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Military confrontation in Ethiopia, Trump and the geopolitics of dams

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Ethiopia's internal conflicts are worsening at a time it needs unity for its tense relations with Egypt and Sudan resulting from the GERD infrastructure project. Donald Trump's interjection into the controversy has only exacerbated the issue, with little regard for complexity in the region. Given the emerging conflict, asks Yohannes Woldemariam, will the countries affected by the dam use Ethiopia's worsening situation to push through their agenda?

The relationship between Abiy Ahmed and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) political party has now deteriorated into a **military confrontation**, which is escalating into a **civil war** with potentially regional implications and the fragmentation of Ethiopia. These developments come as international negotiations on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

(GERD), engineered to produce electricity from the Blue Nile River, have reached a critical stage. Given the emerging conflict, are the Eastern Nile riparian states (specifically Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia) most affected by the dam's construction likely to go to war to resolve their disputes, or ultimately cooperate?

'Water wars' and international involvement

Echoed by **concerns in international media**, Professor Michael Klare has argued that transboundary rivers can be causes of **'water wars'** over control for their crucial resource. In contrast, Professor Aaron Wolf has documented transboundary rivers as a **catalyst for cooperation**, in which the existential significance of water has historically prompted cooperation.

Yet, Ethiopia and Egypt are waging a fierce diplomatic campaign over the GERD project. Ethiopia has long **distrusted Egyptian hegemony** over the Nile but practically little was done to challenge it until 2011, when it initiated nationwide and diaspora fundraising for the dam's construction through **'local taxes, donations and government bonds'**. The late Prime Minister of Ethiopia at the time, Meles Zenawi, worked to outmaneuver Egypt's dominance through **colonial treaties** designed to allow it a larger share of the river's flow, cosying up to six Nile riparian states even further back with the **Nile Basin Initiative** (NBI) in 1999.

Egypt for its part was mobilising support from US President Donald Trump to retain its control over the river, who raised **the issue of Ethiopia's GERD** while on the phone with Sudanese Prime Minister Abdela Hamdock and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in October 2020, blaming Ethiopia for breaking 'the deal' and prompting the US President to **cut aid to Ethiopia** worth \$130 million. **Third party mediation by the United States** and the World Bank is not Ethiopia's choice, as from a geopolitical standpoint Egypt is perceived as more important to the US than Ethiopia. The US National Security Council went as far as **tweeting** and urging Ethiopia 'to show leadership' for the '257 million people in East Africa'. Egypt also

lobbied the Arab League, which **issued a statement supporting their position.**

Trump's brazen meddling in African affairs is consistent with his **documented contempt** for sub-Saharan Africa. By taking Egypt's position, he even appeared to entice the country to **bomb the GERD**, should Ethiopia refuse to relent. Perhaps sensing danger, **Ethiopia suspended all flights** to the area where the dam is located, two weeks before Trump made his threatening statements.

For the most part, leaders in the eastern Nile basin (Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea) lack internal legitimacy, are in deep debt and look for short-term survival strategies. El Sisi in Egypt overthrew a democratically elected (albeit unpopular) government and established a dictatorship. Egypt is preoccupied with its own regional concerns in Libya where it is engaged in a geopolitical game with Turkey, as well as a chronic internal insurgency in the Sinai.

Abiy Ahmed came into office promising to be a transitional agent, but the military standoff with the TPLF in the Tigray region means he himself now clings to power.

The evolution of the GERD

The US Bureau of Reclamation completed a **feasibility study** in the Ethiopian side of the Blue Nile from 1956-64 and proposed four major dams, amounting to nothing. It is suggested Haile Selassie was too busy with internal dissent and trying to put down the fledgling armed struggle for self-determination in Eritrea – that is, until the Meles Zenawi entered office determined to make the GERD a reality. He took advantage of the Arab Spring which engulfed Egypt to begin construction. When asked about Egyptian threats of war in 2010, at a time of comparative national strength and unification, **his reply was:**

'I am not worried that the Egyptians will suddenly invade Ethiopia, nobody who has tried that has lived to tell the story. I don't think the

Egyptians will be any different and I think they know that.'

The GERD subsequently became a symbol of nationalism in Ethiopia, similar to what the Aswan Dam has meant for Egypt. That the source of funding for the Aswan Dam propelled Egypt's alliance with the Soviet Union during the Cold War exemplifies the political international alliances such major infrastructure projects can forge.

The situation can be contrasted with the Tigris River in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East. Turkey is forging ahead with its plans for dams that will deprive Syria and Iraq of much water to which they feel entitled. Its prevailing balance of power and clear regional hegemony mean Turkey can be hardly challenged. Conversely, the military balance between Ethiopia and Egypt probably favours Egypt, but conventional war is almost unthinkable because these two countries are not contiguous. More likely is a proxy war. Egypt has plenty of opportunities in light of the latest conflict and the many **intractable domestic issues Ethiopia is facing**.

The potential for proxy war

Egypt is wooing neighbouring countries trying to establish a **military presence in Somaliland**, as well as an **undetermined relation with South Sudan**, which is worrisome for Ethiopia. Both countries are contiguous to Ethiopia, wary that Egypt can simply utilise non-state actors, providing weapons, training and funding to further its strategic goals, avoiding engagement in direct confrontation. With the **recent outbreak of war between the TPLF and Abiy Ahmed**, the equation may have changed dramatically in favour of Egypt, which can pick and choose from **dissident groups** to destabilise Ethiopia.

Even before the outbreak of the ongoing war, the TPLF and Abiy Ahmed were accusing each other of treason in their dealings with Egypt. Revealing deep fissures, TPLF Executive Committee member and TPLF spokesperson **Getachew Reda tweeted**:

Tigray won't recognize any deal on the **#GERD** which we have reason to believe is in the pipeline. Blaming **@realDonaldTrump** for disclosing Egypt's threat to blow up the dam and **@AbiyAhmedAli**'s treasonous deal on the GERD- is totally uncalled for. **@AbiyAhmed** is a traitor.

Egypt can also count on Arab support, which it has successfully **lobbied through the Arab League** to issue a statement asking Ethiopia to delay the filling of the GERD. Ethiopia has ignored these pressures and continued with the dam's construction.

Among the Nile Riparian countries, the alignment has changed according to shifting geopolitical calculations. For example, Sudan and Egypt were aligned firmly for most of the 20th century, except during the Al Bashir years. Ethiopia was actively wooing Sudan through land concessions in disputed territories and giving political support to the internationally beleaguered regime. In contrast, **Sudan's border** (the mineral rich Halayeb Triangle) and political disputes with Egypt were growing. This continues to be a thorn in the side of Egyptian-Sudanese relations, but it is unlikely to serve Ethiopia as an opening it can exploit.

The potential for international mediation

Egypt chooses to internationalise the issue while Ethiopia prefers mediation by the African Union (AU), where it has managed to bring South African President **Cyril Ramaposa to mediate**. Egypt and Sudan seek a legally binding agreement on the filling of the dam in times of drought which Ethiopia finds unacceptable.

The unstated presumption is that 'sub-Saharan Africa' supports the Ethiopian position (not always true) and Northern Africa will be more sympathetic to Egypt (again, not always true). For example, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) under Félix Tshisekedi has **expressed solidarity with Egypt** on the issue. The DRC will soon chair the African Union thereby improving Egypt's diplomatic clout.

Some African American politicians like the **Reverend Jesse Jackson** are taking the Ethiopian side. Reverend Jackson called existing historical treaties on the Nile neocolonial. This block might be strengthened by a Joe Biden administration in the US, but it is too early to even tell whether it wants to be actively involved. Biden is not expected to perform the recklessness of Trump, but the American appetite for intervention in international disputes is not top of the agenda, especially now that Ethiopia is sabotaging itself by declaring war within its borders. Biden might simply encourage mediation through multilateralism.

Pope Francis has also **weighed in with his concern**, urging all parties to:

‘continue on the path of dialogue so that the Eternal River might continue to be a source of life ... Let dialogue ... be your only choice, for the good of your dear populations and of the entire world.’

It is a testament to the politicisation of the GERD that the Congressional Black Caucus and even Pope Francis are making statements on the issue. While **Pope Francis's statement** is without the agenda of the politicians seeking short-term survival on shaky political ground, his response was measured: Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia will do well to heed his words. Enlightened cooperation while **protecting the Nile watershed** is the only way forward.

About the author



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