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Easing Tensions: Egypt and Ethiopia's conflict over the Nile

Background

Egyptian history is intertwined with that of the ebbs and flows of the River Nile. The Nile provides 85 percent of Egypt's water needs. Cairo, however, is facing a looming calamity – a water shortage the like of which the country has not experienced for seven millennia. The cause is a foreign country. Ethiopia has begun construction of the [Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam \(GERD\)](#) on the waters of the Blue Nile. Once completed in 2022, it will be the largest hydro-electric power facility on the African continent. Its construction poses huge challenges to Egypt.

Discussion

It has been estimated that Egypt would lose 80,000 hectares of agricultural land to desertification with each two percent drop in the flow of the waters of the Blue Nile. The decrease in water flow to Egypt's Aswan Dam, meanwhile, would negatively impact on electricity generation as well. Under these circumstances, Cairo has threatened military strikes against the Ethiopian GERD. In March 2020, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi met with the Egyptian High Command and called on the country's armed forces to be at the highest level of combat readiness so that they could defend against any threat to Egypt's national security. Commentators believed that this was in [response](#) to Ethiopia continuing with the construction of GERD despite Cairo's protestations. Increased water stress may well make prospects of a water war in the region a possibility.

Given the regional dimension of the environmental threats posed, there is a need for greater regional cooperation amongst states. Such cooperation would entail that despite strained political or economic ties, states such as Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan should see the value of their cooperation in confronting a common challenge. In this regard, perhaps Cairo and Addis Ababa need to look elsewhere to draw lessons which could resolve the impasse

between their countries. The 1994 Israel-Jordan peace agreement recognized the quest for fresh water supplies that both countries were confronted with. A [Joint Water Commission](#) was duly established and aimed to engage in joint water infrastructure development, joint project management and to regulate water sharing between neighbours. Israel and Jordan have also agreed to jointly fund a pipeline to the Dead Sea from the Red Sea as they attempt to save it from shrinking further. The fact that this cooperation has endured for almost three decades despite the political tensions between Amman and Jerusalem is testimony to the urgency with which they view water security. In similar vein, one could note the existence of the Oman-based [Middle East Desalination Research Centre](#) which includes Israel and other Arab countries.

Could a Joint Water Commission be established between Egypt and Ethiopia with attendant conflict resolution mechanisms be built in to settle the dispute? At face value, the answer is negative. After all, both countries have been taking unilateral measures without consultation with the other party despite mediation from Washington and the involvement of the World Bank. Moreover, Cairo has been making threats of military action against Addis Ababa. However, despite the threats being made, the military option is unlikely on account of the challenges posed by geography, military capabilities and geo-politics. Both these countries also have linkages to other players – both regional and international. These outside players could assist by using their leverage to convince both countries to come to the negotiating table and achieve compromises.

Compromises would entail understanding the position of the other. The Nile holds an average flow of [84 billion cubic meters per annum](#). According to Egypt, the construction of GERD would threaten its own share of the river by 55.5 billion cubic meters. However, one can also understand the position of Ethiopia. The catchment landscapes of Eritrea and Ethiopia contribute 85 percent to the water of the Blue Nile. Yet because of a colonial agreement, Egypt and Sudan benefits 100 percent from its waters, but upstream countries are restricted in the use of the waters for their own growing needs. Despite the seemingly intractable position between the parties, there is hope. Egypt is not opposed to filling the GERD with waters from the Nile, but simply asks that it does not take place in one go. Filling the GERD in one go will immediately have a deleterious impact on Egypt for years to come. In the short term, then, the solution seems to be for Ethiopia to fill the GERD with the waters of the Blue Nile in stages to stagger the impact on Egypt.

Conclusions

In the longer term, the Nile's riparian countries should explore the idea of using the waters of the Nile more cooperatively and multilaterally. The obvious place to start is re-energize the [Nile Basin Initiative \(NBI\)](#) which began in 1999. The idea behind it was to promote regional peace and security and to share the socio-economic benefits of cooperatively utilizing the waters of the Nile. Distrust is what collapsed the NBI as riparian states did not think that other states will abide by commitments made and take more from the waters of the Nile than allotted by the agreement. The international partners of Egypt and Ethiopia also need to assist with creating confidence-building mechanisms to revive the NBI and ameliorate the tensions between Cairo and Addis Ababa.

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