



Tackling the Challenges of Peacebuilding in the Eastern Nile Basin: A Regional Security Complex Approach

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The Eastern Nile Basin (ENB) is part of the wider Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), which includes Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, Egypt, and Eritrea. More than 280 million people in the region rely on the Nile waters. As a result, access to the Nile has become a national security matter across riparian countries. To address the demands of its growing population, Ethiopia embarked on the construction of an enormous dam—the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile in 2011.¹ Construction of the GERD could have occasioned cooperation and greater integration of the region. Instead, it has fueled mutual mistrust, enmity, and confrontation.²

This paper aims to understand the ENB's commonly shared peacebuilding challenges and makes recommendations by analyzing the dynamics of security interdependence between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan. As an overarching security complex of the Nile Basin, the ENB has been beset by multifarious peacebuilding challenges: porous boundaries (contested borders); the abundant presence of small arms and light weapons (SALW); and internal instability within nations. Concrete examples include the contested territory of "al-Fashaga" (Ethiopia-Sudan) and Halayeb Triangle (Sudan-Egypt); the proliferation

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of SALW along the Ethiopian-Sudan frontier; and the ongoing internal political upheavals in Ethiopia and Sudan. These issues are all linked in differing degrees to the Nile waters dispute. Better management of these three issues will help build peace in the sub-region.

The Eastern Nile Basin as a Regional Security Complex

Regional Security Complex (RSC) theory was first developed by Barry Buzan in 1983 and revised in 1998 and 2003.³ A regional security complex can be defined as “sets of units whose major processes of securitization, de-securitization, or both are so inter-linked that their security problems cannot be reasonably analyzed or resolved apart from one another.”⁴ Security, as it relates to a group of geographically proximate and inter-linked states, in RSC theory is less about objective facts on the ground than something that is socially constructed; actors can readily define an issue as an existential threat requiring emergency responses.⁵ There are three paths a regional security complex can evolve into: “maintenance of the status quo;” “external transformation” (expansion or contraction of the boundary); and “internal transformation” (changes in polarity, social construction, and anarchic structure).⁶ The RSC has been used successfully in a variety of scenarios to assess security issues in Europe, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa.⁷

The ENB comprises all the key features of a regional security complex. It is characterized by asymmetric power relations and the absence of a comprehensive hydrological governance framework. The basin countries have been successful in establishing the NBI and proposed Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), but there is a long way to go before successful implementation.⁸

The sub-basin hosts three major players in the regional complex with distinctive capabilities and interests regarding the Nile. Egypt is an African power that seeks to maintain the status quo. Ethiopia is attempting to counter Egyptian dominance by asserting its right to use the Nile waters for developmental purposes. Finally, Sudan’s position shifts between supporting Ethiopia’s developmental endeavor and maintaining the status quo per the colonial water allocation.

Much of the research on the ENB has focused exclusively on Nile hydro-politics.⁹ Other equally critical security predicaments have been overlooked or treated in a singular way. The RSC theory helps to surface a more holistic understanding of the context and its intersecting dynamics, which in turn may lead to more viable solutions for the sub-basin.

Shared Peacebuilding Challenges in the Eastern Nile Basin

Peacebuilding in the ENB has been thwarted due to the lack of transboundary water governance frameworks, frontiers inherited from the colonial era, domestic governance flaws, and other factors. Although areas of cooperation exist in the ENB, competition characterizes riparian states’ relations. The Nile waters dispute, frontier governance, and domestic political instability are among the major areas of concern for peacebuilding. These peacebuilding challenges have been exploited by different countries in the region.

Nile Waters Dispute

It is important to understand how water sharing frameworks worked in both the colonial and post-colonial eras. The major colonial treaties were signed in 1902 and 1929. The 1902 treaty was signed between Britain, Italy, and Ethiopia.¹² This treaty stipulated that Ethiopia must seek the consent of Britain to build any projects on the Nile. The 1929 agreement was signed between Egypt and Britain (representing its colonies, i.e. Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania). This treaty, which effectively gave Egypt a veto over the Nile waters, lapsed with decolonization in the 1960s.¹³

The post-colonial water sharing agreement includes the bilateral treaty of 1959¹⁴ between Egypt and Sudan, which divided 84 BCM (billion cubic meters) annual flows of the Nile into 55.5 BCM to Egypt and 18.5 to Sudan. Basin-wide initiatives were started with Hydromet (1967), Undugu (1983), TECCONILE (1992), and the Nile Basin Initiative of 1999. The NBI is the most comprehensive institutional framework that evolved out of the previous efforts. The NBI succeeded in tabling a Cooperative Framework Agreement (CPA) for signature in 2010. However, Egypt and Sudan rejected the CPA out of fear of losing their “historic” water share enshrined in the 1959 treaty.¹⁵

The commencement of the construction of GERD is a game-changer insofar as the balance of power within the ENB,¹⁶ and represents an “internal transformation” within the regional security complex.¹⁷ The dam is part of Ethiopia’s development plan to eradicate poverty. With the Nile providing more than 90 percent of the country’s water supply, Egypt argues that the dam poses an “existential threat” to millions of its people.¹⁸ Sudan is caught in the middle of the dam dispute, as a “buffer state” or “king-maker of the Nile,” swinging back and forth between the two.¹⁹ The three countries succeeded in signing the 2015 Declaration of Principles (DOP) on the GERD. The hope was that the DOP might serve to (re)build some level of trust in the troubled ENB.

Nevertheless, the filling of the reservoir, ongoing construction of the dam, and the failure to forge a binding water sharing agreement remain highly contentious. Tripartite talks, the U.S. World Bank brokered facilitation, and the AU-led trilateral negotiations thus far have failed to deliver a sustainable solution. If negotiations are to succeed, the region and the international community should be prepared for very intensive and prolonged talks. If diplomatic efforts fail, conflict in the sub-basin could be on the horizon.²⁰ The Ethiopian government has already reported cyberattacks from Egypt-based groups targeting websites related to the GERD. The hackers have vowed to continue attacking facilities unless the water filling of the GERD is halted,²¹ eroding already brittle trust. However, there is no known link between the hackers and the Egyptian government.

Border Disputes

An RSC approach posits that “the formative dynamics and structure of a security complex are generated by the states within it: by their security perceptions of, and interactions with, each other.”

The most current border conflict came two days after the outbreak of the Ethiopian war on November 4, 2020.²⁸ The move by Sudan to deploy its military to the contested frontier can be attributed to both: a desire to exploit Ethiopia's preoccupation with its domestic instability; and to divert attention from the Sudanese government's own failings through a nationalistic discourse of retaking al-Fashaga. With Sudanese President al-Burhan exploiting the dispute to solidify his support, pressure on Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy to protect Ethiopia's territorial integrity is growing, raising the specter of a serious outbreak of hostilities between the neighbors.

The Halayeb Triangle has been a contested territory between Sudan and Egypt. The problem lies on the 1899 and 1902 colonial boundaries which first drew the Halayeb to Egypt in 1899, and then to Sudan in the latter agreement.²⁹ The region is rich in natural resources such as manganese. "The frontier has become a place of mutual suspicion and tension, not exchange," writes one commentator.³⁰ Egypt now controls the disputed land and Sudan has continued to renew its case for the contested territory to the United Nations.³¹ Notwithstanding improvements in Egypt-Sudan relations following the Arab Spring, the Triangle remains a major source of concern for both countries.³² The border issue influences the Nile waters discussions, with Sudan shifting alliances depending on its reading of where the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia is heading. What is more, the border disputes over the al-Fashaga or Halayeb could potentially draw in neighboring and regional states, further complicating the situation.

Internal Political Instabilities

Governance is also a major issue in the region. The ENB countries rank low on the main indicators of democracy such as those by Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (2020). These countries have undergone mass governance-related protests during the past decade. It could be argued that only Egypt has been working to consolidate a post-Arab Spring political transition towards stability. Ethiopia and Sudan are experiencing far greater political upheaval and conflict. The respective domestic political situations in the region heavily inform peacebuilding efforts in the region.

Ethnic polarization, proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and ongoing war continues to threaten a viable peace in Ethiopia. The Tigray, Amhara, Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Oromia regions are especially volatile. The ongoing conflict is due, in part, to political infighting within the ruling Ethiopian People's Liberation Front (EPRDF) coalition. Domestic political situations interlink to the wider ENB power rivalry. In this regard, Ethiopia has accused Egypt of supporting various rebel groups within its borders, including the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Tigray People's Liberation Forces (TPLF), and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).³³ The TPLF-dominated government has accused Egypt and Eritrea of fomenting instability, in part to prevent the government from investing in Blue Nile infrastructure.³⁴ The Abiy government went so far as to imply that Egypt and Sudan had become involved in the Ethiopian war on the side of rebel groups.³⁵

It is alleged that Sudan has been providing a safe haven for various opposition groups from Ethiopia for decades; for its part, Ethiopia has been a long-term backer of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).³⁶ Unsurprisingly, the Sudanese government's efforts to promote itself as a mediator (as Prime Minister Abiy has done for Sudan in its post al-Bashir transition) in the Ethiopian war have been rejected.³⁷ Since the ousting of President al-Bashir, Sudan has been unable to play a constructive role in the region due to its own high levels of instability and political volatility, including a military coup, which saw its prime minister detained.³⁸ Aside from Sudan's unstable and uncertain transition, the crisis in Darfur, in the country's western half, lingers on, creating yet more instability and the potential for a further melding of different conflicts into a wider war—should issues around the ENB not be tackled holistically. Fragility is arguably the dominant characteristic of the ENB. In the recent Fragility States Index published by the Fund for Peace, globally Sudan rated 8th and Ethiopia 11th.³⁹

Conclusion and the Way Forward

The Eastern Nile Basin is known for the lingering dispute over the Nile waters governance. However, the manifold and interlinked peacebuilding challenges have impeded the promotion of viable peace in the sub-basin. These challenges including,



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