



The Management of Congo Water Basin: Opportunities and Challenges for Science Diplomacy



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Introduction

At the outset, it would be worthwhile to have a better idea about what the terms “Diplomacy” and “Science” mean. Diplomacy is popularly defined as an art and practice of conducting negotiation between nations and application of the foreign policy of a state or a government; and Science as an organisation of the knowledge related to different categories of facts, objects or phenomena. The concept of Science Diplomacy is less known in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as much as in most of the developing and Francophonie Countries, even it has been used in many diplomatic activities since some decades.

Science Diplomacy is at the crossover of two disciplines, diplomacy and science (foreign policy, negotiation, research and knowledge), and can be defined as “the use and application of scientific cooperation to help establish links and strengthen relations between people, societies and countries especially in areas where there may be no other means of official level approach”.

Since their independence, African countries have taken an active part in international relations. A way to register in the game of geopolitical relations of defining the challenges to be met and to go, like the other States, to the conquest of objects and situations favourable to allow the achievement of the fundamental objectives of development.

Water is an essential element for life, there is no need for long scientific treatises to demonstrate it. Today millions of people all over the world lack water, millions of children die every year from water-borne diseases. And some of the world’s poorest countries suffer from drought on a regular basis. The world must find real solutions to these problems. We need to use water more efficiently. We need to

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free women and girls who are forced to fetch water, sometimes very far away, from this daily chore.

Today, there are problems of drought or the process of desertification in other countries close to the DRC, which causes a pressing desire to access surrounding waters, especially those of the Congo Basin.

This is why today a diplomatic reflection is necessary on the way in which management of these waters without forgetting the scientific data linked to the exploitation of these waters; namely the presence of hydroelectric dams which produce electricity for many of the countries in the Congo Basin.

Management of the Congo River Basin from a Diplomatic Standpoint

The Congo Basin is the catchment area of the Congo River in Africa. It covers 4 million square km where 93.2 million inhabitants live, with densities that vary widely depending on the area. The notion of Congo Basin can mean the hydrographic basin of the Congo River, which spans ten countries in Central Africa (Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Gabon, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Tanzania).

The realisation of the vision of harmonised development which takes into account the dimensions of economic dynamism, justice and social inclusion as well as ecological sustainability is then decided on the level of these factors. The presence of resources does not submit to the boundaries drawn by man. On the contrary, minerals, rivers and fauna are often found on both sides of borders and generate consequences for property rights, create externalities and prevent the unilateral use of these resources. At the risk of conflicts, the exploitation or use of a cross-border resource must be regulated, shared or even co-managed, thereby reducing the sovereignty of a State.

Collective action, the division of responsibilities and the sharing of benefits, however, is not a strong tradition in the modern history of Central Africa. The young states of the sub-region, concerned with securing their own borders and building their

nation, did not at first attach much importance to cross-border cooperation. However, the growing importance of the challenges created by the existence of resources, either by defining their own interests or by the action of external actors, including the conflicts they have experienced, has enabled States to perceive diplomacy as being in their own interest, especially if it is driven by the goal of peace and sustainability. It is, therefore, more than commendable in diplomatic, economic and even scientific relations between the Congo, the Central African Republic and the DRC that no misunderstanding has so far been recorded in the management of the common waters of the Congo and Ubangi rivers.

The states of the sub-region have therefore reacted in this direction by creating alongside and in addition to “large” interstate organisations forms of interaction and specialised cooperation organisations which aim at common use and in some cases even to the protection of natural resources. Mechanisms for inter-state collective action have already been created, such as the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC), the Congo-Oubangui-Sangha Basin International Commission (CICOS) and the Regional Fisheries Committee (COREP). These mechanisms provide both a framework for concerted action for the interests of Central African states as well as those of external actors. Governed by principles and norms, rules and decision-making procedures established by consensus, these new interaction frameworks demonstrate what types of governance and cooperation are perceived to be beneficial for the States of the sub-region.

The Democratic Republic of Congo: Center of Water Interests

Although the country is considered to be one of the largest drinking water basins in the world, the DRC is unable to take advantage of this opportunity to ensure socio-economic development for its populations and the rest of the African continent. Congolese are therefore called upon to position themselves to maximise the benefits that water offers to them, and to respond appropriately to the challenges and issues associated with this sector.

Failure would mean that the international community would impose itself, willingly or by force, to gain access to this heritage which some already qualify as world heritage, thus threatening the sovereignty of the DRC with regard to the management and development of its water resources. This scenario is undesirable and should be avoided at all costs.

At present, the DRC is facing a series of wars that are as deadly as they are harmful to the development of this part of the continent and of all African states and probably the world with the increasing demand for water following climate change in view. Considered as one of the lungs of planet Earth, the DRC is called upon to face major challenges in order to be able to exploit and above all preserve these resources for the good of its populations and the rest of the continent and why not the world.

A short while ago, the President of Chad made remarks that went in the direction of taking the waters of the Congo River, either willingly or by force, in order to meet the water needs of his population. However, this is undoubtedly a means of causing a conflict between the DRC and Chad when there are more diplomatic or scientific means of approaching this subject by turning to science technology.

From the above, we can understand that in the coming years' water would be for some States a source of conflicts, because certain States will want to base their supremacy on others especially if these countries are upstream of the important rivers.

Hydro-Diplomacy: A Concept to be Created in Science Diplomacy

We can say that Hydro-Diplomacy could be an essential constituent of Science Diplomacy by playing the role of peacemaker for water conflicts or even of policymaker for the commercial markets around water.

The previous century had witnessed deferential tensions, particularly in areas experiencing hydraulic imbalance, such as north and south of Africa, the Near East and Central America. According to the American geographer Aaron Wolf; the only known real water war goes back 4,500 years. These are two

Mesopotamian cities about Tigris and the Euphrates in southern Iraq today.

Today we are witnessing the birth of terms like "battle for water" or "for water", "water, a new global strategic issue", "the geostrategy of water", "hydro policy", "hydro diplomacy" or "hydro conflicts". These terms generate two types of hydraulic conflicts: intra-state and inter-state.

For example, in the Middle East, water is like in Africa or India, a vital economic and strategic issue, which conditions everyday life. But it also takes on the dimension of a very special political tool for Turkey. Its position upstream of the transboundary rivers of the Tigris and the Euphrates, compared to the situation downstream of Syria and Iraq, gives Turkey control of the two rivers and allows it to use water, first, to the best of its own agricultural and industrial needs.

Therefore water also becomes an element of commercial relations since a whole network of various proposals, for exchange or sale, is being established in the region. But the millennial antagonisms and successive wars have created a climate of suspicion. So that all attempts at sharing or possible cooperation are in advance considered by the parties involved as a ruse to take advantage and not a diplomatic procedure.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that access to drinking water and sanitation was recognised as a human right by the UN in 2010. But sharing this strategic resource, because it affects the sovereignty of States, creates hotbeds of potential tension: in the Middle East, Central Asia, China, Africa, Latin America between Brazil and Argentina, and even between the United States and Canada.

Water diplomacy can save millions of lives because water is an essential element for sustainable development and necessary for security and peace. In the illustration, in South America, Lake Titicaca, the largest freshwater lake on the American continent, has long been a source of cooperation between Bolivia and Peru. Likewise, the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty between India and Pakistan survived three wars between the two countries.

It is time to establish internal and transboundary water management rules. Several legal instruments contribute to the ideals of Hydro Diplomacy. For

example, the 1997 Convention on the Right to Use International Watercourses for Purposes Other than Navigation. In addition, the Helsinki Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, developed within the framework of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, was last year open to ratification by all Member States of the United Nations (UN News, 2017).

Conclusion

If water requests diplomacy, its sharing requires diplomacy to invent. Because if we asked a handful of experts to quote a transboundary river or water table managed in a concerted and harmonious way between several States, the answer would surely be after a pause of reflection, "There is no any!". This explains the asymmetrical relations between riparian states because some are strong and others weak.

Water being the source of everything, it occupies a decisive place in human relations and between states. Historically, it has been seen sometimes as a border and a cause of conflict, sometimes as a rallying point and convergence. And if instead of the "wars for water" regularly beaten up here and there, Peace was imposed on the contrary, because of water! As of today, or in the very near future; the need for common governance of water-related issues is gradually starting to impose itself on the concerned actors; this is what we will surely call "hydro-diplomacy".

Reference

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