

Water Politics. How Sudan's Turbulent Transition toward Democracy Has Led It to Compromise Its Own Well-Being over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

ABSTRACT

Ever since the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam was conceived in 2011 under Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Sudan has adopted a pragmatic stance vis-à-vis the dam, playing an integral role in a 2015 Declaration of Principles (DoP). Signed in Khartoum, the declaration promised to cooperate in good faith over the dam's construction while also looking to alleviate concerns in Egypt over its water supply. This approach mainly stemmed from a recognition that Sudan stands to benefit from the power generation and economic development through the production of sustainable clean energy supply. However, as the 30-year reign of Omar al-Bashir came to an end in 2019 – and an ensuing civil campaign against the country's powerful military gained momentum – Sudan's clear-headedness toward the GERD dissipated. Instead, the country's military led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan has cozied up to its ally Egypt and used rising tensions over the GERD's construction to deflect from domestic tensions at home.

Water | Security | Sudan | Ethiopia | Egypt | USA | Gulf countries

keywords

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Introduction

Situated at the confluence of the Blue Nile and White Nile, Sudan is acutely aware it has a huge amount to gain and lose by the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the largest hydropower dam in Sub-Saharan Africa and arguably the most politically relevant infrastructure project ever developed by the government of Addis Ababa.

The Blue Nile, which begins near Lake Tana in Ethiopia, serves 70 per cent of irrigated land in Sudan and safeguards twenty million people, or half of the country's population.¹ But while the historic river acts as an existential lifeline for the Sudanese population, the river's fluctuations and tendencies to flood have left Sudan with little logical choice other than to engage in water politics surrounding the GERD due to its ability to regulate downstream water flow.

From the moment of the GERD's conception in 2011 under Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Sudan adopted a pragmatic stance, playing an integral role in a 2015 Declaration of Principles (DoP) guiding the construction and operation of the dam. Signed in Khartoum by Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt, the declaration

¹ Internal government document. Sudan Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources, *Sudan's Position: Safeguarding the Lives of 20 Million People Living below the GERD*, 1 December 2020.

* For security reasons, the author, who has been living in the region for several years, prefers to remain anonymous.

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contained the three countries' pledge to cooperate legally and in good faith over the dam's construction while also looking to alleviate concerns in Egypt that its water supplies were under threat.²

This well-balanced stance was largely taken to heart by Sudan in the years following the breaking of ground for the dam. This mainly stemmed from a profound recognition that the country stands to benefit from the planned power generation and economic development through the production of sustainable and reliable clean energy supply that would come with the GERD's construction.³

However, as the 30-year reign of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir came to an end in 2019 – and an ensuing civil campaign against the country's powerful military gained momentum – Sudan's clear-headedness toward the GERD dissipated.

Instead, the country's military regime led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan has used rising tensions over the GERD's construction to deflect domestic tensions at home and provide a key point of leverage in its border disputes with Ethiopia in the al-Fashaga region.

1. From pragmatism to precariousness

Even before the 2015 Declaration of Principles,⁴ Sudan, under the leadership of Bashir, was publicly in favour of the project. From the early days of construction right up to talks with Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi (until 2012) and his successor (after 2018) Abiy Ahmed, Bashir consistently proved to be convinced the GERD would have limited negative impacts on Sudan's water security and irrigation network.

Indeed, studies Bashir had been presented with by officials in his government, such as the dam's admittedly limited Environmental and Social Impact Assessment, showed the Sudanese leader the great potential of the GERD for generating electricity in Sudan and reducing the risk of flooding due to its capacity to regulate the water flow of the Blue Nile. Bashir – through his generally warm ties with Meles – also recognised the right of Ethiopia to develop its water resources for the benefit and well-being of its citizens.

Unlike Egypt, Bashir continuously failed to address the long-held point of negotiation around a water sharing agreement with Ethiopia – namely that Egypt

² "GERD Will Not Affect Egypt's Nile Water Share: Sudan", in *Egypt Today*, 4 May 2018, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/49300/GERD-will-not-affect-Egypt's-Nile-water-share-Sudan>.

³ Khalid Siddig, Mohammed Basheer and Jonas Luckmann, "Long-term Economy-Wide Impacts of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on Sudan", in *ERF Working Papers*, No. 1427 (November 2020), <https://erf.org.eg/?p=25718>.

⁴ Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan, *Agreement on Declaration of Principles between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan on the GERD*, Khartoum, 23 March 2015, <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/121609>.

retained an annual water allocation of 55.5 billion cubic metres as stipulated in a 1959 agreement for the “full utilisation of the Nile Waters”.⁵ Still, as time progressed and Ethiopia edged towards filling the GERD, water management officials in Sudan began to grow more concerned about the negative impacts of the dam.⁶

Of particular concern, Sudan – coupled with Egypt – began to disagree with Ethiopia over the binding nature of the agreement; rules surrounding future development projects and water sharing in the basin during prolonged drought; and the terms attached to a conflict resolution mechanism.⁷

According to one senior water resources official in Sudan, Khartoum’s attitude toward the GERD began to change in 2020 in the run-up to the first filling of the dam in July that year.⁸ This coincided with heightened tensions between Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Prime Minister Abiy at a time when both leaders used the issue of GERD to appear strong domestically and respond to internal pressures such as elections in Ethiopia and concerns about how to regulate water access and usage in Egypt as its population surpassed 100 million people.

As it became clear that Ethiopia would fill the dam unilaterally – without sharing information downstream or agreeing on how many years Ethiopia would take to fill the dam – Sudan sided more closely with Egypt. In July 2020, Ethiopia unilaterally filled the GERD, without notification, by a volume of five billion cubic metres.

This event caused a sudden drop in water level along the Blue Nile as well as a shortage of drinking water supply in Khartoum city lasting around three days.⁹ The event also raised serious concerns in Sudan should a similar filling continue for a second year in July 2021, with a volume of 13.5 billion cubic metres.

Despite these occurrences, Sudan’s resistance to the GERD was not only based on the hydrological facts on the ground. Its resistance also coincided with huge political upheaval in Sudan. In April 2020, Sudan’s long-time leader Bashir was overthrown by the military following months of pro-democracy protests. By September, a new government took office under Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok as part of a three-year power-sharing agreement between the military, civilian representatives and protest groups.

While Ethiopia’s decision to fill the GERD undoubtedly pushed Sudan to be more hawkish towards the project, the country’s leaders and domestic situation have also impacted its traditionally positive relations with Ethiopia over the dam.

⁵ United Arab Republic and Sudan, *Agreement for the Full Utilization of the Nile Waters*, Cairo, 8 November 1959, <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280132f7f>.

⁶ Interview with a Sudanese water management official, 11 August 2022.

⁷ Sudan Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources, *Sudan’s Position*, cit.

⁸ Interview with a Sudanese water management official, 11 August 2022.

⁹ Ibid.

Hamdok, who came in as Sudan's first civilian prime minister, lived many years in Ethiopia and was naturally inclined to side with Addis Ababa over the GERD. This was in no small part because of Egypt's historically close ties with Sudan's military¹⁰ While Hamdok's civilian government set about forging close relations with Western nations and generally showed a willingness to reach a deal at a technical level, the army under General Burhan was reluctant to engage.

As Hamdok's powers were jeopardised by the military over the months and years after the ouster of Bashir, so were Sudan's positions vis-à-vis the GERD.

In the months leading up to the military coup of October 2021, Sudan's military leaders began using the GERD as political leverage, and appeared to trade their loyalties based on what was expendable at the time.

Despite the obvious benefits of reaching a deal on the GERD for both environmental and economic reasons, the head of Sudan's military, General Burhan, aligned himself closely with Egypt's position on the GERD due to Cairo's undying support for the Sudanese Armed Forces.¹¹

Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who is commonly known as Hemedti and runs the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, has by contrast held a more nuanced position having visited Prime Minister Abiy on several occasions in recent years. Hemedti is also believed to own large property assets and land in Ethiopia, which may have influenced his position on the GERD.¹²

All in all, the political instability that came with Sudan's revolution in 2019 and the military coup in 2021 has led the country's leaders to turn their back on what appears to be in the country's best interests. Instead, they have used the GERD as an expendable tool so that shorter term gains can be pursued.

That has led policymakers and analysts in the region to lose confidence in Sudan as a reliable player, as it situates itself between two heavy-weight regional countries for whom the GERD has become such a nationalist issue that they are in no position to compromise.

Sudan is acutely aware that it is caught in the middle between much bigger powers and is unable to shift the balance of public opinion over the GERD either way. However, even though Sudan is often hit with heavy rains that impact tens of thousands of people along the banks of the Nile, the country's leadership has shown no impetus to resolve the outstanding differences between Ethiopia, Egypt

¹⁰ Interview with a Western diplomat, 12 August 2022.

¹¹ "Gerd: Sudan Talks Tough with Ethiopia over River Nile Dam", in *BBC News*, 22 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56799672>.

¹² Interview with a Western diplomat, 12 August 2022.

and Sudan. Doing so would allow Sudan to more efficiently regulate water levels in times when the banks of the Nile flood.

2. Dam politics: How regional relations forged Sudan's position on the GERD

When Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi announced plans to build Sub-Saharan Africa's largest dam, Sudan's reaction was one of openness to the project. This was largely due to the close ties between Meles and Bashir. Bashir had lent support to Meles as he spearheaded his rebel movement in the Tigray region to topple the communist Derg regime in Addis in 1991.

Bashir had also appreciated Meles' role in facilitating talks between his government and South Sudanese rebels belonging to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. At Meles' funeral parade in Addis Ababa in 2012, Bashir extolled Meles for his ability to resolve problems through their close "personal relationships".¹³

Indeed, the 2011 creation of South Sudan, which denied Khartoum a valuable source of oil and natural resources, also led the Sudanese government to reconsider its policies in terms of energy, natural resources, security and regional alliances.

In particular, it made competition with Egypt over the Halayeb triangle more acute from Khartoum's perspective.¹⁴ The separation from South Sudan also took away nearly 80 per cent of the country's oil revenues and forced the government to draw up a three-year programme aimed at diversifying revenues by increasing gold and agriculture production.¹⁵

All of this meant the potentially cheap electricity from the GERD became ever more appealing.

Meanwhile, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, a long-time foe of Sudan, had been overthrown amid popular uprisings at home in early 2011. He was succeeded by Mohammed Morsi, an Islamist president, who expressed a willingness to renew Egypt's relations with Sudan. While the two leaders reportedly engaged on the issue of the Nile¹⁶ and Ethiopia's plan to develop the river, Bashir never went so far as to take up Cairo's stern resistance to the GERD.

¹³ "Sudan's Bashir Pays Tribute to Ethiopia's Zenawi", in *Sudan Tribune*, 1 September 2012, <https://sudantribune.com/article43083>.

¹⁴ Sherif Mohyeldeen, "The Egypt-Sudan Border: A Story of Unfulfilled Promise", in *Carnegie Papers*, June 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/81995>.

¹⁵ William Wallis, "Sudan's Economy Reels from Loss of South", in *Financial Times*, 17 October 2011, <https://www.ft.com/content/ce7f675a-f8c9-11e0-ad8f-00144feab49a>.

¹⁶ "Sudan's Bashir Visits Egypt, Confirms 'Identical Position' on Nile Water Dispute", in *Sudan Tribune*, 16 September 2012, <https://sudantribune.com/article43219>.

While upper riparian countries of the Nile, such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania used the years following 2011 to call for a new regional water regime allowing for a fair and equitable sharing of the waters of the Nile, the downstream riparian countries such as Sudan and Egypt sought to maintain the status quo, which privileges them at the expense of the upstream countries.

However, Bashir always paid attention to expert studies on the GERD,¹⁷ which showed the construction project would come with several positive impacts for Sudan. These included enhanced water management for irrigation in Egypt and Sudan; improved sediment management reducing the cost of dredging irrigation canals; increased energy production at existing power stations; and an improved buffer against climate change-induced extremes such as flooding and drought.

Bashir also went along, in 2012, with the establishment of the International Panel of Experts (IPoE) on the GERD – a panel of ten experts aiming to provide an analysis of the GERD's benefit and negative impacts – which in its final report concluded that the design and construction of the GERD is up to international standards. Unlike Egypt, Sudan announced its acceptance of the IPoE report and did not stand in the way of subsequent reports assessing the impact of the GERD on downstream countries, despite the document stressing the need for further studies.

Standing in stark contrast to Sudan, after IPoE experts adopted the report in 2013, senior Egyptian officials began issuing bellicose statements against the dam, even threatening to forcefully oppose its construction.¹⁸

Morsi's reign lasted little over a year. In 2013, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi seized on widespread public dissatisfaction and support from the army to remove him from office. Sisi then orchestrated his election as Egypt's president and immediately set about trying to convince Sudan to adopt a more critical stance vis-à-vis the GERD. In December of that year, after water resource ministers from Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan concluded a meeting on the GERD, Cairo openly accused Khartoum of being a "biased intermediary" favouring Ethiopia.¹⁹

Sisi's relationship with Bashir and Sudan over the GERD can, therefore, be seen as initially more blunt and less tolerant of Khartoum's position than that of Morsi, who used his entrance into power as an opportunity to reset relations.

¹⁷ Interview with a Sudanese water management official, 12 September 2022.

¹⁸ Ethiopia, *Letter dated 14 May 2020 from the Permanent Representative of Ethiopia to the United Nations Addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2020/409)*, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3862715>.

¹⁹ Khaled Mahmoud, "What Sisi Wants from Sudan", in *Sada*, 14 February 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78367>.

Then in April 2017 Bashir said during a press conference with Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn of Ethiopia that there was “no limit to the relationship between the two countries, politically, economically, commercially, culturally, socially, and in security”.²⁰ Right up until Bashir lost power in 2019, his stance on the GERD remained more or less consistent: Sudan would not actively work against Ethiopia’s plans to develop the Nile as long as the terms of the Declarations of Principles were respected.

3. After Bashir, off come the gloves

After Bashir was toppled, Sudan’s stance on the GERD and its relations with Ethiopia began to change, oftentimes in a very turbulent manner. This is in large part because Sudan has been willing to trade loyalties on the GERD in order to advance a broader political agenda at home.

In November 2019, the United States and the World Bank (WB) joined the negotiation process as observers to support the three riparian countries reaching a final comprehensive agreement on the filling and operation of the GERD. Despite the fact that major progress had been achieved through these negotiations, such as the speed at which the dam’s reservoir should be filled, no deal was signed. Then in February 2020 negotiations stalled, and there was an escalation in statements from both Egypt and Ethiopia.

While this was going on, Sudan – in part due to Ethiopia’s threat to unilaterally fill the GERD – was shifting its support away from Ethiopia and toward Egypt. Regional analysts and diplomats in the region say this can be seen as a direct consequence of Burhan’s need for a strong ally in Cairo as he attempts to quell deadly anti-government protests back home.

In April and May 2020 Prime Minister Hamdok led an initiative to resume negotiations to reach a fair deal before the filling of the dam in July. Hamdok invited three observers to join the negotiations, namely South Africa in its capacity as chair of the African Union (AU), the US and the European Union.

Even though Abiy initially endorsed bringing the likes of the US and the World Bank to the negotiating table, he received huge criticism at home for having done so, especially from more hard-line nationalistic elements of his government who did not want any outside interference. In Sudan, where the democratic transition was under threat but still moving forward, the civilian-military government saw lending its support to the initiative as part of its overall reintegration into the global financial system after spending years under US sanctions as a pariah state.

²⁰ Ibid.

The trilateral negotiations were able to make significant progress, reaching consensus in most of the issues, except a few but important legal and technical points. Areas where all sides agreed included a broad understanding on information sharing, sequencing for filling the dam and what to do in the eventuality of a prolonged drought. By mid-June, it was clear that the negotiations needed political commitment to resolve the key outstanding issues.

After the closed session of the United Nations Security Council in late June 2020 where the GERD was discussed, the African Union requested to host the negotiations on the GERD. The first meeting of the Extraordinary Bureau of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government was held on 26 June 2020. The meeting was chaired by President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa. The Bureau urged the three parties to reach an acceptable and amicable solution to the outstanding technical issues surrounding how the dam should be filled and what exactly the procedures are in the case of a prolonged drought.

Although the negotiations under the AU-led process resulted in a better understanding of these issues, no significant progress was achieved as the political rhetoric around the dam grew in tension.

The AU experts then presented their report about the outstanding issues on the GERD in July 2020. But the report was ignored by Egypt and Ethiopia. Only Sudan accepted it,²¹ arguing that it would form a good basis for further negotiation. Meanwhile, Burhan continued to lean more heavily on Egypt.²²

In July 2020, Ethiopia unilaterally and without notification filled the GERD for the first year by a volume of five billion cubic metres. A monitoring station located at the border between Ethiopia and Sudan showed the Nile's water level plummeted 100 million cubic metres between 12 July and 13, as recorded in Sudanese government logs. The last time levels had dropped that low was in 1984, the driest year on record.

This event altered the position of the Hamdok government and created a deep schism between Ethiopia and Sudan as even Khartoum's civilian representatives of the government began to lose confidence in Ethiopia's commitment to the Declaration of Principles.²³

The AU-led negotiations resumed in August 2020, but Ethiopia now requested that a more beneficial water-sharing deal be a condition before reaching an agreement on the filling and operation of the GERD. Both Sudan and Egypt rejected this as a distinct deviation from the agreed terms of reference stated in the 2015 Declaration of Principles. Soon after, the countries agreed to resume negotiations only on the

²¹ Sudan Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources, *Sudan's Position*, cit.

²² Interview with a Western diplomat, 10 August 2022.

²³ Interview with a senior official at Sudan's Water Ministry, 16 August 2022.

filling and operation of the GERD, and to discuss the right of Ethiopia for future development projects.

4. War in Ethiopia further complicates GERD talks

As 2020 drew to a close, Ethiopia ordered a military incursion into the northern Tigray region after accusing forces loyal to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) of attacking a military base to steal weapons.

Tensions with the TPLF, which had dominated the country's ruling coalition between 1991 and 2018, had steadily risen since Prime Minister Abiy set about consolidating power under his newly formed Prosperity Party after taking office in 2018. This event had a seismic impact on the state of the GERD talks.

Sudan's close military ties with the TPLF and Egypt's animosity towards Abiy meant that Cairo and Khartoum were now loath to give Ethiopia a free pass on the GERD. From the moment the war in Tigray began, Sudan stopped playing ball with Ethiopia. The obvious advantages of achieving a balanced deal on filling the GERD, sharing information about the GERD's operations and how to act in the case of an extended drought, were forgotten. Though quietly, both Sudan and Egypt have played a covert role in the Ethiopian government's war with the TPLF, either by allowing Tigray fighters to have a presence in the country or by allegedly facilitating the transportation of weapons.²⁴

"Although the majority of African countries, and especially our neighbours, saw the issue as an internal matter and left it to us to solve it with our own capabilities... Sudan, on the contrary, took advantage of the situation, breached our country's border and carried out an invasion," the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in January 2022.²⁵

In November 2021, Burhan made a highly publicised visit to the al-Fashaga region – a patch of fertile borderland that both Khartoum and Addis Ababa consider part of their territories – following violent clashes between Sudanese and Ethiopian troops. After years of intermittent clashes, the dispute escalated in late 2020 after the Ethiopian troops that controlled much of al-Fashaga suddenly left to fight in Tigray.²⁶

²⁴ Fasika Tadesse and Simon Marks, "Ethiopia Says It Downed Arms-Laden Plane Crossing from Sudan", in *Bloomberg*, 24 August 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-24/ethiopia-says-arms-laden-plane-from-sudan-shot-down-ebc-reports>.

²⁵ Internal document, Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 2022.

²⁶ "Al-Burhan Vows to Protect Fashaga Area from Ethiopian Attacks", in *Sudan Tribune*, 29 November 2021, <https://sudantribune.com/article226467>.

Weeks later, Sudanese troops went on the offensive and captured a large swath of the disputed territory. Reporters visiting the area in 2021 spoke to military officers, community leaders and local farmers, who told how a long-standing territorial dispute had erupted into a serious cross-border confrontation. Hundreds of Sudanese soldiers were seen stationed in Barakat Nurein, a village that was occupied by Ethiopian farmers until Sudanese forces snatched it in January 2021.

The dispute over al-Fashaga, which is low-lying but ongoing, has been instrumental in Burhan flexing his muscles and riding a nationalist cause at a time when civilian protests against his regime are again isolating (as debt relief talks are frozen and budgetary support too) the country and preventing the flow of foreign aid.

With respect to al-Fashaga, the internal politics of Sudan suggests that any government in Khartoum would be willing to trade almost any issue in order to gain domestically. Burhan seems to be ready to scale up the border dispute with Ethiopia into open war if that distracts Sudanese population from domestic problems and consequently helps him consolidate his power.

Western diplomats and analysts also see an interest on the part of Egypt in enflaming tensions surrounding al-Fashaga and anti-Ethiopian government militias in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, where the GERD is located. Abiy has already accused Sudan and Egypt of providing such support.²⁷

This has increasingly meant Sudan has sacrificed its credibility on the issue of the GERD as it has shifted its position in the last decade. Moreover, even though the devastating flooding going on in the country points to the benefits that Sudan would get from a deal on the GERD, Burhan is not making that argument at all.

The Sudanese leadership is approaching anything GERD-related in an entirely opportunistic way – not to harness the cause of development or environmentalism for its people, but to support the personal political fortunes of whoever is running the country at the time.

5. Trump and the Gulf states

Resolution of the GERD dispute has attracted interest from a wide array of international players. What started off as a mostly regional affair began to generate huge levels of global attention at the end of 2020 as Ethiopia began unilaterally filling the dam's reservoir. The end result of this has been large international heavyweights using the GERD to their own diplomatic ends.

²⁷ "Ethiopia Violence Fuelled by Fighters Trained in Sudan: PM Abiy", in *AFP News*, 19 October 2020, <https://news.yahoo.com/ethiopia-violence-fuelled-fighters-trained-135645958.html>.

For instance, Egypt's Sisi used his close ties with former US President Donald Trump to put massive pressure on Ethiopia to step back from filling the dam and agree to a water-sharing deal on the GERD. This resulted in Trump claiming in October 2020 that Egypt could "blow up" the dam if pushed too far.²⁸ His comments came during a telephone call with Sudan's Prime Minister Hamdok and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Israel itself has taken a keen interest in building relations with Sudan's military leaders²⁹ since the two sides normalised relations in the context of the Abraham Accords in August 2020. On several occasions in recent years members of Israel's intelligence/security services have both visited and received members of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces, including their leader Hemedti.³⁰ Amid popular demonstrations against the military by Sudanese people, Israel has made stability in Sudan a top regional priority as it continues trying to forge closer trade ties with Arab states across the Gulf and North Africa.

For the US, the outspoken remarks by Trump – which were markedly in contrast with the expert technical advice offered by Treasury officials in closed door meetings – was the culmination of the president's steady alienation of the Ethiopian state.

By the last session of the US/WB-led process on 13 February 2020, a draft agreement was in a very advanced stage with 90 per cent of the issues agreed upon by the three countries, and only few differences remaining to be resolved. But Ethiopia in the end distanced itself from the talks, feeling that the odds were stacked against it with the US so openly taking Egypt's side at a political level. A few months later in September, Washington made good on a threat to cut 100 million US dollars in aid due to its filling of the GERD.³¹

Later, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) entered the fray as a mediator between all parties, reportedly having hired its own technical experts. Stability in the Horn of Africa and regional cooperation between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt is paramount for the UAE as it seeks to gain influence both politically and economically.

In Sudan, the UAE has seemingly taken advantage of the weak state of the government to put its hands on strategic assets such as a new Red Sea port. In one deal the UAE has pledged to invest 6 billion US dollars in a new port, a free trade zone and a large agricultural project, a long-standing aim of Abu Dhabi as it seeks to increase agricultural exports from Sudan to the Gulf.³²

²⁸ "Trump Comment on 'Blowing Up' Nile Dam Angers Ethiopia", in *BBC News*, 24 October 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54674313>.

²⁹ "Israeli Security Delegation Visits Khartoum at Invitation of Rapid Support Forces", in *Mada Masr*, 23 January 2022, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/?p=334263>.

³⁰ Interviews with two regional Western diplomats, 10 August 2022.

³¹ Robbie Gramer, "U.S. Halts Some Foreign Assistance Funding to Ethiopia over Dam Dispute with Egypt, Sudan", in *Foreign Policy*, 27 August 2020, <https://bit.ly/2YILz8S>.

³² Nafisa Eltahir, "UAE to Build Red Sea Port in Sudan in \$6 Billion Investment Package", in *Reuters*,

The UAE talks are, however, totally opaque. While Abu Dhabi says they have made progress, there is little publicly available information about what that exactly means. Still, analysts and regional diplomats say that the UAE – unlike the US – has a focused strategy for the Horn that is much more politically and economically targeted than only security focused.³³

“When there’s blood in the streets, buy real estate,” said one regional analyst speaking about the Emirates’ philosophy vis-à-vis Sudan and how it can gain influence in the country.³⁴

Gaining trust through mediation efforts linked to the GERD is an efficient way for the UAE to achieve its goal of gaining a foothold on the Red Sea and cultivating rich agricultural land in the al-Fashaga region. In 2021, the UAE offered to settle the border dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan in a deal that would split land ownership between both countries and the UAE. But regional opposition to outside influence as well as ongoing violence in the area eventually stymied the Emirati plan, which sought to transform Sudan into a regional bread basket with trade routes operating through the Red Sea and beyond.³⁵

Here it must be noted that the UAE has also in recent years cultivated increasingly close relations with Ethiopia as it has provided Ethiopia with military assistance in its fight against the TPLF.³⁶ But that has not resulted in the UAE acting as a one-sided proxy in Ethiopia’s civil war and jeopardising its relations with other countries in the region such as Sudan.

What all of this shows is just how much influence Sudan – through its strategic location and trade potential – can have in resolving the GERD dispute. Despite being the smaller party to the GERD talks, Sudan has quite a few carrots it can use to encourage all parties to come on board with a deal. On the other hand, Khartoum’s close ties with Egypt – and Egypt’s covert support for the TPLF – has equally reduced trust between the three riparian nations and thwarted chances for a deal.

²¹ June 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/exclusive-uae-build-red-sea-port-sudan-6-billion-investment-package-2022-06-20>.

³³ Interview with a Western diplomat, 12 August 2022.

³⁴ Interview with a regional analyst, 12 August 2022.

³⁵ Simon Marks and Mohammed Alamin, “Funding Pours in at Flashpoint that Could See Africa’s Next War”, in *Bloomberg*, 6 July 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-07-06/at-flashpoint-that-could-see-africa-s-next-war-funding-pours-in>.

³⁶ “UAE Air Bridge Provides Military Support to Ethiopia Gov’t”, in *Al Jazeera*, 25 November 2021, <https://aje.io/5nf28m>.

Conclusion – Recommendations and solutions

Although sandwiched between two far greater regional powers, Sudan has the capacity to play clean and pragmatic where negotiations over the GERD are concerned. This is because Khartoum has much more to gain from a sensible deal on the dam than it has to lose.

Not only does the nation of 40 million stand to gain in terms of reputation, it can also alleviate pressures around drought, flooding and irrigation for its own population. It is, therefore, essential that Sudan's leadership avoids using the GERD as leverage for its own short-term political goals.

Regrettably, Sudan has tossed and turned over its position on the GERD depending on opportunistic needs at home. In particular, Sudan's military turned its back on consistent, tacit support for the dam as soon as public resistance to its hold on power mounted and it became more dependent on Egyptian support.

Sudan would be better served in taking up a more neutral position based on the needs of its own people. Khartoum could use the current devastation caused by flooding in the country to put pressure on both Ethiopia and Egypt to reach a deal on the GERD. It could also seek to de-escalate tensions surrounding the GERD by refraining from reinforcing proxies in Ethiopia's civil war with the TPLF as well as aggravating territorial disputes over the al-Fashaga triangle with Ethiopia.

Such tensions were most recently seen in August 2022 when Ethiopia claimed to have shot down a cargo plane laden with weapons for the TPLF, which had entered its territory via Sudan. Ethiopia insinuated that the plane had come from Egypt.³⁷

Sudan would be better served to remove itself from the tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia over the dam and use important international mediators – be it the WB, US or UAE – to weigh on its neighbours to come to a deal.

Khartoum has an opportunity to come across as a mature peacemaker in the region that takes the moral high ground whereby its own people become the country's major consideration.

Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan are all well-versed in the technicalities that could lead to a win-win deal on the GERD. The problem left hanging over everyone's head is trust: Ethiopia holds a powerful weapon in its hands as it can turn off the water supply to Egypt at any given moment.

³⁷ See a tweet by Redwan Hussein, National Security Advisor to Ethiopian Prime Minister, 24 August 2022, <https://twitter.com/RedwanHussien/status/1562416839216578560>.

Despite signed agreements, no treaty or signature on a piece of paper will be sufficient in persuading the Egyptians that there are no circumstances under which Ethiopia will use that weapon. Sudan, therefore, can help build that trust by encouraging both sides to come back to talks and build ties based on economic development, flood mitigation and energy production.

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