Water diplomacy or water war? Which way?

The politics of the Nile is full of tension, mistrust, anxiety, mystery and diplomatic confrontation among the downstream and upstream riparian countries since time immemorial.

The basin has never seen cooperation until recent times. However, there has been cooperation between the two downstream countries (Sudan and Egypt) with the decoration of the 1959 water sharing agreement. The upper riparian countries (Tanzania, DRC, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Eritrea, and Ethiopia) which generate 100 percent of the Nile waters, were neglected from any negotiations and agreements on the utilizations of the river by the colonial powers.

Historical records have shown evidences that demonstrate the occurrence of diplomatic struggle and direct military confrontations between the upstream and downstream countries. This is partly because of the unfair distribution and utilization of the Nile waters among the basin countries. Egypt has been attempting to ensure the continuation of the zero-sum game politics on the Nile waters by undermining the rights of the lower riparian states. Relations between Ethiopia on the one hand, and Sudan and Egypt on the other, have been characterized by love and hate depending on the continuity and the change of the colonial status quo on utilization of the Nile waters. Besides, their foreign policy orientations have been drastically shaped and reshaped by the political dynamism in the Horn region. Generally, and in Nile politics particularly. In fact, the upstream countries have exploited the Nile water resources for their socio-economic developments by calming the 1929 and 1959 colonial agreements and by weakening the upstream states. The net effect of these treaties was to deny the rights of the upper riparian countries from using the waters of the Nile without prior approval of Egypt. What is surprising is that these colonial agreements have excluded and downgraded the right of Ethiopia which contributes 85% of the Nile waters from getting its legal share from the Nile. The 1959 agreement has allocated 55.5 billion cube meters of water to Egypt, 18.5 cubic meters for Sudan, and 10 cubic meters to evaporate in the Sahara desert to keep the ecological balance of the environment. This has been the status quo of the Nile politics in the past. However, due to geopolitical, security and environmental transformations in the region, the colonial status quo has been challenged in a way that generates mutual benefits to the basin countries. Hence, the basin countries have strengthened their cooperation for regional joint planned growth under the framework of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) for the last decades.

The NBI provides a wide-basin framework to fight poverty and to promote socio-economic development among the ten Nile basin countries. It is a historical phenomenon in Nile politics in the sense that it is the first institutional regime on a shared and equitable use of the Nile Waters and for meaningful negotiations as well. Apart from real negotiations, the signing of the Comprehensive Framework Agreement (CFA) by the upstream countries in 2010 became instrumental in bringing new dynamism to Nile politics that significantly changed the colonial status quo and the zero-sum game politics. This dynamism which challenged Egyptian apartheid policy on the utilization of the Nile waters has led to new political and diplomatic development. Issues surrounding the Nile have become the agenda of the Egyptian public after the official announcement of the diversion of the normal flow of the Nile water by the Ethiopian government. Following the redirection of the water, discussions among Egyptian politicians and policy makers in Egypt indicated possible foreign policy strategies and approaches to the Nile to quickly respond to the new dynamism. These possible foreign policy and security strategies that Egypt will put in place have direct or indirect implications to Ethiopian. Egypt may resort to either water diplomacy, water war, or the combination of the two strategies simultaneously to tackle the new development in Ethiopia.
Egyptian strategies

Egypt, in spite of its geographical location in the Sahara desert and its absolute dependence on the Nile waters for its very existence, has been following a foreign policy and security strategy that ensures the uninterrupted flow of the Nile waters. The Nile water has been a key national interest concern of Egyptians, and thus is the central element in the circle of Egyptian foreign policy towards the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia as well. With the recent diversion of waters by the Ethiopian government, Egypt may take the following foreign policy and security strategies which have solid messages to the people of Ethiopia.

Water Diplomacy

Diplomacy has been described as the weapon of weak and poor states. In fact, it is important to transform the emotions and positions of opponent parties by imposing all possible diplomatic pressures. This includes sanctions at political, economic and diplomatic levels. Many states used to apply diplomacy in matters of national interest before resorting to war. In this regard, hard diplomacy has been frequently used by Egypt to ensure the perpetuation of the zero-sum game politics in the Nile basin. However, Ethiopia has been insisting on a win-win approach in dealing with matters of the Nile.

Egypt may use the hard diplomacy to react to the current diplomatic and security developments in Ethiopia as part of their propaganda. For instance, it may:

• Attempt to divert the diplomatic negotiations by presenting a distorted image of the dam and by magnifying its negative socio-economic and environmental impacts. Egypt may also present the construction of the dam to the Arab world and the international community at large as a planned strategy by Ethiopia to damage its national interest. By doing so, it will create confusion and ambiguity.
• Take the matter to the Arab League using its influential position as the seat of the League, so as to impose diplomatic sanctions on Ethiopia and to reduce the flow of foreign currency income by disconnecting its trade ties. It may also convince the Arab countries not to export oil, which will gradually aggravate inflation and living expenses and could be translated into a political crisis.
• Submit the case to the AU, UN, UNSC and ICJ arguing that the construction of the dam severely reduces its “historical share” of the water, for the sake of bringing hard diplomatic pressure on Ethiopia.

Water war

Successive Egyptian governments have had a negative perception of Ethiopia, and have been engaging both in diplomatic battles and proxy wars to damage the economic and political potential for Ethiopia not to exploit its resources. This negative perception is rooted in their idea that “peace in Ethiopia means war in Egypt”. As a result, they never want to see an economically strong and politically unified Ethiopia. This is because they fear that a strong Ethiopia will deny Egyptian access to the Nile waters.

Proxy war

Evidence has shown that destabilizing and weakening Ethiopia through proxy war has been one of the Egyptian security strategies in the past in order to ensure the sustainable flow of the Nile waters from its source. To this end, instead of directly confronting Ethiopia militarily as it did during the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV in 1875 and 1876 at Gundet and Gura respectively, it has opted to support anti-Ethiopian government dissident forces operating in Somalia and Eritrea. Needless to say, Egypt has been extending its diplomatic and financial assistance to Islamic extremist groups and opposition political movements in Somalia and Eritrea. Above all, Egypt never wanted to see the formation of a pro-Ethiopian government in Somalia. Because peace in the war-torn country will have its own trickle-down positive effect on Ethiopia.
Egypt fear that any peaceful relationship between Ethiopia and the government of Somalia would negatively affect its regional interest. Thus, it has been actively involved in Somali politics, directly or indirectly, to turn the outcomes of peace negotiations on its side. Moreover, it has been working to change the political equation of Somali politics to counterbalance Ethiopia’s influence in the region. To mention “Egypt was the main lobbyist in the Arab world in favor of granting financial assistance to al-Ittihad” as MedhaneTaddesse clearly stated in his book “Al-Ittihad: Political Islam and Black Economy in Somalia (2002)”.

I strongly argue that Egypt will continue backing, training and equipping heavy military weapons to dissident political movements operating in Somalia and Eritrea to put Ethiopia in the bottle of challenges and to divert its development energies to war. Even the current public debates in Egypt reinforced that Egyptian politicians have the interest to attack Ethiopia by supporting rebel movements. Associated Press and the BBC reported that radical pro-Morsi Islamic Wasat Party leader, Abu al-IlaMadi, suggested a rumor that “Egypt planning to destroy the dam could scare the Ethiopians into cooperating with Egypt on the project”. A liberal politician, AymanNour, proposed spreading rumors about “Egypt obtaining refueling aircraft to create the impression that it plans an airstrike to destroy the dam”. This clearly proves that Egypt has intentions to attack Ethiopia through proxy war. I don’t think that Egypt will keep its hand away from Ethiopia as long as there are political forces that are willing to attack Ethiopia. Hence, Somalia and Eritrea could be used as a springboard.

Therefore, the government of Ethiopia has to continue its positive contribution in the construction of peace and political stability in Somalia in order to counter balance Egyptian influence. In addition, it has to strengthen its trade and commercial ties more than ever in a way that integrates the two countries economically. Supplying cheap electric power and connecting the people of the two countries by establishing infrastructures can also be one way of keeping its diplomatic and political relations fresh. This eventually minimizes the possibility of threats coming from the Somali side. And the position of Eritrea has to be examined as the government officially recognize the “historical rights” of Egypt to use the Nile waters even after the signing of CFA. As a result, the government in Asmara may give a green light to Egypt to use its territory to attack Ethiopia. Eritrea may use this opportunity to seek revenge on Ethiopia and to externalize internal tension and instability. Thus, we need to rethink our relations with Eritrea.

Military attack: political suicide

Declaring war and launching a military attack on Ethiopia could be one of the possible Egyptian strategies in approaching the new developments.. In fact, it seems obsolete to think of war among the Nile basin countries in the 21st century. In the era of globalization, Egypt may not be successful in securing its water interest by directly launching a military attack unless it colonizes and controls the basin countries as the colonial powers did. But, it would destabilize the political networks of Ethiopia and be able to divert its attention by keeping it fighting with dissident groups. Nevertheless, war has never achieved its objective, instead causing human misery and chaos as the American intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan has proved. Yet our historical relations with Egypt demonstrate elements of war and military confrontation in their attempt to control the source of the Nile. History reveals that Egypt has fought more than 15 wars with Ethiopia with this aim in mind., only aborting its ambition with the devastating defeat at the battle of Gundet and Gura. In fact, it was successful in controlling Harar for ten solid years. This was an indication of the Egyptian appetite to attack Ethiopia by waging war.

Egypt may consider the diversion of the water and the construction of the Dam as a declaration of war and thus may take military action to destroy the dam and to attack Ethiopia. If Egypt does so, the consequences will result in political suicide. Egypt could justify its pre-emptive military actions by arguing that the construction of the Renaissance Dam not only affects its socio-economic development but also its survival.
States under international law have the right to defend themselves from any external threat which could damage their territorial integrity and political sovereignty. One of the legal instruments that the government in Cairo may use as weapon for its pre-emptive military action could be Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.

This article states: “Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security”. In fact, the Charter gives utmost priority to mechanisms of peaceful settlement of disputes such as negotiations, mediation, conciliation, and arbitration. Nevertheless, states often opt to use war as a last resort in self-defense to acts of aggression. For instance, America lunched a pre-emptive strike on Iraq in 2003 claiming Article 51 of the UN Charter as a legal justification. Ethiopia also intervened in Somalia in 2006 following the declaration a jihad war by some Islamist fundamentalist groups, and attacked terrorist groups operating in Eritrea in 2012 relying on the above article. In the same manner, Egypt may attack Ethiopian on the basis of this justification. But the consequences of military action will be very severe for Egypt at least for one reason - its action will provoke public hunger in Ethiopia and may compel the government and the people of Ethiopia to take more radical action even to the extent of stopping the flow of the river.

Generally, the current political development in Egypt concerning the diversion of the Nile, reflected through Egyptian media, clearly indicate that Egyptians intend to use either water diplomacy, water war or a combination to stop the construction of the dam or to attack Ethiopia. Thus the Ethiopian government has to be aware of the changing foreign policy and security strategies of Egypt, and should adjust its foreign policy orientation regarding the new geopolitical and security development in the Horn region. In addition, it has to give considerable attention to the possibility of military confrontation with lower riparian countries (Sudan and Egypt) either directly or indirectly through proxy, and has to strengthen our military apparatus so as to avert potential dangers. This will enable the government of Ethiopia to take pro-active measures. Knowing the Egyptian approach to the current political and diplomatic Nile crisis will help us to rethink and re-evaluate our position and the foreign policy strategy that we have adhered towards the Horn region for the past two decades. Finally, I would like to suggest some pro-active policy actions that the Ethiopian government could take to handle the new developments in the downstream countries.

- Strengthen internal cohesion and economic development to increase power when negotiating with the lower riparian states.
- Build internal military capacity to quickly respond to any anticipated attack from downstream countries. We should not be too idealistic. The possibility of water related war between Ethiopia and downstream countries should not be neglected from political and academic discourse. This is because we cannot avoid war by simply wishing to be eliminated.
- Organize public discussions to make sure that the people are aware of the current developments in Nile politics, and to consolidate national unity.
- Invite opposition political party leaders, civil society representatives, university intellectuals and influential personalities to discuss the report of the International Panel of Experts as the lower riparian countries did; and the Egyptian position, to frame foreign policy direction and create a common national stance.
- Send diplomatic missions to selected Arab League member states to dispel fears and confusion regarding the dam's potential impacts, stressing the project would ultimately benefit all the riparian states. This will also counterbalance Egyptians hard water diplomacy.

To conclude, the only solution to the Nile is a win-win approach. The late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, in his interview with the Egyptian TV in 2010 clearly told the Egyptian people that “utilization of the Nile waters is not a zero-sum game.
It does not mean that if the upper riparian states benefits, Egypt and Sudan should lose. It does not mean that Egypt and Sudan benefit, the upper riparian countries should lose. There is a win-win alternative and the only solution to the Nile is a win-win solution”. He also underlined that “Ethiopia do not accept the principle that some people have which says the Nile water belong to Sudan and Egypt and Ethiopia and the rest will not have a share in the Nile. That concept is a 19th century concept. Egypt must accept that the source of 85% of the Nile water must benefit from the Nile, and unless they accept this principle then the win-win solution will be closed.” This is the concept that Egyptians failed to recognize. They are living in the 20th century, while thinking with a 19th century mind setting.