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THE PROMISE OF GRAND RENAISSANCE DAM

It is Africa's longest river, stretching nearly 7,000 kilometers and shared by several countries, including Sudan, Egypt, Uganda, and Ethiopia. For generations, the mighty Nile River has been a source of water and economic prosperity for millions of people. Now, with the construction of Africa's biggest hydroelectric dam, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the river is set to bring prosperity to millions more Ethiopians.

This ambitious project aims to generate over 6,000 megawatts of electricity, powering Ethiopia's growing economy and supplying energy to not only local communities but also to surrounding nations. The dam has the potential to transform the region's energy landscape and foster greater cooperation among the Nile Basin countries.

While some countries celebrated this feat, others turned to the United Nations Security Council for intervention. The construction and launch of the dam have angered countries such as Egypt and Sudan, who argue that their people and economies will be impacted. Ethiopia, however, argues that the project will benefit the entire Horn of Africa.

After the fanfare dies down, will the countries be able to come up with an agreement that satisfies all parties? The stakes are high, as the future of the region's water resources hangs in the balance. The situation cannot be ignored, and diplomatic efforts, particularly among Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt, must intensify to prevent the disagreements from escalating into something more serious.

The GERD Promise...To Ethiopians

With a price tag of four billion dollars, Ethiopia started an ambitious project 14 years ago. There are roughly 30 other hydroelectric dams in the world, with China accounting for 29% of the world's installed hydroelectric capacity, followed by Brazil, the United States, and Canada. GERD is one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken by the Ethiopian government.

At the opening ceremony in September, locals proudly danced and waved national flags, filled with awe and pride for the country's achievement in building the dam —a rare feat considering that the country just ended a war more than three years ago, and that ethnic violence continues to threaten parts of the nation. Watching the ceremony reminded me of the conversations I had with Ethiopians in Addis Ababa about the dam.

Despite the country's political tensions, there was a palpable sense of optimism that united many, reflecting a shared desire for economic prosperity. They often reminded me that every Ethiopian, whether living locally or abroad, had contributed to the building of the dam. Indeed, millions were raised and used to fund the construction of this mega project.

In 2011, Ethiopia announced that it was building the GERD at a cost of billions of dollars. The aim was to ensure energy security in Africa's second-most populous country, highlighting that the country's national interest would trump regional relations.

Domestically, the country has faced an uphill political and economic struggle over the past few years, marked by the devastating economic impact of COVID-19 and the war in the Northern Tigray region. The Ethiopian government has maintained that the construction of the hydropower dam would fundamentally transform the country's political and economic landscape. Moreover, Ethiopia has argued that the project will benefit not only the country but also the wider region.

However, despite the outrage, Ethiopia continued on its path to complete the project, even if it was with a powerful nation like Egypt, which argued that it would impact the economy and sectors such as agricultural, fisheries, and tourism. At one point, Egypt even threatened to bomb the project.

In a country where 46% of people lack access to electricity, this dam has the potential to significantly transform the country's economy, particularly benefiting rural areas. The country believes the dam will boost not only local access—the government says they hope 90% of Africa's second most populous nation will have access to electricity by 2030—but they would also be able to export to neighbouring countries.

Unhappiness by Some...

However, not everyone is happy. Downstream countries, Egypt and Sudan, have long voiced their objections to the project. They see the dam as a threat to the water supplies and have long feared that it would affect water levels, especially if there is a drought.

Relations between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt remain tight, with Ethiopia minimising the tension. At the inauguration ceremony, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali said the dam was the 'biggest achievement in the history of black people.' Watching him deliver the speech were the Somalian and Kenyan leaders; noticeably absent were Egypt and Sudan.

'The hunger of our brothers in Egypt, Sudan, or anywhere else is also our hunger; we must share and grow together; we have no intention to harm anyone,' Ahmed Ali said. He also emphasised the importance of unity in the region and expressed hope for collaborative efforts to address shared water challenges. However, the absence of Egypt and Sudan at such a pivotal event for the region, highlighted ongoing disputes and the complexity of regional politics in the Nile Basin.

Who Has Access to The Nile?

If one goes back a few decades, some will argue that Egypt and Sudan have had almost unfettered access to the Nile River since a treaty was signed in 1959, allowing the two countries rights to the waters.

Furthermore, it is crucial to grant Egypt the autonomy to choose which projects to endorse. Ethiopia ignored all of this and focused on continuing the project despite objections, including from Egypt's ally, the US. The country also argued that the Blue Nile, which originates from that country, falls under their control, so they have the right to access the water.

It is estimated that millions of people across 11 countries also rely on the Nile, not only Egypt and Sudan. According to the water experts, the basin rivers span 10% of Africa's landmass and sustain people in South Sudan, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Eritrea, and Kenya. Egypt and Sudan, lying downstream, receive the river's waters only after it has passed through the nine upstream states. Ethiopia, however, has largely ignored their concerns.

Diplomatic Fall Out

Now that GERD has been inaugurated, it can now claim to be Africa's largest hydroelectric dam, at 1.8 kilometers long and 145 meters high, and is estimated to generate more than 6,000 megawatts. Egypt has always argued that the filling of the dam will lead to 'severe water scarcity.' It views the GERD as 'an existential threat,' as it relies on the Nile for most of its water needs, estimated at 97 percent.

Ethiopia, on the other hand, rejected this argument, maintaining that the dam, located in the northwest of the country near the Sudanese border, will not reduce the volume of water flowing downstream. Despite years of negotiations, hostilities persist, and talks were suspended for two years before only resuming recently. Diplomatic disagreements continue, and the Egyptian government escalating the situation by filing a formal complaint with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), claiming that the dam “violates international law and threatens Egypt’s water security.” Egypt says Ethiopia’s actions “constitute a grave violation of international law.”

The Egyptian Foreign Minister, Badr Abdelatty, said that the dam “undermines the rights of Nile basin countries and threatens the interest of present and future generations.” Egypt said its patience "should not be misconstrued as weakness" and that "its national security and the well-being of its people are directly tied to the Nile."

As such, “any unilateral action that undermines this lifeline is a red line.” Therefore, Egypt viewed its appeal to the UNSC as a final measure aimed at preventing escalation and upholding justice, equity, and international law.

The situation remains tense, as it is clear that the countries continue to pursue their domestic developmental projects along the Nile. Ethiopia may face consequences following Egypt's letter to the UNSC, making dialogue essential. If the dialogue fails to resolve the ongoing disputes, regional tensions could intensify, potentially leading to diplomatic fallout with security implications for the Horn of Africa. International observers are increasingly concerned about the potential for escalation if negotiations do not yield positive results.

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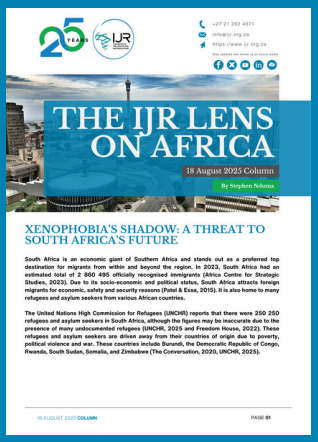

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