

## **What is inside Ethiopia's Grand Strategy?**

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The Institute of Foreign Affairs, a foreign policy think tank based in Addis Ababa, has published a book written in local language. The title reads 'The grand strategy of the two water bodies' tries to analyze the politics of the Nile and Red Sea as having strong relations with the survival of the Ethiopian state. It is a grand strategy, as the book indicates, because of, first, the two water bodies are important sources of security challenges, diplomatic row, and proxies with those that share the same water bodies. Second, the country's future development is believed to be intertwined with those water bodies. History shows that at times when Ethiopia was in a better position to control or to have access to those water bodies, there were better chances of prosperity. The same is also anticipated to be similar in the future. Third, it is a grand strategy because the realization of the stated goals in the book requires the mobilization of national resources and the coordination of different government agencies.

Of course, Ethiopia began building the largest ever dam on the Abay River, the major tributary to the Nile, called the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in 2011 i.e. few months after the signing of the Common Framework Agreement (CFA) by the majority of upper riparian states. As far as knowledge production of the Nile hydro-politics is concerned, there are plenty of publications in which the book by itself also cited a lot and literatures are also portraying the game-changing role of GERD. Ethiopia also defied previous Nile-related agreements mainly due to its non-signing status to the existing legal regimes. Instead, for more than a decade, Ethiopia was mobilizing all riparian states towards the CFA.

The Grand Strategy has its justification in considering the Abay water development as a Grand National goal. The ever-rising population and a surging demand for energy necessitate shifting towards hydro-power generation. Economic growth is another factor in the appetite for more energy. Clean water is also needed to quench the interest of the rising urban population and to produce more agricultural items even through irrigation.

As it is plainly discussed in the book, Abay and other rivers in the country are natural gifts to Ethiopia. So far, the contribution of these rivers to the national economy is very limited. The entire discussion within the book seems to change the course of the contribution of these rivers to the national economy and the stability of the nation. There is also a repeated argumentation about the changing condition of the country- population pressure, rapid urbanization, frequent drought, food insecurity, and escalating demand for access to electric energy- which means Ethiopia shall start exploiting its rich water resources. Hence, the Grand Strategy aspires to maximize water usage in the form of hydropower generation and irrigation even through inter-basin development.

The same justification is also given for Ethiopia's ambition to have secured access to the sea. Ethiopia is the only proximate nation to the Red Sea with more than 120 million people. No littoral state has such a huge population. Again, no state had a historical presence in the southern part of the Red Sea as Ethiopia did. The Book, therefore, presents Ethiopia as a Red Sea state. However, its experience as a landlocked nation and total dependence upon on state began after the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia and was further complicated following the 1998-2000 Ethiopia and Eritrea war. Though the neighboring nations like Eritrea, Djibouti, Somaliland and Somalia have long coastal lines, they are not in a position to develop ports and provide port facilities with market prices, Djibouti being an exception. The meager transport infrastructure is another obstacle to satisfying the ever-increasing logistics demand of Ethiopia.

In both cases, the historical analysis inside the book implies to the fact that there seems to be an interest in ensuring historical continuity in the struggle towards the two water bodies. Since the Medieval times of Ethiopian historical accounts, successive Ethiopian kings have shown interest in exploiting the Abay River and its tributaries. The 20th-century Ethiopian leaders went further in identifying potential water development sites, project designing, and soliciting funds. Ethiopia has also begun the construction of GERD, soon to be completed, in 2011. The incumbent has therefore the responsibility to show its commitment to scale up water-related development. The same is also true for the claim to have access to the sea. The genesis of Ethiopia goes back to the Axumite period. At the time, Ethiopia was a major power in the Red Sea region with territorial reach up to present-day Yemen and the Eastern tip of Somalia. Since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, following the dynastic shift towards the Zagwe, Ethiopia's trade route and outlet to the sea also changed into Zeila and Tadjura. They served as an important sea outlet for centuries to come. Historically,

Adulis, Assab, Massawa, Tadjura, Zeila, and Berbera had served as Ethiopian ports in the Red Sea, Bab el Mendeb, and the Gulf of Eden. When colonialism came to Africa, though Ethiopia maintained its independence, most of its historical ports fell under the surrounding colonial masters.

The struggle to reclaim Ethiopia's historical ports was successful in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Then, the only time that Ethiopia kept the issue of access to the sea in a low political agenda status was after the separation of Eritrea and the coming into power of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991. The book also emphasized the necessity of projecting power to the high seas and securing access to the sea.

The book accounts detail analysis of three areas. First, there is in-depth historical analysis related to the two water bodies and their significance to Ethiopian statehood. Second, there is also legal analysis by considering domestic and international legal regimes. The third is political analysis which includes the challenges Ethiopia is facing, the lessons from different countries, the changing socio-economic conditions of the country, and the geopolitical condition of the Nile and the Red Sea. The analytical part of the book is followed by the strategic concerns and goals.

The strategic section starts by answering the question: 'Why now?' it follows a cautious approach in strategizing the two water bodies in the context of the fragile Horn of Africa. It explains the need to strictly observe the principles of primacy to Ethiopia's national interest, pragmatism, considering all necessary instruments, and transparency in the move towards the implementation phase.