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Heat over the Nile

INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

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The temperature over the Nile issue shot up to the highest point recorded in recent history. It may not have reached crisis level yet, but the tension between Egypt and Ethiopia has reached a point where a cool-headed diplomatic engagement will be required to prevent it from further escalation.

Two years ago Ethiopia began the construction of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and it is reported that more than 20% of the project has now been completed. On 28 May, Ethiopia announced that it had successfully undertaken the diversion of the Blue Nile, a major tributary of the Nile River, in order to continue construction on the river bed. In Egypt there was already a great deal of concern – even paranoia – over the possible impact of the dam on its water security. It is no surprise, given the widely held myths and views in Egypt about the Nile, that the diversion of the Blue Nile has triggered extreme reactions.

Prompted by the public outcry, the Egyptian president, Mohamed Morsi, held a consultative meeting with the country's political elite. The discussions in President Morsi's office were televised. The whole world now knows what was said in that meeting and this has created a diplomatic and political disaster. Shockingly, proposals made in the meeting included threats that force would be used against Ethiopia, meddling in Ethiopia's politics, sabotaging the GERD, arming opposition groups and supporting Ethiopia's opponents.

In so doing, Egypt has shot itself in the foot. According to the Egyptian news website Ahram Online, the meeting 'was full of what some Cairo-based African diplomats described as a condescending Egyptian reflection on Africa'. Ahram Online also stated that 'diplomatic and intelligence sources ... share "grave concerns" over some of the "unbelievable and outright ridiculous statements" that were made during the controversial meeting'. An unnamed senior Egyptian government official acknowledged the great political and legal harm that has been caused: 'Up until that meeting we were in a very strong position as a country that suffers from serious water poverty and ... faced with a unilateral decision of an upstream state to further cut [our] legally stipulated share of water; today we are ... openly masterminding political unrest and maybe even a military offensive against neighbouring states; this could have some serious legal and political ramifications'.

The Nile issue is a major rallying point in Egypt and constitutes a major national security concern. An opposition politician said that 'this goes beyond our internal political disagreements to a very serious national interest matter'. Although Egypt's position has weakened, the desire and need to take measures to protect what it considers to be its long-standing 'national interest' on the Nile are unlikely to be abandoned. Indeed, on 10 June, President Morsi stated that 'all options are open' and that 'if it [the Nile] diminishes by one drop then our blood is the alternative'.

Such a threat of war is prohibited under Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter and Article 4(f) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union and thus lacks any support under international law.

The kind of measures that Egypt chooses to adopt will influence whether the rising tension reaches a crisis point or dissipates. Although the racially charged views and the threatening posture of Egypt may deprive Egypt of support from Africa and major global powers, it is possible that the expressed views of the political elite may not change. Moreover, some of the approaches that were suggested in the meeting may even have enough support to be considered in the formulation of the courses of action that Egypt may eventually consider. And it is important to recognize that Ethiopia is vulnerable. Apart from the existence of armed opposition groups, which can easily be propped up, Ethiopia is unlike most other countries in terms of vulnerability to regional crisis because of its geo-strategic location. It is the only country that shares borders with six of the seven states of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (Uganda is the exception). Ethiopia is therefore closely affected by the conflicts in the region, such as the one in Somalia. Consequently, an Egyptian military team's visit to Mogadishu soon after the controversial televised meeting may be pure coincidence, but is likely to be received with concern in Addis Ababa. The Horn of Africa is also a region with a history of proxy wars and a tendency for the region's states to support one another's oppositions and armed groups. Ethiopia's location makes it particularly vulnerable to such tensions, illustrated by the unresolved conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

What measures can be adopted to bring the temperature down in Nile relations? An aggressive process of constructive engagement is needed. The starting point should be to end threatening rhetoric. Significantly, both countries need to adopt a number of confidence building measures.

On the one hand, while rejecting the threats of war, the Ethiopian government needs to show an understanding of Egypt's sensitivities. There is understandable anxiety and paranoia among the Egyptian public. Taking cognizance of this as well as the ongoing political changes in Egypt and the entire region, it is important for Ethiopia to engage with and reassure Egypt. It would be necessary to more effectively publicise the ways in which the GERD project will benefit the entire region and can be implemented in a way that limits its impact on the level of water flow. It is critical to tap into opinion makers in Egypt who understand the mutual benefits of the project. Although it is necessary for Ethiopia to closely monitor the measures that Egypt may adopt and their possible implications, an effort should also be made to involve all the Nile's riparian states whose role should be brought to bear on attempts to cool the heat down. Sudan is strategically placed to play a particularly crucial role.

For its part, Egypt's political leaders should avoid political rhetoric that propagates non-peaceful methods including the threat of use of force, proxy war or sabotage. And Egypt has the right to insist that the two countries cooperate to ensure that the impact of the GERD on the flow of the Nile is minimised. In addition, as Egyptian commentator Mahmoud Salem points out in a sobering article, it would be worthwhile exploring how the GERD may be harnessed for Egypt's benefit. Examples include reducing loss of water through evaporation and accessing the hydroelectric power that the dam would eventually generate.

If these steps are not taken, there is a serious risk that the hostility will escalate into unnecessary regional crisis. Hopefully there is enough wisdom and leadership to end the tension and even use it for achieving a mutually beneficial cooperative settlement for the peoples and countries of the region.

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