

ETHIOPIA, EGYPT AND SUDAN: THE GERD AT THE HEART OF A GEOPOLITICAL CRISIS

POSITION OF THE PROBLEM

The "Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam" is a dam under construction in Ethiopia on the Blue Nile near the border with Sudan, in the Benishangul-Gumuz -Gumuz regional state. With an installed capacity of 6,450 MW, it is expected to be the largest hydroelectric dam in Africa. The project, made public on 31 March 2011, started on 28 May 2013 and construction is expected to last until 2022. Ethiopia has launched the construction of numerous dams to develop irrigated agriculture and the hydroelectric potential of a country that lacks energy.

Since the start of the project, tensions have been growing between Ethiopia and Egypt and Sudan. The main formal differences between the parties concern the nature of the future agreement (binding or non-binding), the retention and release of water by the GERD during periods of drought and low rainfall, the dispute settlement mechanism (international arbitration or diplomatic facilitation) and future developments upstream of the dam.

Ethiopia is particularly reluctant to make commitments on future developments on the Nile and argues that the current negotiations are about GERD operations and not about the (future) use of Nile waters. For Ethiopia, the filling of the dam is a necessary step for the further construction of the structure, which it considers to be under its sovereignty.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The latest developments in the dispute between the three countries relate to the filling of the reservoirs. Ethiopia is building on its 2020 momentum and plans to fill the dam for the second time during the next rainy season (June-July) in 2021. Egypt and Sudan have condemned this move. The previous filling of the dam in June-July 2020 led to an escalation of tension between Egypt and Ethiopia.

Negotiations between the three countries on the dam (4-6 April 2021) ended in failure. The negotiations, which began in 2020 under the aegis of the African Union (AU) with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, are continuing with the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Félix Tshisekedi, who holds the AU presidency for the year 2021. The AU's mediation follows that of the Trump administration, which was seen as too favourable to the Egyptians and was rejected by Ethiopia. For the time being, the AU mediation has prevailed, even though Egypt and Sudan want the European Union (EU), the United Nations and the United States to act as facilitators, if not mediators, in the process.

The Ethiopian government therefore undertook to finance the construction of the dam alone. Special contributions were requested from government officials and all Ethiopians for this purpose. The government issued vouchers for the financing of the dam. Almost all Ethiopians participated in the construction of the dam, including through a reduction in public salaries.

ISSUES AND REPRESENTATIONS

The aim is to reach an agreement between the three parties on the continued filling of the dam, which is expected to take another four to seven years, depending on the volume of water retained during each filling.

In addition to the technical issues involved in filling the dam's reservoirs, the talks have political, historical and symbolic aspects that are essential for the authorities of the three countries. The three parties, particularly Egypt and Ethiopia, have repeatedly stated that the Nile is a vital issue for their countries and their people.

Ethiopia stresses that the achievement of its development goals to lift millions of Ethiopians out of poverty depends on GERD. It makes it an object of sovereignty and also a symbol of the revival project of the Ethiopian nation with its thousand-year history. It is important to note that in the face of the refusal of international donors, notably the World Bank, the structure was built with internal resources. Special contributions were requested from civil servants and all Ethiopians. The Ethiopian government demanded that local products be used in the construction, which was entrusted to the Italian company Salini Impregilo, which had already built dams in the country. Ethiopia considers that it has "natural rights" to the waters of the Blue Nile, which provides about 80% of the Nile's water during the rainy season. In a country where the central government is highly contested with many hotbeds of tension, the GERD is one of the few issues that can build consensus and national unity. The assertion of sovereignty over the Blue Nile and the filling of the dam attract popular support. While internally, the federal government is violently fighting the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), it would be inappropriate for it to give the impression that it is weak vis-à-vis external powers (Egypt and Sudan) on the issue of the GERD, which is an object of national pride.

Egypt considers that beyond the socio-economic importance of the Nile waters, it has "historical rights" over a river that is the cradle of its civilisation and of which it is a "gift". This is a matter of national pride. Cairo claims that the livelihood of millions of Egyptians is at stake in this issue. As a regional power, the Egyptian regime neither wants to give grist to its potential domestic critics nor to give the impression of lacking political power on an issue it considers essential to its survival.

Sudan, on the other hand, is in a military-dominated transition period, with a civilian Prime Minister striving to play a more prominent role than the one assigned to him. The issue of GERD has therefore become a matter of national military-civilian contention.

Over the past two months, Sudan's position seems to have shifted from its previous neutrality to one that sides with Cairo. It is possible that the dam issue has also contributed to the rise - or even crystallisation - of tensions around the Ethiopia-Sudan border dispute, which could partly explain Sudan's rapprochement with Egypt on the GERD issue.

More than anything, the symbolic dimension is important: the Egyptian hegemony over the region is being challenged, while the dam is a symbol of national pride in Ethiopia.

Appendix 1

The Nile is a river of about 6,700 km in length, and together with the Amazon, it is the longest river in the world. It is the result of the meeting of the White Nile and the Blue Nile. The White Nile has its source in Lake Victoria (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania) and the Blue Nile originates from Lake Tana (Ethiopia). The two branches join at Khartoum in Sudan, and the Nile flows into the Mediterranean forming a delta in northern Egypt. Including its two branches, the Nile flows through Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt. It also flows through Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and its watershed also includes Eritrea through its tributary the Tekeze.



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