have failed to reach a consensus within the TNC (Maguid, 2017). In addition, no independent, multilateral Environmental and Social Impact Assessments has been carried out – suggesting that Ethiopia is reneging from the 2015 ‘Declaration of Principles’ (Kandeel, 2020).

The principles of cooperation have not been translated into specific technical agreements on dam management (and more), in the context of difficult domestic politics for both sides. Neither the Egyptian nor the Ethiopian governments received positive domestic feedback on their agreement. Many historical grievances and distrust remain on the Ethiopian side regarding Egypt (Gebreluel, 2014). Some Ethiopian journalists assess the ‘Declaration of Principles’ as being more in favour of Egypt than Ethiopia (Zegabi East Africa News, 2015). On the other side, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt denounced a ‘high treason’ (Sudan Tribune, 2015b).

Sudan, caught between the competing interests of both Egypt and Ethiopia, has been changing its stance on the issue. Initially opposed to the GERD, Sudan later expressed support for its construction in 2013, claiming that it would serve the interests of all three nations (Maguid, 2017). Recently, however, Sudan has been more cautious with the project, citing concerns that the GERD’s operation and safety could jeopardise its own dams (The New Arab, 2020b).

Recent developments
Trilateral talks – mediated by the United States and World Bank from November 2019 to February 2020 – collapsed as Ethiopia rejected a binding agreement with Egypt and Sudan on the filling and operation of the GERD, which led to both downstream countries requesting intervention from the UN Security Council (UNSC) in May 2020 (Kandeel, 2020).

In June 2020, tensions escalated when Ethiopia declared its intent to fill the dam in July without an agreement, which again led to Egypt and Sudan requesting UNSC intervention on the matter (Kandeel,
In response, Ethiopia threatened military force to defend the dam and protect its interests (The New Arab, 2020a). A more recent trilateral meeting mediated by the African Union in mid-July, however, appeared to diffuse the situation with all three countries reaching a “major common understanding” towards achieving an agreement (Al Jazeera, 2020). From this round of talks, it appears that negotiations are able to move forward and address other “sticking points” on the agenda, such as conflict resolution mechanisms and the dam’s operations in the event of multi-year droughts (Al Jazeera, 2020).

### Intensities & Influences

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### Resolution Success

**Reduction in geographical scope**

There has been no reduction in geographical scope.

**Increased capacity to address grievance in the future**

The capacity to address grievances in the future has increased.

**Grievance Resolution**

Grievances have been mostly addressed.

**Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity**

Conflict resolution strategies have been clearly responsible for the decrease in conflict intensity.
Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

Mediation & arbitration
A tripartite National Committee (TNC), consisting of national experts from Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan, was constituted in 2015 to determine principles of cooperation. Trilateral talks have also been mediated by external parties and organisations, including the United States, World Bank and, more recently, the African Union.

Treaty/agreement
In March 2015, a ‘Declaration of Principles’ was signed by the leaders of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia, setting the foundations for an initial cooperation. A political requirement will be to agree on rules for filling the GERD reservoir and on operating rules for the GERD, especially during periods of drought. This agreement could pave the way for a more detailed cooperation framework, and represents a major step toward dispute resolution.

Resources and Materials

Conflict References
Dispute over Water in the Nile Basin
Security Implications of Growing Water Scarcity in Egypt

References with URL
Al Jazeera (2020). Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan reach ‘major common understanding’ on dam.
Sudan Tribune (2015a). Nile water countries sign framework deal on Renaissance Dam.
The New Arab (2020a). Ethiopian general threatens military force to defend Nile dam as negotiations with Egypt falter.
The New Arab (2020b). Nile negotiations break down as Egypt, Sudan accuse Ethiopia of rejecting legally binding agreement.