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The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD): Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan push for cooperation

Michael Asiedu¹

The African Union (AU) held its 30th Summit from 22 – 29 January in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The central theme of the Summit was a clarion call to strengthen African unity and fight against corruption and the eradication of poverty on the continent. President Paul Kagame of Rwanda was elected the new AU chairperson at the Summit, however, it is a significant development that transpired on the sidelines of the Summit among Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan that this policy update seeks to address pursuant to an earlier published policy brief, *The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and geopolitical tension between Egypt and Ethiopia with Sudan in the mix.*²

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt, Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir and Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn all signaled their resolve to avoid misunderstandings cognizance of Ethiopia's construction of its dam, The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) during a sideline meeting at the Summit. A statement released by the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicated that, "we (the three country heads) have agreed to work as one on matters among the three countries, particularly on the construction of the GERD" (Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

Source of tension among Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan

GERD will be the largest hydro-electric power plant in Africa. Being constructed at a cost of \$4.7 billion (80 billion Ethiopian birr), it is anticipated to produce 6,000 megawatts of electricity. Sudan is positioned to benefit from its construction through importation of electricity from Ethiopia.

¹ Michael Asiedu is a Reseacher at the Global Political Trends Center (GPoT) – Istanbul Kultur University, Turkey.

² This policy brief gives a snapshot of the brewing tension surrounding the GERD and some of the regional geopolitical concerns as well as an alternative for a workable solution (Asiedu, 2018). Retrieved from

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Already, it is 60 percent complete and the filling of its reservoir could commence as early as this summer.

It is projected that the reservoir could take 5 to 15 years to completely fill during which stage downstream countries including Egypt's access to Nile waters could be diminished. Thus, Egypt is concerned that when the dam is operational and significantly during the initial stages of its filling it would receive less than its annual 55.5 billion cubic meters of Nile waters. This is the minimum quantity Egypt needs per year, the Nile supplies almost all of Egypt's freshwater, 85 percent from the White Nile and 15 percent from the Blue Nile.

Egypt already experiences some form of water shortages and so coupled with its significant dependence on agriculture it is projected that lack of enough access to Nile waters could be detrimental to it almost 100 million people. Disagreements surrounding the dam already prompted Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to indicate that the Nile was a matter of life and death for his country. Ethiopia on the other hand indicated it needed the dam to accelerate its onward economic progress.

Sudan who is alleged to have given its backing to Ethiopia in terms of the construction of the dam due to benefits it will acquire when the GERD is operational also has an ongoing dispute with Egypt concerning the ownership of the Hala'ib Triangle.

The Hala'ib Triangle is an area of land of about 20, 500 square kilometers on the Egyptian-Sudanese border. Both Countries have claimed ownership over the Hala'ib Triangle since Sudan gained independence from Britain in 1956. In the 1990s Egypt sent its military to the territory, however, the subsequent 20 decades witnessed a *détente*.

Tensions surrounding the land reignited in 2016 when Egypt signed a controversial agreement with Saudi Arabia to hand over two strategically significant Red Sea islands, Tiran and Sanafir to the latter. The agreement reworked the maritime border between the two countries and unilaterally acknowledged Egypt's sovereignty over the Hala'ib Triangle.

Subsequently, Sudan sent a letter to the United Nations registering its absolute objection of the deal between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to which Egyptian officials swiftly condemned the letter and re-emphasized the triangle as "Egyptian territory" (Adam, 2018).

The AU Summit sideline agreement among Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan

The three leaders, Al-Sisi, Desalegn and Al-Bashir as part of the agreement would meet once a year to put forward decisions regarding common areas of interest. A tripartite development fund

Map 1



institution would also be formed – it would serve as an instrument to strengthen the economic integration aim of building infrastructure such as a railway linking the three countries vis-à-vis trilateral relations among the three countries.

The leaders also mutually agreed on the procedures for future discussions concerning water resources with the construction of the GERD and Nile water resources as the central focus. They instructed their respective water and energy ministers to produce a report in one month that offered ways to resolve all outstanding concerns surrounding the GERD. Essentially, each country has a one-month deadline to submit a report based on its concerns regarding GERD – it is however, not clear who would be a neutral mediator or monitor should misunderstandings on the dam emerge again.

While this agreement struck on the fringes of the AU Summit is laudable and timely it should be viewed with caution as the three countries formed a similar tripartite committee in 2012 that sought to comprehend first the enormity of the GERD, its benefits and impacts on countries along the Nile. For instance, when the earlier tripartite committee was in operation Ethiopia and Sudan disagreed over a proposed baseline from which a study by French firms, BRL and Artelia were commissioned to assess the GERD’s environmental and economic impact. Owing to these disagreements amidst other technicalities in BRL and Artelia’s report, talks broke down.

Also, in March 2015, the three leaders signed in Khartoum a framework cooperation deal on the GERD but it again stalled due to unresolved differences surrounding the GERD. The three leaders could nonetheless use the “declaration of principles” in the Khartoum Framework to pave way for further diplomatic cooperation on the GERD which at the moment poses fears of a regional resource conflict.

Prime Minister Desalegn additionally indicated that, construction of the GERD “was never intended to harm any country but to fulfill vital electricity needs and enhance development cooperation in the region” (Maasho, 2018). This proposed agreements emanating from the AU sideline meeting among the three leaders has instantly reduced to some extent tensions among these countries and though commendable; a third party involvement to monitor the framework concerning the GERD would go a long way to mitigate future disagreements.

Monitoring the Agreement

While Egypt, Ethiopia and Egypt all have their individual capacities to pursue their trilateral/bilateral relations and diplomatic and economic goals among themselves, the concerns surrounding the GERD need a neutral monitor. Given the history of breakdown in talks surrounding earlier similar agreements, the three countries cannot afford a synonymous fate especially considering the fact that the dam’s reservoir could begin its filling this summer.

Significantly, just as this new agreement was struck on the sidelines of the 30th AU Summit, perhaps the AU could step in to monitor and encourage a workable framework particularly with regards to matters surrounding the GERD. The United Nations could as well be part of the monitoring process as Sudan has already raised its displeasure concerning disputes on the Hala'ib Triangle already. Essentially, these two bodies, the AU and UN are involved somehow with the countries already and so using them as the bedrocks to monitor the framework particularly with regards to the GERD is a win-win for all parties.

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CONTACT DETAILS

Global Political Trends (GPoT) Center

Istanbul Kültür University
Atakoy Campus, Bakirkoy
34 156 Istanbul, Turkey
www.gpotcenter.org
info@gpotcenter.org
Tel: +90 212 498 44 76/65
Fax: +90 212 498 44 05

