

WHY ARE DIPLOMATIC TACTICS
NOT EFFICACIOUS IN CREATING
POLITICAL CONCURRENCE
BETWEEN TWO STATES WHEN
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The lack of access to clean water is one of the most critical humanitarian issues facing Africa. With the WHO reporting that only 16% of the sub-Saharan population has access to sanitary drinking water through a household connection, numerous riparian African nations neighboring the Nile river have demonstrated an increasing interest in the management of water resources.¹ However, the use of transboundary waters, such as the Nile, can create “intricate diplomatic challenges... [leaving] states in asymmetric upstream/downstream relationships, at a time when pressures on the world's water supplies are increasing substantially.”² This is evident in the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia regarding Ethiopia’s construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). In 2011, the Ethiopian government announced it's \$4.8 billion plan to construct a hydroelectric dam, capable of generating over 5,000MW of electricity, on the Nile.³ With 83% of Ethiopians lacking access to continuous electricity, the construction of GERD can be seen as part of a wider scheme by the Ethiopian government to promote the development of the country.⁴ However, the Egyptian government believes that GERD will reduce the amount of water flowing from the Nile to Egypt. The Nile provides nearly 86% of “Egypt’s freshwater for agriculture, a major component of the Egyptian economy, along with water for industrial production and sewage treatment,”⁵ thus making the Nile “not only ... an economic lifeline but ... also ... a security issue of the highest order.”⁶ Although over 85%⁵ of the Nile originates from Ethiopia, Egyptian hegemony to the Nile remains; the 1929

agreement between Egypt and the United Kingdom, on behalf of Sudan, “declared their natural and historic rights to water from the Nile.”³ Multilateral diplomatic tactics that have been utilized in order to resolve this political issue are failing; in 2020 alone Ethiopia has refused to sign a draft agreement initialled by Egypt while Egypt has rejected Ethiopia’s proposition to cover the first two years of filling GERD.⁷ Furthermore, the state of these diplomatic tactics are confronted by the possibility of both states going to war; in 2016, former Egyptian president Muhammad Morsi suggested different methods for the destruction of GERD including supporting the anti-Ethiopian government rebels.⁸ Thus, this has prompted me to investigate the following political issue: why are diplomatic tactics not efficacious in creating political concurrence between two states when an international shared resource is primarily claimed by a single state? This political issue is one that is worthy of investigation as it impacts multiple domains of global politics: power, sovereignty, legitimacy, justice, development, peace, conflict, violence, and non-violence. Furthermore, through my engagement activities (explained in the forthcoming paragraph), this political issue will be explored through the following levels of analysis: international, regional, and national.

As an Ethiopian citizen, since the announcement of the construction of GERD, I have been exposed to the patriotic and nationalist ideals present in the daily conversations between my family members, close friends, and other Ethiopian citizens. From these

conversations spanning nearly a decade, the realist beliefs present in the aforementioned people were more clear; a lot of them were willing to go to war over the dispute with Egypt regarding the construction of GERD. This immediate jump to war, resembling the concept of *realpolitik*, made me wonder if all other diplomatic (i.e peaceful) measures had been exhausted. Were the diplomatic measures that were implemented not effective? Why? To explore and ultimately answer such questions and avoid any bias, I interviewed three Ethiopians and two Egyptians who are cognizant regarding this political issue over Zoom (due to COVID-19 mitigations) and asked each six to seven open-ended questions to explore and elaborate on matters as they saw fit. The interviewees provided me with insight regarding the legalities, alternative solutions, and unique perspectives to this political issue: Berhanu Tesfaye (Ethiopian), former associate professor of Law at Mekelle University; Abenezer Worku (Ethiopian), water science researcher based in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia; Zelalem Abiy (Ethiopian), GERD operator; Karim Elsaadany (Egyptian), hydro-political analyst; and Mustafa Rashad (Egyptian), political writer on Egyptian affairs.

During my interview with Mr. Worku, when asked about what he believes is causing these diplomatic measures to be ineffective, he solely blamed these poor results on Egypt's desire to remain the regional hegemony and their stubborn attitude towards any sentiment that would deprive them of their 'historic rights' associated with the Nile.⁹ Furthermore, he emphasized that Egypt is acting in such a manner out of fear that Ethiopia will take over

as the next regional hegemony⁹ as it has the fastest growing economy in Africa, averaging a broad-based growth of 9.8% a year from 2009 to 2019.¹⁰ The consequences of such actions that Mr. Worku suggests that Egypt are pursuing against Ethiopia can be interpreted from a neo-marxist perspective; when a dominant nation (i.e. Egypt) seeks to control a peripheral nation (i.e. Ethiopia), “what yields in consequence is the tension to rebel against the oppressor by dependent states in order to agitate for an equitable and fair share of national resources.”¹¹ Thus, theoretically speaking, Egypt’s need to remain a hydro-hegemony in this region will inherently lead to difficulty in resolving this political issue via diplomatic means. However, it should be noted that Mr. Worku’s aforementioned claims cannot be validated by any hard evidence, but are just assumptions as to why Egypt is acting in a hostile manner. Additionally, in my interview with Mr. Tesfaye, when asked the same question as Mr. Worku, he responded in a similar yet more pragmatic manner; Egypt’s continuous reference to the 1902 Anglo-Ethiopian treaty as means to stop the operation of GERD has not allowed for these diplomatic measures to function as intended¹², as shown by Egypt’s response to the 2015 Declaration of Principles on GERD.¹⁴ My conversation with Mr. Tesfaye prompted me to further research this treaty and its validity as a mechanism to stop the operation of GERD by the Egyptians. This treaty was signed between Great Britain (representing Sudan) and Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia in 1902.¹³ Article three of this treaty prohibits Ethiopia from exploiting the Nile (i.e. participating in any construction

that arrests the flow of the Nile), which is one of the reasons Egypt is against the construction and operation of GERD. However, it can be argued that this treaty is defective as it contains a defect of consent, thus making it invalidated by the affected party; Ethiopia signed this treaty under colonial pressure which could evince psychological coercion.¹³ Furthermore, as both Great Britain and Ethiopia are known to follow a dualist approach in validating treaties and the fact “this treaty was never ratified by the British Parliament or by the Ethiopian Crown Council”, it is not a legally binding document.¹³ Ultimately, from my interviews with Mr. Worku and Mr. Tesfaye, I am now further informed of the theoretical and pragmatic reasons behind why diplomatic tactics, such as the 2015 Declaration of Principles on GERD, are not effective in creating political concurrence between Ethiopia and Egypt. My discussion with Mr. Tesfaye has exposed me to certain legalities associated with this political issue and how the Egyptians have illogically utilized these legalities to stop the operation of GERD. Furthermore, although based on assumptions, my interview with Mr. Worku has allowed me to associate neo-marxist theory to why most diplomatic tactics that are being utilized are inherently destined to be ineffective.

Although the Egyptians that I had interviewed (Mr. Elsaadany and Mr. Rashad) shared a similar stance to their Ethiopian counterparts on how effective a diplomatic approach to resolve this political issue has been, they both described different reasons as to

what has caused diplomacy to fall short. In my interview with Mr. Elsaadany, he emphasised that one of the main reasons as to why diplomatic approaches such as the 2015 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)¹⁶ have not led to bilateral political concurrence is due to Ethiopia's history of conflict over transboundary waters with other riparian nations.¹⁵ Mr. Elsaadany is specifically referring to Ethio-Kenyan water conflict in 2011. Ethiopia's new dam on the Omo River, Gilgel Gibe III, exacerbated the food security crisis present in Kenya and Ethiopia, consequently leading to the death of 34 individuals due to conflict between the Kenyan Turkana tribe and the Ethiopian Dassanech, Nyangatom, and Mursi.¹⁷ Although past actions do not determine future actions, they do provide a relative guideline as to what can occur, hence why Mr. Elsaadany believes that diplomatic measures to solve this political issue are not and will not be effective due to Ethiopia's past conflicts over transboundary waters and the possibility for that to ensue between Egypt and Ethiopia.¹⁵ On the other hand, my interview with Mr. Rashad brought up the idea that a diplomatic resolution is not possible when Ethiopia's GERD directly impacts the livelihood of millions of Egyptian citizens.¹⁸ According to Al Jazeera, GERD would reduce the supply of water from the Nile to Egypt by 11 to 19 billion m³/yr, potentially leaving two million Egyptians without income.¹⁹ Although I empathize with Mr. Rashad, his aforementioned claim ignores the Ethiopian perspective regarding the beneficial impact of GERD on millions of Ethiopians. GERD will lead to a 200% increase in electricity availability in Ethiopia, create

thousands of jobs, and have a substantial effect on the life prospects of Ethiopians who are plagued by poverty.²⁰ However, due to the inherent ambiguity present in this argument, one is faced with deciding which nation faces the gravest consequences from the operation or stoppage of GERD. Furthermore, such ambiguity is also present in certain international instruments utilized to balance competing riparian positions. For instance, the Helsinki Rules and Equitable Utilization Theory, which are “comprehensive codification[s] of international river basin principles [where] each riparian state is entitled to a ‘reasonable and equitable share’ of the international watercourse.”²¹ What is considered ‘reasonable and equitable’ is heavily dependant on relevant factors such as “geography, past and present utilization, economic and social needs.”²¹ However, such diplomatic tactics can be deemed as ineffective due to the inherent ambiguities present. Who decides which factors carry greater significance against another? Egypt may see that it’s ‘historical rights’ to the Nile as carrying greater significance compared to Ethiopia’s need to provide stable electricity to a majority of its citizens. All in all, my interviews with Mr. Elsaadany and Mr. Rashad helped me comprehend some of the reasons behind why Egypt is hostile towards GERD: 1) the potential for violence and 2) the negative impact on the livelihood of millions of Egyptian citizens. Furthermore, the lack of perspective that Mr. Rashad presented during our interview has revealed that one major source of political nonconcurrence is the ambiguity associated with the diplomatic tactics being utilized.

From my aforementioned interviews, there is a general consensus regarding the ineffectiveness of diplomatic tactics in resolving this political issue. This left me wondering what other peaceful alternatives are left? Although quite biased towards the Ethiopian school of thought, my interview with Mr. Abiy gave me further insight into such diplomatic alternatives; he suggested that if Egypt was truly concerned about the impact that GERD would have on the water flow that they receive, they should invest in desalination for freshwater and come up with an Aquifer Storage Recovery scheme.²² As I felt that his suggestions were only towards the Egyptians, I asked him if he had any other diplomatic measures that would apply to both parties. He directed me towards the Rowland-Ostrom Framework for Common Pool Resource Management, an approach that considers the incentives, material capabilities of both countries and the cultural, social and political complexity of the GERD.²²

To conclude, although limited by the lack of a non-riparian perspective, my engagement in this political issue has made me aware of several reasons as to why diplomatic tactics have not been efficacious in creating political concurrence between Ethiopia and Egypt: 1) the fear caused by the potential for violence, 2) the negative impact on the livelihoods of both countries' citizens, 3) the lack of legal continuity, and 4) changes in the balance of geopolitical powers in the region.

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