

Developing a Strategic Communication Plan to "Tell the GERD Story to the World" and Improve Ethiopia's GERD Communication Strategy

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Abstract

In the context of Ethiopia's hydro-diplomacy of the Nile, strategic communication can be critical in mitigating the negative externalities associated with the GERD dispute. It can be used to pinpoint both external and internal barriers by communicating the facts surrounding the dam's construction and the negative role of Egyptian diplomacy. Egypt has heavily employed digital diplomacy to influence the dispute, utilizing campaign strategies, sometimes in the form of propaganda, to disseminate its narrative. A key component of Egypt's approach is media diplomacy. This paper primarily relies on secondary data analysis of available information from newspaper articles, online sources, and academic literature. The establishment of the "Water, Hydro-diplomacy and Communication Forum" to foster a clear understanding of the GERD issue and transboundary river dynamics is a positive step. However, these efforts must be expanded. Ethiopia should proactively employ digital tactics to communicate the facts to both riparian countries and the wider world through a strategic communication campaign, utilizing various media channels to "tell GERD stories to the world." Furthermore, this article recognizes the significance of "GERD Day" for the Ethiopian people, fostering continued dedication to securing prosperity and leaving a positive legacy for future generations.

Keywords: *GERD, Lower Riparian States, Media diplomacy, Strategic communication, Upper Riparian State*

1. Introduction

Strategic communication is essential for effectively conveying the true narrative surrounding the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). This approach involves the careful planning, execution, and management of communication strategies to achieve specific goals, such as building trust and fostering understanding among stakeholders. In the context of GERD, strategic

communication plays a critical role in addressing misunderstandings, promoting transparency, and ensuring the project's success.

By employing strategic communication techniques, stakeholders can gain a clearer understanding of the dam's purpose, benefits, and impacts, leading to increased support and collaboration. For the purposes of this article, strategic communication refers to the practice of utilizing creative and targeted methods to effectively engage with defined audiences to achieve predetermined objectives. This encompasses the use of existing communication channels and tactics while also embracing the latest available technologies. It is a deliberate, planned, and calculated process that maximizes the potential of every chosen platform or medium, ensuring that messages are delivered in an impactful and innovative manner. As Khan (2020) notes, strategic communication "can be delivered through a range of sources, including press releases, social media, radio and television advertisements, internal messages, interviews, white papers, and more." Communicating the right message through various channels to influence audience attitudes is crucial in the GERD dispute. Therefore, this article emphasizes the need to design communication strategies that accurately portray GERD to the world, while also cultivating a strong sense of patriotism and defense of national sovereignty, reminiscent of the Battle of Adwa. It highlights the importance of preserving Ethiopia's unity and upholding the rule of law.

Methodologically, this article employs a framework that involves monitoring various media inputs and personal observations to evaluate news related to GERD, along with secondary sources, particularly regarding strategic communication. This framework offers guidelines on study dimensions, text segmentation criteria, observation instruments, and the integration of qualitative data to enhance the understanding of GERD-related news and strategic communication strategies.

2. The Context of the Nile and GERD

Eleven countries share the Nile River: Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Kenya. However, in 1959, Egypt and Sudan signed an agreement that allocated the river's water resources entirely to themselves (Terje, 2010; Mehari, 2020). This agreement has sparked disagreement and tension among the Nile Basin countries, particularly Ethiopia, which contributes approximately 86% or more of the Nile's annual water flow, and Egypt, the largest consumer of that water (Geoffrey, 2017).

The Nile Waters Agreements, which include the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement between Egypt and Sudan, have historically governed the use of the Nile River. However, these agreements have key limitations. The 1929 agreement granted Egypt complete control

over the Nile during the dry season, when water is most crucial for agriculture, thereby severely limiting Sudan's water allocation. Furthermore, the 1959 agreement allocated the entire average annual flow of the Nile between Sudan (18.5 billion cubic meters) and Egypt (55.5 billion cubic meters), disregarding the rights of other riparian states. The 1929 agreement was also negotiated between Great Britain, representing its Nile Basin colonies, and Egypt, excluding input from upstream countries. Similarly, the 1959 agreement, a bilateral treaty between Egypt and Sudan, was never ratified by the other Nile basin countries (Ashok, 1997). Consequently, these agreements failed to account for the increasing populations and development needs of the upstream countries in the modern era. Moreover, environmental changes, such as decreased precipitation and shrinking water sources like Lake Victoria, have rendered the agreements' rigid allocations unsustainable.

The GERD, a hydroelectric dam over a mile long and 145 meters high, could generate more than 5,000 megawatts of electricity, potentially doubling Ethiopia's electricity production. However, Egypt, which relies on the Nile for nearly all of its fresh water, fears the project could compromise its water supply. Egypt has argued that a 2% reduction in water from the Nile could result in the loss of 200,000 acres of irrigated land. There are also concerns that during droughts, Ethiopia might prioritize filling the dam's reservoir to increase its generating capacity, rather than letting water flow downstream.

The dispute over the GERD is part of a long-standing conflict between Egypt and Sudan, the downstream states, and Ethiopia and other upstream riparian states over access to the Nile's waters. Despite intense disagreements, Ethiopia continues to move forward with the dam, arguing it will significantly improve livelihoods in the region. Talks between the three countries have repeatedly broken down, with no agreement reached on issues such as the timetable for filling the dam's reservoir and how it will be managed during droughts. The tensions have escalated to the point where armed conflict has been warned as a possibility.

Since the commencement of construction in Ethiopia in 2011, long-standing tensions have escalated into a full-blown crisis. In recent years, discussions have resumed among the three countries involved, Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia, despite their rigid positions. In 2010, Ethiopia first announced plans to construct a dam on the Blue Nile, aiming to provide Ethiopia and its neighbours with over 5,000 megawatts of electricity. Egypt raised concerns at the time, escalating the issue to the United Nations and the African Union (AU) for resolution. However, Ethiopia maintained that the dam's designs had already been completed.

The following year, in 2011, Ethiopia laid the foundation stone for the new dam, officially commencing construction on the project. During this period, Ethiopia offered to share construction plans with Egypt amidst the ongoing conflict. That same year, the first meeting of the tripartite

technical committee, comprising the water ministers of Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia, took place. As construction progressed, Ethiopia diverted the Nile in 2013 to facilitate the dam's construction. In response, Egypt decided to engage in negotiations. Talks resumed between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan. In 2014, the establishment of an expert committee resulted in the Malabo Declaration, which guaranteed Ethiopia's right to develop the dam while ensuring measures to mitigate potential impacts on Egypt.

Negotiations stalled in 2017 but resumed in 2018. However, little progress was made between then and 2021, when the African Union intervened. Unfortunately, talks sponsored by the AU in April 2021, which were anticipated to yield a resolution, also failed, leading to a suspension of the negotiation process. In August 2023, negotiations were reinitiated after Egypt and Ethiopia expressed optimism in July about reaching an agreement within four months (Kaledzi, 2023).

In Ethiopia, the path to transforming the current situation lies in the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). This initiative has sparked a dispute among three countries: Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. The conflict is particularly intense between Egypt and Ethiopia, while Sudan's stance varies over time. Water disputes can potentially lead to conflicts if not addressed comprehensively to meet the needs of all parties involved. (Francis, 2022). The tension between Ethiopia and Egypt is very high. The difference is supported by various diplomatic lines, including Media diplomacy. As it is known in today's world, diplomatic activities are highly supported by media technologies, especially internet tools. In today's diplomatic world, the use of media in promoting the national interest is considered a vital instrument, and internet technologies are among the unique diplomatic instruments.

The Nile River has drawn attention recently as Egypt has been making efforts to protect the river's vital strategic and economic resources amid a growing water scarcity crisis that is putting livelihoods, food security, and water management at risk. This crisis has been increasing pressure on the upstream countries of Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda in their attempts to meet their energy needs while also reducing their dependence on internal sources. In response to this critical situation, Egypt has begun using media diplomacy tactics to advance its interests relating to the Nile River. As mentioned above, to settle the dispute, various technical and ministerial meetings were held among the three countries: Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan. Given that little progress has been made throughout these meetings, Ethiopia and its two neighbors have turned to media diplomacy tactics to help negotiate this highly sensitive issue, rather than having an even larger conflict break out over the dam's future, whether it is built or destroyed. However, it is difficult to say that Ethiopians' use of media tactics is comparable to that of Egypt. Egypt uses a joint plan of action as strategic communication to influence the GERD negotiation to build the country's positive image in front of the world population. The joint plan of Egypt's action includes media platforms, such as Radio to the

riparian countries in their language, Television, newspapers, and internet tools, including to the international communities.

Upstream Ethiopia maintains a clear stance, asserting that the hydroelectric power generated by the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) will be essential for meeting the energy needs of its population of 120 million. In contrast, Egypt, which relies on the Nile for approximately 97 percent of its irrigation and drinking water, views the dam as an existential threat. Egypt seeks to control the water exclusively for its own use, with only a minimal percentage allocated to Sudan, neglecting the interests of upstream countries, particularly Ethiopia, the largest contributor to the Nile's waters.

Prominent figures, including UN Secretary-General António Guterres, have made public appeals for dialogue between Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan to reach an agreement on the fair distribution of Nile waters once the GERD is completed (U.S. State Department, 2023; Reuters, 2023). These diplomatic efforts aim to establish a connection between Ethiopia, recognized as the world's foremost dam builder in this context, and its downstream neighbors. John Kerry, serving as the U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, has stressed the importance of mediation and constructive negotiation, rather than coercion, as crucial for alleviating tensions surrounding the Nile. This is particularly relevant as the three countries continue to disagree over specific details and timelines for filling the reservoir (U.S. State Department, 2023; Reuters, 2023).

The media plays a vital role in promoting the talents and capabilities of politicians and thinkers (Asaid, 2017). The impact of communication in politics is steering the world toward a governance system increasingly influenced by the media (Khan, 2021). The power of the media continues to grow, thanks to its extensive global connections. It decisively influences world politics, much like the Nile water dispute. The current influx of information related to the dam is significant, aiming to sway public opinion through media influence. However, this power can also have rapid negative effects (Khan, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to wield media power wisely to foster positive contributions. In this connection, on the Egyptian side, media diplomacy has primarily focused on disseminating propaganda against Ethiopia, the source of the Nile waters. This media influence has been heavily utilized in the negotiations surrounding the GERD, specifically through a strategy called the Joint Plan of Action, which employs various diplomatic tactics to sway the negotiation process. In March 2021, Egypt leveraged various state-run media outlets, including radio and television networks, newspapers, magazines, and online portals, to urge "upstream countries" to cease drawing water from the Nile River without consulting downstream nations such as Egypt and Sudan. This message was particularly directed at Ethiopia, with Egypt demanding that it halt any infrastructure projects that intersect the river until a collaborative agreement on equitable water access rights is reached among all the involved nations.

Similar to Egypt's approach, Ethiopia needs to develop a strategic communication plan that emphasizes the phrase "telling the true GERD stories to the world." This initiative aims to convey Ethiopia's perspective accurately globally. To achieve this goal, it is crucial to plan effective strategic communication. Attention must be given to social media diplomacy and mainstream media, both of which are still developing in Ethiopia. Understanding how various communication technologies can support Ethiopia's international objectives is vital. Increased control over communication will aid in influencing diplomatic efforts. The aim is to provide comprehensive information about the truth surrounding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and the negotiations associated with it. Utilizing all available media outlets to communicate the facts about the dam is a fundamental aspect of this strategic communication plan. Given that the dispute over GERD remains unresolved, designing a future strategic communication plan is essential. This effort is expected to stem from the forum established under the name "Water Diplomacy and Communication Forum," which should extend its reach beyond mere conferences. Today, social media serves as a powerful tool for digital diplomacy, often regarded as a subset of public diplomacy. It encompasses the use of digital technologies and platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Weibo, by states to engage with foreign audiences cost-effectively. In the current landscape of digital diplomacy, countries cannot afford to lag, as embracing these emerging trends provides significant advantages in international engagement and influence. Digital diplomacy enables governments to communicate swiftly and directly with both foreign audiences and their citizens, employing tools like social media, virtual meetings, and digital campaigns to amplify their viewpoints on global issues.

However, digital diplomacy is not intended to replace traditional face-to-face interactions; rather, these two forms of engagement complement each other. Traditional diplomacy facilitates deep, formal negotiations and builds trust through direct interpersonal dialogue, which is critical for handling sensitive or complex issues. Conversely, digital channels offer immediacy, broader reach, and two-way engagement with international audiences and citizens. By integrating these approaches, countries can respond more rapidly to global developments, shape narratives, and foster more inclusive and transparent diplomatic relationships, thereby enhancing their effectiveness on the world stage.

By integrating digital and traditional diplomatic approaches, countries can accelerate their responses to emerging developments, counter misinformation quickly, and proactively shape global narratives. This combination enhances transparency and inclusivity in diplomacy, fostering greater public engagement and scrutiny, which can lead to more legitimate and lasting international agreements (ICT Pulse, 2024; Diplomacy.edu, 2025; RSIS International, 2025). For example, digital diplomacy allows governments to conduct real-time public consultations, deliver targeted information campaigns, and

coordinate humanitarian or crisis responses alongside ongoing traditional negotiations (Astana Times, 2025; ICT Pulse, 2024).

In today's era of digital diplomacy, countries cannot afford to fall behind, as there are significant benefits to be gained from these emerging diplomatic trends. Importantly, digital diplomacy does not replace traditional face-to-face interactions; rather, both forms coexist and complement each other. Digital tools and online activities can effectively enhance a state's ability to communicate its foreign policy positions to both domestic and international audiences. However, in Ethiopia, the use of such media for diplomatic purposes is still in its infancy. The author of this article observes that Egypt employs a joint plan of action to influence attitudes in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) negotiations in a strategic manner, rather than through an "ad hoc" approach. This indicates that actions are taken spontaneously or reactively without prior preparation, formal structure, or systematic planning. In diplomatic contexts, an unplanned approach refers to informal, improvised, or unexpected methods and interventions rather than those that are carefully mapped out in advance. Ethiopia must take proactive measures to engage with various stakeholders worldwide, which can be achieved through strategic communication. As discussed, social media are powerful tools in digital diplomacy, but their effectiveness relies on identifying the advantages and opportunities they present. This necessitates planning communication strategies tailored to the social media framework (Strauß et al., 2014).

Ethiopia can leverage social media to engage its audiences and convey the truth about the GERD. Additionally, radio and other mainstream channels should reach a wide range of populations across Africa, especially in riparian countries, to inform them about the realities behind the dam's construction. This effort requires programming that can be broadcast in multiple languages and demands collaboration among various institutions, including universities and media outlets. Effective communication is crucial; hence, strategic communication plays an essential role in achieving the desired outcomes.

Strategic communication enables Ethiopia to share perspectives, highlight the benefits of its sustainability efforts, and foster collective action by demonstrating how individual actions contribute to broader progress. Success in communication relies not only on frequency but also on the quality of the messages, which should be clear, direct, consistent, and relevant to ensure a shared understanding of the dam's objectives among recipients. Therefore, this article emphasizes the importance of launching a campaign to "tell the GERD stories to the world," which can serve as a valuable guide for Ethiopia's media diplomacy efforts regarding the GERD. This initiative should be led by a responsible institution. The author stresses the significance of utilizing various communication channels designed through strategic communication to win the hearts of the global audience by sharing the truth. From

Ethiopia's perspective, skills in communication practices, public diplomacy, and smart, cost-effective campaigns under the motto "to tell GERD stories to the world" can be considered essential communication strategies.

3. Don't Lose Me "Jealous"(Mikegna Atasatage); Ethiopian Motivational Speech to Support the Construction of the GERD

The Ethiopian saying, "Jealousy fuels ambition," suggests that external challenges can motivate individuals to work harder. This has been particularly true for Ethiopia concerning the Nile issue, as Egypt's continuous warnings and threats have only strengthened Ethiopia's resolve to complete the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project. Despite facing various pressures and constraints, Ethiopia has successfully filled the dam's reservoir and initiated power production from its turbines.

However, negative rhetoric from Egypt—such as claims that Ethiopia is trying to "close our throat" and causing a water scarcity crisis—has generated adverse effects and heightened tensions with downstream neighbors Sudan and Egypt. To address this, Ethiopia should engage in strategic communication to counter these narratives and emphasize the benefits of the GERD project for both Ethiopia and the lower riparian countries.

Strategic communication can help Ethiopia convey a more positive and accurate message about the GERD project to the global audience. This can be achieved through various channels such as media outreach, public diplomacy, and international engagement. By doing so, Ethiopia can correct misconceptions and promote a clearer understanding of the GERD project's significance for the region.

Ethiopia's strategic communication should highlight the importance of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) not just for Ethiopia, but also for the downstream countries. This approach should counter the misinformation disseminated by Egypt, which often portrays the Nile as its only water source while neglecting the existence of underground water resources. Egypt claims a historical right to the Nile's waters, asserting that upstream nations lack a tradition of utilizing and managing these waters. Furthermore, Egyptians argue that upstream countries have alternative water resources—something that Egypt does not possess. This narrative needs to be addressed in Ethiopia's communication efforts to foster a more accurate understanding of the situation and promote cooperation among Nile Basin countries.

Most of the water in the Nile originates from Ethiopia, which contributes approximately 123 billion cubic meters of surface water annually—about 1.5 times the Nile's total annual flow (FAO, 1997). Despite this abundance, Ethiopia utilizes only a small fraction of its water resources, with only 3% remaining in the country while the majority flows to neighboring nations. As one of the poorest

countries in the world, Ethiopia has developed only 5% of its irrigable land, making the effective use of its water resources crucial for future prosperity (FAO, 1997).

The management and distribution of Nile waters among the ten riparian countries is a complex political issue governed by international law. In 1959, Egypt and Sudan signed an agreement for the full utilization of the Nile's waters, which replaced an earlier agreement from 1929. The 1929 agreement, negotiated between Egypt and Britain (representing the East African colonies), prohibited any irrigation or power projects on the Nile that could harm Egypt's interests, thereby ensuring that Egypt maintained significant control over the river's resources (Okoth-Owiro, 2004).

The advent of the internet has transformed various aspects of life, including international relations and diplomacy. Adesina (2017) discusses how these changes impact foreign policy (Abebe, 2014). Studies show that "the presence of GERD has a positive impact on the High Aswan Dam (HAD) water use sectors of Egypt" (Kidus, 2018). While Egypt may derive some benefits from the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the reasons behind its strong opposition to Ethiopia remain unclear. Is the core issue the advantages Ethiopia gains from the dam's construction? The ongoing mistrust between the two nations has resulted in a stalemate in negotiations, underscoring the urgent need for a mutually beneficial agreement regarding the management of the Nile's waters. The central question is whether Egypt's grievances toward Ethiopia stem from the perceived advantages arising from the GERD. While it is true that Egypt has some positive gains from the dam, the main issue appears to be the perceived threat to Egypt's water supply and broader geopolitical implications of the dam's construction.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has warned Ethiopia that his government would not tolerate any moves that would affect its share of Nile water. However, Ethiopia remains firm in its position. The Ethiopian people are driven by a strong sense of patriotism and the defense of their nation's sovereignty, particularly regarding the GERD. This feeling underscores the importance of preserving Ethiopia's unity and upholding the rule of law. The Ethiopian people must continue to dedicate themselves to this cause, protecting their prosperity and legacy for future generations (Ethiopian Herald, 2021). For centuries, Ethiopia's access to water has been under threat from Egyptian forces. However, due to its lack of external allies in the past, Ethiopia was unable to resist these pressures either militarily or diplomatically. Recently, Ethiopia has developed ways to politically challenge Egypt regarding access to water resources. This situation has sparked growing regional tensions over shared resources like water, as well as ongoing hostility stemming from historical issues between the two nations. In the absence of international loans, the Ethiopian people self-financed the GERD, which has become a source of pride and national identity—similar to their victory over the invading Italian army at Adwa on March 1, 1896. Lawrence (2023) suggested that, upon completion of the GERD, Ethiopia should establish a new holiday called "GERD Day."

4. Celebrating GERD Day

The observance of GERD Day in Ethiopia has emerged as a significant expression of national pride and unity, representing both the completion and the transformative impact of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The importance of Nile Day is underscored by the nation's success in two significant conflicts: one diplomatic and another that is comparable to a battlefield. Despite the lack of a definitive basin-wide agreement, Ethiopia has steadfastly pursued the construction of the GERD, achieving substantial progress toward establishing what is poised to be Africa's largest hydroelectric power plant (Gebreluel, 2014).

The Ethiopian Renaissance Dam serves as a contemporary symbol of redemption and economic empowerment, akin to the historical significance of the victory at Adwa for Black people. The government of Ethiopia presents the dam as an emblem of sovereignty and national cohesion. Once completed, GERD Day will be celebrated widely, acting as an impetus for future generations to engage in developmental progress. The overwhelming support from all Ethiopians will be recorded as an inspiring narrative of national achievement through unity. Moreover, the dam will stand as a significant representation of African prosperity.

The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has functioned as a unifying force among the Ethiopian populace, transcending political divisions and ethnic conflicts. The contributions made by the citizens towards the dam's construction are central to its success, and the project serves as a testament to the unity and determination of the Ethiopian people. The GERD should be regarded not merely as a victory for a single leader or political entity, but as a collective triumph for the entire nation. The unity celebrated on GERD Day reflects the country's potential for development and progress, which is crucial for Ethiopia's future.

In recognizing GERD Day, it is imperative to highlight the significant efforts of those individuals who were integral to the construction, negotiation, and resource mobilization for the project. When discussions surrounding the GERD are featured in the media during this celebration, the sentiments evoked among the broader population should resonate with the pride and unity experienced during the historic victory at Adwa. However, it is insufficient to merely evoke national sentiment and patriotism. The government must clearly demonstrate the tangible benefits that the populace has already realized and will continue to derive from the GERD, emphasizing its economic, social, and developmental impacts on citizens' lives. The author of this article contends that by effectively showcasing the individual and collective contributions of the populace, the Ethiopian government can foster a greater sense of ownership and belonging among its citizens. This approach not only reinforces national pride and unity but also ensures the long-term sustainability and support for the GERD and similar projects.

At the same time, the Ethiopian government should address legitimate concerns or criticisms regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and engage in open and transparent dialogue with all stakeholders, both domestically and internationally. This approach will help build trust, resolve conflicts, and ensure the equitable and sustainable management of Nile water resources. By taking these steps, the celebration of GERD Day can become a powerful tool for national unity, development, and recognition of the heroic efforts that have made this landmark project a reality.

In the view of the author of this article, the success of the GERD project reflects the country's potential for democracy and freedom, demonstrating the ability of the Ethiopian people to come together and work towards a common goal. The unity and celebration surrounding GERD Day serve as a powerful reminder of the potential for democracy and freedom to flourish in Ethiopia, marking an energetic step towards the country's development efforts.

It is important to recognize that the GERD project symbolizes unity and determination for the Ethiopian people. Celebrating GERD Day is essential for the future of the country's development efforts. The project's success is a testament to the potential for democracy and freedom to thrive in Ethiopia, representing a decisive advancement in the nation's progress and development. The complexities of water management along the Nile, combined with the interdependencies of the countries sharing its waters, have resulted in a scenario where cooperation and negotiation have become the primary responses to water-related disputes, rather than outright conflict. Despite challenges such as climate change, population growth, and significant projects like the GERD, the nations of the Nile Basin have largely navigated these issues without resorting to warfare. This situation highlights the potential for peaceful resolutions to water disputes, even amidst high stakes and considerable geopolitical pressures (Matthew & Vivoda, V. 2023).

With recent developments in the GERD landscape, notable progress has been observed. The escalating tension between Ethiopia and Egypt has intensified due to Ethiopia's memorandum of understanding with Somaliland; Somaliland is a self-declared independent state in the Horn of Africa that broke away from Somalia in 1991 following the overthrow of Somali dictator Siad Barre. This agreement includes clauses for water access and port usage. Egypt is attempting to exploit the conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia to undermine Ethiopia's development efforts, particularly those related to electric power generation. Somaliland has fostered a growing relationship with Ethiopia, especially in light of ongoing tensions with Somalia. In July 2020, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent a high-level delegation to Hargeisa, leading to an agreement to resume normal diplomatic relations.

Ethiopia's engagement with Somaliland is driven by multiple strategic considerations. One significant factor is Ethiopia's desire to counter what it perceives as increasing Egyptian involvement or influence in Somaliland, particularly given the rising tensions over the construction and management of the GERD and the broader Nile water dispute (Yayehyirad, 2023; Gambaryan, 2024). Ethiopian

policymakers view the potential for Egyptian diplomatic and security involvement in Somaliland as a threat to their national interests, as Egypt has historically considered access to the Nile vital for its own water security (Elhawary, 2021). In response, Ethiopia is actively working to strengthen its political and economic relationships with Somaliland. Somaliland's geostrategic position—along the Gulf of Aden and near key maritime trade routes—enhances its value for Addis Ababa, which is otherwise landlocked and seeking access to alternative ports (Mesfin, 2022). This geographic reality, along with the need for stable and cooperative neighbors, motivates Ethiopia to invest in sustained regional collaboration and deepen engagement with Somaliland as part of its broader national security and economic policy.

5. Conclusion

The construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in Ethiopia poses complex diplomatic challenges, particularly from lower riparian countries, Egypt and Sudan. Addressing these requires effective strategic communication to accurately convey Ethiopia's perspective and counter Egyptian propaganda. Although the GERD is operational, diplomatic tensions surrounding its impact and management are ongoing.

Ethiopia faces demands from Egypt and Sudan for binding agreements on water allocation and dam operations, while it maintains its position of sovereign control. Thus, Ethiopia should continue to invest in both face-to-face and media diplomacy. Direct diplomatic engagements are essential for trust-building and negotiating, while proactive media strategies—such as digital campaigns and public advocacy—are crucial for shaping narratives and countering misinformation.

The "Media Diplomacy and Communication Forum" should extend beyond conferences to develop a comprehensive digital strategy, possibly launching a campaign titled "Tell GERD Stories to the World" and establishing a GERD celebration day. This strategic communication effort should enhance Ethiopia's diplomatic goals regarding the dam and serve as a platform for collaborative learning among forum members. Additionally, Ethiopia's relationship with Somaliland significantly influences the region's dynamics. As Egypt seeks to counter Ethiopia's influence, it has fostered relations with Somaliland, allowing the latter to balance its ties with both countries. Ethiopia aims to maintain stability by strengthening its partnership with Somaliland, which is crucial for addressing security threats in the region. Amid these tensions, Ethiopia must utilize media strategies to influence Egypt's stance. It is also worth exploring why Egypt has not supported Hamas in Palestine while mobilizing resources for Somalia, which is far from its borders.

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