

THE NILE RIVER DISPUTE: ASSUAGING EGYPT'S FEAR OVER THE  
GRAND ETHIOPIAN RENAISSANCE DAM (GERD)

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**Abstract**

*The Nile River is indubitably the longest river in the world. Located in Northeastern Africa, the river which comprises the tributaries - Blue and White Nile has for centuries been the main source of Egypt's fresh water resource. In 2011, Ethiopia commenced the construction of the multibillion-dollar Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile which when completed, will generate the much-needed electricity for its economic development. Currently experiencing a fresh water deficit, Egypt sees the GERD project as an 'existential threat' to its people who are heavily dependent on the Nile waters for their survival. Thus, a 'Water War' between Egypt and Ethiopia is brewing over the GERD. This paper examines the Nile River dispute with a focus on the ongoing water diplomacy to assuage Egypt's fear over the monumental Nile dam project. For the study, the historical approach was adopted, and data were garnered from secondary sources. It was discovered that for long, Egypt has enjoyed the lion's share of the Nile waters. The paper concludes that Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan need to address amicably, with the help of an honest broker, the sticking point in the negotiations on the operation and filling of the GERD's reservoir. This will not only pave the way for a legally binding pact, but will avert further escalation of tensions between the three riparian states, and the outbreak of a destabilizing Water War in Northeastern Africa.*

**Keywords:** Nile River, GERD, treaty, water war, Northeastern Africa

**Introduction**

Water is an essential natural resource that humanity cannot do without. It is needed for the sustenance of mankind, agriculture, the manufacturing of goods, power generation among other things. Some sovereign states, in their national interests, have taken steps to control the flow and use of fresh water resource which have had or may have in the nearest future, a negative impact on neighboring states that rely on it. For example, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has built dams that have affected the flow of the Mekong River which snakes through Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Pilling, 2020). More often than not, such actions have given rise to a water dispute between the states with competing interests. Presently, the water feud that has caught the attention of several international organizations, foreign governments, think-tanks and international relations pundits, is the Nile River dispute mainly between Africa's sub-regional powers - Egypt and Ethiopia, which in recent years have threatened to take military action, when necessary, to safeguard their rights and share of the Nile waters.

The Nile River is the longest river in Africa and indeed, in the world, passing through 11 African countries (Egypt, Ethiopia, [Sudan](#), South Sudan, and Uganda to mention a few) and stretching an incredible 4,130 miles (6,650 km) (Pearce, 2015; BBC News, 2019). The river, located in Northeastern Africa, is made up of two tributaries - the Blue and White Nile. Originating from Lake Tana in the Ethiopian highlands, the Blue Nile flows northward into Sudan where it joins the White Nile (draining from Lake Victoria) in the capital of Sudan, Khartoum, to form the Nile River, before heading to the downstream country, Egypt, and emptying itself in the Mediterranean Sea. At this juncture, it is imperative to know that 85% of the Nile waters stem from the Blue Nile and the remaining 15% from the White Nile (Pearce, 2015; Islam, 2019; Elhennawy, 2020; Pilling, 2020).

Few months after the authoritarian, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt stepped down as demanded by disgruntled Egyptian protesters in 2011 Arab Spring (see Adeola, and Ogunnoiki, 2018), Ethiopia started building the Millennium Dam (now the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (hereafter GERD)), which soonest will be Africa's biggest dam and the seventh-largest in the world, on the Blue Nile, just 15 kilometres from its border with Sudan. At a cost of \$4.6 billion, the 155 metres high and 1,780 metres long mega hydroelectric dam which presently is more than 70% complete, promises to generate 6,450 megawatts of electricity (over three times the capacity of the second biggest dam in Africa - Egypt's Aswan High Dam (AHD) which generates 2,100 MW (see Kerrigan, 2020)), which will more than double Ethiopia's power output, leaving surplus electricity that can be exported at a cheap price to neighbouring states - Sudan, Kenya, Somalia etc. when completed, hopefully in 2022 (Pearce, 2015; Przyborowski, 2019; Aljazeera, 2020a; Elhennawy, 2020; Pilling, 2020). This multibillion-dollar dam, a national pride and

soon-to-be a source of revenue, will make Ethiopia the electricity hub of Africa. However, the dam project in the last 9 years, has made Egypt perturbed.

#### **Problem Statement and Methodology**

Egypt fears that the GERD in coming years will reduce the flow of Nile waters to downstream countries. As a guarantee that this will not happen in the future, Cairo is demanding a legally binding agreement with Ethiopia and Sudan. Concluding a pact in this regard has been problematic in recent years.

The research method adopted for this study is the qualitative method i.e. the collection of data from secondary sources. The information gathered and analysed in this paper were largely from online news sites.

#### **Historical Background: Egypt-Ethiopia Nile River Dispute**

During the colonial period, treaties were signed *vis-à-vis* the Nile River, which based on international law, Egypt has the upper hand in the Nile River dispute (United World, 2020). In the 1902 agreement between Great Britain and independent Ethiopia under Emperor Menilik II, Ethiopia was “not to construct, or allow to be constructed, any work across the Blue Nile, Lake Tana, or the Sobat, which would arrest the flow of their waters into the Nile...” (El-Said, 2020; Tekuya, 2020; United World, 2020).

Secondly is the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty which recognized Egypt's historical rights, and gave it the veto power regarding the construction of anything on the river Nile or its tributaries. Ethiopia in every way possible has negated and belittled this treaty, given that it is a relic of colonialism, and Ethiopia was not a party to the agreement (Brenner, 2020; Tekuya, 2020; United World, 2020).

In the post-colonial 1959 Nile Waters Agreement between Egypt and Sudan, Egypt was allocated 55.5 billion cubic metres (hereafter BCM) of the Nile waters, Sudan got 18.5 BCM, and 10 BCM was for evaporation out of the Nile River average water flow of 84 BC Manually. The said treaty did not allot any amount of Nile waters to upstream countries such as Ethiopia. Hence, Ethiopia sees the pact as an unjust agreement. Also Addis Ababa, certain of the fact that Ethiopia is not a party to the agreement, does not perceive the treaty as legally binding on the country (Pearce, 2015; Islam, 2019; Tekuya, 2020; United World, 2020).

Again, Article 5 of the 1993 Framework for General Co-operation between the Arab Republic of Egypt and Ethiopia, states that: “Each party shall refrain from engaging in any activity related to the Nile waters that may cause appreciable harm to the interests of the other side” (El-Said, 2020; International Water Law Project, n.d.). All this, especially Egypt's ‘hydro-hegemony’ and ‘historical rights’ to the Nile waters, is about to change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **Egypt's Concerns over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)**

Landlocked Ethiopia, the second most populous country in Africa with a population of about 115 million people (World Population Review, 2020), has consistently said that the enormous GERD project it began constructing in the April of 2011, is crucial for its economic development (Pearce, 2015; Przyborowski, 2019; Reuters, 2019a; Meseret, 2020). Once completed, it will generate electricity for “more than 65 million people who currently live in complete darkness” according to Ethiopia's UN ambassador, Mr Taye Atskeselassie Amde (Al Jazeera, 2020b). But Egypt, the most populous country in the Arab world and the third in Africa with a growing population of 100 million people (Al Jazeera, 2020c), sees the GERD as an existential threat. It fears the mammoth dam would severely reduce its water supply from the Nile, which provides more than 90% of the country's fresh water. Egypt presently is confronted with a massive water shortage, and if a dry season occurs, the GERD would leave Egypt, which is almost entirely dependent on the Nile, in a terrible situation (Przyborowski, 2019; Reuters, 2019a; Reuters, 2019b; Brenner, 2020; Pilling, 2020).

Succinctly, Egypt's primary concern is that, no tripartite agreement has been reached on the GERD reservoir's ‘fill time’ i.e. the schedule for filling the reservoir behind the dam (Halawa, 2018). Egypt does not want the filling of the reservoir (which is bigger than the size of Greater London) to be done swiftly but phased over a 15-year period. Ethiopia, which can fill the dam in 2-3 years, plans to do so in 4 to 7 years (MEO, 2020; Pilling, 2020). Closely linked to the aforementioned primary concern of Egypt is the issue of how much water will Ethiopia release downstream during multiyear drought, and lastly the issue of dispute settlement mechanisms. On the latter, Egypt favors international arbitration while Ethiopia insists on negotiations as stated in Article 10 of the 2015 Declaration of Principles (hereafter DoP) (Fabricius, 2020). Sudan meanwhile stands to benefit from Ethiopia's dam in terms of access to cheap electricity and reduced flooding. However, it has raised fears over the operation and safety of the GERD, as the project could endanger its own dams (Magdy, 2020a).

In the June of 2020, Ethiopia reiterated its plan to start filling the reservoir of the colossal dam, with or without an agreement, in July 2020 when the rainy season begins (Al Jazeera, 2020a).

*The Confluence of the White and Blue Nile*



Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/426012445977197744/>

The above map shows the origin and confluence of the Blue and White Nile in Northeastern Africa. The map is significant in this paper for a proper understanding of the Nile River dispute.

If Addis Ababa unilaterally starts filling the controversial dam's reservoir(that can store 74 BCM of water) without ensuring that it will not cause "significant harm" to downstream countries, it will not only be contravening Article 7 paragraph 1 of the United Nations 1997 Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, but will escalate the tensions in Northeastern Africa that may precipitate a bloody and destructive 'Water War' in the region.

**Egypt-Ethiopia Water War Scenario: A Win-Lose Outcome**

The former Vice President of the World Bank, Mr Ismail Serageldin, is widely quoted to have said in the year 1995, that "if the wars of this century were fought over oil, the wars of the next century will be fought over water" (Chatterjee, 2008:1). In the light of the above prediction he made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this might come true in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as war looms in Northeastern Africa following Egypt and Ethiopia's provocative war rhetoric.

In the previous years, Cairo threatened to bring to a halt the construction of the GERD through military action, if the dam reduces the supply of water from the Nile River to Egypt (Brenner, 2020; Pilling, 2020). This threat does not come as a surprise to international relations analysts because, Egypt's share of the Nile waters as Egyptian president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi said on November 18, 2017, is "a matter of life or death" (Helmi, 2017). Responding to Cairo's sabre-rattling, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali of Ethiopia said in October 2019 (few days after he was awarded the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize) that "No force could stop Ethiopia from building a dam. If there is a need to go to war, we could get millions readied" (Brenner, 2020; Pilling, 2020). Recently, Egypt vowed to use "all available means" to protect its "water interests" while Ethiopia's top military officers who visited the site of the contentious GERD in March 2020, issued a statement, vowing to "retaliate if there are any attacks on the dam," (International Crisis Group, 2020; Magdy, 2020b).

Comparing Egypt and Ethiopia's military power, things do not look good for the Ethiopian side. In the 2020 Index of Military Strength by Global Firepower, Egypt was ranked 9<sup>th</sup> in the world, just after the United Kingdom (UK), while Ethiopia was ranked 60<sup>th</sup>. Needless to say here is the fact that Egypt has the most powerful military in Africa (Global Firepower, 2020; United World, 2020).

In an unnecessary Egypt-Ethiopia Water War, the Gulf States that are friendly with and have invested millions, if not billions of dollars in Ethiopia - Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (hereafter the UAE), are likely to support their fellow Arab country, Egypt, which got the backing of Arab League member states (excluding Sudan) for its historical rights to Nile waters in the first quarter of 2020. Definitely, the United States (hereafter U.S.) and some European powers will rally round Egypt being a strategic country *vis-à-vis* their maritime interests. Possibly, Russia (the successor state of the defunct Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (hereafter USSR)) will stand with Ethiopia. Though Russia is one of the major arms suppliers to Egypt (in September 2014 for example, both countries reached a preliminary arms deal worth \$3.5 billion (see Reuters Staff, 2014)) and Egypt, Russia's biggest trading partner on the African continent chances are that it will answer the call of Addis Ababa for military assistance. We would recall here that Ethiopia was a client state of the USSR during the Cold War. This fact might just inform Moscow's decision to support Ethiopia in the war.

Going by the scenario painted above, the obvious winner of the war, having weighed both countries military strength and allies, will be Egypt. Ethiopia should therefore not consider the battle field as where it can resolve the Nile River dispute because it does not stand a chance against Egypt and its Arab and Western allies, militarily. To avoid the victor-vanquish outcome of a zero-sum Water War game, Addis Ababa needs to seize the opportunity now of allaying the fear of Cairo diplomatically, if not for anything, for the sake of its people and the huge capital (partly from patriotic bonds (Pilling, 2020)) that has been spent in building the GERD which will suffer extensive damage from aerial bombardments if a Water War eventually breaks out.

#### **Water Diplomacy: Assuaging Egypt's Fear over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)**

Over the years, Ethiopia has diplomatically made efforts to assuage the fear of Egypt and Sudan over the nearly completed GERD. Following the DoP agreement on the GERD, which was signed in Khartoum by the three riparian countries - Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan on March 23, 2015, trilateral negotiations continued, albeit with little progress made.

In October 2019, Egypt said its years of negotiations with Ethiopia and Sudan on the conditions for operating the dam and filling the reservoir behind it, has reached a *cul-de-sac* (dead end). Hence, it called for an international mediator, possibly the U.S. or World Bank, to play the role of an interlocutor in future talks (Reuters, 2019a; Al Sherbini, 2019). In the maiden Russia-Africa Summit that took place in Sochi, Russia from October 23-24, 2019, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Ethiopian prime minister, Abiy Ahmed Ali, met on the sidelines and agreed to resume negotiations (Al Sherbini, 2019).

On October 29, 2019, the Egyptian government requested that Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari, acts as a mediator over the Nile dam dispute, but Washington stepped in as the third-party negotiator (Przyborowski, 2019; Soto, 2019). On invitation by the Trump administration, the Foreign Ministers of the three Nile Basin countries - Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan, met with the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, Mr Steven Mnuchin and the president of the World Bank, Mr David Malpass in Washington D.C. on November 06, 2019. They agreed to work towards finalising an agreement on the GERD by January 15, 2020 (Egyptian Streets, 2019).

Unfortunately, the U.S.-mediated negotiations broke down after Ethiopia skipped the round of talks on February 26, 2020. Ethiopia stated that it needed to make further domestic consultations with relevant stakeholders before signing the U.S.-drafted deal which it did not ink despite Egypt appending its signature on the document (Magdy, 2020b; Meseret, 2020). On the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020, the League of Arab States (LAS) or Arab League for short, adopted at the ministerial level, a resolution drafted by Egypt on the GERD. The resolution underscored Arab support for Egypt and Sudan's "water rights" to the Nile River. However, Sudan expressed 'reservations' over the resolution while Ethiopia rejected the "blind" support given to Egypt by the League member states (El-Sheikh, 2020). Four days after Egypt's Foreign Minister, Mr Sameh Shoukry toured seven Arab countries - Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, and the UAE to further garner support for his country on the Nile River dispute (Al-Monitor Staff, 2020).

Though Ethiopia was initially opposed to international mediation, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali in January 2020, called on South African president and incoming chairperson of the African Union (hereafter AU), Cyril Ramaphosa, to mediate the dispute (MEO, 2020; Pilling, 2020). On the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, 2020, Egypt sent a letter to the president of United Nations Security Council (hereafter UNSC) on the GERD crisis (Khashab, 2020). On June 26, 2020, the leaders of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan agreed in a virtual AU Summit, to return to talks aimed at reaching an accord on the operation and filling of the GERD's reservoir, in particular, during consecutive dry years. Three days later, Egypt's Foreign Minister, Mr Sameh Shoukry, urged the UNSC to adopt a draft resolution as an expression, at the highest levels of the deep interest of the international community in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan reaching an agreement on the GERD. On the part of Sudan, it made an appeal, like Egypt, to the UNSC to intervene in the years-long dispute (Magdy, 2020a; Press Association, 2020). This was done in line with Article 35 paragraph 1 of the UN Charter (1945) which states that "Any Member of the United Nations may bring any dispute, or any situation of the nature referred to in Article 34, to the attention of the Security Council or of the General Assembly" (United Nations, n.d.).

The latest news *vis-à-vis* the water diplomacy is the announcement made by the State Department of the U.S. Having been guided by President Trump, the State Department said on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, 2020, that America will be suspending some aid, reportedly \$130 million in aid, to Ethiopia over the "lack of progress" in the country's talks with Egypt and Sudan on the disputed dam project (Anna, 2020). No doubt this move by America is to pressurize Ethiopia into concluding an agreement with Sudan and the U.S. favorite, Egypt. In late October 2020, President Trump made a remark that Egypt will eventually "blow up" the dam if the dispute is not resolved soonest. But Ethiopia refuses to be coerced into finalizing a pact with Egypt and Sudan.

#### **Conclusion**

The Nile River, serving the mainstay of the Egyptian economy - agriculture, and to an extent its lucrative tourism sector, is no doubt a lifeline of the largely arid country. For decades, Egypt has enjoyed the lion's share of the Nile waters based on treaties inked during the colonial era. But now, Ethiopia's construction of the record-breaking GERD on the Blue Nile has become a headache for Cairo that perceives the dam project as an imminent threat to the survival of its people. To allay therefore the fear of Egypt and to resolve the ongoing Egypt-Ethiopia Nile River dispute, both countries plus Sudan need to address amicably with the help of an honest broker, the sticking point in the negotiations on the operation and filling of the GERD's reservoir. This will not only pave the way for a legally binding pact, but will avert further escalation of tensions between the three Nile Basin countries, and the outbreak of a destabilizing 'Water War' in Northeastern Africa.

#### **Recommendations**

In the light of the findings of this paper, the incumbent government in Cairo should ensure Egyptian farmers reduce, if not stop planting water-intensive crops e.g. rice. It should assist them switch from traditional to modern irrigation method. Though an expensive process, Egypt needs to invest more in the desalination of seawater as an alternative to Nile waters. Henceforth, Cairo and Khartoum should not 'internationalize' the Nile River dispute. This option should only be resorted to when all remedies within Africa have been exhausted. In this regard, the AU in line with the principle of "African solutions to African problems", needs to be proactive in finding a lasting panacea to the Nile dam dispute. Sudan, caught in between Egypt and Ethiopia's diplomatic row, should not take sides. In its national interests, Sudan needs to ensure its own worry over the GERD is addressed despite the fact that it will benefit from the dam project when completed. The growing population in Egypt and Ethiopia, coupled with climate change and an increase in the consumption of fresh water, and unpredictable rainfall to replenish the Nile River in the nearest future. Thus, both Egypt and Ethiopia need to cooperate more on the conservation of Nile waters.

#### **Limitations and Future Study Guide**

The Nile River dispute is a feud that is ongoing. Hence, data made available on the long-standing dispute are from time to time updated as events unfold. Staying up to date and revising information already analyzed in this paper was a limitation to finalizing the study. This paper examined the history of the Nile River dispute, Egypt's concerns over the GERD, a Water War scenario between Egypt and Ethiopia, and water diplomacy *vis-à-vis* assuaging Egypt's fear over the GERD. Future study by scholars with a research interest in the Nile River dispute can narrow the study to national interests and the Nile River dispute nexus. The Nile River no doubt is to Egyptians a core national interest seeing it concerns their survival. To Ethiopia, damming the Blue Nile is vital for its economic growth and development which fall under middle-range national interest. An in-depth study in this regard will contribute to the extant body of knowledge on the protracted dispute.

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