

# Egypt and the Politics of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam: An Update

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- The failure to reach a binding agreement on the GERD may have adverse consequences for Egypt and Sudan.
- To enable long-lasting cooperation in the Nile basin, a comprehensive approach to addressing water issues beyond the GERD dispute is needed.
- Cooperation among all riparian states is crucial, as they face similar challenges in growing water demand, rapid population growth, and economic development.

On August 12, 2022, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced the completion of the third phase of filling the reservoir behind the \$5 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Nile River, in spite of not having reached an agreement with Sudan and Egypt. Negotiations between the three parties to reach a comprehensive and binding agreement on filling, storing, and operating the GERD have so far proven futile. In a [letter](#) addressed to the United Nations Security Council, Cairo reiterated its objections to Ethiopia's unilateral filling of the dam. Cairo's protests did not bear fruit, but nevertheless, calm reigns. This brief explains how Egypt's signing of the 2015 Declaration of Principles and the neutral position of its allies led to a stalling of negotiations and gave Ethiopia a free hand to continue unilaterally filling the GERD.

## Egypt's Predicament with the 2015 Declaration of Principles

Egypt did not object as strongly to the third filling of the dam as it did to the first and second fillings. Egypt appears to have realized that it must deal with the dam as a reality, as its previous protests did not lead to any progress. However, a closer look at the negotiations among Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt over the course of the last decade shows that the latter had already endorsed the GERD without reaching a binding agreement. On March 23, 2015, the heads of the three states met in Khartoum and signed the [Declaration of Principles](#) (DoP), which accepted the GERD project and acceded to Ethiopia's rights to the Nile

waters. The DoP gave Ethiopia the legal right to build the dam, which also meant the right to fill it. Crucially, while much of the finances for the GERD had been generated through internal fundraising, the DoP expanded the room for international funding for the dam. However, the agreement had no clause that assured Egypt of its interests in the Nile, such as those related to water security, water allocation, or the validity of the [1959 Nile Agreement](#) between Egypt and Sudan. The DoP crucially undermined Egypt's ability to internationalize the dispute with Ethiopia, as [Article 10 of the DoP](#) stipulates that if the parties reach a deadlock in their negotiations then the matter must be referred to the heads of the three states. Such constraint became all too evident in June 2021 when [Egypt took the dam dispute to the UN Security Council](#) (UNSC), but all its members underscored the need to continue negotiations under the auspices of the African Union (AU). The UNSC echoed Ethiopia's long-held position that the AU is the right space to solve the GERD negotiations.

Thus, when the Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed asks Egypt and Sudan to negotiate instead of going to the UNSC, he is practically adhering to the DoP. In fact, the DoP is not an international treaty and contains no legally binding obligations, as it has not been ratified by any of its signatories. Some argue that because it is lacking a normative status under international law, the DoP does not oblige Ethiopia to sign a treaty to fill and operate the dam. Ethiopia believes that the non-binding guiding principles given in the DoP are sufficient unto themselves. It is

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now obvious that Egypt made a strategic mistake when it signed the DoP.

### Where do Egypt's allies stand as Ethiopia continues to fill the GERD?

Egypt's most important ally, the US, asserted its support for Egypt's water security. However, the US also has a close relationship with Ethiopia and is not generally involved in the Nile water issues. The US did not show any particular interest in interceding in the dispute until after President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi met then-President Donald Trump in 2019. Sisi specifically requested that the US serve as a mediator among Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan to resolve the outstanding issues of filling the reservoir behind the dam and ensuring a regular flow of water after the reservoir is filled. In November of that year, a series of meetings began in Washington, DC that eventually broke down by the end of February 2020 when Ethiopia perceived that the US was leaning toward the side of Egypt. The Trump administration put pressure on Ethiopia to accept their proposal by [partially halting aid](#) and even warning that Egypt had the right to [blow up the dam](#) if an agreement was not reached. These actions made it hard for the US to play any constructive role in mediating the dispute over the GERD. Following this, the US role has been quite minimal, and the issue was returned to the African Union. Currently, the Biden administration continues to [reiterate](#) America's support for Egypt's water security but has adopted a more neutral stance.

It took Saudi Arabia almost 11 years to officially back Egypt's position on the GERD in June 2022. [Some have argued](#) that the Saudi position came in light of its growing competition with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for influence in Egypt through obtaining investments and buying Egyptian state assets. Saudi Arabia [stated](#) that Egypt's water security is integral to Arab water security. However, Saudi Arabia also maintains political and economic relations with Ethiopia. For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Ethiopia's large population makes it a potentially large market for its oil and commodity products. Ethiopia is also influential in the Horn of Africa, a region that has been strategically important to Saudi Arabia since the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings and its military intervention in Yemen that began in 2015. Moreover, unlike Egypt, Ethiopia is endowed with a substantial amount of freshwater (12 major river basins and 11 large lakes) as well as [renewable energy resources with huge potential for hydro, solar, wind, and geothermal power](#). Being entirely dependent on imported food, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries stand to gain much from investing in Ethiopia's water resources and agricultural and livestock development to ensure their own food security. In addition, the presence of Saudi Arabia and UAE in

the Horn of Africa allow them to project power beyond the Middle East in a region that includes some of the world's major trade sea lanes and land routes. Recently, the UAE [stated](#) that the DoP remained the underlying reference point for future negotiations. In other words, the GCC's political and economic influence may allow them to bring Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia to conclude a binding agreement, but at the same time, neutrality serves their wider geopolitical interests.

Meanwhile, other important international actors, such as Russia and China, maintain a neutral position in the dispute. During his latest visit to Egypt and Ethiopia, which coincided with the third filling of the GERD, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov did not even mention the GERD dispute. Russia is vying for political and economic influence in the Horn of Africa, showing the same interest in both Egypt and Ethiopia. On the other hand, China supports the principle of "African solutions to African problems" but not in the way Egypt might want. In a [speech](#) in August 2021 at the UNSC, Zhang Jun, China's representative stated that his country "believes that through joint efforts, the completion of GERD can become a tripartite development project to enhance mutual trust and win-win cooperation." China has close relationships with all of the parties involved in the GERD crisis and has been directly involved in the dam, particularly by [financing its power lines and infrastructure](#). This noninterference policy is crucial for China to protect its ever-growing economic investments in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, one of China's largest African trade partners.

### The way forward

Technical solutions are still possible for the GERD, such as coordinating water release to prevent droughts and working together to tackle longer-term issues, such as climate change and overpopulation. However, the dam itself and the control of the Nile River have large political connotations. In addition, the political and economic crises that the three countries have experienced in the last decade make it difficult for any party to adopt a cooperative stance that could potentially entail domestic political costs for the government. As a result, all three have deployed a discourse that encourages the securitization of the Nile waters to legitimize their cause internationally and shore up public support at home. The longer the GERD negotiations continue without progress between Ethiopia and Egypt, the poorer bargaining position the latter has and the greater the risk of escalation.

(Housam Darwisheh/IDE-JETRO) August 16, 2022