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How Egypt Is Slowly Losing Its Hold Over the Nile River

Julian Hattem | Friday, July 7, 2017

For millennia, the Nile River has served as the backbone of Egypt, the lifeblood of its people. Gradually, though, the land of the pharaohs is losing its grip.

Late last month, Uganda hosted the first ever heads-of-state summit aimed at resolving disagreements over the waters of the Nile. But it produced no major breakthrough and appeared to be a flop. In coming months, the opening of a major dam in Ethiopia will truly test Egypt's anxieties that countries upstream are refusing to bow to its demands. The dam's opening will reveal just how much leverage Egypt has lost.

Egypt has a strong historical and legal claim to the Nile dating back to the colonial era, but that framework is being undercut by rapid development and population growth upstream. Currently, more than 430 million people live across the 11 countries that make up the Nile Basin: Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Eritrea. The population of the Nile Basin is likely to jump to nearly 1 billion by 2050.

The upstream countries "can't wait forever for Egypt to get onboard," says Aaron Wolf, a professor of geosciences at Oregon State University. At the same time, he adds, the river is being valued less for its water supply and more as a means of producing electricity. "That whole conversation is shifting both the power balance and the interest to upstream states."

Under a 1959 agreement, rights to virtually all of the Nile's water was split between Egypt, which is



A fishing boat sailing down the Nile River in Cairo, Egypt, Sept. 3, 2011 (AP photo by Amr Nabil).

entitled to 55.5 billion cubic meters, and Sudan, with 18.5 billion. Egyptians and Sudanese depend on the water much more than their upstream neighbors; Egypt in particular receives practically no rainfall, and relies on the mighty river for 97 percent of its water. But over the years, upstream countries have taken issue with the terms of that decades-old agreement, to which they were never parties.

In 1999, nine riparian countries formed the Nile Basin Initiative to try and manage the waters. South Sudan became the 10th member after it gained independence in 2011; Eritrea sits as an observer. The initiative began work on a new framework for governing the river, but Egypt and Sudan refused to sign on to a deal reached by other nations in 2010, known as the Entebbe Agreement. Egypt subsequently froze its participation in the initiative and has held out ever since, insisting it won't return unless it is guaranteed notification before the construction of any new project on the river and until all decisions are made by consensus.

Other nations are loath to give Cairo de facto veto power over their domestic infrastructure plans. But to hear Egypt tell it, any major change to the framework and its historical water rights could leave it dying of thirst.

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That position inspired Egypt's initial opposition to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which is scheduled to open along the Blue Nile at some point in the next three or four months. Ethiopians view the dam, which will be Africa's largest hydroelectric facility, as a source of national pride that they hope will power the continent's fastest-growing economy. When construction is complete, the dam will stand more than a mile wide and 570 feet tall, and will more than double the country's current capacity to generate energy. Waters from the Blue Nile comprise roughly 80 percent of the river that traces its way into Egypt.

For decades, Egyptian politicians have discussed any interference with the Nile's waters as an existential threat. In 2013, Egyptian politicians unknowingly mused about sabotaging the Ethiopian dam on live television (<https://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/06/with-cameras-rolling-egyptian-politicians-threaten-ethiopia-over-dam/>). Before construction began in 2011, Egypt reportedly considered a military response (<http://www.businessinsider.com/hacked-stratfor-emails-egypt-could-take-military-action-to-protect-its-stake-in-the-nile-2012-10?IR=T>) to block Ethiopia from interfering with the river's flow. Decades earlier, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat

declared that water was “the only matter that could take Egypt to war again.”

Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan—where the Blue and White Niles meet to form the great river—signed a deal to resolve their dispute in 2015 (</articles/15395/nile-deal-signals-regional-reset-among-egypt-sudan-and-ethiopia>). Egypt has since offered grumbling support for the dam, suggesting it recognizes the need to support upstream nations’ demands. Once the dam opens, no one expects Egypt to take a rash step and follow up on Sadat’s old threat.

But Egypt’s internal politics have made it difficult to back down entirely, so some amount of posturing is likely. Yet Cairo has few cards to play.

The more apocalyptic predictions about the dam’s impact on Egypt’s waters are likely overstated, says Kevin Wheeler of Oxford University’s Environmental Change Institute. “There’s a lot of hyperbole, ranging from some believing it’ll do nothing, to others claiming that it will devastate Egypt,” Wheeler says. “Neither of those two extremes are accurate, and there’s a lot of space in the middle for reality.” If anything, the dam could help regulate water flowing into Egypt and keep the country supplied during times of drought.

The biggest test will be in the first few years, as Ethiopia plugs up the Blue Nile to fill a vast new reservoir. If Egypt and Ethiopia are on the same page, Wheeler says, they will be best positioned to mitigate any droughts or water shortages. After that, water is likely to flow downstream at a constant pace.

The Ethiopian dam was not explicitly on the agenda during the recent Nile summit. But Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi were the only two foreign leaders who bothered to show up, suggesting that other nations want them to resolve their differences before anything else can be accomplished.

The summit began inauspiciously, when presidential guards for Sissi and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni got into a shoving match inside the State House (<http://www.observer.ug/special-editions/53551-why-summit-on-river-nile-ended-with-no-deal.html>), Uganda’s presidential residence. It didn’t get much better when technical teams from multiple countries reportedly walked out at one point during the discussions. Analysts said little of consequence had been achieved (http://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1456136/nile-basin-summit-underway).

Sissi has made a noticeable push toward greater engagement with his African neighbors south of the Sahara, but the dispute over the Nile is proving to be a stubborn obstacle. Still, his presence in Kampala suggests that he recognizes Egypt’s changing position and is trying to maintain some authority.

With Egypt's population set to grow by nearly 30 million by 2030, its own demand for water will increase. All the while, climate change will increase the variability of the river's flow by 50 percent, according to a recent study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (<https://sustainability.mit.edu/article/nile-faces-greater-variability>). The Nile's volume is likely to rise by 10 to 15 percent, researchers predict, but there will also be more years of drought as well as years of surplus. All that instability might make it more appealing to rely on a system of dams that regularize and control the river's flow.

The passage of time will force Egypt into signing on to a new or modified river management agreement, predicts Salman M. A. Salman, a consultant and former water law adviser for the World Bank. "Egypt will look right and left and will find that the dam is completed, that Ethiopia is trying to build other dams and the only alternative left for them is to cooperate," Salman says. "Time is not on their side."

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