Egyptian Mega Projects on the Nile: repercussions and implications to Ethiopia

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Recently I came across one commentary by an Egyptian management consultant by the name Ms. Rania Al-Maghraby (PM World Journal, Vol. I, Issue III-October 2012). With a candid English and pleasant conceptual flow, she mentioned some of the Mega Projects Egypt is considering executing in the years to come. I was mesmerized with the size and complexity of the projects in the pipeline. Some of the projects indicated in her commentary are Egypt-Saudi Arabia Bridge crossing over the Red Sea, another Aswan type high dam on River Nile, Western Desert New Axis Project, Sinai desert development projects, nuclear power generation plants and even a space program. How great! (Dear Reader, please first read her commentary from www.pmworldjournal.net under the title “Mega Projects on Egypt’s Horizon”).

The Nile Basin, specifically including present day Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia, is one of the ancient civilizations on planet earth. It is interesting to see the coming up of plans that elevate this part of the world to what it historically deserves. Though implementation is a challenge to be faced with, Egyptians should be applauded for planning the mega projects having a profound impact on the development of their country. However, given the existing geopolitical chemistry, the above mentioned projects are not without some impact to Ethiopia and the entire Nile riparian countries. In this regard, it is logical to infer and argue that there will be both negative and positive impacts affecting Ethiopia depending on how Egyptians choose their future hydro politics avenue.

Direct and Indirect Negative Impacts

With the exception of the space program and the nuclear power generation plants, four of the Mega Projects under consideration are directly linked to River Nile. The new Aswan type High Dam will store water of River Nile in the Sahara desert. The stored water will be used for Western Desert New Axis project and a multitude of projects in the Sinai desert. These three locations are deserts of scorching sun where life barely exists. In this part of Egypt, the loss due to evapotranspiration will be excessively high. Agriculture development in the Sahara desert will definitely require enormous amount of water. Given that the flow of the river is both erratic and limited, water will be scarcer than ever, long before changing the mere desert to a green field. Unless there are some other covert reasons, the idea of planning agriculture in the middle of the Sahara desert is hence more extravagant than economical. As water stress looms, it will lead to confrontations with upper riparian countries. Rather, it will be wise to use the waters for industrial and tourist purposes.
In this water stressed region of the world, everyone seems in need of having Nile waters. Knowing this reality, Egyptian regimes have been intentionally too generous in offering the Nile waters to countries outside the basin. Anwar Sadat, during his visit to Jerusalem in 1979, promised two billion cubic meters of water for Israel. Some media outlets have reported in the past that there have been secret discussions by the late Gadhafi of Libya and Mubarak of Egypt in diverting the waters of the Nile to the other water scarce country of the former. The late Yasir Arafat of Palestine is said to have raised a similar question directly to Colonel Mengistu. It is also possible to infer that the Egypt-Saudi Arabia Bridge will not be a mere bridge alone. Given Egypt’s generosity to its Non-Nile basin neighbours, thinking the inclusion of heavy duty water pipes from Nile to Saudi Arabia along with the bridge will be more reasonable than speculative. This purposeful sole Egyptian generosity will water the Holy places of the three Great Religions: Jerusalem, Mecca and Medina bringing a totally new geopolitical and religious dimension in the already volatile region.

Some Egyptian politicians may think this approach aligns Saudi Arabia and Israel including Libya along the interests of Egypt. By extension, it may be possible that friendly countries of these new additions will reinforce Egyptian interests. Libya and the Saudis, the two oil rich countries, may finance these ambitious projects. Israel, though very much doubtful, will be there for technical support and diplomatic maneuvering. If this scenario holds, the poor Nile Basin African countries, Ethiopia in particular, will be confronted with the diplomatic, security, financial and military muscle of the new additions: Israel, Saudi Arabia and Libya.

Unlike its proactive generosity to non-riparian countries, Egypt’s reaction to its southern neighbours is clouded by aggressiveness and contempt. It is observed sometimes with military threatening and more often with clandestine disruptive and subversive acts. To Egyptians, every development issue regarding Nile has to be concluded maintaining their hegemony. According to their hitherto approach, their southern neighbours must always bow down to the terms and conditions of Egypt. If not, they posture the military option. The perverse logic here is that for Egyptians to use the waters of the Nile extravagantly, Ethiopians should willingly accept death from poverty and hunger. Generally, as has been described by several commentaries, it is possible to argue that Egypt is a country that has not abandoned its past expansionist ambitions. Whatever they have done so far and planning to do in the future over the Nile is in complete disregard of the consent of upper riparian countries. Contrary to this fact, Egyptians insisted for the creation of an international panel of experts (IPE) to study the impact of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GRD) to Egypt and Sudan to which Ethiopia responded with good gesture. GRD is meant for power generation and is the first of its kind ever attempted by Ethiopia. Will Egypt in return invite Ethiopia for impact assessment studies of the Mega projects? Who knows, if a sense of cooperation prevails in the new leadership, they may.

While keeping Egypt’s hitherto stance in place, upper riparian countries especially Ethiopia needs its appropriate fair shares from the waters of the river. Being a contributor of some 86% of the Nile flow, Ethiopia’s argument for a fair share of the Nile waters is the most humble offer, if
not too conciliatory. The need to feed the growing population and the generation of electricity are some of the challenging realities Ethiopia is faced with. With a population of some 90 million suffering from recurring hunger and dehumanizing poverty, Ethiopia’s argument for a balanced fair share is by far the most considerate. Ethiopia is considerate well knowing that its population will double in little over two decade’s time. The situation of other Upper riparian countries is also nearly similar to Ethiopia’s.

Despite this commanding reality, successive Egyptian regime leaders had been saying in public that they will go directly into a military confrontation for any upper riparian country undertaking development projects on the Nile. This military posturing is mostly meant for a psychological war. Although this psychological war is always there, Egyptians have been more successful in the clandestine operations than in the military front. They were successful in blocking Ethiopia’s loan requests from all bilateral and multilateral sources. They were also successful in assisting the Eritrean secessionists which culminated in their favour. Their covert assistance to the late Said Bare of Somalia in the 1970s engulfed the lives of tens of thousands of Ethiopians and Somalis. So did it to the two brothers and sisters, Eritreans and Ethiopians. Egypt was also successful in making Black Africans: Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia, members of the Arab League extending its political influence even beyond the basin. It is widely known to Ethiopians that the Egyptian intelligence service had been busy doing the unnecessary against Ethiopia. A shared vision with countries of the basin has not been fruitful so far.

In a paradoxical approach, Egyptian regimes aspire adding more artificial lower riparian countries than cooperating with the natural ones. Their attempt so far has been disruptive towards their poor African southern neighbours. In the 21st century, this approach will not take them far. The military, diplomatic and clandestine activities may partly work for Egyptians at a tactical level but at the expense of their long term interests. Instead, it will lead to costly wars in which Egyptians themselves may dearly pay. In the unlikely event of the wars tilting in Egyptian favour, an irreversible hatred may follow within the peoples of upper riparian countries. When hatred is incepted inside the prevalence of absolute poverty, it is possible to think the unthinkable. In short, another form of extremism may surface out.

Citizens of the upper Nile, unable to live by the stubborn and greedy manipulation of others, may go for whatever avenue. Brandishing on a military might cannot win somebody who is ready to sacrifice for a cause he believes in. Even in the military front, unlike Israel and other western countries, the Egyptian military capability by itself is not that sophisticated making it vulnerable to defeat. Recent world history teaches us modern sophisticated military or economic supremacy is so fragile that its ruin takes a little bit of thinking the unthinkable in a sinister way. It does not require much research to guess that in the worst case scenario, the Nile water itself may be turned into a curse to humanity in the basin and outside. And no one can be certain as to the depth and extent of the damage that may follow. But, one thing is absolutely clear. A “forced hopeless” human being incepting hatred can do the worst ever. God save us all from a catastrophe. The only way out of this quagmire is cooperation.
Expected Positive Outcomes

Egypt and Sudan are ancient civilizations with rich culture. They also have reasonably rich intellectual base to think and act at strategic levels. Ethiopians too are well conscious and very considerate when it comes to the interests of their downstream brothers. Despite the continued Egyptian clandestine operations affecting every citizen, Ethiopians are well-wishers to both Egypt and Sudan. It is an inherent culture for Ethiopians to share whatever resources they have. Unless it is a media fabrication, I know no sane Ethiopian saying or feeling Egyptians and the Sudanese should suffer from thirst. Only someone insane or inhuman can think this. The same is true to other upper riparian countries. Given this reality, the age-old hostile geopolitical orientation must be fundamentally changed. Instead of focusing on short term tactical gains, Egyptians have to focus on a lasting solution with cool head and rational approaches, leaving aside the politicization of the Nile and their already failed old expansionist ambitions.

In this case, the possibility of cooperation of all the basin countries needs to be reinvigorated and concluded with a legally binding agreement through collective understanding. Upper riparian countries must understand and legally assure Egypt that its only source of water, Nile, will always be there for Egyptian use. In return, Egypt has to understand that damming Nile in Sahara and leading to extravagant use of water in the desert is irrational. It has to be understood that each drop of water misused is a mutual resource shared by all the peoples of source countries that are dying of hunger and poverty, probably every single minute. Assuring Egypt of its water security is not meant blessing a monopoly. Similarly, sharing water with others is not meant aggressively affecting Egypt’s water security. Rather it is meant for a mutually beneficial approach where, according to the diplomatic language, all riparian countries strike a win-win solution. Egypt being solely dependent on the Nile flow and Ethiopia being a contributor of 86% of the river flow, they should be the ones that need to come first in reconciling their interests. The Sudan, South Sudan and other riparian countries will follow.

Egypt’s attempt in anchoring arguments over colonial treaties will not take us a single step forward in arriving at a binding agreement. Colonialism has been a human disgrace and basing ones arguments on the colonial legacy is even more disrespectful. Neither is the military option feasible. If all upper riparian countries go for the construction of several projects at the same time, can Egypt afford to go to war with all of them? If yes, can it win? What if the countries counter act in unison? What if some people, the “forced hopeless”, in the upper riparian countries go for a sinister approach? Other approaches such as using the Suez Canal embargo or diplomatic maneuvering will not also work in assuring Egypt of its future water security. If the worst comes, Egypt will be more vulnerable than any of the countries up in the basin. Sudan will also be sandwiched. The solution is once again honest cooperation.

In this regard, the development phase of the Egyptian Mega Projects on the Nile is expected to bring together Egyptians, financiers and the would-be beneficiary countries. In order to ensure sustainability, it is reasonable to expect that financiers and the incoming artificial riparian
countries including the Egyptian elite will raise the issue of a binding agreement with upper riparian countries. This may push both Egypt and Sudan to come to the negotiating table.

If this scenario holds, all riparian countries will set up a legal framework and equitably fix the water quota of each country. Any surplus water under-utilized by any country can be taken up by Egyptians and the Sudanese. There is also a possibility that some upper riparian countries may release a portion of their share free of charge to Egypt and Sudan as a friendly gesture. Ethiopia should be exemplary in this regard. Having a hostile topography in the basin, Ethiopia’s immediate irrigation potential is limited. Until it reaches the level of using its quota, it can deliver part of its share either freely or in return for some material value. Another option is exporting any surplus to Israel, Libya or Saudi Arabia in return for financial or other material advantage. The revenues from the export should come to the countries of the basin for a basin wide development, where protection of the environment is one basic priority. The Cooperation approach will assure water security changing the entire basin and beyond into a location of collective understanding, shared destiny, peace and tranquility. That will usher in the regeneration of the ancient Nile civilization. Working in cooperation will thus be in the interest of all the children of the Nile.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the Egyptian Mega Projects over the Nile are complex projects worth considering. However, their adverse impact to the upper basin countries is so huge that a prior thorough discussion and collective understanding is imperative. Egyptians must evaluate other more economical alternatives before they embark upon implementation. Instead of building another Aswan at the heart of the Sahara desert, building several dams in Ethiopian highlands benefits both Ethiopia and Egypt in terms of power generation for the former and water loss reduction for the latter.

Due to suspicion and naive hostility, the foregone opportunities so far are quite immense. In the 21st century, suspicions and subversive approaches must give way to civility and pragmatism. After all, we are inseparably linked in all aspects. Naïve hostility must be replaced by true cooperation. When mutual understanding and cooperation prevails, it is possible to think the unthought-of benefits accruing from this great gift of Mother Nature, River Nile. Through cooperation, it is possible to save a sizable loss of water in South Sudan, Sudan and Egypt. Imagine the benefits of cooperation in changing the basin’s nearly half a billion population into a common market. Imagine also reducing military expenditures of basin countries and directing the resources to the development of the poor people in terms of education & health, improving food supply, job creation from agro processing & tourism development, etc. This will have a magnetic effect in attracting FDI, greatly enhancing trade and creating a myriad of social, political and economic benefits. Though it seems challenging, it is possible. It only takes positive thinking followed by true negotiations that lead to a final binding agreement on the quota. The ones that can make it happen are Egyptians by fully abandoning their past
expansionist and hegemonic mentality! Let us not forget that Europeans who were fighting each other for centuries are now united under one umbrella. Why not we?
God bless the children of the Nile!