

Water and security in the Nile River basin: an issue of future military conflict?

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The Nile draws its water from three rivers, the White Nile, the Blue Nile and the Atbara, and runs through eleven countries: Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, South Sudan, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Egypt when it finally reaches the Mediterranean Sea. The Nile River is the only major source of renewable water in Northern East Africa and guaranteeing access to this natural resource represents a vital political interest for most of the Nile basin countries. In the last decades water security has been further jeopardised by growing environmental degradation and climate change. Moreover, a general framework for political cooperation between riparian states for the management and usage of the Nile waters is so far missing, increasing the possibility of future military confrontations if access to the Nile waters will be further limited. This article firstly will provide a brief historical background of political agreements between riparian states regarding the management of the Nile waters, secondly it will focus on security matters, finally some conclusions on the future geopolitical scenario will be drawn.

Hydro political history of the Nile River

Nowadays tensions between riparian states regarding access and usage of the Nile waters date back to the colonial era when Northern East Africa was predominantly controlled by British imperial rule. In 1902 the first Nile Treaty was signed between Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea on one side and Egypt and Sudan on the other: still today this diplomatic document is a source of dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia due to linguistic interpretations and disagreements

about its validity. In 1929 the Nile Waters Agreement was signed between Egypt on one side and Great Britain on the other (this time the latter represented Sudan, Kenya, Uganda and today Tanzania). In the 1929 Agreement control of 96% of the flow was assigned to Egypt, the remaining part to Sudan; furthermore, Egypt obtain the right to veto upstream projects. When Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania became independent they denounced the Treaty, nevertheless Egypt managed to maintain control over future dam projects. The last colonial treaty dates back to 1959 when now independent Egypt and Sudan laid down the basis for co-management of the Nile further excluding the other upstream riparian states where the flow of the Nile originates.

More recently, political stabilization accompanied by economic and demographic growth have changed power dynamics in the Nile basin; consequently, past colonial treaties do not reflect anymore nowadays political equilibrium between upstream and downstream states. In 1997 upstream riparian nations founded with the Entebbe Agreement the Nile River Cooperative Framework (NRCF), followed in 1999 by the creation of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), a commission dedicated to the fair distribution of the Nile waters resources. The Entebbe Agreement, which entered into force in 2011, recognizes to upstream states the right to construct dams. Given the content of its provisions the Agreement is still not signed by both Egypt and Sudan.

Security in the Nile River basin

According to scholars it is possible to identify some “pressures” on the management of the Nile waters: the growing population in all riparian states and economic development. Even though economic growth is not uniform in all eleven states, surely it contributes to increasing water consumption for agriculture, livestock, and industrial production. Given the fact that the Nile waters are a closed and limited resource, countries can reduce their dependence by diversifying their economies. Today the only state that has reached a level of economic development that allows economic diversification is Egypt which is currently engaged in international commodity trade and imports around 60% of its total food needs.

In the Nile basin the concept of national security acquires a vast connotation: in fact, it refers not just to the State-centric concept of security but also to people-centric security. In other words, in the Nile basin national security is linked to access to freshwater and food, economic growth, sanitation and people wellbeing, environmental sustainability, energy production, political stability and fundamental rights protection. Studies and past experiences have clearly demonstrated that environmental stress and difficulty in accessing natural resources can increase ethnic and political tensions within or between states and even lead to military confrontations. Furthermore, it should be considered that countries in Northern East Africa are notoriously politically unstable, some of them are commonly defined fragile states. In this scenario, depletion of the Nile waters exacerbated by lack of cooperation between riparian states would surely favour tensions and political instability together with democracy deterioration and the spread of criminal activities.

In addition, Di Nunzio highlights how water management projects such as dams' construction and irrigation projects can be the source of both regional and internal conflict: building a dam often implies the displacement of large communities and most countries do not have effective internal governance that allows the government to extend the benefits deriving from these projects to larger portions of the national population.

Recent developments

Historical rivalries between Egypt and Ethiopia regarding the Nile waters have recently been exacerbated by the decision of the Ethiopian government to build the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Today the dam's construction has been completed while its filling procedures are still ongoing. Both Egypt and Sudan have strongly opposed its construction claiming that it would reduce water availability for agriculture, industry and hydropower production and further aggravate environmental issues such as desertification, costal erosion, and salinization.

Nowadays geopolitical scenario allows to draw two important conclusions. The first one is that a formal mechanism of cooperative management of this vital resource is still lacking, even though Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia agreed to cooperate in the NBI. The necessity to find an agreement on the GERD

functioning will hopefully push these states to reach improved forms of cooperation. Secondly, traditional Western donors who have always been reluctant to provide financial support to upstream countries for water projects (also because of Egypt strong influence) have been gradually substituted by new actors such as China, the Gulf States and India, this way disrupting power balance in the region.

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