

Egypt's Decade of Water Woes

by Hafsa Halawa

ABSTRACT

As the Nile River dispute between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan enters a new decade, this paper seeks to map out the Egyptian perspective of the dispute, through an outline of the interventions made, opportunities lost, and challenges posed by the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Looking at Egypt's domestic water security challenges, regional relationships and the tripartite process, and the role and influence of external actors, the paper describes a decade of diplomatic stagnation as entrenched nationalism creates forms of immovable policy on the River Nile.

Water | Security | Egypt | Ethiopia | Sudan

keywords

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Introduction

Over the last decade, Egypt has been undergoing an evolution of sorts in its approach and policy towards its water resources, management of the River Nile and its position and relationships across the Horn/East Africa. Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project has brought to the fore tensions that have existed between Egypt and its Nile partners, Ethiopia but also Sudan, for decades.¹ Over the last twenty years, other riparian states have sought to upend this unequal water allocation to apportion the waters of the world's longest river to better serve all states the river runs through. Throughout history the Nile has played both an integral role in Egypt's domestic politics and regional policy, as well as the curation of a strong Egyptian identity that centres itself on the promise and fruit borne from the river.

Ethiopia's GERD thus marks a major unilateral move against Egypt and Sudan, although over the decade-long dispute Egypt specifically has grappled with this existential threat to its water security, with wild policy implementation that ranges from desperate diplomatic action to appealing to the highest international negotiators and even threatening military intervention inside Ethiopia.

As the furthest downstream country, change was always inevitable, and despite great hostility at the beginning Egypt has evolved greatly, both domestically and

¹ Jonathan Gornall et al., "Battle for the Nile", in *Arab News Deep Dives*, 19 June 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1878956>.

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Paper prepared in the framework of the project "African challenges to multilateralism: the geopolitics of the Nile between conflict and cooperation", October 2022. This paper has benefited from the financial support of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation and of the Policy Planning Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation pursuant to art. 23-bis of Presidential Decree 18/1967. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation or the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

in its foreign policy towards its riparian partners, since the project first began a decade ago. However, agreement over management of the Nile remains elusive as relations among the tripartite countries deteriorate. Meanwhile, Egypt is strengthening its position as a strategic economic and security partner in the Horn of Africa, seeking a larger role and confirmation of its status across the region.

This paper will look at the GERD project through the prism of Egypt's national interest, local dynamics that have dictated diplomacy towards Ethiopia and its neighbours, and the influence of external power and mechanisms that have been attempted to negotiate a water management agreement among the tripartite countries.

1. National interest and local dynamics

When the GERD, in its current form, was first announced in April 2011, Egypt was in the throes of seismic political upheaval with popular protests that brought down the regime of Hosni Mubarak and decapitated a large part of the security state he had put in place for thirty years. Amid such domestic turbulence, few Egyptians – leaders or citizens – took notice of the GERD announcement by then Ethiopian President Meles Zenawi. Caught in an existential battle for the identity of the state, with the rise to power of the long-time marginalised Islamist organisation Muslim Brotherhood (MB), and the forceful and vehement rejection of its policies by a large swathe of the Egyptian public, the country had little bandwidth to look beyond its borders and acknowledge any foreign policy concerns. In addition, the turbulence of the years 2011–13 was so time-consuming and fast-moving, with numerous governments and shifting of leadership, that Egypt's government was only tasked with responding to continued popular resentment of the system. Egypt's domestic political situation remained in flux and relatively unstable and unpredictable until the popularly support military coup that unseated, in June 2013, former President Mohamed Morsi and installed then Minister of Defence, now president, Abdel Fattah Al Sisi in power.

As the political situation devolved over the course of thirty months, Egypt paid scant attention to its foreign policy issues, and Egyptians had little time for any distant or potential threats. In addition, a broader arrogance among Egyptian society, bred by the continued power exercised by Egypt over the Nile for decades, meant that there was very little fear of a material threat to its water supply. Furthermore, Egyptian civil-military relations that have long revered the military institution and the security apparatus, through slightly distorted views of success in the Arab-Israeli wars, and the role of military leaders in power, have also meant that much of the population remained confident that the Egyptian military would not hesitate to act if the river were threatened. Both a poor assessment of Egypt's declining military might, and a misunderstanding of regional dynamics and river hegemony led the country to be taken by surprise at developments further south.

The result initially was outrage and anger and an almost immediate call by the public to act to stop the dam. However, one of the major triggers that precluded mass mobilisation on the streets of Egypt on 30 June 2013 was the leaking of a recorded cabinet meeting where then-President Morsi announced the country would consider invading Ethiopia to protect its water interests if construction on the GERD began.² Widely circulated, the video alarmed domestic military leaders, who called Morsi a threat to national security, and helped secure further popular support for his military ouster, instigated through carefully curated messaging that identified Morsi a threat to the country, despite fear over the dam. Although Egypt has taken a decisive and swift turn to engage in diplomatic attempts to negotiate with Sudan and Ethiopia since the fall of Morsi, Egyptian diplomats serving in the region at the time note how damaging the leaked Morsi video became for future attempts to negotiate successfully: "we continue to be regularly reminded of that video. It cannot be overstated how damaging it was. [...] It confirmed all conspiracy theories among Ethiopians that we intended to destroy the dam".³

Nevertheless, Sisi has led Egypt since June 2013, leading to a culture of more consistent political leadership in the country, which has allowed a more substantive foreign policy to take hold. Even as the domestic situation continues to fluctuate, as civil and political rights are severely curtailed, by and large President Sisi's hold on power remains strong and durable. After a turbulent immediate response to the GERD project in the days of transitional government and under President Morsi, Sisi has worked to prioritise the dam, align Egypt's interests with notable allies, including the US and Europe, as well as bargaining with partner Sudan. The effort has led to a much more focused, urgent and widespread foreign policy that centres itself on Egypt's water security demands and needs.

Despite protestations among officials that Egypt never intended to destroy the dam, until the signing of the 2015 Declaration of Principles between Cairo, Khartoum and Addis Ababa, it was an internally held belief that Egypt should have been entitled to a sort of "veto" on the project.⁴ While the dynamics on the ground within Ethiopia, as GERD construction continues, have superseded diplomatic talks, in small quarters of the security establishment it remains a core belief that such a policy was necessary, even as the entire posture of the Egyptian government and security apparatus has shifted significantly.⁵ Subconsciously this sentiment has trickled down – through media and regular public statements from officials over the years – to the people, who continue to view the GERD as an attempt to harm Egypt's national security and stability.⁶ Such sentiment has lent itself to

² Ahmed Maher, "Egyptian Politicians Caught in On-Air Ethiopia Dam Gaffe", in *BBC News*, 4 June 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-22771563>.

³ Interview with Egyptian diplomat, Cairo, June 2017.

⁴ Interviews with security official, Cairo, 2016–18.

⁵ Interview with retired security official, Cairo, June 2021.

⁶ This includes newspaper articles that have threatened war with the comparison of the two countries' militaries (2018), regular criticism of Ethiopians in local media and negative reports on GERD development, including the risks posed by poor construction, etc., while government officials

opportunities for the current president to stoke anger and nationalism among the population, regularly declaring that he will ensure no harm comes to Egypt, and – at times of desperation – continuing to threaten military action of some sort if necessary. Indeed, to this day it forms a regular point of public statements by the Egyptian President in diplomatic relations with all facilitating parties to tripartite talks, that he will “not let any harm come to the country” over GERD.⁷

The result is an entrenched and committed Egyptian population that views Ethiopia's behaviour with contempt. This, despite the fact that numerous technical advisers – both Egyptian and foreign – have confirmed that in the first instance, Egypt can implement several mitigating processes and mechanisms that can manage the reduction of water from the GERD as it fills.⁸ Technical experts have long agreed that there is a clear and concise agreement to be made on not only the filling of the GERD and drought management, but also longer term water management, but that “the dispute has always been political”.⁹

To that end, Egypt is the “mother of the world” (*Om el Donia*), at least according to its own citizens through this regular colloquial mantra that is often raised – both in defence of, and in comical reference to – Egypt's domestic and foreign policy. To this day, successive Egyptian leaders have pointed to the country's rich history, the legacy of the pharaohs in civilisation and the power of its strategic positioning linking Asia to Africa through the Sinai Peninsula. The heart of this mantra comes from this idea that Egypt is the “gift of the Nile”,¹⁰ as believed by Ancient Egyptians who claimed their survival was due solely to the river.

This idea that Egypt is unique, special and a gift to the world has carried through centuries and generations till today, and is now an ingrained part of the Egyptian psyche and its national pride. The mantra, and the core belief within Egyptians that they hold such a place in history, has defined all parts of society including social, political, and economic dynamics among the people as well as in their relationship with the institutions that govern them and with their leaders – monarchy and military alike. It also extends to how they view their relationships with the rest of

have regularly used local political talk shows to highlight the existential nature of Ethiopia's actions against Egypt. The efforts culminated in an outlandish statement from former US president Donald Trump when he announced, in unscripted comments, that he “wouldn't be surprised” if Egypt were to attack Ethiopia over the GERD (October 2020). Some Egyptian officials reportedly took this as a green light from the US government to initiate strikes against the dam structure (which never went ahead). “Trump Suggests Egypt Could Order Military Strike on GERD”, in *Enterprise*, 25 October 2020, <https://enterprise.press/?p=113104>.

⁷ “Sisi Tells Congolese President Egypt Will Not Accept Harm to Its Water Security”, in *Egypt Today*, 8 May 2021, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/102725/Sisi-tells-Congolese-president-Egypt-will-not-accept-harm-to>.

⁸ Khalid Hassan, “Egypt Promotes Local Projects to Mitigate GERD Effects”, in *Al-Monitor*, 3 August 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/node/27047>; interview with US water expert, April 2018 (and thereafter regular interviews between 2018–21).

⁹ Interview with former Egyptian agricultural minister, Cairo, May 2018.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Migiro, “Why Is Egypt Called the Gift of the Nile?”, in *WorldAtlas*, 28 January 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/why-is-egypt-called-the-gift-of-the-nile.html>.

the world. In the modern era, the mantra has been used by political leaders to rile up a domestic audience over a wide variety of issues, including the political isolation and crackdown on political Islam following the 2011 uprising that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power for a short-lived period, and in defiance of attempts to wrestle control of the River Nile away from Egypt, through the GERD.

Within Egypt, water is a priceless commodity, both literally and (until recently) figuratively.¹¹ Owing to the inherited belief that the country's water resources are the property of all Egyptians, there have never previously been successful attempts to manage water supply within the country's borders or access to it for citizens – namely farmers and the wider agricultural sector, which gained prominent political power first under former President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1960s. Nasser himself was the architect of the Aswan High Dam, bringing Soviet finance and technical expertise to complete what was then the largest embankment dam in Africa,¹² overtaken now in size and capacity by the GERD. Aswan became a symbol not only of Egyptian nationalism through its utilisation of the river, but also a strong political signal of anti-West sentiment and growing independence in the era of the Arab-Israeli wars and following the retaking and nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956.

Today, however, Egyptians' relationship with water is slowly being upended. Since 2020, President Sisi has enacted legislation that seeks to price water, has raised water prices for consumer consumption (both residential use and drinking water) and recently enacted new tariffs for water use more broadly that will change centuries of effectively free water access for irrigation and farming. Much of these changes have been sold to citizens as necessary owing to the regular and constant threat of the GERD as Ethiopia continues its construction and filling of the massive reservoir without having reached a written negotiated settlement with Egypt and Sudan. However, President Sisi's actions are responding not only to a future threat of reduced water access by material construction such as the GERD, but also an immediate need to regulate water access and usage as the population in the country surpasses 103 million (2021), and under the deployment of a mass infrastructure plan that is expanding into Egypt's vast desert land.

Whilst the GERD has become a convenient catch-all for Egypt's water ills, whether warranted at this current time or not, and has provided a timely and required scapegoat for important changes to internal waste management and usage, it remains imperative that Egypt make such changes – irrespective of the GERD – as the country becomes ever more water-scarce.¹³ Egypt's growing population

¹¹ Catherin A. Nikiel and Elfatih A. B. Eltahir, "Past and Future Trends of Egypt's Water Consumption and Its Sources", in *Nature Communications*, Vol. 12 (July 2021), Article 4508, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-24747-9>.

¹² "Aswan High Dam", in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, updated 14 September 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Aswan-High-Dam>.

¹³ Amir Dakkak, "Egypt's Water Crisis – Recipe for Disaster", in *EcoMENA*, 11 August 2020, <https://wp.me/p2DEft-GD>.

and increased water consumption have made it now one of the most per capita water-scarce countries in the developing world.¹⁴ Furthermore, the country continues to have an inefficient water delivery system, and poor irrigation that results in significant water flows being lost.¹⁵ Although it remains full and provides significant water access for the country, Lake Nasser (the reservoir that sits behind the Aswan High Dam) has always been criticised for the large amount of water that is lost annually to evaporation. This is only increasing as temperatures rise as a result of climate change. Egypt has already significantly become food insecure, importing all of its wheat for domestic consumption, and in recent years more rice as it uses imports to support the curbing of water-intensive farming practices domestically.¹⁶

Even as more positive developments such as increased wastewater practices and desalination projects are announced,¹⁷ as new laws are implemented there remains little to no public discussion or even forewarning of new practices that are enacted. President Sisi has governed with almost no public engagement, with regular seismic economic decisions that take the public by surprise, whilst concurrently enacting a brutal crackdown on civil society and political freedoms that has effectively silenced the public into submission. This is most prominently highlighted by the USD 12.5 billion loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that was signed in November 2016, which saw Egyptians' income wealth halved overnight as Egypt implemented a required currency devaluation, while fuel subsidies were simultaneously partially lifted causing a horrific spike in inflation.¹⁸

As the country now faces a long-term shock food security crisis with the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine affecting global wheat supply (Egypt being the world's top importer of wheat¹⁹), Egyptians have never truly recovered the loss of income as a result of that first deal, and now must contend with yet another devaluation of the currency, with growing rates of inflation bringing about a big hike in food and energy costs.²⁰ All of this as wages have not risen comparatively, initial positive

¹⁴ Eliora Goodman, "Dual Threats: Water Scarcity and Rising Sea Levels in Egypt", in *Tahrir Institute Explainers*, 20 August 2021, <https://timep.org/?p=35121>.

¹⁵ Adrien Detges, Benjamin Pohl and Stella Schaller, "Security Implications of Growing Water Scarcity in Egypt", in *Climate Diplomacy*, 20 August 2017, <https://climate-diplomacy.org/node/442>.

¹⁶ Hassan Abdel Zaher, "Adapting to Water Shortages, Egypt Reduces Rice Cultivation", in *The Arab Weekly*, 11 March 2018, <https://thearabweekly.com/node/38987>.

¹⁷ Patrick Werr, "Water-poor Egypt Eyes Quadrupling Desalination Capacity in 5 Years", in *Reuters*, 21 October 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/water-poor-egypt-eyes-quadrupling-desalination-capacity-5-years-2021-10-21>; "Egypt Has 146 Wastewater Treatment Plants, 2 to Be Added", in *Egypt Today*, 8 April 2021, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/100667/Egypt-has-146-wastewater-treatment-plants-2-to-be-added>.

¹⁸ Associated Press, "Egypt Inflation Surges to 33 Percent After Fuel Subsidy Cuts", in *VOA News*, 10 August 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/3979981.html>.

¹⁹ Motasem A. Dalloul, "The Wheat Crisis in the Arab World Is Exemplified by Egypt", in *Middle East Monitor*, 23 March 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/?p=545198>.

²⁰ Mirette Magdy and Tarek El-Tablawy, "Egypt Hikes Interest Rates and Lets Pound Fall to Absorb Shocks", in *Bloomberg News*, 21 March 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-21/>

improvement of unemployment numbers has now been hit by the pandemic, and continued lifting of subsidies amid consistent increased borrowing – domestically and abroad – has merely shifted the burden further onto citizens seeking alternative sources they can afford, be it gas, domestically subsidised food offered by the military, or accessing the flood of Chinese goods into the market replacing the more expensive European, American or other Asian alternatives.

2. GERD negotiations

As the country adjusts and responds to its domestic shifts in water access, pricing and usage, the GERD negotiations have generally remained stagnant in the years since the Declaration of Principles (DoP) was signed in Khartoum in 2015, now effectively frozen as domestic dynamics navigate the approach to diplomatic efforts.

President Sisi began his tenure with immediate and swift outreach to the other tripartite countries, Sudan and Ethiopia, seeking a quick and resolute end to the diplomatic dispute.²¹ Egypt's stance in 2013, led by the military chief-turned-president, was however initially seen by its neighbouring countries as bullish and aggressive, whereby domestic politics asked of the country's leaders (themselves caught in a bid to confirm their own domestic legitimacy to lead) to seek an end to the GERD project and resolve the water apportionment spat in favour of the water flows Egypt has enjoyed for decades. At the root of this initial diplomatic effort was a push for internationally recognised and approved technical studies of the GERD project, to assess the possible risks and harm to Egypt and Sudan as downstream countries, and the effect of reduced water flows and access on their national security. Egypt has always staunchly pursued technical feasibility studies to cement its position that the GERD risks significant damage to Sudan and Egypt.²²

At its heart the DoP, also known as the "Khartoum Agreement", included vague terms that would commit all three countries to such studies. However, with no agreement on one specific partner to conduct the studies, each country took its own initiatives to contract its preferred international partners to undertake studies. These studies were conducted as tripartite talks continued, albeit used as Egypt's political weapon to stall the talks based upon no agreement on the material effects of the GERD. These studies, alongside national ones conducted by each of the three countries, were never adopted and never released to the public, even after completion. To this day, granular disagreements over language persist, including the simplest terms of whether the countries could amend or make recommendations on respective

[egypt-central-bank-raises-benchmark-rate-in-surprise-meeting](#).

²¹ Jackson Mutinda, "Nile Dam Row: Sisi Switches to Soft Power to Bring East Africa to Egypt's Side", in *The East African*, 13 November 2013, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/magazine/sisi-woos-ea-to-egypt-s-side-on-dam-matters-3617448>.

²² International Crisis Group, "Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute", in *ICG Africa Reports*, No. 271 (20 March 2019), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/9541>.

studies produced (including the ones they had commissioned), and disagreement over requirements for endorsement of the results provided.²³

In addition to the Khartoum Agreement's commitment to studies, there was the imperative agreement by all parties that no filling of the reservoir at the GERD would begin without agreement on the filling schedule and general operation of the dam (art. 5, DoP). While the Egyptians stuck to this part of the agreement as the basis for their engagement in talks among the tripartite partners, Ethiopia continued construction of the dam, leading Egyptian officials to accuse the Ethiopians of bad faith and – in hindsight, a rather prescient view – of seeking to dismantle the agreement by establishing events on the ground at the dam construction site to make the agreement effectively null and void. The period of tensions in the talks coincided with an about-turn from Sudan, with then-leader Omar Al Bashir effectively “switching sides” to support Addis's claim to the river and up the stakes in the talks by even offering Addis Sudan's share of the River Nile to complete the fill.

Then, in 2018, as Abiy Ahmed came to power in Addis Ababa, Egypt sensed an opportunity to ameliorate itself in the eyes of the new Ethiopian prime minister and make its case for a positive development in the talks that could favour a deal keeping Egypt's water allocation relatively secure. Abiy's rise to power came at a time when Sudan had slowly been moving away from its long-time partnership with Egypt over the Nile, as Khartoum came to the realisation that the GERD would be good for its own agricultural sector, and other disputes between the two countries – notably disputed territory²⁴ and suggested militarisation of islands off the coast of Egypt and Sudan²⁵ – took precedence within the bilateral relationship. With Abiy's rise to power, and his outreach to Egypt to mend fences over the dam dispute, it forced a recalibration of sorts over the GERD by both Cairo and Khartoum. While Bashir attempted to mend fences with Cairo,²⁶ Abiy visited that city to famously declare while standing next to Sisi that he would commit to no harm coming to the Egyptian people from the GERD.²⁷

The developments in 2018 allowed Egypt to exercise more confidence than the situation warranted, and committed Egypt to its “no concessions” policy over the dam and the negotiations over water management – a policy initiative that has been the hallmark of President Sisi's time in power in most domestic and foreign policy. However, arguably the confidence was short-lived, as the tripartite itself

²³ Interview with Egyptian diplomat, Cairo, June 2017.

²⁴ Walaa Hussein, “Is Egypt-Sudan Border Dispute New Thorn in Renaissance Dam Negotiations?”, in *Al-Monitor*, 8 May 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/node/11975>.

²⁵ “Bashir Breaks with Egypt, Hitches Wagon to Gulf States”, in *Africa Intelligence*, 24 February 2017, https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-and-southern-africa_politics/2017/02/24/bashir-breaks-with-egypt-hitches-wagon-to-gulf-states,108213474-eve.

²⁶ “Egypt: Sudan's Bashir Arrives in Cairo amid Easing Tensions”, in *Al Jazeera*, 19 March 2018, <https://aje.io/xqxy2>.

²⁷ Abdi Latif Dahir, “Ethiopia's Prime Minister Has Promised Not to ‘Harm’ Egypt's Share of the Nile”, in *Quartz Africa*, 13 June 2018, <https://qz.com/africa/1301915>.

was then overrun by two powerful and seminal political events for the region, that now forced Khartoum and Addis to focus their attention away from tripartite negotiations in much the same way Egypt's attention had been averted in 2011: the removal of Sudanese President Bashir through mass protests in 2019 and the re-start of a civil and regional war in Ethiopia in 2020 that has seen Abiy and his allied forces take on the Tigray People's Liberation Front in a brutal and violent conflict.

As Egypt has attempted to navigate its national interests throughout the turbulence, its domestic situation has stabilised – albeit under the strict and dangerous veil of authoritarianism – with politics extinguished and President Sisi exercising consolidated control over institutions and the economy, including his own military apparatus. Even so, Egypt has found little fortune throughout the decade of negotiations on the River Nile, and the entrenched nationalism that has seeped out of Addis and Cairo in particular during that time has caused talks to stagnate and halt, leaving a now largely frozen diplomatic channel – this, despite attempts to engage the international community in observation and facilitation of talks, such as the Washington process and the African Union (AU) process (detailed below). For the Egyptians neither process has yielded any result, nor has it even yielded a face-to-face meeting among heads/interim heads of state of the three countries, who have not met in person in over four years.

Egypt has, throughout the dispute and its repeated failure during negotiations, continued to contend that the GERD is a national security risk that threatens the country and with unilateral reduction in access to water, an act of aggression that harms the country's stability and could warrant the harshest of responses. However, a more measured and calculated diplomatic stance adopted since 2018 has enamoured Egypt to its international partners, including appeals to the UN Security Council and to its most fervent international allies in Europe and the US to support Egypt. While this has been utilised to maximum effect of late as Ethiopia has descended into conflict, the rigour with which Addis continues to push the completion and filling of the GERD – with no seeming intention to conclude an agreement with its downstream partners – has left Egypt at somewhat of a loss as to how to respond.

For Egypt the long-term threat of the GERD remains the precedent it sets of further upstream development of the river, without the engagement of downstream partners. The defiance in rejecting the GERD – or rather, the outrage at the lack of agreement over the last decade concerning the dam – stems from the bigger existential threat over how the river may continue to be developed, which would cause undisputed irreparable harm to Egypt and severely limit its water supply. In order to contend with this threat, the Egyptians – publicly and privately – continue to argue the existential question the GERD raises, albeit not necessarily from the structure alone. With Ethiopia's loud commitments to develop the Nile further inland,²⁸ as citizens are caught in a frenzy of nationalist fervour, Egypt's concerns

²⁸ Edward Yeranian, "Ethiopian PM's Claim About Building 100 New Dams Provokes Egyptian Ire",

over future unilateral plans for more dams and long-term reduced water access are both valid and warranted.

As talks continue to stall, Egypt is keeping military action “on the table” as an option to show its resolve against Ethiopia’s continued unilateral development, namely the idea of air strikes on the dam structure that would damage if not destroy the GERD. However, such public outbursts – a now almost annual recurrence when the rainy season nears – are largely empty threats. While President Sisi has worked to successfully consolidate much of the military apparatus around him since he came to power, he still presides over an incredibly conflict-averse military institution that neither seeks conflict nor supports it.²⁹ Furthermore, as the dam structure has been realised, the opportunity to do significant material damage to the GERD itself has become significantly harder with the sole use of targeted air strikes, without any commit to some sort of ground invasion (an option that has never been seriously entertained by the Egyptians).

While the Egyptians will continue to periodically threaten the use of force, in reality any sort of military incursion to impede or stop the construction of the GERD has never had any momentum among regional or international allies,³⁰ meaning Egypt would – if it ever deployed such action – lose significant goodwill with Western allies, and find itself isolated in its own neighbourhood. Thus, it remains an unfavourable option, notably as Egypt has managed to build upon the growing isolation of Abiy Ahmed – at home and abroad – to cement its national security needs.

3. External actors and influence

While the tripartite dispute remains an inherently regional and domestic issue for the three countries involved, the last decade has seen periodic influence over the diplomatic process and its outcome by external actors. This has come about either through direct invitation to engage in the dispute by one or more of the respective tripartite leaders at any given time, as well as uninvited engagement from outside, exerting influence over one or more of the countries that has ultimately negatively influenced the tripartite process.

in *VOA News*, 1 June 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/6206492.html>.

²⁹ Across the region this has been exemplified by the military’s unwillingness to heed calls from Gulf partners to support the war in Yemen, or deploy troops to various conflict zones to prop up allies. The institution is one born out of the Arab-Israeli conflicts, and the disastrous Yemen conflict in the 1960s that has turned the institution into a largely insular and inward-looking apparatus. The marginalisation, including of foreign policy, under the Mubarak regime bred an economic and business-minded military apparatus that has sought to cement its stature through continued economic investment and growth rather than mass security deployment. While President Sisi has recently expanded significant investment in the military apparatus, it remains a more defensive move, as new bases and expanded equipment purchases seek to both secure consolidated support for his rule domestically, and protect the borders from more direct hard security threats emanating from instability in Libya, Sudan and along the Gaza border/Sinai Peninsula.

³⁰ Interview with US diplomat, Cairo, June 2019.

The most notable of these has been the Washington process (2019–20) – instigated by Egypt – and the AU process that followed it (2020–present), initiated by Ethiopia, both of which were endorsed by all three countries' representatives. However, over the last decade, as the diplomacy has fluctuated, each country has concurrently taken it upon itself to attempt to secure support from among a collection of regional actors across the Middle East and East Africa. The effect has been fractures in wider geopolitics in the region, questions over sustainable Red Sea security and even border incursions as tensions increase.

Egypt has played a quiet but arguably effective role, seeking to build regional relationships across the African continent and among East African partners, such as Uganda, Kenya, Djibouti, Eritrea and South Sudan, to measured success. Initially criticised in the early years of the dispute for seeking support in the region based solely on the GERD and with relatively little to offer either economically or militarily, Egypt's position among countries in the Horn of Africa has slowly developed into a prominent one of diplomatic and security power. The first attempt at exercising soft power found little support, with minimal economic benefit beyond support to education and health facilities in Burundi (for example). However, of late Egypt's diplomacy has borne fruit in the form of joint economic, security and defence cooperation agreements with notable countries in the Horn, such as Kenya, Djibouti, Uganda and South Sudan. In particular, a growing friendship with the Ugandan leadership has come to define Egypt's security and diplomacy outreach.

While Egypt has not quite reached the level of challenging Ethiopia's relative hegemony over East Africa, it has acted to counter much of Ethiopia's expansive reach and control – including over regional institutions like the AU (based in Addis); and Egypt's outreach has seen significant success in inserting itself into regional conflict (South Sudan) and stand-offs (Ethiopia-Eritrea prior to the 2018 peace agreement). Furthermore, Ethiopia's own isolation as a result of its civil conflict has acted to reduce the potency of Addis and of Abiy as a prominent regional leader, although Ethiopia's burgeoning economy and population continue to situate it as one of the region's most powerful countries.

President Sisi has used his own personal diplomacy to build relationships with long-term autocrats in the region, seeking to bother the leadership in Addis, as well as build a broader security framework in East Africa that can better serve Egypt's own interests. The African continent broadly speaking was ignored for years by former President Mubarak, and Sisi spoke regularly in the early years of his presidency of an "African revival" in foreign policy. Egypt now boasts several security and trade arrangements with a number of countries (Uganda, Djibouti, Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan), and holds the diplomatic card of hosting the upcoming global climate conference, COP27, for the first time in Africa (Sharm el Sheikh, November 2022).

As the Global South prepares to take its climate appeals to the world stage, President Sisi and his government now hope to centre part of that global debate on water security and Africa's climate challenges, bringing the GERD front and centre on the

global stage. By using the COP27 conference as a form of diplomatic support for its climate role and by promoting itself as the leading advocate of African climate concerns, Egypt aims – in part – to give itself an opportunity to present its own water challenges, as part of the bigger discussion on climate mitigation and adaptation that is set to be the centre focus of Global South demands from the Global North. The recent flurry of action on water issues as they relate to climate and not primarily national security is a stark shift in Egypt's policy approach, and comes as the role of the Gulf countries increases in this region. The alliance with Abiy on the part of the United Arab Emirates and Turkey during the civil conflict has made Egypt nervous, particularly as it has grown to feel Abu Dhabi is undermining its legitimate national interests in the Horn region.³¹ Meanwhile, Egypt is recalibrating its relationship with long-term political adversaries such as Qatar, in part to strengthen its regional alliances and protect its national security interests.

However, the current state of GERD talks and the diplomatic stalemate that has ensued since the collapse of the Washington process is now showing signs of abating. Egypt's insistence at the eleventh hour to make permanent agreed-upon drought measures for the fill schedule, and include an arbitration clause to resolve future disputes, prior to notifying the Ethiopians, led them to walk away from negotiations in anger. Although the AU's facilitation talks have resulted in strong bilateral attempts to bring the parties together by successive AU presidents, this has yet to yield a negotiation at the highest level or engage leaders of the three countries. The process remains unable to engage diplomacy further to bring the countries close to an agreement, even if such agreement were to focus only on the remainder of the GERD fill schedule.

Egypt has regularly looked to its international allies to support its efforts within the tripartite, and has placed significant weight and pressure on a successful outcome in Washington. That neither a supportive compensation framework for the Ethiopians could be agreed, nor a fill agreement cemented in writing, came as a deep shock to the Egyptians who, at times of late, seem dumbfounded by the developments and unable to identify how to engage diplomatic channels further.³²

That the most prominent attempts to bring the parties together have never resulted in full mediation – merely facilitation of talks between the countries – reflects how far apart the countries remain on the issue of the GERD and broader Nile management. As the Horn region has remained largely quiet on the issue involving the three major powers, other countries further afield in the Middle East have had no qualms about inserting themselves into both domestic and tripartite issues. The Horn of Africa region continues to be at risk from the riches envisaged by other actors with their continued engagement. Of the highest concern, China

³¹ Hafsa Halawa, "Burning Ambition: Egypt's Return to Regional Leadership and How Europe Should Respond", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, October 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=78605>.

³² Interviews with Egyptian diplomats and current and former security officials, Cairo, November 2020 to September 2021.

and the UAE – along with other Gulf actors such as Qatar and Mediterranean countries like Turkey – eye up investment and politically strategic interventions in the Horn to support their own food security targets and Suez Corridor/Red Sea security ambitions.

These narrow interests have resulted in nefarious behaviour from external actors in domestic issues of each of the countries. In 2013, Egypt's military relied heavily upon support from the UAE and Saudi Arabia to overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood and bring Sisi to power. Since the overthrow of the Bashir regime in Sudan, all Gulf actors, Turkey, Iran, Russia and Israel have all been involved in attempting to support and secure military rule in the country, despite continued mass mobilisation that rejects all forms of military leadership. And in Ethiopia, the UAE and Turkey have become strong backers of Abiy's assault on Tigray, providing essential drone capacity that has allowed Abiy to emerge victorious as the war enters what many believe is its final phase. Meanwhile, China continues its mass investment schemes across the continent, with a specific focus on the Horn as a strategic element of its global Belt and Road initiatives, while slowly and quietly building a security presence in the region.

For Egypt this has resulted in a sense of abandonment by its regional allies and partners towards what it considers an existential threat. The support to Abiy's regime in Ethiopia and driving investment in Ethiopia, despite the material threats Cairo believes it poses to Egypt's own prosperity, have built a sense of urgency on the part of Egypt's leaders to protect its national interests. Notably, this is seen in a rising transactional nature of relationships, where Egypt has made support for its allies (namely the UAE) on other important regional issues – such as Iran, the war in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq – more conditional on an active engagement to support Egypt's own national security concerns and priorities. It has also caused Egypt to take a more independent turn in its regional alliance. Despite reengagement of Turkey by the UAE and Israel, Egypt has not pursued an active rapprochement agenda, and has turned to Qatar to expand a rapid partnership following the rapprochement that came with the ending of the Gulf Crisis in 2020.³³ Meanwhile, in its dealings with Abu Dhabi and Israel, Egypt leverages economic investment to cement its status as a regional ally, while continuing to pursue its own national objectives in the East Africa region., including its own deviation from allied policy in Sudan and Libya.

Alongside the influence of external actors, each of the tripartite countries has had its own hand at periodic meddling in each other's affairs. Abiy was integral in forging the first declaration that followed the removal of the Bashir regime in Khartoum, although tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia have increased as border incursions along the Al-Fashaga region have brought the two countries close to

³³ Ian Siddell, Mohsin Iqbal and Borys Dackiw, "GCC and Egypt Sign the 'Al-Ula Declaration', Ending the Qatar Boycott", in *Baker McKenzie's Sanctions and Export Controls Update*, 6 January 2021, <https://sanctionsnews.bakermckenzie.com/?p=1809>.

direct confrontation. Sudan is also concurrently forced to withstand the flood of refugees from Tigray into its territory, numbering over 500,000 at conservative estimates. Egypt has been an integral actor in the post-Bashir developments in Sudan, backing the military council and its leadership in Khartoum, including its coup in September 2021 – although it is understood that Cairo does not completely fall in line with other regional actors over the shape of leadership within the military council. All the while, Egypt and Sudan contend with continued (albeit uncorroborated) assertions from Ethiopia's leadership that they have been directly supporting the Tigray People's Liberation Front in the raging civil conflict. Although rumours persist, these remain unsubstantiated, and both countries' militaries strenuously deny the accusations.

Conclusion

Egypt finds itself at a crossroads. It has spent a decade trying to counter the development of the GERD to no avail. Every attempt – regionally or internationally – at solving the dispute through diplomatic means has failed, and as domestic issues dictate the policy interventions of each party, the countries are now arguably further apart than ever before at solving this dispute and reaching a negotiated settlement.

This comes as the GERD begins to produce power and the countries gear up for the year-three fill. With a drought season on the horizon in the coming 18–36 months, Egypt and Sudan are growing increasingly nervous about the continuation of the fill of the reservoir without any protections against drought, or commitments by the Ethiopians to release water.

Egypt continues to rebuff suggested attempts to return to the negotiations, arguing that Ethiopia has not shown any genuine interest in reviving the talks to a fruitful end. The GERD remains at the top of Egypt's foreign policy agenda, and a crucial part of any and all engagement with regional and international allies at all events and all bilateral meetings. However, for the moment it is hard to foresee any positive outcome in the coming months. Heads of state for the three countries have not met since 2018, and a mixture of post-pandemic economic struggles alongside domestic upheaval and a severely weakened AU institution make a solution to the crisis unlikely.

A possible result of Ethiopia respecting the outlined agreement made in Washington for the fill schedule (even though it was never signed) could then result in a moratorium on talks, allowing the countries to reset, stabilise their domestic contexts, and for Ethiopia in particular to realise power from the dam before any further talks are conducted.

Updated 13 October 2022

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