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## **Beyond the River: Elite Perceptions and Regional Cooperation in the Eastern Nile Basin**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper argues that benefit-sharing literature has assumed, rather than examined, the conditions under which cooperation over shared water resources from transboundary rivers can lead to regional cooperation in other economic sectors – cooperation 'beyond the river'. Using the case of the Eastern Nile Basin, the paper illustrates how economic cooperation between Ethiopia and Sudan has progressed in the last decade despite the lack of significant improvement in their water cooperation. Egypt and Sudan, on the other hand, have largely failed to translate their downstream hydropolitical alliance into stronger interdependencies in other economic sectors. In explaining this nonlinear relationship between water cooperation and cooperation 'beyond the river', the article explores the perceptions of political elites in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan on the benefits and terms of cooperation, their assumptions as to who should set these terms and lead the cooperation process, and their ideas on the meaning of cooperation itself. It also underlines how incumbent regimes in each of the three Eastern Nile Basin countries view the possibility of collaborating with their counterparts in the Basin to reap the benefits of cooperation, and assess the impact of regional and international variables on this cooperation. In addition to secondary sources and official documents, the article is based on original and up-to-date interviews conducted with government officials and experts in Cairo, Addis Ababa, and Khartoum between September and November 2017.

**KEYWORDS:** Benefit sharing, hydro politics, regional cooperation, Eastern Nile Basin, Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The signing of the Declaration of Principles (DoP) on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project on 23 March 2015 in Khartoum, Sudan has created a sense of optimism among politicians and scholars, and the hope of progress towards regional cooperation between the Eastern Nile countries of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan. Since its launching in April 2011, the project has created tensions between Egypt (which considered it a threat to its water security), and Ethiopia (which insisted that the dam would cause no significant harm to downstream Egypt and Sudan). In an attempt to transform the project from a source of tension to a basis for trilateral cooperation, the DoP emphasised that the purpose of the GERD is to promote "transboundary cooperation and regional integration through the generation of sustainable and reliable clean energy supply" (Agreement on Declaration of Principles between the Arab Republic of Egypt, The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, and the Republic of the Sudan on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Project, 2015, article II).

The signing of the DoP was followed by other steps to initiate bilateral and/or trilateral cooperation beyond water resources, and implement agreements that had been signed before. During the Africa Business Forum in Sharm el-Sheikh in February 2016, Egypt proposed the establishment of a trilateral fund for the implementation of joint development projects, a notable initiative that remained part of the negotiations over the GERD (Egypt State Information Service, 2016). In October 2016, Egypt and Sudan signed a new strategic partnership agreement that covered the areas of agriculture, transportation, commerce, tourism and education.

These positive developments promised to fulfil the expectation that the construction of the GERD would encourage the riparian states to cooperate on a more balanced and equitable basis (Salman, 2011; Chen and Swain, 2014). Trilateral talks on the GERD that followed the signing of the DoP were seen as "a constructive step towards wider institutional transboundary cooperation and regional economic integration in the Nile basin" (Cascão and Nicol, 2016a: 550). More broadly, these developments seem to support the argument of the benefit-sharing literature that the easing of tensions around transboundary water resources could foster cooperation 'beyond the river'. According to this argument, cooperation on shared water resources can lead to cooperation in other water-related sectors (food and energy production, and trade) and may even lead to reducing restrictions on the movement of goods, labour and finance, thus promoting regional cooperation and even integration (Sadoff and Grey, 2002, 2005; see also Phillips et al., 2006; Woodhouse, 2017).

However, this literature on the benefits of cooperation on transboundary rivers in general, and on the Eastern Nile in particular, presumes the automatic spillover of water cooperation to other water-related and non-water-related sectors. In other words, it assumes, rather than examines, the conditions of cooperation beyond water resources – a lacuna that this paper seeks to address through answering two related questions: 1) under what conditions would cooperation on water resources promote cooperation 'beyond the river'? and 2) how can a better environment for cooperation 'beyond the river' be created?

To answer these questions, the paper integrates the literature on domestic determinants of regional cooperation into the analysis of conflict and cooperation over transboundary water resources. It argues that a closer analysis of the domestic factors and interests that promote or hinder cooperation 'beyond the river' is necessary for understanding the gap between the potential for, and the actual record of, cooperation. Using the case of the Eastern Nile, the paper explores how the riparian states perceive the terms and benefits of cooperation 'beyond the river', and the extent to which these perceptions converge and/or diverge.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections. The first section critically reviews the literature on water cooperation, especially literature linking water cooperation to regional integration. The second section introduces the case study, time frame and methods used for data collection. The third section examines the perceptions of political elites and institutions in the three Eastern Nile countries with regard to cooperation on and beyond water resources, before and after the construction of the GERD and the signing of the DoP. The fourth section discusses the findings, and concludes with some policy recommendations for fostering cooperation 'beyond the river' in the Eastern Nile.

## **BEYOND THE RIVER: EXPLAINING REGIONAL COOPERATION IN TRANSBOUNDARY RIVER BASINS**

Over the last two decades, the debate on the hydropolitical relations of transboundary rivers has shifted from whether increasing demands for water resources would lead to water wars, to how cooperation and conflict are often intertwined in riparian relations, and how riparian states can move towards more cooperative arrangements. Transcending the dichotomy between conflict and cooperation, several scholars have illustrated how interactions over transboundary water resources combine features of competition/unilateralism and collaboration/multilateralism. This combination is determined by the changing balance of power exercised by some riparian states and contested by others. Power projection and contestation is not only pursued by coercive means (e.g. military force and coercion/pressure), but also by utilitarian mechanisms (i.e. offering economic and political incentives for cooperation), as well as normative and ideational means (e.g. signing treaties and framing the dominant discourse) (see, for example, Cascão, 2009; Mirumachi, 2015; Zeitoun and Warner, 2006; Zeitoun et al., 2016).

This paper expands the discussion of the utilitarian mechanisms by examining the incentives and processes of cooperation beyond water resources, and their link to cooperation in the water sector. While most of the water cooperation literature in the last decade has focused on interactions between riparian states, this paper links the domestic and transboundary levels by exploring the views of national

actors in different riparian states on the benefits and costs of cooperation on and beyond the river. In doing so, it contributes to the literature on the multilevel analysis of water politics (see Warner, 2008; Warner, 2010; Warner and Zawahri, 2012). Although this literature has largely focused on how riparian states manage pressures on their water policies from non-state actors domestically and other riparian states regionally, this paper focuses exclusively on state actors at the domestic level. It calls for further research to assess the impact of non-state actors on cooperation beyond water resources.

Within water cooperation literature, the paper particularly builds on and critiques the benefit-sharing approach, which suggests that cooperation on shared water resources can lead to cooperation in other sectors, or may be a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for regional cooperation between riparian states (Sadoff and Grey, 2002: 401; Phillips et al., 2006: 36). According to this approach, riparian states should broaden the range of benefits or 'basket of options' accruing from cooperating in the management of international rivers (Phillips et al., 2006) to include 'benefits beyond the river' that may cover areas not directly related to water resources (indirect economic benefits) (Sadoff and Grey, 2002, 2005). Based on the neo-liberal assumption that states base their decisions on rational choices, benefit-sharing scholars have argued that riparian states would cooperate 'beyond the river' if they recognised the gains to be achieved from cooperation and the opportunities lost by non-cooperation (Sadoff and Grey, 2002; see also Woodhouse, 2017; Woodhouse and Phillips, 2009). This analysis presumes an automatic link between the different types of benefits such that "cooperation at any stage will promote the capacity and willingness for future cooperation" (Sadoff and Grey, 2005: 7). Basin and sub-basin water resources planning opens the potential for regional cooperation and interdependence between riparian states, to share benefits within and across sectors (e.g. hydropower generation in one country benefitting industrial development in another; efficient farming in areas with productive soil and a favourable climate leading to increased regional virtual water trade and food security) (Woodhouse, 2017).

Despite its potential contribution to the transformation of conflicts over water resources, the benefit-sharing literature does not explore *when* cooperation on water resources management spills over to other areas. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the ways in which the visions of political institutions and policymakers promote or hinder cooperation in generating benefits 'beyond the river'. It concurs with Klaphake that the definition of benefits (and costs) of cooperation 'beyond the river' is not objective, but rather depends on the 'domestic market' of regional cooperation in each country. Goals and interests set by decision makers, which may differ from one riparian state to the other, contribute to shaping the potential for transboundary cooperation (Klaphake, 2006: 111). The analysis of how these benefits and interests are defined explains the gap between what is "rationally desirable" and what is "politically feasible" in transboundary cooperation (Luzi, 2007: 213).

In exploring the perceptions of political elites and institutions of regional cooperation 'beyond the river' in transboundary basins, the paper makes use of literature on regional cooperation. The hypothesis of the benefit-sharing literature on the link between water cooperation and cooperation beyond water resources is premised on the neo-functionalist argument that cooperation spills over from one sector to other sectors and issue areas. Neo-functionalists, however, have examined the conditions of spillover more closely. They highlight that the extension of cooperation to other functionally related sectors depends on how national actors and elites *perceive* the benefits and drawbacks of this cooperation, and come to believe that common or shared problems cannot be resolved at the national level (Haas, 1961; Haas and Schmitter, 1964). In other words, cooperation does not only depend on functional spillover (i.e. the interdependence between sectors that makes it difficult to isolate them from each other), but also on political spillover associated with the changing expectations of elites and their role in promoting further cooperation (Bergmann and Niemann, 2015).

In this context, political actors and policymakers promote regional cooperation depending on their assessment of the impact of this cooperation (or lack of it) on their power positions at home (Väyrynen, 2003; Mansfield and Milner, 1999). They may champion a regional project that promotes transboundary cooperation by capitalising on the similarities and common interests shared by its constituent members

(Neumann, 1994). Conversely, they may use nationalist appeals that depict other riparian states as enemies, in order to divert attention from domestic crises and mobilise domestic support to incumbent regimes, thus hindering regional cooperation (Dinar, 2002). In transboundary river basins, water and hydraulic projects (especially large dams) have been used by political elites in different regions, including the Middle East and Africa, as symbols of nation and state building, and thus as a lever to gain legitimacy (Allouche, 2005; Menga, 2016).

At the regional level, successful cooperation depends on the convergence of domestic policy preferences among the concerned states (Fawcett, 2009; Hurrell, 1995; Söderbaum and Granit, 2014; Väyrynen, 2003). It is based on "shared understandings and meanings given to political activity by the actors involved" (Hurrell, 1995: 335; see also Marchand et al., 1999). This implies the existence of mutual gains or rewards such that "each actor helps the others to realise their goals by adjusting its policies in the anticipation of its own reward" (Milner, 1992: 468). These actors should more or less agree that their national development objectives will be advanced through regional cooperation, with a positive-sum outcome. This agreement can be based on unplanned convergence of interests, on innovative policies by state officials to transform crises to opportunities, and on the promotion of common interests (Haas and Schmitter, 1964).

In Africa, and more so in the Middle East, the experience of regional cooperation has been significantly affected by changes in the international systems and policies of world powers. It is also evident that economic relations between the two regions and external partners have been stronger than relations within the regions. It has been argued, however, that these systemic variables do not sufficiently explain the record of regional cooperation in Africa and the Middle East. The role of political elites in using regional security and economic relations to promote their interests and ensure state and/or regime survival is also significant (Clapham, 2001; Fawcett, 2009; Fawcett and Gandois, 2010). How states in the region perceive each other has promoted cooperation in specific sub-regions and hindered it in others. According to Clapham, the minimum requirement for regional cooperation in Africa is a shared "idea of the state" – the acceptance of the boundaries, identities and domestic governments of other states in the region (Clapham, 1996, 2001).

According to scholars of regionalism in Africa and the Middle East, another important requirement for successful regional cooperation is the balance between, on the one hand, having a regional hegemon who leads the process of cooperation and, on the other, avoiding raising other countries' fears of domination by this hegemon. This cooperation must also, in the end, deliver balanced benefits to all participating countries (Clapham, 1996, 2001; Fawcett and Gandois, 2010). The establishment of strong regional leadership requires political, economic and social instruments to influence other countries in the region, as well as a degree of 'internal cohesion', a factor that is relevant to many African countries, including Ethiopia and Sudan. A state that establishes itself in the region needs to be "firmly established within its own territory" (Clapham, 1996: 122). Regional cooperation, in other words, largely depends on the *state capacity* to drive the process of cooperation by establishing its legitimacy at home and in the region (Fawcett, 2009; Fawcett and Gandois, 2010). This also touches on the profound question of the nature of the state in Africa and the Middle East, and whether it is designed by political elites to increase domestic control or to promote regional cooperation (Verhoeven, 2015, 2016).

To sum up, the study of regional cooperation should uncover the visions of political actors and institutions involved and the extent to which they share an understanding of the terms and benefits of cooperation, especially its impact on their power positions at home. It should also explore how political actors in each state perceive their counterparts in the region, assess the potential of collective cooperation to reap mutual benefits, and define who should lead the process of cooperation. In other words, rather than being automatic, cooperation among riparian states 'beyond the river' would depend on their experience of water cooperation and the potential for cooperation in other sectors, as well as on the definition by political elites and institutions of the benefits and costs of cooperation.

## CONTEXTUALISING AND UNDERSTANDING THE EASTERN NILE

There are three reasons why the Eastern Nile Basin is a relevant case for exploring the link between water cooperation and cooperation 'beyond the river'. First, according to benefit-sharing scholars, the Nile Basin in general, and the Eastern Nile in particular, has good potential for generating "significant benefits of multiple types" including benefits 'beyond the river' (Sadoff and Grey, 2002: 401). In fact, the concept has been specifically developed for the case of the Nile in order to encourage the riparian states to transcend their historical disagreements about sharing water, and engage in a dialogue to share the benefits of water use (Jägerskog and Lundqvist, 2006).

Second, a number of scholars have emphasised the opportunities for integration of hydropower and cheap labour in Ethiopia, natural resources (especially land) in Sudan, and capital, agricultural industries and irrigation technology in Egypt (e.g. Al-Saidi et al., 2017; Blackmore and Whittington, 2008; Ebaidalla, 2016; Salman, 2018). In line with the benefit-sharing literature, most of these scholars adopt an economic approach to cooperation in the Basin, focusing on the complementary comparative advantages of the three Eastern Nile countries. While acknowledging the generic political complexities that may obstruct the economic integration of certain sectors of the three countries, they have not sufficiently analysed the domestic political conditions that promote and/or hinder cooperation.

Third, in the framework of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) – the intergovernmental partnership on river cooperation launched in 1999 – the Eastern Nile Council of Ministers (ENCOM) adopted a clear vision for regional cooperation. In 2001, the 2020 operational vision of the Eastern Nile embraced the objective of achieving an integrated region with "multipurpose projects in power development and pooling, transport and irrigated agriculture; free movement of goods and services, and active inter-country private sector cooperation" (Blackmore and Whittington, 2008: v). This was to be based on water cooperation in the areas of flood preparedness, irrigation and drainage, and watershed management. The three Eastern Nile countries commissioned independent researchers under a Joint Multipurpose Programme (JMP) to scope the projects that could deliver benefits to all basin countries. The team concluded its analysis with a proposal for a first set of joint multipurpose investments for water storage and hydropower production on the Blue Nile (Blackmore and Whittington, 2008). In the broader framework of the NBI, several studies were commissioned under the Socio-Economic Development and Benefit Sharing (SDBS) project to identify projects which would promote cooperation in cross-border trade, food security and energy (Nile Basin Initiative, n.d.). The fact that the three Eastern Nile countries have not collectively progressed in most of the proposed fields of regional cooperation raises the question of why riparian states with a history of cooperation on water resources and presented with the obvious economic benefits of regional cooperation, still fall short of being able to cooperate 'beyond the river'.

At the same time, the case of the Eastern Nile allows for an examination of the link between cooperation on and beyond water resources, across countries, and over time. The variation at the bilateral level in 'beyond the river' cooperation between the three Eastern Nile countries makes it possible to explore the links between water cooperation and cooperation in other economic sectors. Despite its limitations as a project-specific document, the signing of the DoP – the first trilateral agreement in the sub-basin – allows for an examination of the extent to which this step has been translated into cooperation in other sectors in the last four years.

To uncover the perceptions of political elites and institutions, their divergence across countries, and their changes over time, the paper depends on (in addition to official documents and secondary sources) first-hand interviews held in the three countries. Between September and November 2017, the author held 72 semi-structured interviews in Cairo, Addis Ababa and Khartoum, and in Kigali during the most recent 5th Nile Basin Development Forum. Fifty-seven of these are relevant for this paper.<sup>1</sup> Interviewees

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<sup>1</sup> The remainder of the 72 interviews targeted representatives of business, business councils and civil society organisations, whose visions are not covered in this article.

representing the political elite included former and current government officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Water Resources and Irrigation, Agriculture, and Trade. They also included scholars close to policy circles, and researchers in think tanks associated with the government. Some of these scholars and researchers are involved in current negotiations over the GERD and/or advise their governments' Nile-related policy. The positions of these scholars allowed them to be less conservative, compared to government officials, in discussing the challenges facing bilateral and trilateral economic cooperation.

In approaching the interviewees, the author benefitted from previous contacts made during workshops on the Nile, and (in the case of Egypt) closed meetings with senior government officials in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Water Resources, as part of their activities to reach out to researchers and opinion makers. In Ethiopia and Sudan, interviews were also facilitated by two host institutions that are well connected to policy circles, the Institute for Peace and Security Studies at Addis Ababa University and the Water Research Centre at the University of Khartoum.

Out of the 57 relevant interviews, 26 interviews were held with Egyptians, 13 with Ethiopians, and 18 with Sudanese. More interviews were held with Egyptian policymakers than with others, not only because of the author's relatively easy access to government officials in Cairo, but also because of the numerous bureaucratic units responsible for implementing Egypt's Nile policy in each ministry, especially in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Most officials, especially in Egypt, were interviewed on conditions of anonymity and preferred not to have the interview recorded. To standardise the reference to interviewees in the three countries, their identity will not be disclosed.

The questions directed to the interviewees covered their assessment of the track record of bilateral and trilateral cooperation 'beyond the river' before and after the signing of the DoP, their identification of the priority sectors of bilateral and trilateral economic cooperation and the benefits they expect from this cooperation, the actual involvement of their ministries/institutions in cooperation projects, and the challenges facing the implementation of these projects.

The paper examines the extent to which the perceptions of policymakers and political institutions have affected the implementation of long-standing initiatives such as agricultural integration projects between Egypt and Sudan, and recent proposals such as the trilateral development fund. Priority sectors, as identified by political elites and in literature, included agricultural and livestock investments and trade, power trade, cross-border transport infrastructure, and industry and technical cooperation. Progress on cooperation in these sectors is measured by the extent to which the conclusion of agreements has led to the implementation of projects, the delivery of benefits from these projects, and consequently to the gradual increase in interdependencies at the bilateral and/or trilateral level. Although the paper refers to long-standing historical factors that have shaped elite perceptions – such as the disagreement between Egypt and Ethiopia on the utilisation of the Nile River, and the Egyptian role in colonial and post-colonial Sudanese politics – the analysis focuses on the period that began in the early 1990s with the coming of the current regimes in Ethiopia and Sudan to power. It extends to 2017 in order to explore the impact of Egyptian regime change on Eastern Nile cooperation. Whether the rise of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to power in Ethiopia in April 2018 and the current reformation of Ethiopia's political elite will affect the country's bilateral and regional relations is a question for future research, and is not included in this article.

### **ELITES' PERCEPTIONS IN THE EASTERN NILE: BETWEEN NATIONALISTIC DISCOURSES AND REGIONAL COOPERATION PROJECTS**

Nile hydropolitics has historically dominated bilateral and trilateral relations in the Eastern Nile, and has affected the potential for cooperation in other sectors. However, analysis of the perceptions of the three riparian states of the relationship between water cooperation and cooperation 'beyond the river' reveals interesting commonalities and differences that have not significantly changed since the launching of the

GERD and, later, the signing of the DoP. These commonalities and differences do not only relate to the terms or priority economic sectors of cooperation, but to the conceptualisation of cooperation itself.

### **Egypt: Regional cooperation for maintaining national water security**

For centuries, for consecutive governments in Egypt, maintaining and increasing the flow of the Nile waters has been a top national security priority. To achieve this objective, regional cooperation beyond water resources was one of the utilitarian means occasionally pursued with Nile riparian states in general, and Eastern Nile countries in particular. Contrary to the benefit-sharing rationale, Egypt considered cooperation 'beyond the river' as a means of protecting its water security rather than a result of robust water cooperation based on resolving long-standing disagreements on the utilisation of the river.

However, Egypt has not succeeded in creating strong, sustainable economic interdependencies with Sudan and/or Ethiopia. The most consistent area of bilateral cooperation between Egypt and the Nile Basin countries beyond water resources has been in technical cooperation. Since its establishment in 1982, the Egyptian Fund for Technical Cooperation with Africa (EFTCA), in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has provided training in the areas of diplomacy, security, health, and agriculture to hundreds of Ethiopian and Sudanese professionals, in addition to sending dozens of Egyptian trainers there and to other Nile Basin countries (Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003, in Al-Oqaily, 2013: 413).

Beyond technical cooperation, there have been only sporadic attempts to implement bilateral and trilateral projects in areas where the three Eastern Nile countries enjoy comparative advantage. Although Sudan remains Egypt's top trading partner in the Nile Basin, the two countries have largely failed to translate their hydropolitical alliance, based on the 1959 Agreement on the "Full Utilisation of the Waters of the Nile", into a successful model for economic cooperation. The two countries have frequently deliberated integrating Sudan's fertile lands and Egypt's expertise. Following the signing of the bilateral pact of political and economic integration between Egypt and Sudan in 1974, a joint agricultural company was set up in 1976 to implement a project on an area of 165,000 feddans (about 70,000 ha) in the Damazin region of Blue Nile State. The failure of the two governments to mobilise funds for sustaining the project and its management structure, and developing its infrastructure, led to its gradual decline. Several proposals by the company's administration to jointly invest in other areas in Sudan were not implemented (Interview 70, Khartoum, November 2017).

After signing the Egypt-Sudan Four Freedoms Agreement in 2004, which granted Egyptian and Sudanese citizens freedom of movement, residence, ownership and work in either country, Egyptian farmers initiated new projects in Sudan. However Sudanese officials complained about the limited Egyptian investments in this sector (Verhoeven, 2015: 162-3). Apart from some privately-owned schemes that have not been fully developed, sporadic attempts by Egyptian governments in the last decade to revive integration in this field have, as revealed by Egyptian official sources, not been translated into actual large-scale projects that deliver benefits to the two countries (Interviews 60 and 71, Khartoum, November 2017).

The sporadic character of Egypt's economic cooperation policies with Sudan has been also evident in Egypt's relations with Ethiopia. By the end of the 2000s, with the growing disagreement over the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) on the Nile, Egypt realised the importance of resorting to economic diplomacy. Negotiations of the CFA had started in 1997 to establish a new comprehensive treaty for cooperative management and development of the Nile Basin Water Resources, and to set up a Nile River Basin Commission (NRBC) as a permanent institutional mechanism for cooperation. The major dispute over the CFA resulted from the insistence of Egypt and Sudan on referring to their historical rights, and current uses as defined by historical agreements, in the new legal framework (Ibrahim, 2011).

To ease tensions over the CFA, the former Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif, accompanied by a large business delegation, paid a visit to Addis Ababa in December 2009 to discuss the launching of new Egyptian investments in Ethiopia. The visit came only three months after a visit by the former Minister of

International Cooperation Faiza Abul Naga, together with the Minister of Agriculture and Land Reclamation Amin Abaza, to discuss increasing agricultural and livestock investments in Ethiopia. One of the results of these visits was a proposal to launch a livestock investment project that included livestock fattening and an abattoir for meatpacking and export (Sisay, 2010; Nkrumah, 2010). The National Bank of Egypt conducted a feasibility study and suggested a location for the project that would reduce the cost of transportation to the nearest port, but the proposed location was not approved by the Ethiopian government (Interview 49, Addis Ababa, November 2017). During the Prime Minister's visit, Egypt proposed the establishment of an Egyptian industrial zone in Ethiopia and to that end signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ethiopian government. Although the Ethiopian government has generally welcomed investments by individual Egyptian companies, no agreement on the location of the industrial zone was achieved and no progress in implementing it was recorded (Interview 51, Addis Ababa, November 2017).

The sweeping political changes in Egypt associated with the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, followed by Ethiopia's decision to move ahead with the unilateral construction of the GERD, forced Egypt to revise its regional policies. After his rise to power in June 2014, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has made attempts to improve relations with African countries in general, and with Nile Basin countries in particular, after the years of decline of these countries as political and economic priorities under Mubarak. Active presidential diplomacy by el-Sisi was accompanied by setting up new institutions to boost Egypt's presence in Nile Basin countries in general, and with Eastern Nile countries in particular. These institutions included a new Egyptian Agency of Partnership for Development (EAPD) set up in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2014 to promote technical cooperation with African countries in general, and particularly with Nile Basin countries. A new Egyptian Initiative for Developing Nile Basin Countries was also launched in 2012 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Arab Republic of Egypt, n.d.), and started operating as a new unit that was officially associated with the cabinet, but was relocated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs three years later. The initiative aims to implement new development projects, especially in the fields of groundwater development and rainwater harvesting, energy, agriculture, and health. These new institutions were meant to strengthen bilateral relations between Egypt and other Nile Basin countries in the wake of Egypt's decision to freeze its membership in the NBI to protest the signing the CFA by most upstream Nile riparian states despite lack of agreement on all its articles (Interviews 20 and 21 Cairo, September 2017).

However, the basic character of Egypt's policy of economic cooperation with Nile Basin countries in general, and Eastern Nile countries in particular, remains largely unchanged. According to Egypt's 2030 vision for sustainable development, relations with Nile Basin countries are addressed in the context of foreign policy and national security, with no mention of these relations in the sections on economic and social development, except in the generic terms of "strengthening relations with Nile basin countries" (Ministry of Planning, Monitoring and Administrative Reform of Egypt, 2015: 46). The first short-term (2018-2020) foreign policy goal is, according to the vision, "maintaining Egypt's share in the Nile water" (ibid: 14). The aim of strengthening bilateral technical cooperation has remained, linking Nile Basin countries with Egypt through mutual benefits that "would increase the cost of adversely affecting Egypt's water interests in the future" (Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation of Egypt, 2015a: 3).

The new institutions set up by Egypt to promote bilateral cooperation were not enough to promote sustainable economic interdependencies. The number of Ethiopian participants in EAPD's activities has varied over time and has been affected by hydropolitical relations between the two countries (Fahmy, 2017). The new Egyptian Initiative for Developing Nile Basin Countries implemented a number of groundwater projects in Sudan, but has not received a response to its proposals for cooperation with Ethiopia in agricultural technology and fisheries (Interview 21, Cairo, September 2017). At the trilateral level, the implementation of the development fund proposed by Egypt was delayed as a result of a lack of response from Sudan and Ethiopia to the detailed proposal sent by the Egyptian Foreign Ministry (Interviews 4 and 22, Cairo, September 2017; Interview 60, Khartoum, November 2017). It was only after



two meetings in April and May 2018 between the ministers of water resources and foreign affairs and the heads of the intelligence agencies of the three countries to resolve disagreements in GERD negotiations, that the fund was formally initiated in Cairo in July 2018.

As a consequence, the active presidential diplomacy and the new momentum created by signing the DoP have contributed very little in the last four years to strengthening bilateral and trilateral economic relations. While several Egyptian officials attribute this outcome to the continued mutual suspicions resulting from decades of disagreements over the utilisation of Nile waters, especially with Ethiopia (Interviews 4 and 22, Cairo, September 2017; Interview 60, Khartoum, November 2017), three other interesting interpretations are worth highlighting. First, a number of the Egyptian officials and scholars interviewed suggested that the nature of the current political regimes in, and foreign policies of, Ethiopia and Sudan continue to hinder bilateral and trilateral economic cooperation. They argue that the divisions within the ruling coalition in Addis Ababa and, until recently, the political and economic domination of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (despite representing only a minority of the Ethiopian population), as well as the international and domestic pressures on Omar al-Bashir's regime in Khartoum, encourage incumbent regimes in Ethiopia and Sudan to use the Nile for domestic political mobilisation. According to these officials, the two regimes occasionally depict Egypt as the common enemy in order to divert attention away from domestic crises or to unite divided factions against a common threat (Interviews 4, 6, 7, and 16, Cairo, September 2017). This diversionary foreign policy – which has also been occasionally used by Egypt, especially at times of sharp political divisions in 2012-2013 – does not create an environment conducive to regional cooperation.

Second, other officials highlight the risks of cooperation and/or the disagreement with Sudan and Ethiopia on the terms and conditions of bilateral and trilateral cooperation. An Egyptian diplomat and a technocrat emphasised that increasing agricultural and livestock trade and large-scale investments in Sudan and Ethiopia would mean giving the two countries more bargaining power that could be used against Egypt at times of tension over the Nile waters (Interview 25, Cairo, September 2017; Interview 30, Addis Ababa, October 2017). This may explain why there has been no political decision taken in Egypt on large-scale, long-term investments in agriculture and livestock in the Eastern Nile (Interview 12, Cairo, September 2017). The same perception of risk is probable in the proposed Egyptian industrial zone (Interview 51, Addis Ababa, November 2017).

In a similar vein, although Article VI of the DoP gives Egypt and Sudan priority in purchasing GERD power, Egypt has indicated that importing electricity from Ethiopia is unlikely in the meantime. This has come at a time when Ethiopia has announced that it is studying the feasibility of exporting power to Egypt (Tawfik and Dombrowsky, 2018). Egyptian diplomats and technocrats involved in ongoing negotiations over the GERD have highlighted that before an agreement on hydropower trade there must be an agreement on the first filling and operation of the GERD. Since the first filling and operation will determine the water flow to Egypt, linking the agreement on these elements with the bilateral hydropower connection and trade is seen as a way of making the provision of water conditional on the purchase of hydropower (Interviews 4 and 5, Cairo, September 2017; Interview 30, Addis Ababa, November 2017; see also Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation of Egypt, 2015b).

According to interviewed Egyptian officials, a final constraint on Egypt's relations with Ethiopia and Sudan beyond water resources is the two countries' regional economic and political relations and alliances. Economically, various actors such as Gulf countries – some of which have more financial resources and are relatively free of the historical baggage of Nile hydropolitics – are expanding their land investments in Ethiopia and Sudan (Interviews 4 and 25, Cairo, September 2017; for more information about these investments and their impact on Nile hydropolitics see Cascão et al., 2019). Politically, Sudan's close relations with Qatar and Turkey, the two fierce foes of the current Egyptian regime, has been seen, at least in the period from mid-2013 to the end of 2018, as an influential factor that affects Cairo's relations with Khartoum on strategic issues including with regard to Nile water. In this context, decisions taken by the Sudanese regime on cooperation on water and non-water issues were seen in

Egypt as politicised positions shaped by Khartoum's regional alliances, rather than being based on achieving Sudan's economic interests or improving bilateral relations with Egypt (Interviews 7 and 23, Cairo, September 2017; Interviews 60 and 61, Khartoum, November 2017). This denial of the agency of the Sudanese regime is part of a broader attitude towards Sudan that will be analysed later.

To sum up, Egypt has adopted a particular conception of cooperation that has subordinated cooperation 'beyond the river' in the Eastern Nile to water cooperation designed to protect its water security, and the former has been only occasionally pursued in order to achieve the latter. In spite of active presidential diplomacy, new institutional mechanisms, and a set of new proposals and initiatives in the last four years, there has been little change in Egypt's conceptualisation of cooperation or in its assessment of the benefits, risks, and terms of potential collaboration with political regimes in Ethiopia and Sudan.

### **Ethiopia: Combining nationalist discourse and regional integration projects**

The Nile River has always been central to Ethiopia's bilateral and trilateral relations with Sudan and Egypt. But a review of official documents, and discussions with government officials and scholars, suggest that several factors have contributed to a record of Ethiopia's bilateral 'beyond the river' cooperation with Egypt that is different from that with Sudan. While Egyptian-Ethiopian relationships suggests that resolving disagreements over the utilisation of shared water resources may be a necessary condition for cooperation in other areas, Sudanese-Ethiopian relations suggest that cooperation 'beyond the river' may move faster than water cooperation, rather than follow from it.

In its Foreign Policy and National Security Strategy, Ethiopia underlined the potential of cooperation between the three Eastern Nile countries based on their comparative advantages: agricultural lands in Sudan, hydropower in Ethiopia and agro-industry in Egypt (Ministry of Information of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2002). However, as far as cooperation with Egypt is concerned, Ethiopia has described disagreements with it over the utilisation of the Nile water as "a major stumbling block to any sort of robust bilateral link that might have enhanced the interests of both countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, n.d.). The discussion of relations with Egypt in Ethiopia's Foreign Policy and National Security Strategy is almost exclusively about the Nile (Ministry of Information of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2002: 126), an indication that it is Nile hydro-politics rather than economic cooperation that takes priority in bilateral relations. In contrast, Ethiopia, which previously saw Egypt and Sudan as representing one block (based on the 1959 bilateral agreement), started to see Sudan's position on the Nile as not representing an "unsurpassable obstacle" for developing relations between the two countries in other areas (ibid: 90).

The easing of tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia around the GERD after signing the DoP has not significantly changed Ethiopia's vision of the weight and impact of Nile hydro-politics on bilateral relations. A number of Ethiopian experts and diplomats engaged in current talks over the GERD acknowledge that these talks represent a significant step forward, and argue that Ethiopia does not condition its relations with Egypt in other sectors on cooperation on water resources or on ongoing GERD talks (Interviews 31, 38, 29, 40 and 42, Addis Ababa, October 2017). However, other officials and scholars close to policy circles admit that as long as the central disagreement over the legal principles governing the utilisation of water resources has not been resolved, it will affect cooperation in other sectors. A senior Ethiopian diplomat argued that sticking to the 1959 agreement between Egypt and Sudan remains an obstacle with regard to improving other types of relations and is a "source of suspicion and mistrust" (Interview 39, Addis Ababa, October 2017). An Ethiopian consultant involved in GERD negotiations argues that riparian states must learn from the past lack of success of full separation between the technical track of cooperation and the legal track of agreement on the principles governing utilisation of Nile waters (Interview 32, Addis Ababa, October 2017).

The view that improvements in relations in other sectors are conditional on resolving disagreements over utilisation of Nile waters may explain Ethiopia's position with regard to the proposed trilateral development fund. A senior diplomat attributed the delay in the establishment of the fund to the slow pace of bureaucratic processes (Interview 38, Addis Ababa, October 2017). However, according to the Ethiopian consultant involved in GERD negotiations, Ethiopian policymakers consider any proposal by Egypt that suggests alternative frameworks of cooperation as a diversion from the basic problem of 'equitable utilisation' of Nile water resources (Interview 32, Addis Ababa, October 2017). A senior Ethiopian diplomat agrees with this assessment, arguing that creating "parallel structures [outside the NBI] would not help Nile cooperation" (Interview 39, Addis Ababa, October 2017).

This last remark may also suggest a disagreement between Egypt and Ethiopia on the preferable framework of cooperation. Despite agreeing in principle on other trilateral and collective frameworks of cooperation, Ethiopia seems to prefer the NBI/ENTRO as a mechanism for this cooperation. It was through this mechanism that Ethiopia managed for the first time to lead a collective action of upstream riparians in the signing and ratification of the CFA, to contest the dominant order in the Nile Basin (Ibrahim, 2011). One would expect Ethiopia to attempt to capitalise on this leverage rather than resorting to parallel structures that could increase Egypt's leverage. By contrast, as noted earlier, after freezing its membership in the NBI/ENTRO, Egypt has been proposing several other platforms for bilateral and collective cooperation.

Another example illustrating this Ethiopian position is the Victoria-Mediterranean (VICMED) navigation line. The project, championed by Egypt and approved in 2013 by the Presidential Infrastructure Champion Initiative (PICI) of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), is set to promote trade between Nile Basin countries (NEPAD, n.d.). Although Ethiopia joined the project, its Ministry of Water, Irrigation and Electricity suggested to the ministries in other upstream countries that the NBI should be responsible for its implementation. More importantly though, according to a senior official the ministry does not see this project as a priority. It thinks that it is another version of the Jonglei Canal project to save evapotranspiration in the Sudd wetlands of South Sudan, which Egypt and Sudan failed to finalise in the 1980s (Interview 42, Addis Ababa, October 2017). In other words, Ethiopia understands that it is water flow, not trade, that is the basic objective of the project, an example that reveals the broader Ethiopian suspicion of the objectives of some proposals for 'beyond-the-Nile' cooperation with Egypt.

In contrast to its definition of the constraints on cooperation with Egypt, landlocked Ethiopia has eyed opportunities for cooperation with Sudan in infrastructure (rail, road connections, hydropower connections) and trade relations. The Ethiopian government has considered that in terms of its own economic development, among the countries of the Horn of Africa "Sudan can play a more significant role in the short, medium and long terms" (Ministry of Information of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2002: 87). Against this background, economic cooperation has improved between the two countries in the last decade, even before Sudan declared its supportive position with regard to the GERD. In 2002, Ethiopia and Sudan signed a preferential trade agreement that eliminated tariffs on all industrial and agricultural products originating from both countries. Ethiopian imports of Sudanese oil have increased from less than four percent of its total oil imports in 2005 to more than 12 percent in 2011 (Makonnen and Lulie, 2014).<sup>2</sup> Sudan imported electricity from Ethiopia after inaugurating the 230 KV transmission line between the two countries in 2013, promoting interdependence in energy resources (Verhoeven, 2011). In March 2017, the two countries launched a cross-border road transportation service between their two capitals (Ethiopian News Agency, 2017b). In his last visit to Sudan in August 2017, the then Ethiopian Prime Minister Desalegn announced that Ethiopia aims to conduct half of the trade of the northern part of the country through Port Sudan (Ethiopian News Agency, 2017a).

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<sup>2</sup> This percentage should have declined after the secession of the South in 2011 and the suspension of the production of oil in the wake of the civil war in 2013, but no current reliable figures are available.

Ethiopia's definition of the benefits of cooperation with Sudan has also to be understood in the framework of the ruling EPRDF's foreign policy towards neighbouring countries and its vision of regional integration. According to a senior Ethiopian diplomat, Ethiopian policy towards Sudan has reflected the shift in the country's foreign policy to transcending the 'siege mentality' that dominated the Derg regime and increasing mutual interdependencies with direct neighbours as "strategic partners in the regional integration project" (Interview 41, Addis Ababa, October 2017).

Interestingly, and in contradiction to the benefit-sharing argument, water cooperation between Ethiopia and Sudan has been moving more slowly than cooperation in other economic sectors. In the framework of the NBI/ENTRO, Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt, have implemented a few projects in the field of watershed management, irrigation and drainage, and flood preparedness. In this same framework, Ethiopia and Sudan implemented their 230 KV power transmission line. Sudan's return to the NBI in 2012 – two years after Egypt and Sudan suspended their membership – indicated that both Sudan and Ethiopia are interested in strengthening the NBI (Interview 42, Addis Ababa, October 2017). At the bilateral level, however, cooperation has been "slow" and sometimes "frustrating", according to Ethiopian officials. Bilateral cooperation has been pursued through the Ethio-Sudan Technical Advisory Committee (ESTAC) for water resources, established according to a 1991 bilateral declaration for "prior consultation, exchange of data and information, and exploring areas of cooperation" on the Nile (Ethiopia-Sudan Peace and Friendship Declaration, 1991). Cooperation, however, has been confined almost entirely to discussing the sharing of information on the river flow, which Sudan needs in order to forecast flooding and improve preparedness (Interviews 27 and 42, Addis Ababa, October 2017). Ethiopian officials emphasise that Sudan has benefitted from the construction of the Tekeze Dam, which was commissioned in 2009 on the Tekeze River, one of the tributaries of the Nile. But, as revealed by a senior Sudanese official, even this project was constructed unilaterally without consultations within ESTAC (Interview 71, Khartoum, November 2017). Accordingly, as a senior Ethiopian water bureaucrat put it, "there was not much progress and nothing special" about Ethiopian-Sudanese water cooperation. He stated that the assumption that water cooperation and a common position on the GERD were significant factors in cooperation in other sectors is "farfetched" (Interview 42, Addis Ababa, October 2017).

Finally, a challenge for promoting 'beyond the river' cooperation with Egypt (as compared to with Sudan) is, according to Ethiopia's perception, the continued attempt of some official institutions in Egypt to destabilise Ethiopia in order to prevent it from using Nile water. According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, signing the DoP indicates that Egypt's attitude towards Nile cooperation is changing under the leadership of President el-Sisi. However, "saber-rattling and diplomatic manoeuvring" are still used by forces in Egypt who want "to set the clock back", and promote self-interest at the expense of others (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, n.d.). When Ethiopia witnessed a wave of protests in the Oromia and Amhara regions in late 2016, the then Ethiopian Prime Minister Desalegn declared, in a rhetoric that represents continuity with the past, that some institutions in Egypt have been collaborating with 'terrorist' groups to destabilise Ethiopia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2017). A leading figure in the TPLF – until recently the dominant wing of the ruling EPRDF – argued that although Ethiopia should not "externalise its problems" by blaming other countries for creating or exacerbating them, Egypt "should not exploit Ethiopia's internal weaknesses" (Interview 34, Addis Ababa, October 2017).

In the same vein, Ethiopian officials have raised concerns about the real objectives behind Egypt's recent active diplomacy in the Nile Basin and in Africa more broadly. According to an Ethiopian expert engaged in GERD negotiations, Egypt has to stop "beating around the bush" by pursuing regional policies that aim at putting pressure on Ethiopia, and should adopt "genuine and practical" policies that seek mutual benefits. Egypt, according to this interviewee, should avoid underestimating the power of upstream countries, and instead should look at them as "equal partners" (Interview 45, Addis Ababa, October 2017).

This indicates that as far as relations with Egypt are concerned, Ethiopia has been consistently using a nationalistic discourse that claims the right to use its natural resources to promote development, blame external forces for disrupting its development endeavours, and instrumentalise the symbolism of unifying all Ethiopians against the antagonistic behaviours of downstream countries (Erlich, 2002; Menga, 2016). Dominated until recently by a minority group that tried to hold the multi-ethnic state together through ethnic federalism, such a symbolic unifying claim has been essential to the legitimacy of the Ethiopian coalition government. It has been part and parcel of the EPRDF's project of economic development, which raises the slogans of 'Renaissance', fight against poverty, and 'unity in diversity' (Clapham, 1995; Orłowska, 2013).

In contrast to its view of consecutive Egyptian regimes, the EPRDF considered the Islamist regime in Khartoum as one that supported the Front's struggle against the Derg regime. The EPRDF regime has been cognisant of the threats to the region of ideological extremism in Sudan (Ministry of Information of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2002: 83), especially after the assassination attempt on Mubarak in Addis Ababa in 1995 in which political figures of the Islamist regime in Khartoum were implicated. This led the EPRDF to lending its support to the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which waged a war against the Sudanese government in the South as a response to Khartoum's support of armed groups in Ethiopia. However, Ethiopia's war with Eritrea (1998-2000) and the beginning of the peace negotiations between the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in 2001 paved the way for the easing of tensions between Khartoum and Addis Ababa (Verhoeven, 2011; Doop, 2013). As Ethiopian officials argue, these political developments encouraged the two regimes to accept their differences and not to intervene in each other's affairs, which contributed to the strengthening of their relations. Even the border dispute between the two countries has been eased at the official level through the formation of joint committees (Interviews 39 and 41, Addis Ababa, October 2017; Interviews 57 and 59, Khartoum, November 2017). This does not necessarily mean that the relationship between Ethiopia and Sudan 'beyond the river' is sustainable. Officials on both sides admit that suspicions between security institutions in the two countries prevail and that some of these institutions would prefer putting more restrictions on the movement of people and/or goods (Interview 27, Addis Ababa, October 2017; Interview 57, Khartoum, November 2017; see also Verhoeven, 2011: 3).

To sum up, while Ethiopia's relations with Egypt indicate that disagreement over the utilisation of shared water resources can affect cooperation beyond these resources, Ethiopia's relationship with Sudan suggests that cooperation 'beyond the river' may be strengthened without resolving these disagreements and promoting water cooperation. Ethiopia's definition of the benefits of economic cooperation, as well as agreement between Ethiopia and Sudan on the terms of this cooperation and on the possibility of working collectively to reap these benefits, may explain this non-linear relationship between the two tracks.

### **Sudan: Redefining national and regional interests**

Subsequent Sudanese regimes have always recognised the significance of the Nile waters in bilateral relations with Egypt. Water cooperation between the two downstream countries, based on the 1959 agreement and the related Joint Permanent Technical Commission (JPTC), has continued despite political tensions (Schiffler, 1998: 141). As noted earlier, since the beginning of the 1970s the two countries have made several attempts to integrate their economies beyond water cooperation, with little success. By contrast, Ethiopia and Sudan have recently been more successful in creating economic interdependencies. A number of Sudanese politicians and scholars argue that this rapprochement between Khartoum and Addis Ababa was based on Sudan's reassessment of Egypt's and Ethiopia's approach to economic cooperation, and of the benefits Sudan has accrued from cooperation with Cairo in the past, compared to the achieved and potential benefits of cooperation with Addis Ababa.

In principle, a number of Sudanese officials agree with the Ethiopian viewpoint that a successful model of trilateral cooperation in the Eastern Nile can emerge based on the three countries' comparative advantages: agricultural lands in Sudan, hydropower in Ethiopia, and agro-industry in Egypt (El-Tom, 2004; Interviews 52 and 56, Khartoum, November 2017). This may be attributed to Sudan's attempt to unleash its full agricultural potential, estimated at 105 million ha, less than 20 percent of which is cultivated (Cascão and Nicol, 2016b). According to Sudanese policymakers and scholars, however, in practice several factors have affected the implementation of this vision of Eastern Nile integration at the bilateral and trilateral levels. According to them, past cooperation agreements with Egypt were not sustainable because they aimed at protecting Egypt's interests in general, and water interests in particular, by lending political support to undemocratic regimes loyal to Cairo (Abdel Latif, 2006; Interview 18, Cairo, September 2017). Egypt, according to Sudanese politicians and diplomats, has often defined cooperation with Sudan in narrow nationalistic and security terms that are dominated primarily by water (and border) security, and has expected Sudan to follow Egypt's Nile policy rather than pursue an independent position (Al-Bakry, 2011; El-Tom, 2004; Abdel Latif, 2006). A leading figure in the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) captured this meaning when he noted that the Nile has been both a link and a barrier between Egypt and Sudan because Egypt's political elite has seen Sudan only as a backyard entity and a guard of its water security (Omar, 2017).

From the Sudanese viewpoint, Egypt's narrow security approach has hindered the implementation of the Four Freedoms Agreement. While Sudanese laws prevented ownership of land by foreigners but granted other freedoms to Egyptians, Egypt did not fully reciprocate (Al-Abedeem, 2017). According to the Sudanese political elite, this Egyptian approach has prevented the emergence of a sustainable model of bilateral economic cooperation. Since 2000, the Sudanese government adopted plans for agricultural revival, renewing the objective of transforming Sudan into the breadbasket of the Middle East and Africa, an objective that has become particularly salient after the secession of the oil-rich South in 2011 (Verhoeven, 2015). As highlighted by the former Sudanese Foreign Minister Ibrahim Ghandour, in this context Sudanese officials have frequently called upon Egypt to invest in the agricultural sector in Sudan (Ghandour, 2017). However, according to Sudanese officials and water bureaucrats, consecutive political regimes in Egypt have not exploited opportunities for investing in agricultural lands in Sudan in spite of the potential for contributing to the two countries' food security (Interviews 52, 56, 65, 66 and 68, Khartoum, November 2017).

Some Sudanese politicians and water bureaucrats go even further, arguing that Egypt has concerns about any project that could increase Sudanese withdrawals from the Nile waters, even if such water withdrawals are within its quota as defined in the 1959 agreement (Omar, 2017; Interviews 52 and 73, Khartoum, November 2017). According to them, Egypt's concerns in this regard have contributed to the failure of Egyptian agricultural investments in Sudan, including the joint project in Damazin, which were confined to unsustainable rainfed and high-cost groundwater-based agriculture (Interviews 52 and 56, Khartoum, October 2017). This view was also reflected in Sudan's assessment of the Egyptian reservations about the GERD. Sudan is expected to benefit from the regulation of the water flow, using it to expand its irrigated agriculture. At the same time, as highlighted in a statement by the Sudanese foreign ministry, the Sudanese government acknowledged that "the historical political relations between Sudan and Egypt will destabilise in case the Sudan managed to realise a real economic transformation especially in the field of agriculture" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Sudan, n.d). In this sense, the Sudanese support of the GERD has reflected and increased, rather than instigated, the Egyptian-Sudanese divergence of perceptions on cooperation 'beyond the river'.

In comparing the actual benefits that Sudan reaps from cooperation with Egypt with the actual and potential benefits that it gains from cooperation with Ethiopia, some Sudanese diplomats and scholars contrast the expected benefits to Sudan from the GERD with the negative impacts experienced from the Aswan High Dam (AHD). In a criticism of Egypt's focus on achieving its water security at the expense of Sudan, they refer to the injustices associated with the construction of the AHD in terms of resettling

Sudanese without adequate compensation and with little regard of their cultural heritage. Some of them argue that Sudan has learned its lesson from the AHD, and has decided to be more assertive in defending its national interests, and thus is supporting the GERD (Interviews 54, 63 and 69, Khartoum, November 2017).

Sudanese criticisms of Egypt's approach to bilateral cooperation are coupled with an increasing Sudanese resentment of Egypt's tendency to expect Sudan to follow the Egyptian viewpoint on Nile cooperation-related issues. According to a senior water bureaucrat, Egypt discussed the VICMED project with other Nile Basin countries before discussing it with Sudan, even though the latter is a principal partner in the project. This echoes the claim that Egypt takes Sudan for granted rather than treating it as an equal partner. For the Sudanese official, Egypt should have asked Sudan to take the lead in trilateral and collective projects such as VICMED or the trilateral development fund because Sudan has good relations with all parties (Interview 44, Kigali, October 2017). This interesting remark indicates that the disagreement between Egypt and Sudan is not only about the benefits and terms of cooperation, but also about who should lead cooperation projects.

From the Sudanese point of view, a related challenge to cooperation 'beyond the river' between Sudan and Egypt (as compared to Sudan and Ethiopia) is Egypt's occasional attempts to destabilise the regime in Khartoum in order to influence its Nile policies. Sudan's former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ibrahim Ghandour reflected this accusation when he argued that "some [officials] in Egypt believe that Sudan has to be weak for Egypt to remain strong and do not realise that a strong Sudan is important for a strong Egypt" (Ghandour, 2017). In relation to the Nile in particular, some Sudanese water technocrats and scholars close to policy circles argue that in order to put pressure on Sudan to change its position on the GERD and halt the expansion of irrigated agriculture projects, the current Egyptian regime has hosted the Sudanese political opposition, supported armed opposition movements in Darfur, worked to extend international sanctions on Sudan, and backed the regime of Silva Kiir in South Sudan (Interviews 52, 57 and 69, Khartoum, November 2017). In addition to allegations of Egypt's 'occupation' of the disputed Halayeb Triangle, which is often raised at times of political crisis between the two countries, these accusations reflect the deep-seated complexities of bilateral relations (Al-Oqaily, 2013).

By contrast, the current Sudanese regime regarded the TPLF-dominated regime in Ethiopia as one that came to power through its backing and in turn supported Khartoum against regional and international isolation (Middle East Monitor, 2017). Even at the time of tensions in the mid-1990s, Ethiopia did not sever diplomatic relations with Sudan (Interview 69, Khartoum, November 2017). Although the amount of electricity exported to Sudan from Ethiopia has been limited, it was, according to a senior Sudanese water technocrat, the "low-hanging fruit" that crystallised the benefits of bilateral cooperation (Interview 52, Khartoum, November 2017).

To sum up, the definition of the benefits of cooperation 'beyond the river' by the Sudanese political elite has, especially in the last decade, largely brought it closer to Ethiopia and pushed it further from Egypt, in spite of the long-standing water cooperation between Sudan and Egypt. Pressured by domestic divisions, the Sudanese regime has increasingly opted for a discourse and policy that claims independence from Egypt's Nile policy.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The signing of the DoP on the GERD, as the first trilateral agreement related to the Nile waters, was a remarkable step that could have pushed cooperative endeavours 'beyond the river'. However, the sense of optimism on the impact of the DoP on regional cooperation in the Eastern Nile must be put into perspective by evaluating the extent to which it has changed Eastern Nile political elites' perceptions of the benefits and terms of cooperation. Egyptian-Ethiopian relations on and beyond the river indicate the negative impact of Nile hydropolitics on cooperation beyond the Nile, adding weight to the benefit-sharing argument that building trust on water cooperation is needed in order to cooperate in other

economic sectors. However, the Egyptian-Sudanese and Sudanese-Ethiopian cooperation on and beyond water resources suggests that the link between the two variables is far from being automatic.

Economic relations between Ethiopia and Sudan have progressed in the last decade, despite the lack of significant improvement in water cooperation. At the same time, the long-standing alliance between the two downstream riparians Egypt and Sudan has not been translated into increasing interdependence in other economic sectors. This conclusion challenges the argument of the benefit-sharing scholars that water cooperation may be a "necessary" condition for cooperation in other sectors (Sadoff and Grey, 2002: 401; Phillips et al., 2006: 36). More studies are needed to examine the link between water cooperation and regional integration in other transboundary rivers. Useful insights could also be gained from applying the multilevel analysis of water politics (Warner, 2008; Warner, 2010; Warner and Zawahri, 2012) to cooperation 'beyond the river', exploring the role of non-state actors in promoting cooperation in other economic sectors, and the impact of that cooperation on states' regional cooperation policies.

In examining the record of cooperation beyond water resources, the analysis in this paper indicates that the three Eastern Nile countries have not collectively met the basic requirements for cooperation that are identified in the regional cooperation literature. Analysis of policy documents, discussions with government officials, and examination of actual policies and past experiences of economic cooperation point to fundamental disagreements on the terms of bilateral and trilateral cooperation, on who should lead this cooperation, and on the definition of cooperation itself. For Sudan and Ethiopia, trilateral cooperation in the Eastern Nile means promoting interdependence in areas of comparative advantage – hydropower generation in Ethiopia, food production in Sudan, and agro-industry in Egypt – in a way that contributes to the two countries' development plans and domestic and regional legitimacy. For Egypt, economic cooperation beyond water resources has been one of the tactical and utilitarian means of maintaining water security, and has been a policy option often pursued in order to gain political leverage in times of crisis with Eastern Nile countries, rather than a sustainable policy line based on a desire to integrate regional cooperation into the country's development plans. Given Egypt's overall water dependence on other Nile Basin countries and on the Eastern Nile in particular, for a number of Egyptian government officials the promotion of cooperation with these countries means increasing their dependence on Egypt in other sectors. Linking Egypt's food security, for instance, to countries that also control its water security would mean giving more means to these countries to pressure Egypt's domestic and foreign policies.

Defining the terms of cooperation and establishing who defines these terms and thus leads cooperation is no less important than the conceptualisation of cooperation itself. Egypt's conservative position on cooperation in some sectors may be explained by its concerns about other countries' use of Nile waters to influence its policies, and about engaging in a new regional hydropolitical order that is defined by Ethiopia. Egypt's caution in this regard is evidenced by its insistence on first reaching an agreement on the GERD's filling and operation, and only then negotiating the purchase of hydropower. Ethiopia, in turn, considers an "equitable and reasonable utilisation of the Nile waters" to be a basic and defensible term of cooperation on and beyond the Nile. Caught in the middle, Sudan remains officially committed to agreements and institutions of bilateral water cooperation with Egypt. At the same time, interested in projecting independence from Egypt's Nile policy and thereby benefitting from cooperation with other partners, Khartoum has popularised the benefits of cooperation with Ethiopia as a reliable ally that has supported Sudan against international sanctions, and as an economic partner that could support its development plans. This shift in Sudan's position occurred at a time when it was showing little enthusiasm for, and much scepticism towards, new cooperation initiatives led by Egypt (e.g. the trilateral development fund and the VICMED navigation project).

A lack of mutual acceptance of regimes, identities and boundaries underlies these divergent conceptualisations of the meaning and terms of cooperation 'beyond the river' – a failure of what Clapham calls a shared "idea of the state". Disagreements over boundaries have often come to the surface at times of crisis in bilateral relationships between Egypt and Sudan and between Sudan and



Ethiopia, rather than being the main reason for the crisis. But acceptance of regimes and identities has had an even more profound impact on bilateral relations. Egypt has perceived the TPLF-dominated regime in Ethiopia and al-Bashir regime in Sudan as regimes under pressure, which use the Nile water to bridge various national and international political divides. In the course of interviews, some Ethiopian government and party officials raised doubts about Egypt's African identity and policy, revealing uneasiness about Cairo's recent active diplomacy in Africa in general, and the Nile Basin in particular. In spite of its positive discourse on the complementarity and potential integration of Eastern Nile economies, the EPRDF's regime has consistently played the nationalist card in relation to Egypt, reproducing historical narratives that stress the priority of using its Nile water resources to achieve development. In its turn, Khartoum's occasional criticism of Egypt's foreign policy in general, and Nile policy in particular, has been employed to showcase to supporters and critics the regime's determination to pursue independent policies, and to fight against forces that aim to destabilise it. This suggests that the closer that countries of the region move towards national cohesion, the less their need to instrumentalise their relations with other riparian states for domestic mobilisation.

At a practical level, transcending the challenges facing cooperation beyond the river in the Eastern Nile requires an open negotiation between the three countries which builds on their commonalities and bridges gaps in the perceptions of the benefits and terms of cooperation. Reaching shared understandings of 'equitable and reasonable utilisation' of Nile waters, and adjusting policies and negotiating positions to achieve this understanding, would be a good, but definitely not a sufficient, step in this direction. Equally important, past experiences of bilateral and trilateral cooperation indicate that setting up additional institutions and initiating new projects are not the right starting points for promoting cooperation beyond water resources. Rather, this cooperation needs to be based on accepted terms of engagement – terms which include equal partnership, refraining from striking regional alliances that target one of the three countries, non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, and delivering equitable benefits from cooperation. These terms, whether agreed upon formally or informally, should guide negotiations on new cooperative projects on and beyond the Nile.

Rather than proposing ambitious projects and long wish lists for public diplomacy purposes, this open negotiation would also help identify the most realistic and viable sectors and projects for cooperation, and would identify the sectors and projects that need to be excluded – at least in the short term – due to lack of trust, or differences in perceptions. Finally, promoting regional cooperation would require astute reflection on the economic and investment policies that hindered implementation of past bilateral and trilateral agreements and projects, and would be predicated on a more thorough integration of Eastern Nile cooperation issues into the national development agendas of the three countries.

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