



# Ethiopia's hydro-imperialism provoking instability and realignments in The Horn of Africa

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## Abstract

Ethiopia is using her strategic water endowment to build alliances, dominate neighbours and subdue regional powers. This is triggering regional realignments and provoking instability as she pursues unilateral actions meant to elevate her position in The Horn of Africa (HoA). So far, her dam

projects have destabilised fragile ecosystems, caused famine and threatened the hydro-investments of downstream states. This paper argues that the use of water as a tool of soft power and foreign policy will expose the region to resource-based conflicts which will embolden the activities of

non-state actors such as the Al-Shabaab. The discussion projects that the next war in The Horn is likely to be based on water resources, hence, the need for African states to develop frameworks for sharing transboundary water resources.



Photo Credit Middle East Monitor

## Introduction

Prospects of Ethiopia using her comparative advantage as the ‘water tower of Africa’ to become the ‘power house of Africa’ remains real. This will tilt the balance of power to her favor, threaten stability in the volatile Horn of Africa (HoA) region and set the stage for new regional realignments. Ethiopia’s dam projects are part of her 25-year master plan that will substantially change the ecology, conflict dynamics, cooperation and stability in the HoA (Gritzner, 2008). She has acted and continues to act unilaterally, oblivious of the interests of her downstream neighbours: Kenya, Sudan, Egypt, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and South Sudan.

The hydro-politics continues to disadvantage Egypt and Sudan through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the River Nile; Kenya, through the Gilgel Gibe I-V dams on the Omo river basin; Somalia through the Melka Wakena, Genale Dawa III and IV dams that drain water from Jubba and Shebelle rivers; and South Sudan through the Baro I and II dams on the Baro-Sobat river. These dams are strategically built on basins that sustain entire states or regions thus exposing them to political and socio-economic instability. Ninety percent of Egypt’s economic activities are based on River Nile while 70% of Somalia’s agriculture depend on Jubba and Shebelle rivers. Similarly, River Omo provides 90% of water flowing into Kenya’s Lake Turkana. The hydrological future of these nations rests with Ethiopia since without water they are almost uninhabitable. To the north-west, Eritrea and Djibouti’s power and water needs are equally at the mercy of Ethiopia.

This paper argues that ‘water is life’ and the dams are a first step by Ethiopia to subtly control the life of states in The HoA. It concludes that the establishment of an African hydro-resources cooperation agreement within the ambit of United Nations (UN) is urgently needed to tame Ethiopia’s hydro-imperialist ambitions.



## Impact on The Horn of Africa Relations

### Ethiopia’s master plan

Ethiopia is capable of using hydro-politics to propel her foreign policy and develop stronger regional influence, a situation that is likely to provoke instability and realignments in the HOA (Bayeh, 2014; Nasr & Neef, 2016; Verhoeven, 2011). Her initial proposal was to use the dams to improve her weak energy position. However, she has gained the potential to meet most of the hydro-electric demands of sub-Saharan Africa (Verhoeven, 2011). She intends to use this advantage to nurture a dynamic manufacturing sector. With cheaper and reliable power, she will continue to attract investors, as she attempts to displace competitors, especially Kenya, who is the presumed economic power hub in East Africa.

Since the beginning of the GERD construction, foreign direct investment in Ethiopia has spiked (Nasr & Neef, 2016). She has already attracted the Dangote Cement which abandoned Kenya due to high energy costs. It is estimated that industrial power in Kenya costs \$0.17 per kWh while Ethiopia’s is \$0.09 per kWh (The East African, 2016). To Kenya, in particular, this strategic displacement by Ethiopia has the potential



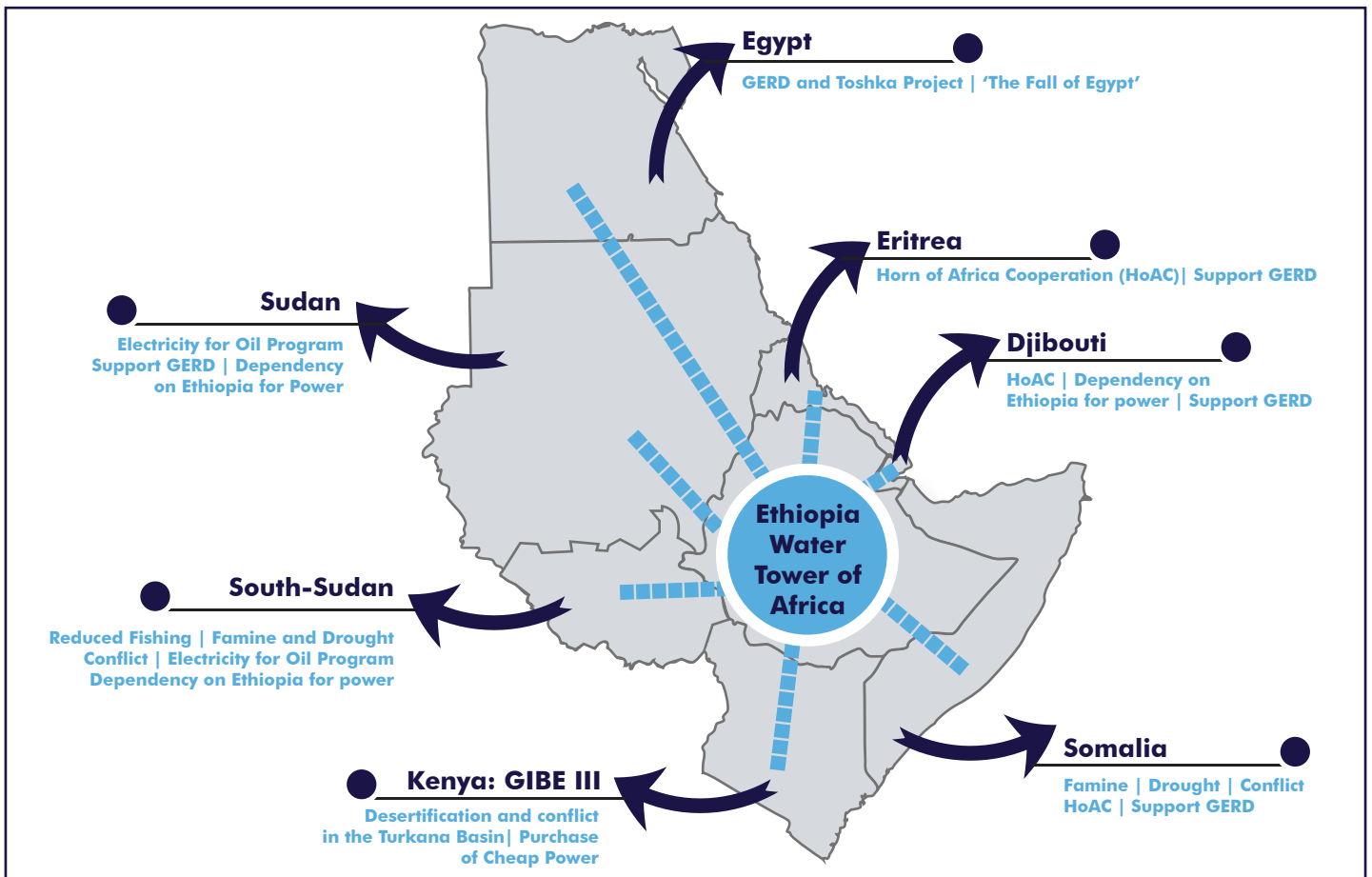


The dams will not only produce electricity, but will also fuel her agricultural projects. These will cushion her from climate change fragility, human-induced resource degradation, population growth, extreme droughts and famine that is the reality of The HoA (Kitissou, 2004). Though internal peace is still elusive, Ethiopia hopes that with reliable agricultural production and food security, the government can increase the support of the masses (Verhoeven, 2011) and with the domestic bliss, she can focus on gaining power regionally and globally.

The absence of a resource sharing agreement has emboldened Ethiopia to adopt hydro-hegemonic behaviours. In 1997, she protested Egypt's proposal to build Toshka project which was to divert water from the Nile River. Again in 1998, she objected to Somalia's proposal to build the Baardheere dam on Jubba river.

In both cases, she claimed that both Egypt and Somalia were preempting her right to harness the waters from Nile and Jubba Rivers, respectively, and were foreclosing the future. While refuting the Egyptian proposal, she protested that the Toshka project would be the basis of Egypt asserting newly acquired rights on the Nile founded in the 'established use' argument. She further warned that she would not forgo projects of her own in order to protect Egypt's user rights in the New Valley or Sinai (Salman, 2010). In response to Somalia's projects, she argued that the dam would cause appreciable harm to her interests and further threatened that she had the potential to impound all river discharges (Salman, 2010). It is therefore evident that the Ethiopia's hydro-imperialistic strategy to control the HoA had long been crafted. This is elaborated in figure 1.

**Figure 1: Ethiopia's Blueprint on the future of Balance of Power in the HOA**



## The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and Ethiopia-Egypt power play

The controversial GERD has exposed Ethiopia's aggressiveness and power play with shared water resources. The GERD pits Egypt—a waning hegemony against Ethiopia—a rising hegemony (Nasr & Neef, 2016). Both countries have threatened war against each other to safeguard their water resources. Ethiopia has taken advantage of this crisis to build up her political muscle with the backing of her less prominent neighbors and former foes such as Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan and Djibouti.

The US has attempted to mediate and de-escalate the GERD crisis. Equally, African states and Kenya, especially, have pushed for African solutions for African problems in order to protect the region from unwanted external interference on the issue (Krampe et al., 2020). Egypt has sought the support of Kenya as she seeks to craft a deal on the Nile which she considers a national security issue. At the moment, Ethiopia and Egypt are both eyeing African Union (AU) mediation process to resolve the tension between them.

Ethiopia is particularly warming up to Kenya, which is an observer state given that the Nile drains from Lake Victoria (The Presidency, 2020). However, she has skipped negotiation meetings organised by the US and AU. In July 2020, she began filling up the dam even as her



Photo Credit: Twitter

neighbors such as Kenya warned her against unilateral decisions on the GERD. She remains adamant that she will not be pressured to back track even with America's withdrawal of economic assistance.

Ethiopia's defiance risks provoking a full-blown war with Egypt, who had already warned in 1998 that her next war would be over the waters of the Nile (Kitissou, 2004). Egypt's air combat is unrivalled by any Nile-riparian state and has already purchased new fighter jets from France in what seems to be a preparation for war. Previously, she had held intentions of blowing up the dam, an option that was backed by the US-Trump administration (Kitissou, 2004; Demerew, 2020). Diplomatically, Egypt is trying to win over Nile Basin states on the eventuality of a confrontation with Ethiopia. She has already signed a security and intelligence sharing deal with Uganda and Burundi as both countries reckoned that they have shared security interests especially on the GERD. The other option for Egypt is to support the simmering internal civil war in Tigray in a bid to derail Ethiopia from the GERD.

An escalated conflict in The HoA would destabilize the region and further dent her recovery from the South Sudan and Somalia civil wars. This will create an opportunity for violent extremists from the Maghreb to move their activities downwards as they take advantage of the spoils. Kenya's peaceful prospects in the region will be under undue pressure to host refugees from the war-torn regions. Moreover, if Egypt opts to back Ogaden irredentists in Ethiopia, in an alternative scenario, then Kenya faces the possibility of a new threat emanating from the suspended 1963 Kenyan-Somali irredentist struggle.

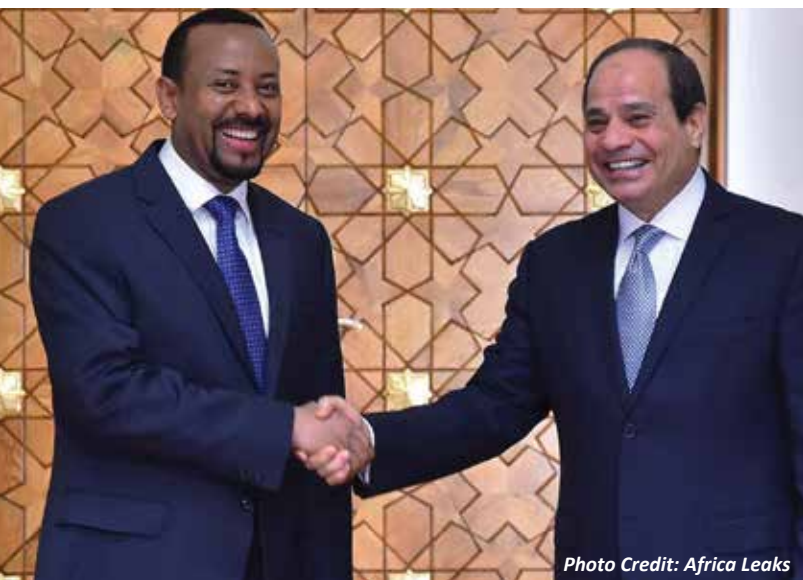


Photo Credit: Africa Leaks



## Ethiopia-Somalia hydro-politics power play

Ethiopia's hydro-imperialism has continued to load over Somalia's hydro-projects. At the center of Ethiopia-Somalia hydro-politics are Melka Wakena, Genale Dawa III and Genale Dawa IV hydro-projects. These dams have been built by Ethiopia along Jubba and Shebelle rivers, shared by Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia. Ninety per cent (90%) of their flows originate from Ethiopia (Mohammed, 2013). River Jubba and Shebelle are important to Somalia because they serve Somalia's rice bowl and other irrigation projects such as the Jubba sugarcane, Mugaambo rice, Arare banana and Mandera irrigation projects.

Ethiopia has previously warned Somalia of her potential to impound all river discharges when Somalia attempted to build the Baardheere Dam on Jubba river in 1998, (Salman, 2010). She has made real her threat in her new master-plan by building the Genale-Dawa Dams on River Jubba and the Melka Wakena Dam on River Shebelle. Between 2010 and 2035, Ethiopia is planning to build several other dams on these two rivers. These dams will obviate any plans Somalia has for the Baardheere Dam (Mohammed, 2013). Ethiopia has not bothered to give any notifications to Somalia on the projects, yet Somalia will be the most affected downstream riparian state. She has further taken advantage of the fact that there are no agreements between them on sharing river waters. It is estimated that the sum of the existing uses in Somalia and planned ones in Ethiopia will exceed available water resources in the rivers.



Photo Credit: Middle East Online

The potential of conflict arising over the shared rivers looms large (Mohammed, 2013; Sebhat & Wenninger, 2014). The unilateral major water projects will have substantial adverse impacts on Somalia and beyond. The depletion of these shared resources is likely to escalate inter-clan tensions among pastoralists and farmers in Somalia. This will destabilize the government and give Al-Shabaab more leeway to undermine the ongoing stabilisation efforts. If Al-Shabaab is re-energised, the security dynamics of HoA, the East African region and Kenya will be affected. If famine and drought persists, the influx of Somalia refugees to Kenya and Ethiopia will cause more insecurity and humanitarian crises.

The upstream advantage, therefore, affords Ethiopia a leverage to control the socio-economic and political life of downstream Somalia. Within this context, Ethiopia will continue to diplomatically bully Somalia to submission in order to gain competitive advantage regionally and internationally. This is already in play as she has been giving Somalia unfettered political and military support in the wake of deteriorating Kenya-Somalia relations. In return, Kenya has strengthened ties with the internationally unrecognised Republic of Somaliland as realignment of relations in the HOA heats up. Egypt too has chosen to align with Somaliland and is actually building a military base there. The efforts by Ethiopia, Kenya and Egypt to outflank each other's strategic positions adds to an already explosive mix in the Horn.



Photo credit: Britanica Dams and Reservoirs



Photo Credit: Twitter

### Gibe III and the entrapment of Kenya

Kenya appears to have been set up in the hydro-politics and is bound to dance the Ethiopian tune. Ethiopia has been building upstream dams, diverting water from the Omo River northward, away from the Kenya-Ethiopia border. The cascading five dams, Gibe I to Gibe V, are built along the Omo River Basin that is the source of 90% of Lake Turkana's bordering the two countries.

While Kenya is vocal on the GERD, she has been astoundingly silent on Ethiopia's unilateral and selfish use of Omo water resources. Since 2007, Ethiopia's dam on the Omo River, Gibe III has contributed to the continued desertification of the region (Gritzner, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2017; United States Department of Agriculture, 2020). Water levels have alarmingly dwindled, with data showing the lake's water level dropping to 363 metres from 365 metres in 2016, when Gibe III opened (United States Department of Agriculture, 2020).

This has increased salinity in Lake Turkana to a level that may no longer be safe for consumption or sustainable for fish species. Nevertheless, the rains around Mount Elgon in Kenya have enabled the Kerio and Turkwell rivers which contribute the remaining 10% of Lake Turkana's water to temporarily salvage the situation. But is it sustainable in the long run?

Lake Turkana supports hoteliers, pastoralists, fishermen, and the indigenous communities who rely on irrigation or tourism for their survival (Reuters, 2020). Experts have warned that upstream activities in Gibe III will lead to mass starvation in the famine-prone Omo and Turkana basins, sparking major armed conflict over the scarce natural resources. This is likely to cause a humanitarian catastrophe and major cross-border armed conflicts (Gritzner, 2008).

Ethiopia's master plan is likely to derail Kenya's oil exploration activities in Turkana, Northern Kenya. If cross-border conflicts erupt, extremists could easily take advantage of perceptions of the North-Rift region marginalisation in order to destabilise this oil rich area. Resistance among Turkana communities to the Gibe III dam has been met with increased security operations by the Kenyan government.



Activists have been warned against protesting over government policies (Carr, 2017). The region already exists as a 'quasi-governed space' with the presence of national government and security apparatus not felt in most areas. Proliferation of small arms and light weapons is on the rise and is inextricably linked with survival and even livelihoods. Communities have historical grievances against the state and there is a weak sense of national identity (Mkutu, 2014). This situation, coupled with the flow of illegal arms from unstable states such as South Sudan is likely to create protracted conflict over the natural resources in the area. General discontent and conflict in an oil-rich region is an equation that the Kenyan government is not prepared to deal with.

The indifference of the Kenyan government to Ethiopia's provocations is due to her interest in the electricity that will be generated for a 'power deficit' nation. Thus, Ethiopia has successfully entrapped Kenya into supporting its hydro-politics

despite the fact that Kenya risks losing her regional clout in the HOA and being domestically destabilised.

To this end, Kenya has initiated a dialogue with Ethiopia aimed at establishing a joint cooperative framework agreement on Lake Turkana, River Omo and Dawa Basin Commission. But Ethiopia's response has been slow, with arguments that she will consider the proposal after studying the rivers.

Ethiopia seems to be reluctant to agree on river cooperation (Mohammed, 2013) and is sending signals that she does not recognise Kenya's stronghold in the region. Kenya's ambivalence and laidback strategy in handling Ethiopia's soft and hard-balancing is perhaps due to her conservative foreign policy that does not preempt that any country in the region could radically depart from the status quo. Hence, the caution and self-restraint.



Photo Credit: Twitter





## Ethiopia-Sudan hydro-politics power play

Sudan was initially not opposed to Ethiopia's actions despite the fact that she is a downstream state likely to be affected by the GERD project. She was a very vocal proponent of AU-led tripartite mediation on the GERD. During the Tigray Crisis, she even arrested a senior leader of Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) who was in conflict with Ethiopia. However, she has changed her position after a border dispute with Ethiopia at the al-Fashqa area. She has now proposed that the European Union, the United States, and the United Nations should be co-mediators of the AU in the GERD talks. Egypt accepted the proposal but Ethiopia rejected it insisting that AU should be the sole mediator.

Even though Sudan has been a traditional ally of Egypt, her turnabout appears to have been emboldened by the delisting of her status from the US-terror blacklist. Sudan is no longer a pariah state and is slated to receive billions from international financial institutions having had the US clear her loans at the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. This will give her the muscle to pursue self-sustaining developmental projects, including stalled hydro-power projects such as the Shereyk Power Station.

Ethiopia is likely to use her hydro-relations to bring Sudan, to secure support her dam projects (Bayeh, 2014; Verhoeven, 2011). Since 2010,

Ethiopia has been exporting surplus electricity to Sudan, which Khartoum has been in dire need of as the urban demand for electricity far outstrips supply. This will in the medium-term be detrimental to Sudan's economic growth as she experiences power cuts for 12 hours a day (BBC, 2021). The land-locked country has further baited Khartoum by purchasing Sudan's oil (black gold) and pursuing inter-linked infrastructural development (Bayeh, 2014; Verhoeven, 2011). Sudan's view is that Ethiopia's production of electric power (blue gold) will be mutually important for both countries (Bayeh, 2014).

Ethiopia boasts of a regional comparative advantage, ecologically, and economically and is not shy to use this advantage to her favor. She buys Sudan's oil below the global market rate in a tactfully negotiated 'electricity-for-oil' deal. In reality, Sudan has come to terms with the fact that she is at the mercy of Ethiopia who has the option of diverting and opting out of Khartoum's oil deal, even if it will be at a higher price. This has become a national security issue since any decision by Ethiopia to switch off the lights on Khartoum will leave Sudan at the mercy of Addis (Verhoeven, 2011). Such a move by Addis on Khartoum is likely to escalate the tensions on the GERD and may set the stage for a possible altercation in The HoA security-nexus.

## Ethiopia-Djibouti hydro-politics relations

Djibouti has a strategic coastline but Ethiopia is endowed with abundant water resources and electricity which the former needs for her economic growth. She has an arid desert landscape, with no fresh water. This forces her to import water and food from Ethiopia (Allison, 2020). Most of her electricity comes from Ethiopia too. In 2017, Ethiopia offered to Djibouti free water for the next 30 years. The water pipeline system, currently under construction by the Chinese will transport 103,000 cubic meters of water daily from Hadagalla in Ethiopia to Djibouti's key towns of Ali-Sabieh, Dikhil, Arta, and the Capital Djibouti (Elmahly & Sun, 2018; Tekalign, 2019). This will solve Djibouti's water crisis making her beholden to Ethiopia's kindness.

Djibouti is currently far more dependent on Ethiopia than before. Addis can literally pull the plug on Djibouti, generating acute vulnerability if the current leaders and alliances were to shift dramatically (Styan, 2016). Djibouti has been relying on oil-fired generators whose high cost of electricity has hindered its economic prospects. The Ethiopia-Djibouti Power Interconnection Project was the first in the region. After her connection to Ethiopia's electricity grid in 2011,



Photo Credit: Middle East Monitor

Djibouti is now getting cheap powersupply and has witnessed domestic improvements, especially in reducing inflation and the cost of imported oil. Ethiopia needs Djibouti's port and her hydro-politics plays a great role in facilitating socio-economic and political relations of the two countries as well as the larger HoA (Bayeh, 2014). Ethiopia's cheap hydroelectric power supply has dramatically reduced Djibouti's total dependence on oil and diesel by up to 70%. Ironically, Ethiopia's national access to electricity is the lowest in Africa. This implies that her quest for electrical energy dominance is more of a regional power play strategy rather than a national-development agenda (Tekalign, 2019).

This regional strategy saw Ethiopia back Djibouti in the competition for the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This was a clear message to the region that the balance of power is quickly tilting. Djibouti's sustained stand depicted that the HoA states no longer respect the dominance of Kenya and that Ethiopia will be seeking to spread her spheres of influence even in global forums. In fact, the land-locked nation has begun re-establishing her navy which is going to be based in Djibouti. This will increase the influence of Addis in maritime security in the HOA.



Photo credit: KBC

Photo: Abou



## Ethiopia-Eritrea hydro-political relations

Ethiopia has managed to whip up Eritrea into submission and gained her support on the GERD. She has built the Tekeze Dam on the Tekeze River that flows into Eritrea. This dam will facilitate power exports to Sudan and transmission lines between Bahr Dar and Metema, connecting the Ethiopian and Sudanese power grids which are already in place. Eritrea's interest in buying cheap and reliable hydro-electric power could also explain why she is warming up to Ethiopia. At some point, Eritrea considered indirectly buying Ethiopia's energy through Sudan. Though this would have been an expensive purchase, it was the only option since she heavily relies on two oil-based power plants and only the major cities have access to electricity. Her options are limited since she has no proven reserves of crude oil, natural gas or coal. Therefore, access to Ethiopia's electricity is crucial for her development.

The newly established Ethio-Eritrea relations has weakened Egypt's diplomatic moves on how to galvanise the HOA to support Egypt in the dispute. In October 2020, Eritrea's President Isaias Afwerki visited the GERD, months after Ethiopia began filling the dams. Afwerki, who had always expressed negative stances on the dam has radically changed his position and loyalties. Previously, Eritrea was an ardent supporter of Egypt positions against the GERD. Since Eritrea's independence, Ethiopia has always accused Cairo of funding Asmara to



Photo credit: Voice of America

destabilise Addis. In 2016, Afwerki accused Ethiopia of using the dams for political goals and to arm-twist other states rather than for power generation and development for her people. He likened Ethiopia's agenda to what Turkey was doing with Syria and Iraq on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Aman, 2020).

Ethiopia is keen on making Eritrea believe in the direct benefits that will accrue from the GERD. Both states are members of the HoAC and Ethiopia is willing to leverage on their common interests. It is expected that Ethiopia will push for visits to the dam by other African leaders to drum up support for her common position with the AU, which is currently sponsoring negotiations on the GERD (Aman, 2020). Ethiopia's landlocked state is her biggest vulnerability. Being the center of gravity in the HoAC, she hopes that Eritrea will grant her access to Assab and Massawa sea ports. This relationship was cemented when Eritrea aided Ethiopia's military assault on the Tigray region.

Ethiopia hopes that the HoAC will cushion her from conflict, disruption and this will improve her diplomatic strategy both regionally and globally. She foresees that diversifying her reliance on Djibouti for access to the sea will make her stronger to spread her influence in The HoA. She has also negotiated a 19% stake in the development of Berbera Port in Somaliland, Mombasa and Lamu in Kenya, and ownership of Port Sudan. This is bound to boost her economic prospects significantly as she is the most advanced economy in the HoAC (Henneberg & Stapel, 2020). Eritrea equally hopes to benefit from Ethiopia by keeping open supply routes to and from Sudan. This is integral for most of the informal trade that takes place in this region (Love, 2009).



Photo credit: The New Yorker



Photo credit: Middle East Online

## Ethiopia-South Sudan hydro-politics power play

Ethiopia is in the process of building Gambella, Baro I and Baro II on the Baro/Sobat river system which originates from the Ethiopian highlands. The river system is shared by Ethiopia and South Sudan as the Baro, Akobo and Pibor rivers join to form the Sobat River and eventually, the White Nile. The dams on Baro River are to be used for agricultural and hydro-electric purposes. The Baro is the only navigable river in Ethiopia and the backbone of Gambella town. In the 1900s, the port Gambella provided direct access to the sea via the Nile through Khartoum. Ethiopian coffee was exported via this route, up to the 1940s. At its peak, up to 40 ships would dock at any one time (Alemayehu et al., 2016). The civil war in Sudan and in the Gambella region made this port unusable. However, this transboundary resource is of great importance to Ethiopia, South Sudan and other downstream countries. It is possible that once the Ethiopian navy is in place, this will be one of the key water resources it will seek to safeguard.

Population and irrigation pressures on the Baro River and Mashar marshes are already affecting the Baro-Sobat Basin. Environmental indicators reveal reduction in fish production could reach up to 44 % in Mashar marshes. Further, recession agriculture practiced on flood plains will be reduced by 5%. Similarly, Mashar's wetlands will be reduced by about 50% under all scenarios as a result of water regulation (Sileet et al., 2013).

This is likely to expose the region to resource-induced conflict given that the Gambella region has had a series of cross-border conflicts.

Based on Ethiopia's playbook with all her neighbors, it is expected that she will attempt to unilaterally construct dams and use the Baro River to increase her influence on South Sudan. Juba is indebted to Addis which helped them in the secession war against Khartoum (Doop, 2013). It is possible for Ethiopia to influence South Sudan to join the HoAC to counter IGAD and the EAC. If the HoAC takes on economic issues, then Kenya's Lamu Port Southern Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) project with Ethiopia and South Sudan will lose significance and Kenya's influence in the region will greatly depreciate (Henneberg & Stapel, 2020).

South Sudan is an easy target for Ethiopia considering that only 1% of the country's population have access to electricity and will therefore be in need of Ethiopia's surplus energy. Addis has made an arrangement to buy South Sudan's oil and sell electricity to Juba. This is bound to make South Sudan dependent on Ethiopia in a fashion similar to Sudan's lopsided 'electricity for oil' deal.



Photo credit: Twitter



## Conclusion

Ethiopia's hydro-politics remains the center of gravity of her foreign policy in The HoA. Whereas it presents, at the face-value, lucrative goodies to those states she has whipped into submission, its roots portend long-term imperialistic tendencies that angle on instability and regional realignments in the conflict-ridden region. She has crafted a grand-strategy to weaken the dominance of Egypt in the North and Kenya in the East. Likewise, she has strategically subdued weaker nations such as Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia. The influence of Kenya and Egypt in the global and regional politics will wane and new realignments focusing on Ethiopia will emerge. If untamed, her ambitions are likely to affect the climate, water resources and ecology of The HoA and this will affect the conflict dynamics, cooperation and political stability in the Horn.

## Recommendation

Time is ripe for an African hydro-resources cooperation agreement. Within the ambit of UN, it is urgent that states negotiate on shared transboundary resources to avert the looming conflict in the region. More so, Egypt and Kenya should focus their diplomatic relations to balance Ethiopia's threats rather than pass the buck and hope that Ethiopia will back down.

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