Jesenya Lowman

Professor Trask

POSC 1020: Introduction to International Relations

10 November 2021

Transboundary Water Disputes in Africa: The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

Recently, Ethiopia constructed a dam along the Nile River posing a potential water crisis in Egypt and Sudan. Once the Renaissance Dam is filled, water resources will significantly deplete for Egypt including Sudan who already has a formal agreement —1959 Nile Waters Agreement— with Egypt regarding access to the Nile. Egypt siphons over 90% of its water supply from the Nile River. In this sense, Egypt considers itself to have historic entitlement to the Nile River and the allocation of its resources. After Egypt's settlement with Sudan (mediated by British Colonists) in the form of the 1929 Nile Waters Agreement, that notion was further reinforced since it gave a larger number of legal rights to Egypt (Swain 677). History is seeming to repeat itself, with Ethiopia taking advantage of its natural rights to the river. The Blue Nile, located in Ethiopia, is one of the two reservoirs from which 80% of the Nile's water flow originates. The Renaissance Dam has great potential as an energy resource, and Ethiopia is looking towards it to spur its economic growth (El-Fekki 2021). As of now, there have been no formal negotiations between Egypt and Sudan with Ethiopia. I think they should discuss each state's economic interests and work towards a compromise that satisfies some of their crucial needs. Once an agreement is reached, they should also consider the economic situations of non-disputing states along the transboundary water and future conflicts they will create. Conflicts like water disputes are recurrent, so it is important to have a permanent forum and set institutions for resolving the conflicts.

Ethiopia will benefit a lot from the Renaissance Dam's construction, but it poses consequences to the economies of Egypt and Sudan. Egypt is at severe risk for complete desertification, and the Nile has been the main source of much of Egypt's water supply and economic development. The Renaissance Dam will leave Egypt with unfavorable options for providing freshwater, namely desalinization of seawater and importation of freshwater, both of which are very expensive. Sudan is not as vulnerable as Egypt, though there are still lands in northern Sudan that receive scarce amounts of rainfall and rely mostly on irrigation methods for agriculture. Moreover, only 56% of Sudan's population has access to clean water (Pearson 2020) despite their sizeable access to the Nile. The terms of the 1959 Nile Water Agreement between Sudan and Egypt allocate 15 billion cubic meters and 85 billion cubic meters of water to each country respectively (Swain 679). On the other hand, Ethiopia still has one of the highest poverty rates, but its population and economy have been fast-growing. The Renaissance Dam will provide 6,450 megawatts of energy (twice the amount they currently produce), and around 48% of their population already has access to electricity. All in all, Ethiopia is going to have a large amount of excess energy to sell and export to other countries which opens a great opportunity for economic growth. Ethiopia has already finished building the dam, so they need to discuss an agreement in which they all benefit in some way. A similar transboundary water dispute over the Tigris River happened between Syria, Turkey, and Iraq in which Turkey was building expansive dams and irrigation systems that were significantly depleting the already scarce water resources in Syria and Iraq. Part of the settlement was for Turkey to increase the flow of water from 450 cubic centimeters to 500 cubic centimeters in Iraq for a few years. In exchange, Iraq agreed to trade petroleum with Turkey and limit Kurdish military activities near its borders (Khalid 2021). Likewise, Ethiopia can exchange some of their water for other needed resources the other two

states can satisfy. The GDP per capita of Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt are $645, $2,514, and $3,548 respectively (Pearson 2021). Ethiopia's high levels of corruption and economic instability are not attractive to wealthier and more developed states who are looking to invest hence why Ethiopia is lagging. Their economy depends on 40-45% on agriculture, so a solution would be for Egypt and Sudan to invest more in trading some of Ethiopia's products, for example, coffee beans. In exchange, Ethiopia will allocate enough water to Egypt and Sudan. It is important to note that the likelihood Ethiopia will agree to similar terms is not too high since its initial plans for the Renaissance dam is already set to give them an economic advantage with or without the business exchange with Sudan and Egypt. I believe the most these suggested terms can do is maintain a degree of peace between the three states. Still, low frequency of armed-conflict and wars contribute to economic stability which each of the disputing states are looking to maintain or achieve. Sudan is not as dependent as Egypt on the Nile, so it would also be beneficial to promote the efficient use of water resources already there.

Another issue is the fact that Ethiopia has not made notable efforts to cooperate or even discuss the problem. To strengthen communication between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, the countries signed a memorandum of understanding regarding any future disagreement over the reservoirs (Khalid 2021). The memorandum has been an effective solution to getting conflicting states to cooperate on recurrent tensions. Provided that Africa is known for its frequent and intense armed conflicts, I believe transboundary water disputes in Africa are an international security threat to the parties directly affected. Even if the three states come to a formal agreement, it is reasonable to assume that similar tensions will resurface in the future. Since the UN has the most authority and credibility in resolving international conflicts, the advisory opinions of the UN General Assembly are much-needed guidance for future talks. But there is an

issue with providing an opportunity for the states to talk over the matter. Ethiopia, Sudan, and Ethiopia are all ratified members of the UN, although Ethiopia is the only state to not have a legally-binding agreement giving compulsory jurisdiction over their disputes to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) —the "pseudo"-judiciary branch of the UN (United Nations). This exemplifies one of the core weaknesses of the UN: The UN's authority is limited unless all the involved states have a formal agreement with the ICJ. In the case of the Nile River dispute, it leaves the conflicting countries without a forum for discussing their issues with the Nile. Still, the UN needs to be involved to some extent in the initial stages of creating a treaty.

This is not the first time that there has been a dispute over the Nile. British colonizers settled the dispute between Egypt and Sudan by splitting legal rights to the Nile between them. The 1929 Nile Water Agreement between Egypt and other colonized countries in Africa settlement gave most rights to Egypt, and it was the same case in the 1959 agreement with Sudan. Neither considered the needs of other states host to Nile River's water that may come to depend on it like Ethiopia in this situation. Before finalizing the treaty, Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia should consider potential disputes that may arise between other countries along the Nile such as Uganda, South Sudan, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Tanzania, and Rwanda. Otherwise, similar disputes will continue to arise in the future.

Works Cited

Ashton, Peter J. “Disputes and Conflicts over Water in Africa”. Researchspace, 2007, http://researchspace.csir.co.za/dspace/bitstream/handle/10204/3625/Ashton_d1_2007.pdf;sequence=1, Accessed 27 Oct. 2021.

Declarations recognizing the jurisdiction of the Court as compulsory. International Court of Justice, https://www.icj-cij.org/en/declarations, Accessed 11 Nov. 2021.

El-Fekki, Amira, James, Andrew. “Egypt and Ethiopia Clash Over Nile River Dam as Water Scarcity Looms World-Wide.” Wall Street Journal, 10 Jul. 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/egypt-and-ethiopia-clash-over-nile-river-dam-as-water-scarcity-looms-world-wide-11625925602?mod=saved_content. Accessed 28 Aug. 2021.

Khalid, Mohammad. “Geopolitics of Water Conflict in West Asia: The Tigris-Euphrates Basin”. FINS, 18 Feb. 2021, https://finsindia.org/journal/geopolitics-of-water-conflict-in-west-asia-the-tigris-euphrates-basin/, Accessed 27 Oct. 2021.

National Geographic Society. “Nile River”. National Geographic, 22 Feb. 2019, https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/nile-river/#:~:text=The%20Nile%20River%20was%20critical%20to%20the%20development,Congo%2C%20Kenya%2C%20Uganda%2C%20Sudan%2C%20Ethiopia%2C%20and%20South%20Sudan, Accessed 11 Nov. 2021.

Pearson. “S.” Pearson, 2021, https://media.pearsoncmg.com/bc/bc_0media_geo/mapmaster/mm2/, Accessed 29 Oct. 2021.

Swain, Ashok. “Ethiopia, the Sudan, and Egypt: The Nile River Dispute.” The Journal of Modern African Studies, vol. 35, no. 4, 1997, pp. 675–694., doi:10.1017/S0022278X97002577.

United Nations. *Member States*, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/member-states#gotoD, Accessed 3 Nov. 2021.