

# Ethiopia: The Changing Aspects of the Ethio-Egypt Water Diplomacy — Key Drives, Challenges, and Prospects

Nigusu Adem YIMER

**Abstract:** Starting the inception of the 2010s, Ethiopia's relations with Egypt have been experiencing one of the deepest crises in the relationship of the two countries' history. Ethiopia, one of the upper riparian states of the Nile River not only theoretically challenged the exclusive veto power of Egypt over the Nile River but also practically start constructing one of Africa's largest hydropower dams on the Blue Nile since 2011. The challenging behavior of Ethiopia over the Nile River worried the long-standing regional hegemon, Egypt. Against this background, this paper aims to forward a new insight into how and why Ethiopia challenged the long-standing superior-subordinate Egypt-led order over the Nile River. Moreover, in its discussion, the paper tries to address key drives, challenges, and prospects of Ethiopia-Egypt water diplomacy. The paper also illustrates how and why the Ethio-Egypt water diplomacy strain becomes a cross-cut on the two nation's foreign policy matters. The paper has also attempted to understand how the superior-subordinate power duality approach works over the Nile River against the new balancer.

**Keywords:** Ethiopia, Egypt, Relation, Nile River, Challenges, Prospects.

## Context

Starting in 2011, Ethiopia has been experiencing its deepest and most disquieted crisis with the Egypt-led order in the Northeast Africa region. The nationalistic approach of state leaders together with the commencement of the construction of The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in a geopolitically unstable and hotspot region lays the ground for the unpleasant relations between the two nations. At the

Nigusu Adem YIMER

Jimma University, Ethiopia

E-mail: [nigusuadem@yahoo.com](mailto:nigusuadem@yahoo.com)

---

Conflict Studies Quarterly  
Issue 41, October 2022, pp. 78–96

DOI: 10.24193/csq.41.5

Published First Online: 01 October / 2022

June 2020 Security Council virtual summit the Egyptian minister of foreign affairs, Sameh Shoukry, portrayed the construction of (GERD) as “A threat of potentially existential proportions... of over 100 million Egypt’s” (Daily News Egypt, 2020). At the same summit, the Ethiopian representative Ambassador Taye Atske Selassie respond with a similar language “For Ethiopia, accessing and utilizing its water resources is not a matter of choice, but of existential necessity” (Zane, 2020).

While politicians, scholars, and news outlets explain the success of Ethiopia in starting the construction of Africa’s ever-largest hydroelectric power project-argue that Ethiopia would never start the construction of the dam over the Blue Nile- had Egypt not been troubled by the 2011 Arab spring. Ahmed Noubi, owner of a sugar cane plantation, for instance, argued that “It was upsetting to see the last Ethiopian Prime Minister take advantage of the chaos in Egypt to push ahead with this project at a time he knew there could be no consultation with anyone in Cairo” (Wirtschafter, 2019).

Another time, in September 2019, the President of Egypt, Abdul Fattah Al-Sisi, said that “dams on the Nile would have never been built was it not for the impact of the 2011 uprising”, “urging Egyptians not to repeat the mistakes of the past” (Morsy and Alaa El-Din, 2019).

Although many politicians, policymakers, and intellectuals associate the official start of the construction of the GERD with the 2011 chaos in Egypt, their prophetic arguments that conceptualize the above explanation are misleading and deceitful for the following three reasons. First, history confirms that such kinds of arguments have fallacious predictability power. For instance, in the 1960s Ethiopia together with the United States Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) studied a hydropower project called ‘Border Dam’ at the same site where the GERD is directly being constructed. Conversely, it is apparent that during the time, Egypt was not in chaos. However, Ethiopia failed to implement the 1960s project on the Blue Nile because of internal problems and financial shortages. Second, such kind of portrayal and/or prophecy is stemmed from the conceptualization of the superior-subordinate duality hierarchical order between Ethiopia and Egypt to retain the hegemonic position of Egypt on the Nile River. Finally, such kind of conceptualization is largely charged simply because of the construction of Ethiopia as an ‘inferior other’ against the ‘superior’ Egypt on the issue of the Nile.

So, this paper primarily asks the following questions:

- Why the discourse of superior-subordinate duality conceptualization over the Nile River challenged and Ethiopia start a mega-dam on the Blue Nile that tests the interests of Egypt? And how can this difference in the relations between the two countries elucidate?
- How and why the Ethio-Egypt water diplomacy issue becomes a cross-cut on the two nation’s foreign policy matters?
- What would be the possible prospect scenario for the Ethio-Egypt water diplomacy?

To give a general answer to the above questions the paper is divided into four sections. The first section of the paper tries to explain the drives for the contest between Ethiopia and Kenya. Additionally, the first section of the paper addresses the reason why the superior-subordinate water order duality crisis between Ethiopia and Egypt is unique and worth studying. The second section of the paper addresses the potential reasons for the shift of the traditional line in Ethiopia and Egypt's water diplomacy. In abstraction, this section tries to address the reasons that enabled Ethiopia to challenge and deconstruct the superior-subordinate Egypt-led order over the Nile River. The third section of the paper focuses on illustrating the main challenges of the changing aspects of the Ethio-Egypt water diplomacy. Along discussing the main challenges for the two nations changing realities on water diplomacy, the third section emphasizes issues such as (i) the geopolitical design of the region together with overseas actor-based justifications; (ii) the state-level power-reconfiguration trajectory, and; (iii) system structure (i.e., from the point of the Northeast Africa regional balance of power reconfiguration). The last section of the paper focuses on the prospects of the Ethiopia-Egypt water diplomacy

### **Briefing the Drives for the Contest**

The foundation for the superior-subordinate duality order between Egypt and the remaining upstream Nile riparian states including Ethiopia was laid several decades ago during the colonial era, in 1929 (Salman, 2013, p. 18). The 1929 Anglo-Egypt colonial accord which was revised in 1959 once again exclude Ethiopia which contributes 86% of the Nile water and give veto power to Egypt which contributes 0% of the water of the Nile River. Subsequently, Ethiopia several times attempted to challenge the 'win-lose' superior-subordinate duality order on the Nile River. But it was only at the inception of the 2010s that the plan to break the cycle of the superior-subordinate duality order over the Nile River came to materialization. It is possible to hypothesize the reason for the changing nature of the status quo of the superior-subordinate hierarchical order between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Nile River is because of the following two simple reasons. First, the relative peace and economic development in Ethiopia in the 2000s contributed to the changing dynamics of the superior-subordinate hierarchical order over the Nile issue. The second reason is because of the progressive and ambitious nature of the Ethiopian leadership during the time. While explaining the "challenging behaviors of subordinates" Ali Balci stated that "The greater the improvement in material capacities, the greater the likelihood that subordinates will challenge". Ali also mentioned that "Leaders with a grandiose vision are more likely to challenge" (2019, 16).

To maintain the status quo of the superior-subordinate duality over the issue of the Nile River Egypt has used to use the policy of destabilization, isolation, and colonial legal accords as a tool. This is done intentionally with the plan to maintain Ethiopia as a subordinate 'other' on the issue of the Nile River. To strengthen the rhetoric fodder of Ethiopia's subordinate position on the issue of the Nile River, Egypt has used to use

Article III of May 15, 1902, colonial agreement between Ethiopia and Great Britain (as a colonial master of Sudan) as a springboard. Article III of the 1902 accord reads that:

*His Majesty the Emperor Menelik II, king of kings of Ethiopia engages himself towards the Government of His Britannic majesty not to construct, or allow to be constructed any work across the Blue Nile, Lake Taana, or the Sobat which would arrest the flow of their water into the Nile except in agreement with His Britannic Majesty and the Government of the Sudan (Ethiopian National Archive and Library Agency (ENALA, 1902, 17-2-268-02A)).*

However, presenting the 1902 colonial agreement to maintain and assert the status quo of the superior-subordinate duality order on the issue of the Nile controversy is wrong for two simple reasons. First, the agreement was signed by the British representing Sudan but not Egypt. So, Egypt is using the 1902 colonial accord simply to further conceptualize its superior or veto power rhetoric fodder on the issue of Nile over Ethiopia in particular and the rest of upper riparian states at large. Second, Article III of the 1902 frontier accord remarks about ‘arresting’ the flow of the River. But the new Renaissance Dam under construction by Ethiopia is not planned to ‘arrest’ the flow of the Blue Nile. Rather the water generates electricity and continues its flow without any arrest or interruption. Meaning, that hydroelectric energy production does not affect or interrupt the flow of water. So, why Egypt has time and again oppose the construction of a hydroelectric dam over the Blue Nile? The answer is simple as that the Egyptians are wholehearted to maintain the superior-subordinate duality order over the Nile through ‘homogenizing’ any activity on the River as an ‘existential’ threat for Egypt. Second, the completion of the hydroelectric megaproject like GERD inevitably will challenge the existing order and hegemonic alignment over the Nile issue in particular and the Northeast African regional politics in general. So, Egypt’s strong opposition is stemmed to maintain the hierarchical regional prevailing order and regional hegemonic position of Northeast Africa, which is Egypt in our case.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Ethiopia expressed its objection towards the hierarchical superior-subordinate duality order between Egypt and Ethiopia on the issue of the Nile River. For instance, in 1958 Emperor Haileseilase I presented a request to participate in the water negotiation between Egypt and Sudan. But the Cairo-Khartoum front rejected the request of Addis Ababa. It was in response to this experience that the Blue Nile master plan study project was started in 1958 by the collaboration of the UNBR and Ethiopia. Finally, the study of the Blue Nile master plan project (1958–1964) proposed the construction of four high dams along the Blue Nile including the ‘Border Dam’, where exactly located at the same place as the GERD. The Blue Nile master plan project was the beginning of the challenge for the hierarchy of the superior-subordinate duality order between Egypt and Ethiopia on the issue of the Nile. Because the proposal of the Blue Nile master plan project yields fruit after five decades on July 22, 2020, in which

Ethiopia declared the successful filling of the first phase of its dam on the Blue Nile. The Nobel Peace laureate Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, also said "The completion of the first round of filling is a historic moment that showcases Ethiopians' commitment to the renaissance of our country" (Al Jazeera, 2020).

On the other hand, to maintain the hierarchy of the superior-subordinate duality order over the issue of Nile against Ethiopia, the Egyptian-led order provides different kinds of benefits to internal and neighboring hostile states against Ethiopia. The aid to opposition groups to destabilize Ethiopia includes- military or economic aid, political support whenever necessary, and preaching respected status in the Middle East using its political acceptance in the region. Ethiopia has time and again accused Egypt's destabilization activity against its national security. Accordingly, while the crisis of Ethiopia and Egypt relations grow deeper, the destabilization efforts of Egypt against Ethiopia have dramatically increased. For instance, in 2013 the Egyptian political elites caught on a live TV program plotting how to attack the GERD and destabilize Ethiopia unaware the meeting has under live transmission. The meeting was chaired by the late Egyptian President, Mohamed Morsi. Here are some of the ideas circulated in the meeting. The leader of the Ultraconservative Islamist party, Younis Makhyoun, stated that "Egypt should back rebels in Ethiopia or, as a last resort, destroy the dam". He also said that "Ethiopia is 'fragile' because of rebel movements inside the country. We can communicate with them [opposition or rebel groups] and use them as a bargaining chip against the Ethiopian government" (Zenawi, 2013).

In response to the destabilizing efforts and plots by the Egyptian politicians in the live transmission Getachew Reda, the spokesperson of the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, stated that "Egyptian leaders in the past have unsuccessfully tried to destabilize Ethiopia. "The Renaissance Dam is here to stay. It is advisable for all actors of the political establishment in Egypt to come to terms with this reality" (Zenawi, 2013). Furthermore, In December 2017, the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn stated that Egyptian institutions are harboring, supporting, and funding terrorist groups in Ethiopia (Middle East Observer, 2017). Cairo, however, did not accept the allegation of Addis Ababa, it rather criticized the Ethiopian authorities time and again accusation over Egypt of Ethiopia's internal problem.

In the same way, to maintain the sustainability of the hierarchy of the superior-subordinate duality order between Ethiopia and Egypt the latter has used to use the policy of isolating Ethiopia from the politics of the region. For instance, in January 2015 the Egyptian foreign minister Samah Shoukry visited Kenya and talked to strengthen bilateral relations. In his speech, Shoukry said, "We need to avoid manipulation by certain countries that don't want to see strong African governments making independent decisions" (Anadolu Agency, 2015). The speech of Shoukry was interpreted as an implicit accusation against Ethiopia's operation on the Nile River.

Furthermore, on February 18, 2017, President Al Sisi of Egypt made a one-day state visit to Nairobi. Even if President Sisi and President Uhuru claimed that the visit was to strengthen the two countries' bilateral trade and economic relations, many onlookers argued that the visit of Al Sisi has a clandestine motive to isolate Ethiopia from its old regional security ally, Kenya (Middle East Observer, 2017). Ethiopia and Kenya has a bilateral security pact since 1963. So, there is no doubt that the prime motive of Al Sisi's and his ministers' time and again presence at Nairobi is to sustain the superior-subordinate hierarchical order over the Nile by implementing diplomatic isolation against Ethiopia.

The January 2017 Egypt lead tripartite alliance between Cairo, Uganda, and South Sudan hit the headline of Egypt's ambition to isolate Ethiopia in regional politics. Here it is worth missioning the recurrent visit of the Egyptian ministers and Al Sisi to Juba and Entebbe. For instance, Sisi himself visited Uganda on December 18, 1916. Referring to Egypt's newspaper *al-Dostour*, the Middle East Observer states that "Egypt, Juba, and Uganda currently form a tripartite alliance its main target to siege Ethiopia" (Middle East Observer, 2017). Referring to an anonymous rebel official the Middle East Observer states that "There is a dirty deal going between Kiir and Al-Sisi, (...) the issue of Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is one of the main deals being finalized in Cairo" (Middle East Observer, 2017).

Furthermore, in March 2018 Cairo invited South Sudan's President Salva Kiir to discuss the latter's request to be a member of the Arab League. Kiir preferred Egypt as a facilitator to be a member of the Arab League using the political acceptance of Egypt in the Arab League (Anadolu Agency, 2018). Egypt also needs to have a military base in Ethiopia's southwestern neighbor, South Sudan. Egypt also does the same action by approaching other neighboring states of Ethiopia such as Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan. This is done to isolate Ethiopia from regional politics and to maintain the old hierarchy of superior-subordinate duality order over the Nile River.

In the same manner, in March 2020 Egypt's foreign minister Samah Shoukry embarked on an extensive tour to different African countries such as Tanzania, DR Congo, South Africa, Burundi, Niger, and Ruanda. In the same month, Shoukry presented the message of Al Sisi to the French President Emmanuel Macron aims to delay the filling and operation of the GERD. Concomitantly, on his tour, Shoukry implicitly accused Ethiopia and presented a call to EU member states to exert efforts on Ethiopia's stand on the Nile water. Nearly a week before his tour to Europe and Africa Shoukry has made the same tour to Arab and Middle Eastern countries (Egypt Today, 2020).

The clandestine ambition of Al Sisi and his minister's tour including Shoukry from Africa to Europe and from the Middle East to North America is clear and net; that is to isolate and defeat Ethiopia in a diplomatic market and maintain the status quo of the hierarch of the superior-subordinate duality order on the issue of the Nile River. In short,

Egypt worked in destabilizing Ethiopia, plotted a proxy war against Ethiopia, conspired against diplomatic isolation against Ethiopia, warned of military action, and so forth. However, despite this grave and countless disagreement, Egypt did not go to military action against Ethiopia to secure its superior and/or veto power rhetoric over the Nile River, nor did Cairo declare diplomatic interruption with Addis Ababa.

### **The Shift of the Traditional Line**

The next section elucidates potential reasons why and how Ethiopia is challenging the hierarchy of the superior-subordinate order over the Nile River. Accordingly, the challenging behavior of the subordinate (i.e., Ethiopia in this case) against Egypt's order over the Nile River is clustered into three main phases.

For almost a long time challenging the superior-subordinate hierarchical order over the Nile River was unthinkable during the colonial era up until the end of the cold war era. During the colonial era, the issue of the Nile River was exclusively determined by the colonial interest of the British. As a result, there was no chance for Ethiopia to challenge the British hegemonic order over the Nile River. During the cold war period, the 'East' and 'West' ideological struggle together with the Somali irredentist movement and the Ogaden war (1977–1978) did not give a chance for Ethiopia to challenge the superior-subordinate hierarchical order over the Nile River. The Eritrean secessionist resistance movement in which the Egyptians took an active proxy role also hindered Ethiopia to challenge the status quo of the superior-subordinate order on the Nile River. However, the end of the cold war era gives the chance for the world to be under a uni-polar system. As a result, both Ethiopia and Egypt became strategic and security allies for Washington. The new global system supports creating a platform for discussion. As a result, the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) was formed in 1999 and the first phase of Ethiopia's challenging behavior towards the superior-subordinate order over the Nile River technically started.

The geopolitical shift in the Northeast Africa region in particular and in the world at large together with the increasing demands of cooperation among upstream nations resulted in the establishment of the NBI in Uganda, Entebbe. The commission involves 11 Nile riparian states to work for fair and equitable water allocation and management. Nearly after ten years of discussion and counter discussion participants of the NBI agreed to sign the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) in 2010 at Entebbe. The CFA formally introduce the issue of fair and equitable water distribution into a formal dialog in the process of the Nile water administration. The CFA committed to the complicated concept called water security. In fact "the Entebbe Agreement has shifted control over the Nile away from Egypt and Sudan, who previously had a monopoly over the river's resources as a result of colonial agreements" (Di Nunzio, 2013). Furthermore, the CFA is a clear sign that challenges the superior-subordinate order on the Nile River and the historic



veto power of Egypt over the River for the first time in history in such a cooperative manner. As a result, Egypt strongly objected to the signing and ratification of the CFA. However, despite Egypt's objection, the upper riparian states such as Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda have signed it (Kimenyi and Mbaku, 2015). Egypt was also invited to sign the CFA. However, Egypt unequivocally rejected the request and withdrew itself from the NBI. Referring to Zeitoun *et al.*, Rawia Tawfik argued that the CFA is a "contestation of both the rules of the game and the sanctioned discourse underpinning the previous and long-standing hegemonic arrangement maintained by Egypt" (2015, p. 10). Moreover, while explaining the changing dynamics of the superior-subordinate order between upstream and downstream countries Salman states that the CFA is the start of "more balanced power relations vis-à-vis the downstream riparians" (2013, p. 27).

Therefore, the signing of the CFA brings a new phase in challenging the Egypt-led Nile order. Meaning, that the other technical landmark for the start of the second phase for challenging the superior-subordinate hierarchical order on the issue of the Nile River was started following the signing of the CFA in 2010. Subsequently, using the CFA as a legal backup Ethiopia officially declared the start of the construction of the GERD over the Blue Nile in March 2011. Apart from the CFA, the relative domestic peace in Ethiopia in the 2000s together with the economic development in the country instigated it to boldly challenge the existing superior-subordinate hierarchical order over the Nile River and to start a mega-dam on the River. Here, it is worth missioning once again Ali Balci's argument on "challenging behaviors of subordinates". Ali argued that "the greater the improvement in material capacities, the greater the likelihood that subordinates will challenge" (2019, p. 16).

Once Ethiopia officially launched the construction of the GERD on April 2, 2011; the situation in the superior-subordinate hierarchical order over the Nile River transformed from challenging to changing the existing order over the Nile River on the ground. The start of the project and the failure of Egypt to reinforce the so-called 'red line' on the Nile issue enabled Ethiopia a more important footprint on the deconstruction of the superior-subordinate hierarchical order over the Nile River. Another sign of Egypt's submission was reflected in the 'appeasing' gesture of Cairo under its public diplomatic staff that arrived at Addis Ababa nearly two weeks after the official start of the project. Afterward, the provisional Prime Minister of Egypt, Essam Abdal Aziz Sharif, arrived at Addis Ababa. The situation helped Ethiopia to explain the agonizing superior-subordinate hierarchical order over the Nile River to the international observers. Particularly, the situation makes Addis Ababa develop a counter narration called 'equitable and fair' water utilization to halt Egypt's veto discourse over the Nile River.

In addition, Ethiopia used the International Panel of Experts (IPoE) to counter and halt the superior-subordinate order over the Nile River. The IPoE was established to



revise the design documents of the GERD project. In the meantime, Egypt requested Ethiopia to stop the construction of the project until the final reports of the IPoE have been completed. However, late Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Melese Zenawi, noticed that "the construction of the dam won't be delayed even for a single minute" (Gizaw, 2014). Here, it is important to notice that in the superior-subordinate hierarchical order the theoretical premise argues that the rise of the potential competitor leader or "leaders with a grandiose vision are more likely to challenge" or "grandiose leaders surrounded by like-minded advisors are more likely to challenge" (Balci, 2019, 16). So, in the same line, Ethiopia's Prime Minister's unwillingness to halt the construction of the dam conceptualizes the practical challenging behavior of the subordinate in the consolidation of its counter superior-subordinate order dictation over the Nile River.

Third, Ethiopia's 'competitive' and 'assertive' move in the IPoE give way for the signing of the 2015 Khartoum Declaration of Principles by the three eastern riparian states. The signing of the March 2015 Khartoum Declaration of Principles by the heads of states of Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan technically noticed the inception of another phase in challenging the superior-subordinate hierarchical order over the Nile River. In the process, the Declaration of Principles accepted the construction of the GERD on the Blue Nile. Above all, in its Article IV Paragraph I the Declaration of Principles states that "The Three Countries shall utilize their shared water resources in their respective territories in an equitable and reasonable manner" (State Information Service, 2017). Article IV Paragraph I clearly defines the more likely rise of a new order on the issue of the Nile River that potentially challenges the status quo of Egypt's veto position on the River. Therefore, the changing dynamics define that the subordinate is on a track to being a new balancer and will likely challenge the hegemon.

### **Understanding the Challenge**

The growing shift of the traditional superior-subordinate line inquest together with the transformations of the traditional parameters to manage the Nile water crisis occupied a remarkable place in the dynamics of the foreign policy agenda of Ethiopia and Egypt. Added to this, with the growing appearance of Ethiopia as an alternative military actor in the region (i.e., Northeast Africa), the Ethio-Egypt relations become at the crossroad between aggressive diplomacy and the military raid that would have the possibility to invite several actors with varieties of interests. Thus, all along the louds and softs of the two nations (i.e., Egypt and Ethiopia) foreign relations, not only, their bilateral relations are shaped by the powerfully systematized Nile water issue, but also cross-cuts the two nations' foreign policy matters at regional, continental and extra-continental levels in many ways. Thereupon, any foreign policy analysis of Ethiopia either in the Horn of Africa and/or in the Middle East or at any stage at a global level was and continued to be a major concern in the political platform of Egypt. In the same vein, Ethiopia's cross-border problem with the neighboring states such as, among others,

Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea, and/or its active role in the AU and/or IGAD is taken seriously by Egypt. Thus, in the Northeast Africa region ideological battle, Ethiopia's move to emerging as a new balancer, which would be the new normal in the region, would remain incomplete because of the demagoguery foreign policy approach of Cairo to accept Addis Ababa as a new actor in the region.

At the same time, it is equally remarkable to note that Ethiopia is the primary challenge for the policy of Egypt in the Horn of Africa in particular and the rest of the continent at large. Meaning, it is possible to argue that without the blessing of Ethiopia the policy of Egypt in countries surrounding Ethiopia would remain incomplete. This is the way that the long-standing water dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt was and continued to be the primary challenge for the diplomatic maneuvers of the two nations in addressing their foreign policy objectives.

Against this background, there are three major lines of arguments in the process of establishing the challenges of the changing realities of the Ethio-Egypt water diplomacy. The first line of argument illustrates the discussion along with the geopolitical design of the region together with actor-based justifications. The second line of argument focuses on the state-level power-reconfiguration trajectory. The third line of justification in the course of the Ethio-Egypt water diplomacy would be illustrated from the point of system structure (i.e., from the point of the Northeast Africa regional balance of power reconfiguration).

Arguably one of the reasons that complicated the diplomatic traditions between Ethiopia and Egypt has been the geopolitical relevance of the Northeast Africa and the Horn regions together with the active role of external security actors in the political scheme of the regions. Given this, Krampe, de Goor, *et al.* argued that "the tensions among Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan around the building of the GERD have become part of the larger geopolitical playing field in the Horn of Africa" (2020, p. vii) for global and emerging security actors.

It is also vital to note that the climate of the diversified interests of external security actors together with the tight diplomatic traffic between Cairo and Addis Ababa has stayed and will stay a lingering and seemingly never-ending security agenda in global politics. Added to this, based on security rhetoric fodder, the presence of the military hard wares of European countries, the United States, China, the Middle East, and Asian actors in the region would complicate the diplomatic deadlock between the two nations. Meant, the Nile water political turmoil together with the active military operation of various actors with their diversified interests can boil the diplomatic traffic between Ethiopia and Egypt. Thereupon, the initial water diplomacy battle between Ethiopia and Egypt gradually become more complicated and invited major global actors and turn out to be one of the global issues that test the foreign policy priorities of major global actors in the region. In view of this, "one of the major difficulties in the [water

diplomacy of] the Nile basin is the fact that the actors are multiple, distinct and sovereign" (Yohannes, 2008, p. 15).

To illustrate the global actors middling in the Ethio-Egypt water diplomacy, it is essential to remember, for instance, Donald Trump's call to "blow up" the Ethiopian dam (i.e., the GERD) in his October 2020 speech while declaring the Israel-Sudan normalization of relations. As a result of Trump's call, the GERD issue that has remained a big factor in driving the foreign policy and politics of Ethiopia and Egypt continued to be the figurehead diplomatic matters between the two nations more than ever before (Yimer and Subaşi, 2021, p. 67). In actual words, the longer the day to find a binding solution for the water complication in the region the more global actor's role increases in boiling the water dispute.

Additionally, despite the leadership was changed in the United States in 2021, the anti-Ethiopia sentiment which was commenced during the Trump administration remained unchanged even during the Biden administration. It is apparent that the undercurrent subject that made the United States turns its back against its long-time strategic ally in the Horn region, Ethiopia, stemmed from the interest of the former to influence the latter on the issue of the GERD. What this defined us is that the United States together with its western allies gives priority to the geopolitical vitality of Egypt around the Red Sea and Northeast Africa regions above the geopolitical value of Ethiopia for the America-lead political west in the Horn of Africa.

Despite the global actor's alignment and realignment either with Ethiopia or with Egypt, what is an irony here is that while Ethiopia shifted its diplomatic gear to the political east (i.e., China, Russia, Turkey, and Iran) to fill the western abandoned gap the American lead political west recurrently tried to create artificial political agenda to portray the country (i.e., Ethiopia) as a distant "other". To verify the American lead political west's "otherization" activities against Ethiopia it is sufficient to see posts of the American embassy website at Addis Ababa between October and November 2021. For instance, despite the situation being peaceful in Addis Ababa, one of the Embassy's posts on 22 December 2021 reads: "The security situation in Ethiopia remains concerning and can deteriorate without warning. The U.S. Embassy urges U.S. citizens in Ethiopia to depart using commercially available options." On the top of this, there is a warning that reads "the Embassy is unlikely to be able to assist U.S. citizens in Ethiopia with departure if commercial options become unavailable" (U.S. Embassy Ethiopia, 22 December 2021).

But, it seems that the primary motive of the United States over Ethiopia is to urge the latter, by any means, to accept the colonial agreement on the Nile water that undermines the upper riparian nation's claim (i.e., fair and equitable water utilization). Yet, it is also evident that Washington is nurturing the Nile issue as a bargaining tool to influence Ethiopia from establishing a good social, political, and economic climate with the emerging Asian and Middle East actors. Thus, a controversy over cross-boundary resources

such as, among others, rivers paves the way for the escalation of regional tension on the one hand and aggravation of geopolitical competition among global security actors on the other. This means the escalation of the political tension between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile River invites geopolitical competition among the global security actors on the premises and the risk of water war tension on the flip side (Krampe, de Goor, *et al.*, 2020, p. 12). For instance, Egypt time and again threatens to use its military might to secure its water share. Here, it is important to note that the Egyptian concept of the so-called “water share” had a colonial origin that leave zero percent for the upper riparian nations (Swain, 2011, p. 691).

However, the simultaneous engagements of foreign military actors (from Europe, Asia, America, China, and the Gulf region) with varieties of interests would possibly deplete the security situation of Northeast Africa and the Horn of Africa regions by inviting proxy wars. Thus, the active backing of the regional tensions through nurturing the Nile issue by global actors would cause potential regional instability that ends up with regional instability, massive migration, social disintegration, and refuge formation that would jeopardize the security of the region. This in turn will have serious ramifications for international security (Yohannes, 2008, p. 28).

The other challenge in the process of the Ethio-Egypt water diplomacy is the trajectory on the system level power-reconfiguration of the Northeast African region. The behavior and Attitude of the Northeast African nations towards the political dynamics of the geographically proximate nations has always been a means for the system-level power reconfiguration of the Northeast Africa region. The system-level power reconfirmation, in turn, challenges the course of the Ethio-Egypt water diplomacy. In abstraction, how Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan project-specific patterns of power-reconfiguration beyond their national boundary in the form of alignment, realignment, rivalry, and entanglement has been challenging the Ethio-Egyptian water diplomacy.

On the specific patterns of the system-level power reconfiguration of the Northeast Africa region, the behavior of relations between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan has a vital role in determining the nature of the system of the region. However, it is very essential to understand that in the patterns of the Northeast Africa system reconfiguration, arguably, Sudan oscillated between the systemic actors of the region (i.e., Ethiopia and Egypt). Meaning, in the northeast Africa subsystem, based on their behavior and attitude, while both Ethiopia and Egypt are identified as conservative and resistant to the political patterns of the region (this is legitimate because of their inflexible political approach on the Nile River), Sudan has always been identified as an unstable oscillating actor in the sub-system because of (e.g., ideological, identity, and geopolitical) influences.

The oscillating behavior and attitude of Sudan on the northeast Africa region subsystem could be seen as a good example to show the changing nature of transnational derives and the inconsistency of the nature of alignment in the Northeast Africa region

subsystem. Thereupon, as Sudan's political leaders support the case of Egypt, its foreign policy becomes antitheses to Ethiopia's cause. At other times, when Sudan's political leaders appear to support Ethiopia's cause, its foreign policy becomes antitheses to Egypt's cause.

Against this background, throughout much of the cold war era, the Ethio-Sudan relations were more belligerent than cooperative. The two nations were active in organizing militant insurgent groups one against the other. Ethiopia's allegation against Khartoum for the 1995 president Hosni Mubarak's assassination attempt further complicated the two nation's belligerency (Young, May 2020, p. 3). However, the hostile attitude started to shift for three reasons: (i) when the U.S. sanctioned Sudan for supporting terrorism; (ii) when the International Criminal Court (ICC) presented allegations against al-Bashir's war crime and a crime against humanity at Darfur in 2009; (iii) when al-Bashir's international legitimacy decline because of the above two allegations (Mulugeta, July 2014, p. 17).

The isolation of Bashir from international politics together with the failure of Egypt to provide sufficient political support to al-Bashir's cause; forced the latter to develop a trust deficit in Egypt and developed a rapprochement policy towards Ethiopia. Thereupon, al-Bashir declined his adherence to the 1929 and 1959 colonial agreement over the Nile water. In March 2012 al-Bashir announced that he has "supported construction [of] the Renaissance Dam" (Young, May 2020, p. 11). This three hundred sixty degrees twist on the policy of Sudan over the Nile water disappointed Egypt while it pleased Ethiopia. However, the friendly gesture between Ethiopia and Sudan would not be a long-lasting event in the Northeast Africa subsystem because as al-Bashir was toppled by a popular uprising in April 2019, Khartoum made the same flip-flop. In abstraction, the post-al-Bashir transitional government returned the Ethio-Sudan relations to the traditional hardline and aggressive approach. The post-al-Bashir Ethio-Sudan belligerency become more complicated when the latter militarily took control of Al-Fasheqa, a fertile agricultural area in Gonder: Northwestern Ethiopia (Yimer, February 12, 2021).

However, despite the oscillating nature of Sudan in the Northeast Africa subsystem, Ethiopia and Egypt always see in a wary eye on the subsystem. The unwavering belligerent attitudes between Ethiopia and Egypt have been recurrently challenging the peaceful water diplomacy between the two nations. Additionally, it caused a recurrent broken order in the Northeast Africa and Horn of Africa regions.

The Northeast Africa subsystem patterns of alignment, realignment, cooperation, rivalry, and entanglement amid the cycle of Ethiopia-Egypt-Sudan have also challenged the general characteristics of the Nile water diplomacy. The aggressive pattern of the Northeast Africa subsystem together with the involvement of global actors and their rivalry, additionally, made the Northeast Africa and the Horn of Africa regions a safe

haven for the involvement of non-state militant actors in shaping the political, cultural, religious, and geopolitical behaviors of the regions. The multiplicity of actors in the subsystem, in turn, complicated the Ethio-Egypt water diplomacy.

The divergence of state level-interests (i.e., ideological, identity, hegemonic, and resources) in the Northeast Africa regional subsystem has also been causing polarization of geopolitical frictions in the region. The questions of ideology, identity, resources, and hegemonic frictions in the subsystem sometimes escalate into violent and non-violent conflicts. Thereupon, for any kind of subversive and strategic actions, in the subsystem, there is an equal and comparable counter subversive and strategic reaction. These uncompromising attitudes in the Northeast Africa regional subsystem among the Northeast Africa regional actors harden the unfolding water diplomacy between Ethiopia and Egypt.

### **Prospects**

In the dynamics of the Ethiopia-Egypt disagreement over the Nile water, despite several international negotiations having been conducted, there is arguably slight progress in deescalating the long-standing water dispute between the two nations. Discussions directed by the U.S. state department, which was later joined by the European Union and the United Nations, for instance, concluded by scoring few achievements (Polakovic, July 13, 2021). While there exists a degree of optimism as the three countries (i.e., Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan) signed the Khartoum Declaration of Principles (DoP) in March 2015 (Mohyeldeen, February 12, 2021), most of the consensus on the filling and operations of the dam remain in vain. Subsequently, the narrow hope to find a solution through negotiations deteriorated day by day, and the hope of optimism was gradually overshadowed by an attitude of pessimism.

As tension runs high, in the region, international mediators try to prevent the outbreak of water war. However, the inflexible behavior from both Cairo and Addis Ababa remained a challenge for prospective international negotiators. Egypt time and again, for instance, vowed not to allow the dam to reduce its water share while Ethiopia equally vowed equitable and fair water sharing, and associate the construction of the GERD with the national development project that would never harm the downstream nations. The uncompromising attitudes of the two nations over the usage of the Nile water, eventually, raised the pessimism to find binding solutions at least in the very near future.

Additionally, despite the Security Council over and over again encourages Egypt, and Ethiopia, to find a solution through negotiations at the “invitation of the Chairperson of the African Union (AU) to finalize expeditiously the text of a mutually acceptable and binding agreement on the filling and operation of the GERD, within a reasonable time frame,” (Reuters, September 15, 2021) yet, it is not clear whether Egypt and Ethiopia



will be able to resolve the standoff between the two sides over the filling and operation of the dam.

With this in mind, while the degree of prospect pessimism augmented to address the Nile complication through negotiation, Egypt, again and again, vowed to consider other options to address the water question. In June 2020, a couple of months before Hamdok's phone conversation with Trump, for instance, Sameh Shoukry said that "due to Ethiopia's obstinacy in reaching a negotiated settlement, Egypt was now considering other options for resolving the dispute" (Mohyeldeen, February 12, 2021). Shoukry's announcement reflects the gray and gloomy prospects of the two nation's water diplomacy. Indeed, his announcement does not help to build optimism for the negotiation process. Rather, it would push opponents of the agreement to take the opportunity to voice pessimism over-optimism in the negotiation process.

The recurrent failure of the two countries to reach a conclusive accord despite holding several negotiations proved that the prospect of diplomatic talks between the two nations will be more complicated. Although some onlookers say that the possibility to reach a binding agreement is not very far, some other spectators have expressed their frustration noting the gloomy prospect to reach a conclusive accord shortly. Whereby, the inflexibility and the general historical trends in the two nation's water diplomacy could reflect that the technical negotiations have turned into a political deadlock. The following three factors possibly show the current political deadlock that will support the gloomy prospect of the Ethiopia-Egypt water diplomacy.

*(i) The [two] parties entered the negotiations with different needs and objectives. These different positions have historical roots and are part of the respective countries' traditional approaches to Nile Basin management; (ii) The GERD is situated in a geopolitical hotspot. The region is turning into a competition stage for external actors over its natural resources, such as oil, natural gas, hydropower, and precious metals. It is a region evincing a number of overlapping conflicts, with alliances forming across conflicts that are becoming hard to separate. The region also hosts external armed forces from over a dozen countries, including the United States, France, and China. This creates partisanship in terms of which country external actors support, and; (iii) The domestic costs of the negotiations for the [two] countries are high. State leaders tied their own hands in the negotiation process by adopting nationalist rhetoric to make domestic gains. The political climate is also fragile, with intrastate and border disputes leading to waning trust and increased accusations of meddling (Attia and Saleh, July 2021, p. 1).*

The dubious prospect of comprehensive water deals and its possible outcome could be further traffic of aggressive diplomatic campaigns one-another and extension of talks which are overshadowed by a trust deficit. However, such kind of approach-which could



never result in a desirable outcome for the two nations' water complications- would risk the diplomacy of the two nations in particular and the security situations of the broader Northeast Africa region in general.

## Conclusion

In the superior-subordinate hierarchical order of the Nile River, the subordinate has used approaches such as, among others, legal, discursive, individual leader's experience, global and regional geopolitical shifts as a means to challenge the Egypt-led power order over the region. In the process of challenging the Egypt-led order, the consecutive double-digit economic growth in Ethiopia in the 2000s has helped Addis Ababa to charge a more 'competitive' and 'assertive' policy over the Nile River against the Egypt-led hegemonic order. Apparently, the political experience of the late Ethiopian Prime Minister (i.e., Meles Zenawi) had possibly helped to challenge the Egypt-led order on the Nile River. Given the fact that "Grandiose leaders surrounded by like-minded advisors are more likely to challenge", (Balci, 2019, 16) the 20 years of political experience of Melese Zenawi's role is more visible in challenging the long-standing superior-subordinate order over the Nile River by preaching the discourse of 'equitable and fair' water resource sharing and launching the GERD on the Blue Nile in 2011. Furthermore, the signing of the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) in 2010 and the Declaration of Principles in 2015 at Entebbe and Khartoum respectively also laid remarkable phases in the process of challenging the Egypt-led order over the Nile River.

Arguably one of the reasons that complicated the diplomatic traditions between Ethiopia and Egypt has been the geopolitical relevance of the Northeast Africa and the Horn regions together with the active role of external security actors in the political scheme of the regions. Given this, Krampe, de Goor, *et al.* asserted that "the tensions among Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan around the building of the GERD have become part of the larger geopolitical playing field in the Horn of Africa" (2020, p. vii) for global and emerging security actors.

On the other hand, as tension run high, in the region, international mediators try to prevent the outbreak of water war. However, the inflexible behavior from both Cairo and Addis Ababa remained a challenge for prospective international negotiators.

In abstraction, if Cairo refuses to accept the principle of 'equitable and fair' water resource sharing, how the prospect order of the Nile River can be defined. Will Cairo rebuild its dominant order over the Nile River? Although the probability of its success is 'one in a million' there will be trials from Cairo to regain the status quo of its exclusive dominant position on the Nile River. However, as a highly possible scenario — Egypt will give a say to the upstream countries and will accept the inevitable realities of 'equitable and fair' water sharing as mentioned in Article IV Paragraph I of the 2015 Khartoum declaration.

## References

1. Al Jazeera. (2020). Ethiopia's Abiy hails 'historic' start of disputed dam filling. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/ethiopia-abiy-hails-historic-start-disputed-dam-filling-200722144600826.html>.
2. Anadolu Agency. (2015). Kenya thanks Egypt for anti-cancer support. Retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/health/kenya-thanks-egypt-for-anti-cancer-support/84153>.
3. Anadolu Agency. (2018). In Cairo, South Sudan leader seeks Arab League membership. Retrieved from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/in-cairo-s-sudan-leader-seeks-arab-leaguemembership/1086597>.
4. Attia, H., & Saleh, M. (July 2021). The political deadlock on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) Focus Africa.
5. Balci, A. (2019). A three-level analysis of Turkey's crisis with the U.S.-led Order. *Insight Turkey*, 21(4), 13–24.
6. Daily News Egypt. (2020). Egypt's Foreign Minister full speech on GERD at UNSC. Retrieved from <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2020/06/30/egypts-foreign-minister-full-speech-at-unscon-gerd/>.
7. Di Nunzio, J. (2013). Conflict on the Nile: The future of trans boundary water disputes over the world's longest river. *Future Directions International*. Retrieved from <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/conflict-on-the-nile-the-future-of-transboundary-water-disputes-over-the-world-s-longest-river/>.
8. Egypt Today. (2020). Egypt's FM Shoukry to embark in African tour to deliver message from Sisi. Retrieved from <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/82670/Egypt%E2%80%99s-FM-Shoukry-to-embark-in-African-tour-to-deliver>.
9. Ethiopian National Archive and Library Agency (ENALA). (1902). Ethiopia-Somalia Frontier. 17-2-268-02A, Treaties between the United Kingdom and Ethiopia and Between the United Kingdom, Italy, and Ethiopia relative to the frontiers between the Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. ENALA.
10. Gizaw, M. (2014). International rivers should know GERD won't be delayed even for a single minute. *Tigray Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.tigraionline.com/articles/exposing-ngos.html>.
11. Kimenyi, M. S., & Mbaku, J. M. (2015). The limits of the new 'Nile Agreement'. *Brookings*. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2015/04/28/the-limits-of-the-new-nile-agreement/>.
12. Krampe, F., Van de Goor, L., Barnhoorn, A., Smith, E., & Smith, D. (2020). *Water security and governance in the Horn of Africa*. SIPRI Policy Paper No. 54. SIPRI.
13. Middle East Observer. (2017). Al-Sisi visited Kenya amid Egypt's excessive activities with Ethiopia's neighboring countries. Retrieved from <https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2017/02/20/al-sisi-visited-kenya-amid-egypts-excessive-activities-with-ethiopias-neighboring-countries/>.

14. Mohyeldeen, S. (February 12, 2021). The dam that broke open an Ethiopia-Egypt dispute. *Carnegie Middle East Center*. Retrieved from <https://carnegie-mec.org/2021/02/12/dam-that-broke-open-ethiopia-egypt-dispute-pub-83867>.
15. Morsy, A., & Alaa El-Din, M. (2019). Egypt's Sisi says 'dams on the Nile would have never been built was it not for the impact of 2011. *Ahramonline*. Retrieved from <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/347744/Egypt/Politics-/Egypts-Sisi-says-dams-on-the-Nile-would-have-never.aspx>.
16. Mulugeta, K. (July 2014). *The role of regional powers in the field of peace and security: The case of Ethiopia*. The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
17. Polakovic, G. (July 13, 2021). Water dispute on the Nile River could destabilize the region. Retrieved from <https://news.usc.edu/188414/nile-river-water-dispute-filling-dam-egypt-ethiopia-usc-study/>.
18. Reuters. (September 15, 2021). U.N. Council urges Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan to restart dam talks. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-council-urges-egypt-ethiopia-sudan-restart-dam-talks-2021-09-15/>.
19. Salman, M. A. (2013). The Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement: A peacefully unfolding African spring? *Water International*, 38(1), 17-29.
20. State Information Service. (2017). Agreement on Declaration of Principles between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan on the GERDP. Retrieved from <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/121609/Agreement-on-Declaration-of-Principles-between-Egypt%2C-Ethiopia-and--Sudan-on-the-GERDP?lang=en-us>.
21. Swain, A. (2011). Challenges for water sharing in the Nile Basin: Changing geo-politics and changing climate. *Hydrological Sciences Journal*, 56(4), 687-702.
22. Tawfik, R. (2015). Revisiting hydro-hegemony from a benefit sharing perspective: The case of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. *Germen Development Institute*.
23. U.S. Embassy Ethiopia. (22 December, 2021). Retrieved from <https://et.usembassy.gov/security-message-security-situation-and-commercial-air-availability-from-addis-ababa/>.
24. Wirtschafter, J. (2019). Egypt water anxiety grows over Ethiopia dam on Nile. *AP News*. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/25fe417a2419c4cacdd72643eba3e9ef>.
25. Yimer, N. A., and Subaşı, T. (July 2021). Trump's securitization 'Speech Act' on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). A risk on the Ethiopia-Egypt water diplomacy. *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, 36, 66-82.
26. Yimer, N. A. (February 12, 2021). All-out-war between Ethiopia and Sudan on the doorstep? *Politics Today*. Retrieved from <https://politicstoday.org/all-out-war-between-ethiopia-and-sudan-on-the-doorstep/>.
27. Yohannes, O. (2008). *Water resources and inter-riparian relations in the Nile Basin: The search for an integrative discourse*. State University of New York.
28. Young, J. (May 2020). *Conflict and cooperation: Transitions in modern Ethiopian-Sudanese relations*. HSBA Briefing Paper. HSBA.

29. Zane, D. (2020). Nile Dam row: Egypt and Ethiopia generate heat but no power. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53327668>.
30. Zenawi, M. (2013). Egyptian politicians caught plotting how to attack Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Retrieved from <https://www.meleszenawi.com/egyptian-politicians-caught-plotting-how-to-attack-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam-video/>.