

# Making the Nile River a Point of Cooperation between Ethiopia and Egypt: Building Confidence through Water Diplomacy

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## Abstract

*Transboundary water resources interconnect different nations that can have a viable interest on the water resources. That variety of interests on the same water resource sometimes creates differences among the parties. Acknowledgement of the differing interests of relevant actors has paramount importance to settle water disagreement. The current Nile disagreement issue between Ethiopia and Egypt is out of the academic scope and only become partial news coverage point of the News Media on both sides. Partial reporting of the problem will only increase tension among the nations and brings insecurity. Thus, this study has brought impartial analysis of the problem by considering the interest of both sides to settle the problem through water diplomacy. The study also tries to provide the importance of water diplomacy in solving the Nile River conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt. In conducting this study, the researcher has analyzed all relevant literatures related with water disagreement and water diplomacy to shade light on the problem and propose a solution.*

## Keywords

water diplomacy, Nile water, negotiation, grand Ethiopian renaissance dam



## I. Introduction

Water is the main important element for human development and therefore also has strong connection with security (Keskinen, 2014). It is crucial to generate hydroelectric power and to supply farm products through irrigation (Laura R. and Margaret, 2015). Water is also used as one way of attracting tourists to the nation. These scenarios attract the government's and people's attention towards the protection and security of water resources.

The Nile river disagreement needs comprehensive and continuous water diplomacy between Ethiopia and Egypt to build confidence and to avoid any conflict whatsoever. The concept of water diplomacy links water and its management with foreign policy and peace mediation at different scales. In this way, water diplomacy represents proactive peace mediation and conflict resolution and complements on-going efforts on both water cooperation and regional cooperation.

Cross-boundary water is one of the most desirable natural resources that should be utilized based on the principle of equity and the rules of international law (Laura R. and Margaret, 2015). The resource should also be the point of cooperation among nations instead of being a source of conflict and disagreement. The interests involved in transboundary water resources are even more complex and need cooperation and optimism among nations (Sumit, Jeroen and Anamika, 2020). Any action by one of the riparian nations will affect the interest of other countries that share the water resource (Patrick and Rens 2017). If any riparian country wishes to make any additional use of the shared water resource, that country is supposed to be engage in discussion with the other nations during,

at the time of the construction and after the construction of the project to bring transparency and confidence among the nations (Yildiz, 2019). Anything short of transparency among the nations would lead to disagreement and conflict.

The main concern of this particular study is the Nile water and the disagreement associated with it among Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan up on the start of a mega project on the river by Ethiopia in 2011. The Nile River is one of the longest rivers in the world that flow through different east and north east African countries. The river has been mostly utilized by Egypt than any other riparian countries so far. The river is also a paramount importance for Egypt as it constitutes ninety percent of the country's freshwater supply. Ethiopia on the other hand started the mega project with the intention of alleviating scarcity of power supply and as a means boosting its development plan. Eighty-five percent of Nile waters originate in Ethiopia from the Blue Nile, which is one of the Nile's two main tributaries, along with the White Nile.

Upon the start of this project (The Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam) the relation between Ethiopia and Egypt getting rough and disagreement became prevalent. The point of disagreement consists of two main things. The first thing is the Egyptian fear of shortage of water supply because of the dam under construction. The other main problem related with the party's failure to bring settlement through transparency and water diplomacy.

## **II. Research Methods**

In conducting this study qualitative method has been employed. Different relevant literature associated with water diplomacy and water conflict management have been reviewed as part of this study. A lot of studies have been conducted on the subject of water diplomacy. Those studies on water diplomacy and water conflict management were carefully analyzed to draw the importance of discussion using water diplomacy to address the Nile River problem between Ethiopia and Egypt.

## **III. Discussion**

### **3.1 Explaining the Progresses made between Ethiopian and Egypt to Address the Problem**

The Nile river is the longest ever river in the world which happened to include Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan as riparian nations to this water. From this riparian nations Egypt has been considered as the highest consumer of this water resource in different ways. This is not a wonder at all considering the fact that Nile water consists of more than ninety percent of Egyptian fresh water. The other riparian nations except Sudan to some extent neither used nor revealed their intention of using it until recently. This neutrality to the water by other tributaries and riparian nations has put water dispute on the Nile not an issue for a long time. This in effect maintains absolute and stable consumption of the water resource by Egypt who is always suspicious of possible interference by the other riparian nations and of course mainly from Ethiopia who contributes almost eighty percent of the Nile water.

The stability and peace on the Nile water came to an end at the start of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam also called GERD in short by Ethiopia in 2011. This dam by Ethiopia is expected to be one of the largest dams in the world and the first largest in Africa with a hydroelectric power generation potential of more than 6000. This brand-new large dam lights hope for the community in Ethiopia and is considered a threat by Egyptian who think the water coming could be diminished. It is important though to carefully consider both sides of the story so that it could lead to effective water diplomacy to address the problem. On Ethiopian side the dam is a hope, a light and desire to come out of poverty. Ethiopia termed as one of the fastest growing economies in the world recently on which it has directly related with the country's quest to eliminate poverty

(Wollie, 2018). For this end the country needs massive electric power. More than 60 percent of the population in Ethiopia lives without access to electricity. Almost 90 percent of Egyptian in contrast have full access to electric power. The Ethiopian government also planned to generate hard currency that the country desperately needed for progress by selling some of the power generated from this new dam. Based on its presumed importance to the people of Ethiopia the citizens are funding the project from their pocket because of the fact there has been reluctance by international monetary organizations and states to fund the dam for some reason may be because of the push by Egypt.

Egypt on the other hand has been considering the dam as a threat to its water supply since the country is getting its ninety percent of fresh water from the Nile River. The Egyptian long dependence on the Nile water triggered the fear that any significant decrease in the volume of water would lead to drought and starvation. Egypt relies significantly on Nile water for irrigation and fresh water use for a really long time without any tangible attempts for alternative water supply. Alternative water supply could have been a best option for Egypt as the upper riparian nations will start to use form their fair share of the water Nile at some point based on equitable utilization of transboundary water; this in effect leads to a decrease in the amount of water that Egypt can get from the Nile River.

The real water conflict started to emerge between Egypt and Ethiopia when the latter announced the start of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in 2011. Upon following the announcement Egypt strongly expressed its dissatisfaction with the dam under construction on the Nile water. The dam then got international attention and most states urged Ethiopia and Egypt and later Sudan to settle the dispute peacefully. Up on this call and the back and forth communications between the government of Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt then the countries decided to establish a group of experts that will review the safety and the overall impact of the new dam on the lower riparian nations. The expert rendered its report to the countries and the lower riparian nations especially Egypt hesitated to accept the report which mentioned in nutshell that the dam will not cause significant harm to the lower riparian nations if filled in a reasonable time to be agreed by the parties. By using this report as the first official neutral document even though slightly disputed by Egypt, the countries started negotiation on the dam for the first time in 2013. This negotiation is the longest negotiation which has not been settled yet. The first round of negotiation was between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan without any third-party involvement in any capacity. This part of the negotiation lasted for about five years and failed to bring the required result. There are different factors for the faller but mainly consisted of lack of commitment to discuss the issue in good faith, using the water conflict for internal political gain and biased reporting by the media.

The countries started a second round of negotiation in early 2019 before the World Bank and a representative from the United States government. The countries at this stage mainly discussed the issue of filling the dam more specifically how much years should be required to fill the dam and how the water should be managed during drought season. The issue of dispute resolution mechanism was also part of the discussion in this round. The main divergence occurred when Ethiopia and Egypt proposed a different length of time frame to fill the dam by Ethiopia. Ethiopia happened to be insisting on three to seven years variation based on the amount of rain Ethiopian highlands received and any possible drought affecting the volume of water. Egypt on the other hand wanted a long period of time for the filling ranging from twelve to twenty years. This part of the negotiation continued for about months in front of representatives from the World Bank and the US government. The negotiation however failed to materialize any settlement among the nations when Ethiopia rejected a proposed settlement draft by the US government where the representative from Ethiopia found the settlement proposal too onerous and did not consider the interest of Ethiopia.

A third round of negotiation is going on right now between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan chaired by African Union. The countries so far made different meetings and there were some important developments from those discussions. The countries are now hoping to reach a settlement in this round of negotiation.

### 3.2 Explaining the Odds

Settlement of international disputes in general and resolving disputes on transboundary water in particular can be affected by different variables which in result cause delay and faller in the negotiation process. The negotiation process between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt was officially started in 2013 but has not been settled yet. Even though the countries made a lot of effort for several years to make some progress on the discussion, positive results have not been secured since different factors affect the outcome of the negotiation. Lack of commitment by the parties to address the problem in good faith is one of the main reasons that influence the negotiation process. In international dispute settlement process commitment and good faith are the ultimate important elements that the parties should carry. The parties should be committed to discuss the matter and provide all the possible settlement options that could bring some win-win resolution. Without a genuine commitment it is unlikely that settlement can be materialized.

The best way addressing disputes between sovereign nations is negotiation between the concerned parties without third party involvement. In any international dispute however, third-party involvement is inevitable in one or another way. The involvement of third parties in international water disputes can sometimes be recommended as far as that involving third parties can act impartially and in good faith. During the second round of negotiation between Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan the World Bank and representatives of the US government were part of the discussion as an observer. Even though the World Bank and representatives of the US government did have limited involvement during the negotiation, still their participation gave hope for the people that there could be a settlement at the end of the negotiation. After several discussions and meetings before the observers, this round of negation also failed to bring any settlement like the previous one. The settlement did not materialize mainly because Ethiopia accused the US representative of assuming a role of arbitrator instead of an observer against the agreement of the parties. Ethiopia further mentioned that the proposed draft settlement only benefits the interest of Egypt by totally disregarding the expectation of Ethiopia from the negotiation.

The other factor affecting the negotiation on the new dam has a lot to do with politicizing the matter by the parties for internal political gain. The Nile River is vitally important for the people of Egypt as it is a treasure for Ethiopian. As a result, anything on the Nile water alarms the peoples in both countries and they want the government more protective of their interest. For Egyptian the Nile is a source of food and fresh water as well. They even believe the Nile is a gift of God to the people of Egypt. Ethiopians on the other hand have been looking for something miraculous to happen that could make them use the water crossing their yards. They wrote melodies and included them in their music and art as well. They have been considering it as a treasury that will change their way of life by being an electric power and food source. The Ethiopians funding of the new dam directly from their pocket shows what Nile and the dam means for the community in Ethiopia. This fact indeed affects the governments of all parties in this dispute of their capacity of making genuine and committed negotiation in good faith. They rather prefer to galvanize the issue to distort internal political questions.

The media has assumed more of a negative role in this negotiation process. The role of the media is important in public issues like this. The media is supposed to be informing the public about issues and interests affecting the country. During reporting the Medias are also expected to be impartial and truthful to the information they are providing to the people. Impartial and good reporting can bring transparency and accountability of the parties involved in the process. The

media's approach towards reporting of the Nile conflict and the following negotiation can be described as biased and more of speculation on both sides. The Media prefers to narrate fear to the people of all parties involved in this dispute instead of impartial reporting. This in result creates suspension and hate among the people. Good reporting could have a positive impact in the negotiation process among the parties.

### **3.3 Building Confidence through Water Diplomacy to Address the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Disagreement between Ethiopia and Egypt**

Water diplomacy can be perceived as all form of positive and committed contacts in good faith among sovereign nations to address conflicts on transboundary water resources (Lawrence and Shafiqul, 2012). The diplomacy has different level based on the parties involving in that specific water resource (Martina, David, Elizabeth and Phillia, 2019). It could be bilateral, multilateral, and regional and sometimes it could also be global. During the process of water diplomacy different actors were involved in the negotiation process. Technical experts from engineers, international water law experts, geopolitical analysts and economists are among the important actors involving during the process of water diplomacy. Water diplomacy provides a means to prevent and mitigate water-related political tensions by making simultaneous use of water know-how and diplomatic tools and mechanisms. Water diplomacy combines foreign and security policy with development policy and peace mediation, with focus on water and related resources under changing climate. Water diplomacy can help nations to avoid military and other adverse political confrontation by enabling them to discuss the water conflict using different peaceful dispute settlement mechanisms. The kind of water diplomacy to be used by the actors will be depends on the stage of the conflict (Ruben V. and Fan, 2011). Commonly used methods are negotiation, good offices, impartial fact finding, mediation and conciliation. Arbitration and adjudication may occur when all other possible dispute resolution methods have failed to bring a peaceful settlement.

The researcher motivated to bring this study to the spot because of the fact that the disagreement on Nile water will have a negative impact for both countries and will also affect the stability of the region. Thus, the researcher was interested to stress on the benefit of engaging in serious water diplomacy discussions to maintain normality between Ethiopia and Egypt for any potential disagreement on the Nile water. The countries so far tried different some of the options included under the concept of water diplomacy. Impartial fact finding was conducted by experts appointed by the parties. Right after the fact finding process a series of negotiations was conducted but failed to bring a comprehensive settlement whatsoever. The negotiation is still going on under the observation of representatives from African Union after a failed negotiation of the same type observed by representatives from the World Bank and US government. There are also other possible water diplomacy options on the table if negotiation does not bring positive results. Conciliation will be the next stage to address the problem. This stage requires a neutral third-party facilitator whose role in the process is more than observer and less than an arbitrator. If carefully selected, the third party will have a vital role in bringing the parties together. The last but less recommended option for the parties to use is either arbitrator or adjudicator to address the problem. During arbitration the countries will have the right to select the arbitrators. The arbitrators will have the power to make a binding decision against the parties (Elisa, 2020). Adjudication will be conducted before an international court or tribunal. If the matter is related to a breach of international law like the claim by Egypt of the previous two treaties on the Nile water the adjudication takes place before the International Court of Justice or ICJ. This bench is composed of judges who are experts on international law.

## IV. Conclusion

The start of The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam or GERD on the Nile River by Ethiopia in 2011 triggered a water conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt. The countries on both sides put forward their worries and hopes towards the dam on the river. Egypt has been arguing the dam would seriously impact the water supply that the country mainly depends on for its fresh water from the Nile. Ethiopia on the other hand is trying to prove that the dam will not considerably affect water supply to the downstream countries since the dam's main purpose is generating hydroelectric power that the country desperately needs for development. With the intention to address the problem the countries so far engaged and still engaging in a series of different negotiations with observers and without observers. Besides a lot of efforts to bring consensus all the previous negotiations ended up without a meaningful result. The countries are currently in the process of negotiation under the chair of African Union. It is important for the nations to bring solutions using different water diplomacy methods by avoiding or mitigating those odds affecting the negotiation.

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