

AN ANCIENT REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX ON THE RISE: THE NILE WATER CONTROVERSY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EGYPT

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Abstract

The terminology and theory of “regional security complexes” (RSC) may be new, yet, the underlying factors, causes and characteristics are as old as human civilization and/or the River Nile. Out of the eleven countries the Nile is flowing through, Ethiopia and Egypt – with in-between Sudan – are “hosting” the Blue Nile, which carries about 85% of all the river’s water. With both Egypt and Ethiopia trying to cope with a rapidly growing (exploding) population of already over one hundred million each, as well as the necessity of providing food and electricity, water sharing has become an imminent task and a direct threat for both. Thus, the recent – but already decade-long – hostility between Egypt and Ethiopia over the sharing of the water of the river resulted in the emergence of a new regional security sub-complex, that of the Nile basin.

Water as a Regional Security Complex (RSC) creator

Barry Buzan in his Regional Security Complex Theory states that “a regional security complex is made up of states the security threats and interests of which are intertwined to the extent that they cannot manage them alone ... consequently, it is defined by an interdependence” among the states making up the RSC. This interdependence – and the “radius” of the perceived threats – presupposes a geographic proximity, which is crucial to the understanding and perception of any RSC. Yet, as Buzan and his colleagues argue, security has many sectors – social, military, political, economic, environmental –, which may, in themselves, be the reason of the understanding of a zone. Especially, if a sectoral issue is securitized.

Water – whether sea or river – has the capability to lie at the core of regional security complexes. Fresh water, or more precisely the access to fresh water has been a factor of human and social security, attested by that fact that the first human settlements were established along the great rivers globally. Yet, with the introduction of “nation-states” among internationally accepted and observed borders, sharing river water has gained a different – political momentum. Geographical proximity here is a given, but the position of any state is defined by several other factors: the size of

population and territory, location on the river (upper flow-lower flow, or opposite sides), other sources of water, the rate of industrialization, climate, agriculture, etc. Another decisive factor – both historically and/or currently – may be the presence and eventual interference of external actors. This, with the colonization in Africa, has had a lasting impact.

Access to water, however, has been – and according to many predictions will be – the cause of military action. The already mentioned delineation of borders introduced a new paradigm, in which states either go to war (or threaten with war) to get access or are induced to cooperate. Even more so that water has a wide set of economic relevance, from providing food to serving as a channel of transport and trade. Climate change, however, threatens freshwater flows, the economic benefits they may provide, and even the life of the society. Thus, changes in the environment may even increase the threat of war over water resources.

The complex problematic of water issues, with relevance to all sectors of a regional security complex, resulted, over most of the great rivers of the globe, in the formation of regional organizations – proving again that water issues are above the competence of any one state. In the absence of universally accepted international law, cooperation and the solution to or management of an eventual military tension or confrontation are typically among the main reasons of the establishment of such organizations, together with social, economic and environmental considerations.

The Nile basin as a Regional Security Complex (RSC)

The Nile valley, one of the most ancient places of human history and civilization, reflects this multi-sectoral security. The geography of the regional security complex is first outlined by the network of bigger and smaller water-flows making up the River Nile, then by the state-boundaries of the state actors themselves. The Nile, the confluence of the Blue Nile stemming from Lake Tana in Ethiopia and the White Nile stemming from Lake Victoria in Uganda, is the longest river on the earth, with a length of 6550 km, and a catchment area of some 3.35 million km². The Basin is home to different peoples and cultures, and over 500 million people (and the number is rapidly growing). The Blue Nile provides some 85% of the water-flow, and the White Nile some 15% of the total. The catchment area of the Nile is shared by eleven states: those around the upper flows – Ethiopia, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Kongo, Eritrea, Kenya, Ruanda, Tanzania, and Uganda – due to their geographical situation are usually considered less dependent on the Nile than the countries further down the river – Egypt, Sudan and to a certain extent South Sudan. Water management of the upper river states, however, has/may have a defining impact on the water-flow and quantity of water on the states along the lower parts of the river. Egypt and Sudan, as the lowest lying states along the river, are especially exposed to any such project on the upper river. While the whole of the Nile valley basin can be considered as a regional security complex, the Blue Nile – originating in Ethiopia

and following through Sudan and Egypt as well as carrying the majority of the Nile water – can be considered as a regional security sub-complex within.

The Nile catchment area has gradually been discovered for the external world, yet, historically the Nile has always served as a connection between the Mediterranean and its littoral states, and the far-away sub-Saharan Africa. First colonization, then independence, however, created political bonds and a specific, continental sphere, where Nile countries could frame common interests. The development of African identity and the establishment of the Organization of African Unity among Cold War circumstances, and later that of the African Union not only provided a specific field for cooperation, but also a kind of a rivalry for – among different things – natural resources, water included.

These political developments had several diverse security implications, including the different waves of industrialization, the increasing need for arable lands and the irrigation thereof to feed the exploding populations, and the consequently different stages of environment degradation, etc. Besides these generally present ‘common’ concerns, some others have been manifested with different directions within the RSC: while political-military relations were directed from the north to the south, social mobility – the migration of peoples – were going the opposite way, from the south towards the north. Both ways the Nile has served as the main route.

The Blue Nile as a sub-complex within the broader Nile RSC

The ancient Greek historian and geographer, Herodotus (5th century BC) called Egypt “the gift of the Nile” – proving that the exposure to and dependence from the Nile has been a constant given all through history. This is usually understood in the food security sense of the phrase, with the role of the water in agriculture in focus, including the regular floods of the river, which helped this agriculture, but also delineating the territory fit for living. Since most of the territory of Egypt – historically and today – has been unfit for establishing (bigger) settlements, 95% of the population has lived and is living along the river and in the river delta – besides the narrow strip along the shores of the Mediterranean. Consequently, the way of living is either related to the Mediterranean Sea – with a certain cosmopolitan identity of the sea-faring people -, or an agriculture-based way of life, in which land is the defining element, to the extent that “no Egyptian is ready to give up one foothold of land to anyone”.

This dependence on the Nile has always been very high on the agenda of any ruler or government of Egypt, but with the demographic explosion since the mid-20th century this has become by now the biggest task and concern. It could even be said – with some exaggeration – that the prism through which decisions are weighed and passed is “how to feed the 100 million plus population”, which is increasing very fast. In 2022 Egypt’s population is estimated some 108 million people,¹ more than

¹ CIA World Factbook – Egypt, Population.

five times the number in 1950, when Egypt had some 20 million inhabitants/citizens only. But the population has doubled even when compared to the 52 million in 1987, and by 2100 a further doubling i.e., some 220 million people are expected. This, although a slow-down in the increase is expected and estimated, and despite the “Two is enough” (*itnēn kifāya*) campaign² pursued recently by the government and taken up by civil society actors as well.

On the other hand, ancient statehood, and the fact that practically all Egyptians have been leading a settled way of life for centuries now, have had an impact on the social construct of the Egyptian society, clearly distinguishing it from those of many other Arab states: most significantly, this resulted in the dimming of such old social bonds and tribal/clan structure that are still determinant e. g. in neighbouring Libya. Consequently, Egypt is one of the very few states in its region which can be considered a “nation-state”.³ It could be said that the state has taken over the authority of the rulers, providing for the people/citizens, and one of its main tasks has been the securing of the water-flow (and the consequent floods). In terms of agriculture, but also of trade. Movement on water is usually understood as seafaring, yet, for Egypt the River Nile has served for millennia as a route of transport of goods and people since ancient times. Most Egyptian rulers, from the earliest pharaohs onwards, tried to expand their rule and influence on the south, to Nubia or even deeper. The pyramids of several pharaohs up along the river well into Sudan symbolize these efforts. Although the Ottoman rulers did not venture deep down into Africa, they did develop – along the Nile – connections to the upper river flow territories.

While for Egypt (and Sudan) it is the water-flow and its role in the maintenance of human life, food and agriculture are the main motivations, for Ethiopia it is the electricity that can be generated with the very same water that is the determinant factor. Though Ethiopia’s population is approximately equivalent to that of Egypt – an estimated 113 million people in 2022⁴ – due to the fact that the population is much more widely spread, in 2020 only some half of the population had access to electricity (51.1%), but when the construction of the GERD started in 2011 it was 23% only.⁵ Ethiopia is poor in energy resources, and although in the recent past gas fields were discovered in Ogaden, it will take a longer period until the country can rely on the gas as the building of the infrastructure takes time and cost money. Consequently, relying on water as a potential source of energy is a faster and cheaper

² See e.g., the Facebook site for the campaign, <https://www.facebook.com/2kefaya/>

³ It should be noted, however, that as the Arab Spring events and its aftermath proved that a hundred years after the delineation of boundaries among/within the Arab states, a sense of „national” identity has developed everywhere, although these could be mostly related to the territorial state.

⁴ CIA World Factbook – Ethiopia, Population.

⁵ Access to electricity (% of population) – Ethiopia, 2020. World Bank,

solution. The foreseen capacity of the GERD is expected 6500 MW, which, compared to the 4244 MW Ethiopia had in 2019 is a significant rise in production.⁶ Consequently, the GERD has become a subject of national pride for the Ethiopians, a symbol of industrial ambitions and of leaving the historical poverty behind. The Ethiopians also have a strong sense of ancient statehood combined with an autocephal Christian Church as its ideological basis. Thus, any limitations regarding the GERD's output or operation is easily termed as the enforcement of old colonial dictates.⁷ (It should also be noted that in country with 84 ethnic groups registered in the constitution and the bloody civil war going on in Tigray, the importance of the GERD's symbolism as a unifying factor cannot be underestimated.)

The history and situation of the Nile in modern times was mostly a function of the colonizing powers in Africa: Britain, France, Italy and Belgium. The "1891 Anglo-Italian Protocol, Great Britain and Italy demarcated their 'respective spheres of influence in North-Eastern Africa' ... allowing the United Kingdom to maintain control over the headwaters of the Tekeze (Atbara) River." In the 1906 "secret tripartite agreement between Great Britain, France and Italy, the latter two countries completely ceded all Nile basin interests to the British ... The colonial ruler of Congo, King Leopold II of Belgium, formerly agreed with the British that he would not attempt to construct any structures (such as dams or other irrigation facilities) on the Semliki and Isango rivers ... [thus] a succession of United Kingdom governments continued to play a dominating role in the Nile basin during the first half of the 20th century."⁸

With the British military presence mostly concentrated in Egypt and Sudan, it was the Blue Nile that stood in the focus of British attention. Consequently, Nile water sharing agreements typically focused on Egypt and Sudan, leaving Ethiopia on the sidelines, if mentioned at all. (As were the other states along the White Nile, which is the reason why the validity of the Nile treaties and agreements has come to be questioned by more than one Nile states.) With the movement towards the end of colonization, however, a series of agreements started to be concluded among the Blue Nile riparian states themselves and the United Kingdom regarding Nile issues.

⁶ Quoted by Marsai: A Nagy Etióp Újjászületés Gát és a Nílus vízfelhasználása körüli diplomáciai küzdelem I.

⁷ Ethiopia Won't Bend to US Pressure on Dam, Foreign Minister Says. VOANews, March 13, 2020.

⁸ In-depth analysis: Past agreements on the Nile.

Agreements related to the (Blue) Nile

In contrast to the widely accepted 1982 *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (with 157 signatories), there is no generally codified law on rivers, thus legal arrangements for water sharing and development, cooperation and (eventual) conflict resolution are typically regional, if at all.

1.

The first document dealing with the relationship of Ethiopia and the lower riparian countries with regard to the utilization of Nile is the *Treaty Between Ethiopia and Great Britain on the Delimitation of the Frontier between Ethiopia and Sudan* signed by Ethiopian Emperor Menelik and United Kingdom's envoy Lt. Col. John Lane Harrington in Addis Ababa in May 15 1902. Article III states that "His Majesty the Emperor Menelik II, King of Kings of Ethiopia, engages himself towards the Government of His Britannic Majesty not to construct, or allow to be constructed, any work across the Blue Nile, Lake Tsana, or the Sobat which would arrest the flow of their waters into the Nile except in agreement with His Britannic Majesty's Government and the Government of the Soudan." [*underlying by the authors*] Egypt and Sudan claim the rights in the Treaty based on principles of state succession as they were at the time under British military rule.⁹

2.

Following the declaration of Egypt's independence in 1922, in an exchange of notes between Lord Lloyd, the High Commissioner of Great Britain in Cairo and Muhammad Mahmoud Pasha, the President of the Egyptian Council of Ministers, the British Crown recognized the "natural and historical rights of Egypt on the waters of the Nile nor on its agricultural development needs".¹⁰ Egypt, on the other hand, acknowledged that "the development of the Sudan needs a quantity of water flowing from the Nile higher than used hitherto by the Sudan".¹¹ Thus, Egypt was guaranteed 92.3% of the river flow, while Sudan 7.7%. The agreement – which was based on the conclusions of the 1925 Nile Commission – also gave Egypt a veto right over the eventual change of the status quo, and stipulated that "Except with the prior consent of the Egyptian Government, no irrigation works shall be undertaken nor electric generators installed along the Nile and its branches nor on the lakes from which they flow if these lakes are situated in Sudan or in countries under British administration which could jeopardize the interests of Egypt either by reducing the quantity of water flowing into Egypt or appreciably changing the date of its flow or causing its level

⁹ Berhane: The 1902 Treaty.

¹⁰ Exchange of Notes between Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom and the Egyptian Government on the Use of Waters of the Nile for Irrigation. Art. 2,

¹¹ *Ibid.* Art. 2.

to drop.”¹² The upper riparian states, were not mentioned at all, reflecting the fact that they were under colonial rule, i. e. from the colonizers’ perspective had already been settled. Although Ethiopia was independent, it was not mentioned either.

3.

Following Sudan’s gaining independence in 1956, the *Agreement between the United Arab Republic and the Republic of Sudan for the full utilization of the Nile waters* was signed in 1959 by two independent riparian states. Yet, since it was relying on the previous 1929 agreement and was concluded between two recently becoming independent (from British colonial rule) states and two ‘brotherly Arab nations’, it could be claimed to continue – in a way – the old pattern and tradition of such agreements.

Although under the new water sharing agreement Sudan got the right to more water (from the previous 4 billion to 18.5 billion cubic meters), Egypt was still entitled to a much bigger volume (from the previous 48 billion to 55.5 billion cubic meters) of the Nile total of 84 billion cubic meters, with 10 billion cubic meters ‘written off’ due to natural evaporation (which was mostly due following the construction of the Aswan Dam).¹³ Yet, the agreement confirmed the “established right” of both to the water. They also agreed to cooperate on projects for the exploitation of waters lost in the Upper Nile Basin, as well as technical issues of water management.

The agreement specifically mentions the claim by other riparian countries to a share in the Nile waters, but only to conclude that „Both Republics agree to study together these claims and adopt a unified view thereon.”¹⁴

4.

The 1993 Framework for General Co-operation Between the Arab Republic of Egypt and Ethiopia, signed by Egyptian President Mohamed Hosni Mubarak and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, was the first bilateral agreement following the colonial period, between an Arab and a non-Arab (African) state. The agreement emphasized the need for cooperation and agreed that “the issue of the use of the Nile waters shall be worked out ... through discussions ... on the basis of the rules and principles of international law” (Art. 4.). “Each party shall refrain from engaging in any activity related to the Nile waters that may cause appreciable harm to the

¹² Ibid., Art. 4.2.

¹³ It should be noted that nothing is included on any eventual planning to lessen the amount of evaporation, which in fact has increased to approx. 12.5 billion cubic meters since. Marsai: A Nagy Etióp Újjászületés Gát és a Nílus vízfelhasználása körüli diplomáciai küzdelem I.

¹⁴ Agreement between the United Arab Republic and the Republic of Sudan for the full utilization of the Nile waters. Art. V. para 2.

interests of the other party.” (Art.5.) “They undertake to consult and cooperate in projects that are mutually advantageous.” (Art.6.) „The two Parties shall endeavour towards a framework for effective co-operation among countries of the Nile basin.” (Art.8.)¹⁵

Efforts at cooperation in the Nile River basin

The end of the Cold War, the changing international environment and external great power interest, along with the manifold impacts of globalization, industrialization and demographic explosion introduced a new era of regional cooperation in the Nile River basin. In 1992 the *Nile-COM* (the Council of Ministers of Water affairs of the Nile Basin countries) was established by six riparian states (Egypt, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda) “to create a regional partnership to facilitate the common pursuit of sustainable development and management of the waters of the River Nile.”¹⁶ In 1997 it was joined by Democratic Republic of Congo, with the other riparian states in support from the outside.

The *TECCONIL* (Technical Cooperation Committee for the Promotion of Development and Environmental Protection of the Nile Basin) was established in 1993 to promote cooperation on water management, and in the same year – with the help of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) – the conference series *Nile 2002* was started “to provide an informal mechanism for riparian dialogue as well as with the international community.”¹⁷

In 1999 the Nile-COM decided to establish the *Nile Basin Initiative* (NBI), an all-inclusive basin-wide institution, an intergovernmental partnership of ten Nile Basin countries, in Dar-es-Salam, Tanzania, with the secretariat in Entebbe, Uganda. The aim of the NBI was “to provide a forum for consultation and coordination among the Basin States for the sustainable management and development of the shared Nile Basin water and related resources for win-win benefits.”¹⁸

In 2010, however, the upper-flow countries (Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Ruanda, Tanzania, and Uganda) launched a new initiative, which came to be signed as the *Entebbe Agreement* (Cooperative Framework Agreement, CFA). The parties claimed their rights over the water resources of the Nile and rejected both the 1929 and the 1959 agreements, thus challenging both Egyptian and Sudanese rights under those former agreements. The Entebbe Agreement has thus become the basis of the Ethiopian dam construction and of the upper-flow states’ increasing awareness of their own rights to Nile water.

¹⁵ Framework for general co-operation between the Arab Republic of Egypt and Ethiopia signed at Cairo, 1 July 1993.

¹⁶ In-depth analysis: Past agreements on the Nile.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Nile Basin Initiative

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)

The first plan of a dam on the Blue Nile was raised in the mid-20th century, when between 1956–1964 with US help Ethiopia prepared calculations on the potential agricultural and industrial benefits, and even designated the place of the dam. Yet, real preparation started – in secret – in 2009, with the preparation of feasibility studies. Consequently, when the dam construction project was started during the Arab Spring in Egypt, and thus Egyptian attention was focussed on the domestic transition, Egypt claimed that Ethiopia was taking advantage of the situation. As the construction was going on, the real details were also exposed, e. g. in contrast to the previously acknowledged capacity of the water reservoir behind the dam the real capacity turned out to be almost fivefold (from 16 billion cubic meters to 74 billion cubic meters, i. e. practically one year of the waterflow of the Blue Nile).

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is “a 6,450 MW hydropower project nearing completion on the Blue Nile in Ethiopia, located about 30 km upstream of the border with Sudan. It will be the largest hydropower project in Africa. Owned and operated by the Ethiopian Electric Power company, the 145-m-tall roller-compacted concrete gravity dam will flood 1,874 km² at a normal pool elevation of 640 m and will have a tributary catchment of 172,250 km².”¹⁹

The main rationale behind the construction was generating electricity – a cause perceived with sympathy by the other riparian countries where access to electricity is rather limited, especially when compared to the 100% access in Egypt. Consequently, when Ethiopia promised to provide Sudan with electricity, the offer was positively accepted.

Table 1. Access to electricity in the Nile states in 2019 (%)²⁰

Egypt	Sudan	Ethiopia	Burundi	Dem.Rep.of Congo	Eritrea
100	53.83	48.27	11.06	19.10	50.39
Kenya	Rwanda	South Sudan	Tanzania	Uganda	
69.70	37.78	6.72	37.70	41.30	

¹⁹ Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Ethiopian Ministry of Water and Energy,

²⁰ Source: Electricity access 1992–2022.

Besides electricity, however, the Ethiopian government was referring to other benefits of the dam: the construction provided approx. twelve thousand jobs, though it must be noted that there were several accidents as well. The GERD Coordination Office on its website further notes that the “artificial lake [*behind the dam*] will provide boat and boating transportation for the area, it also provides an opportunity to develop additional fish resources and become a world-class tourist destination ... Since the hydroelectric plant is free of carbon dioxide, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam contributes to the protection of environmental ecosystems ... New rural roads being built for access to different parts of the project create a chance for transport access ... Reduce air pollution, reduce climate change, generate economic connectivity in local countries, and bring about economic growth ... In general, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project is expected to give significance role for the development of the Nile Basin Countries through cooperation on development, better use of water and the improvement of the climate.”²¹

The GERD controversy

Between 2011–2014 Egypt was turning inwards and was preoccupied with its Arab Uprising, and the consequent political transition. Though the foreign policy principles remained unchanged – namely, to protect Egypt’s territorial integrity and national sovereignty – with the multiple economic crises, which the ‘Lotus Spring’ had been accompanied through the years of political unrest, Egypt has become dependent on the Gulf Cooperation Council’s countries financial help. These political and economic processes relatively unprioritized the eventual construction of the GERD project. When Egypt “woke up” and political power was consolidated under the Sisi administration in 2014, the GERD project was already in its implementation phase. Ethiopia has thus come to challenge the hydro-hegemony of Egypt, which was guaranteed by the previous international agreements. The wider context was provided by the great power competition, of which not only Ethiopia, but the whole Horn of Africa and the Red Sea have become scenes, and which rivalry at the same time is also manifest in the shifting regional order in the broader MENA region. Besides the local actors and the “usual” global powers (the United States, Russia, China) regional states – Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates – have been contesting for the influence over the Horn and the Red Sea. As the Sisi regime has redefined Egypt’s role in the region as a regional power, the GERD issue has arrived at the forefront of security challenges of the state.

As Ethiopia has already started the construction of the site, Egypt’s position has gradually changed from hostility to engaging in diplomatic negotiations.²² Egypt and Sudan have ceased to obstruct the construction of the dam, thus, the issue has increasingly become centred on the speed of the filling of the reservoir behind the

²¹ GERD Coordination Office.

²² Interviews conducted by the authors in the Egyptian MFA between 2013–2020.

dam, especially, when the real dimensions thereof were disclosed (see above). While both have focused on the prevention of any unilateral action by Ethiopia, Sudan was more supportive of the project, which has not only allowed Khartoum to buy cheap electricity, but also to control the rather unpredictable flow of the river. In 2015, the three countries have reached to an agreement (Declaration of Principles), in which Ethiopia has promised not to unilaterally cause harm to the two downstream countries. This agreement has secured the position of the Sisi regime, which has become more assertive on the dam issue. (Sisi's position has been supported by Donald Trump, who use the nickname of 'my favourite dictator' on the Egyptian President causing some controversy in the U.S. as well as in Cairo.)

Since 2015 there have been several rounds of talks by the Tripartite Committee without reaching to any conclusion. In 2020, however, with the mediation of the United States, the three riparian countries agreed on a timetable about filling the dam, which was seen as a major milestone according to experts. In the agreement, Ethiopia assured Egypt and Sudan that it intends to fill dam between four to seven years, and the country would halt the implementation of the second phase in case of a low annual inflow. After the agreement, Ethiopia started the first filling in July 2020, and new set of negotiations were initiated under the auspices of the African Union. These negotiations, however, collapsed in 2021, when Addis Ababa decided to proceed unilaterally with the second phase invoking harsh criticisms from Cairo. Egypt argued that the unilateral steps of Ethiopia constitute a breach of the Declaration of Principles of 2015. To complicate the matter further, both Sudan and Ethiopia have come to face domestic political turmoil and unrest: Sudan has witnessed the unseating of its President Bashir, and a political transition started with a power-sharing agreement. In Ethiopia the civil war going on in Tigray is threatening the delicate domestic political balance of power. Yet, Sudan's support to the dam construction has not changed, nevertheless, Egypt is more critical with the Ethiopian regime. As the first turbines have started the operation, there is no room to prevent the project, but only slowing down the filling process. However, at this time of writing this is yet to be seen.

Conclusion

The River Nile has – all through history – had the capability to construct a regional security vacuum, with all the five sectors enlisted by Barry Buzan and Co. Human life being dependent on the water, the river was the condition to life, as well as – with its non-regulated floods – a threat. Managing life along the river was among the first organizing factors of society and the reason of the early emergence of statehood. Access to water, including the river as a route of trade and movement of people had always carried the potential of armed conflicts. Agriculture, and later industrialization also make the riparian states dependent on water, which, with climate change and global warming may become increasingly indispensable.

With these multiple benefits and threats, the Nile has also been exposed to such political divisions as locals and conquerors/colonizers (since the 19th century), settled-down vs nomadic/desert populations, states vs tribal societies, Arabs vs non-Arabs/Africans. As explained above, water (and other natural resources) sharing agreements were first phrased by the main colonizers, and even when they withdrew and regional states became dependent, their ‘heritage’ was still relevant in the negotiations of certain agreements a cooperation.

The controversy of Egypt and Ethiopia over the Blue Nile, a regional security sub-complex on its own, can be fit into the wider Nile Basin regional security complex, which, however, still remembers both the colonial times and the gaining independence thereof, and the Arab vs African division. As all Arab states on the African have had historical relations to sub-Saharan Africa, Egypt also has had an eye on the sub-Saharan section of the continent. Still, the fast political and economic development of African states was a surprize and a strategic and psychological challenge, especially at a time when the Arab states were undergoing the so-called Arab Spring. Although the different Arab states were experiencing different developments – from the ‘simple’ demonstrations to civil wars -, these, including unresolved structural problems in society and economy, plus regional or external interference keep Arab political attention focused on domestic and (Arab) regional affairs, and leave not much place for the projection of power into Africa.

The starting of the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in 2011 took advantage at this momentum. In a way, it can be considered as a ‘resistance’ to Arab/Egyptian power, a test of how far sub-Saharan states may stand up to Egypt to realize their own interests over the Nile. The fact that in this case it is Ethiopia, one of the most influential states in sub-Saharan Africa, which is ready to face Egypt, shows the changed and cautiously changing balances of power on the continent.²³

While for Egypt the protracted armed conflict in Libya and the activities of radical groups in the Sinai Peninsula are ‘simple’ security threats, the GERD is an existential threat. This explains Egyptian statements from Anwar Sadat (water is “the only matter that could take Egypt to war again”)²⁴ through Mohamed Mursi (“As president of the republic, I confirm to you that all options are open ... If Egypt is the Nile’s gift, then the Nile is a gift to Egypt... If it diminishes by one drop, then our blood is the alternative.”)²⁵ to Abdel-Fattah Sissi (“No one can take a single drop of water from Egypt, and whoever wants to try it, let him try”).²⁶ Yet, Egyptian room for manoeuvre has become rather limited as reflected by the frequent shifts between threats and offers of cooperation.

²³ Marsai, *ibid.* p. 6.

²⁴ Beating the Drums of War? Egypt’s National Security Threat and the Nile Dispute. Egyptian Streets, 28 JUNE 2020.

²⁵ Why a ‘water war’ over the Nile River won’t happen. Al-Jazeera, 13 Jun 2013.

²⁶ In stark warning, Egypt leader says Nile water 'untouchable'. March 31, 2021.

Though by the third decade of the 21st century it can be questioned if ‘it will be Africa’s century’, with the increased space of climate change, water wars and conflicts over the access to water seem a realistic threat. And the Nile River basin can be among the first scenes.

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