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Water and Power: The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and Nile Basin Security

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Water has been an important natural resource since the beginning of civilization. It is one of many resources studied in the field of International Relations, from a variety of perspectives and theories, to examine its influence on politics and state behavior. The decrease in water supplies brought on by climate change has made water an contentious subject in social and political debates, and the rivalry over water's limited supplies during the global water crisis poses important justice issues of allocation, accessibility, lawful recipients, and prioritized uses. When Ethiopia began filling the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in 2020, the dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt over the GERD and the Nile Basin was not just about generating electricity. It was about sovereignty, identity, and history. While a realist perspective frames the issue as a matter of national interest and security, we will approach the subject through the lens of identity and perception. How do the conflicting identities and discourses of Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile River and the GERD shape their political behavior?

The historical roots of the Nile conflict

Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan are engaged in a long-standing disagreement over the Nile, the world's longest river. Despite the breakdown of mediated negotiations, all three countries remain heavily dependent on the river. The Nile is a transboundary river, with Egypt and Sudan as the downstream nations that depend heavily on its water for various purposes, albeit to varying degrees. More than 97% of Egypt's freshwater and 77% of Sudan's freshwater comes from the Nile River. For the past 5,000 years, Egypt maintained regional hegemony and enjoyed unchallenged access to the Nile.

Colonial powers mostly fueled the conflict between the nations of the Nile Basin. To promote the sugar and textile industries, these colonial powers sought to establish sizable plantations to produce cotton and sugarcane, which they exported to Europe and other continents. Britain controlled treaty negotiations over the use of the Nile River to safeguard its interests in Egypt, at the expense of the other riparian governments. These treaties gave Egypt priority water rights. This laid the historical foundations for the imbalance in the distribution of the Nile's waters, which remains one of the main reasons for the conflict among the nations of the basin.

After gaining independence, many African nations rejected the colonial agreements as biased and not legally valid. The Republic of Sudan renegotiated the 1929 agreement and, on November 8, 1959, in Cairo, reached a revised agreement with the United Arab Republic of Egypt regarding the full utilization of Nile waters. This marked the first agreement between sovereign nations in the Nile Basin. The agreement confirmed that Sudan would receive less water than Egypt, despite the river's major portion flowing through Sudan. However, Ethiopia and other upstream countries viewed the deal as unjust because it restricted their ability to utilize and develop the Nile's resources.

Egypt's identity and the existential threat narrative

Egypt depends entirely on the Nile River for its freshwater needs. Ethiopia claims exclusive rights to use these water sources, with more than 80% are being consumed. This situation has made it a permanent goal for Egyptian leadership to ensure the continued flow of Nile waters. The significance of the Nile in ancient Egyptian thought stems

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from two fundamental reasons. First, Egypt was often referred to as the 'gift of the Nile', which explains the deep respect and veneration Egyptians held for the river. Second, it was considered inconceivable that the lifeblood of Egypt originated outside its sacred lands. This belief in the sacred nature of the Nile has helped to shape Egypt's national identity and its perception as a homeland.

The modern Egyptian thinker Jamal Himdan emphasized a critical perspective on the Nile's importance by stating: "The first civilization was the fruit of a blissful union between Egypt and the Nile. If history is the father of the Egyptians, then Egypt is the mother of the world, and the Nile is simply the greatest ancestor of human civilization". Furthermore, the Nile River is considered an integral part of Egyptian identity, deeply embedded in the culture, mythology, and political discourse of what it means to be Egyptian. The management and control of the Nile became apparently a religious issue in both Egyptian and Ethiopian minds, historically associated with a miraculous theme in Christianity until the 19th century. So, the Nile serves as a socially and spiritually constructed symbol rather than just a natural resource. Both Ethiopians and Egyptians revere the Nile, viewing it as having a divine origin and being intertwined with their national destinies. This belief influences their behavior, conventions, and even their states' interests.

As a result, the tensions surrounding the Nile are rooted in deep cultural and religious narratives that extend beyond mere political or security concerns. The threat posed by dam construction to Egypt's access to the Nile could redefine aspects of its national identity, which is historically and culturally intertwined with the river. This identity is founded on the belief that the Nile, adopted by the ancient Egyptians, is rightfully theirs alone.

Ethiopia's identity and the justice narrative

The concept of water justice aims to ensure fair access to water for all stakeholders and across different generations. A proper understanding of water justice should be grounded in the right to access water, equitable use and distribution of water resources, participation in decision-making processes related to the governance and management of water resources, and the effective utilization of water in river systems. Many scholars link the concept of 'justice' to terms such as equity, fairness, reasonableness, and equality. This connection considers global needs and challenges, which are directly tied to sustainable development. Numerous studies have shown that employing these concepts is vital for allocating transboundary water and managing shared water resources, serving as a mechanism for maintaining regional and international peace and security.

Ethiopia asserts that, unlike other upstream countries, its right to manage its water resources fairly and responsibly. GERD symbolizes this pursuit of water justice. Historically, Ethiopia has been excluded from agreements made without its involvement, hindering its ability to benefit from a river that originates within its borders. Ethiopia views this exclusion as a violation of the principles of equitable water usage. According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the GERD embodies 'unity in the face of poverty and perceived backwardness' for Ethiopia, making the dam project highly significant for the nation. Moreover, "The GERD is a matter of ensuring sovereignty" stated Demeke Mekonnen, the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister of Ethiopia. Becoming a significant power exporter would provide Ethiopia with the energy it needs, strengthen its economy, reduce extreme poverty, and foster profitable international connections.

This narrative has been leveraged to support the dam's mission and establish internal national legitimacy. Additionally, it promotes a vision that aligns with Ethiopia's overall growth and economic justice aspirations. As a result, the dam has become a symbol of the country's regeneration. Ethiopia frames the dam as a distinctly African project, emphasizing that the Nile is shared among eleven African states, and many observers believe it will facilitate the continent's green transition. Conversely, Egypt views these developments as a potential threat to Arab water security. Therefore, the dispute surrounding the dam goes beyond mere hydrological concerns; it represents a deeper struggle between Egypt's ancient civilizational identity and Ethiopia's emerging modern identity centered on the Nile.

From the perspective of Ethiopians, the construction of the dam also transforms the symbolic representation of the Nile and the development of Ethiopia's national identity. Historically, the Nile was seen as a curse from an economic

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point of view that deprived Ethiopia of its natural resources and was associated with negative connotation. However, perceptions of the river have changed dramatically, with it now viewed as a catalyst for Ethiopia's economic and developmental progress. The Nile has emerged as a unifying element in the creation of a new Ethiopian identity, grounded in industrialization and modernization, with the GERD at its core. This indicates that Ethiopia is striving to build a collective identity that legitimizes its pursuit of the GERD project, despite Egypt's ongoing opposition. Ethiopia aims to establish a new national identity rooted in growth and self-determination. At the same time, Egypt asserts historical rights over the Nile, reflecting a deeper identity clash between the two nations.

Egyptian foreign policy and strategic behavior toward the GERD

The Nile River has long been a vital source of life for Egyptians, making Egypt's foreign policy in Africa, particularly its relationship with Ethiopia, one of the country's most critical foreign policy priorities. Many writings by policy and decision-makers illustrate this viewpoint. For example, in the *Philosophy of the Revolution* text, President Gamal Abdel-Nasser identified the Arab, African, and Islamic worlds as the most significant spheres of Egypt's foreign policy. He emphasized the Nile River as the artery of life, a key reason for Egypt's engagement in African affairs. Similarly, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, an Egyptian diplomat and former UN secretary-general, delineates four primary foreign policy spheres for Egypt: Arab, African, Mediterranean, and Islamic. He considers Africa the most important of these due to the challenges posed by the Nile. One of the most pressing challenges posed by the Nile is the GERD, particularly for both Egypt and Ethiopia.

The GERD is a major hydropower project built on the Blue Nile. The project has sparked a dispute among Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia over claims to natural and historical rights to the Nile's waters, as outlined in the 1929 and 1959 watercourse treaties. These agreements granted Egypt veto power over projects along the river in other riparian states. They established Egypt's annual share of Nile waters at 55.5 billion cubic meters and Sudan's at 18.5 billion cubic meters, while overlooking the needs of upstream countries.

Since Egypt relies on the Nile for over 90% of its water supply, any disruptions to the river's flow are regarded as a national security issue. This dominance, often referred to as hydro-hegemony, contrasted with the ambitions of then Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who aimed to utilize the river to improve domestic and regional socioeconomic conditions. For Ethiopia, the GERD is essential to its Growth and Transformation Plan. This growth was expected to result from attracting large-scale foreign investments and increasing power generation from 2,000 to 10,000 megawatts. When Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi announced the country's intention to construct the GERD in 2011, Egypt was preoccupied with the impacts of the Arab Uprisings on its domestic politics. As a result, Egypt did not effectively address the issues surrounding the GERD. Internal challenges took precedence over external ones, preventing the GERD issue from being prioritized in Egypt's foreign policy agenda.

In the following years, negotiations involving the World Bank, the United States, and, since 2020, the African Union attempted to mediate the situation. Despite these efforts, the parties failed to reach a comprehensive, binding agreement concerning the dam's filling and operation. On February 20, 2022, amid a continued stalemate in negotiations, Ethiopia activated the turbines of the GERD, marking the start of the dam's power generation phase. This decision, made by Ethiopia without consulting Egypt and Sudan, highlights a continuing trend of unilateral decision-making and a preference for sovereignty over collaboration and compromise in resolving this crisis.

The three phases of Egypt's foreign policy regarding the GERD

1. 2011–2013: Domestic Preoccupation

Internal unrest following the 2011 Arab Uprising significantly limited Egypt's foreign strategy in the early 2010s. Egypt's response to Ethiopia's announcement of the GERD was slow and ineffective, primarily due to the political turmoil that included the overthrow of President Mubarak, the transitional government, and the brief control of the Muslim Brotherhood. Domestic priorities overshadowed foreign concerns, allowing Ethiopia to strengthen its position on the dam. During this period, Egypt was undergoing changes in its political and social identity, shaping its actions beyond mere material factors such as finances or power. Conflicts arose over ideas and values, and the state's

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identity was still being defined. Societal and national identity appeared divided, leading to an unclear perception of Egypt's role. Thus, internal political discussions focused mainly on preserving the state which diminished decision-makers awareness of Egypt's responsibilities as a guardian of the Nile.

2. 2014–2019: Strategic Realignment and Diplomatic Reengagement

Egypt began to assert a more coherent and proactive foreign policy when President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took office in 2013. The GERD was a prominent issue on Egypt's national security agenda. Cairo sought to reestablish communication with Sudan and Ethiopia, leading to the 2015 Declaration of Principles (DOP). Egypt also strengthened its negotiating position by leveraging diplomatic alliances with the United States, Europe, and Gulf allies, emphasizing cooperation while maintaining its historical water rights.

3. 2020–today: Assertive Diplomacy and Internationalization

As Ethiopia continued to fill and operate the GERD independently, Egypt adopted a more assertive diplomatic stance, by framing the conflict in terms of international law and regional stability. Additionally, Egypt recognized the need for both internal reforms and external pressure, as evidenced by domestic water management initiatives such as pricing policies and irrigation modernization. Overall, Egypt's foreign policy regarding the GERD has shifted from a reactive and internally focused stance to a strategic, globally oriented approach, achieving a balance between diplomatic engagement and the defence of its critical water interests. Further, following the ascent of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to power, the Egyptian state aimed to restore a cohesive national identity along three key dimensions: Internal stability as a prerequisite for regional leadership; re-establishing Egypt's role as a leader in the Arab and African regions; and evoking the historical symbolism of Egypt as the gift of the Nile.

To create a strong regional alliance that compels Ethiopia to return to the negotiating table and uphold the principle of do no harm, Egypt is attempting to realign the Horn of Africa nations that previously supported Ethiopia under the Entebbe Agreement. This strategy is part of a broader Egyptian ambition to regain its African influence, which has waned over the decades, and to reassert itself as a key player in the regional security dynamics of the Red Sea and Nile Basin. In this context, Egypt's efforts in the Horn of Africa reinforce its self-image as a major Nile power, tasked with safeguarding the regional water system. Its initiatives to engage countries like Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti, alongside efforts to counterbalance Ethiopia, reflect an identity narrative that views the security of the Nile as an extension of Egyptian national security.

Conclusion

The complexity of the water conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia stems from differing perceptions and identities that each state holds regarding itself and the other. For Egypt, the Nile River is a crucial component of its national and historical identity, intertwined with concepts of survival, national security, and its rich cultural heritage, leading it to perceive the river as a historical right that must be preserved. In contrast, Ethiopia seeks to forge a new identity that reflects its emergence as a rising regional power and to actualize it through significant development projects, such as the GERD. The resolution of the conflict surrounding the GERD requires a transformation of perceptions and narratives between Egypt and Ethiopia. It can be achieved through dialogue, confidence-building measures, and the establishment of shared norms. The central idea is to create a collective identity among states that share the Nile, viewing it as a source of mutual development rather than a source of competition, and recognizing the river as a shared regional heritage and a cooperative resource.

Table 1: The key treaties, their signatories, and main provisions

Treaty Name	Year	Signatory Parties	Main Principles
Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty	1902	Great Britain on behalf of Sudan and Ethiopia	Outlined the boundaries between Ethiopia and Sudan and had a provision prohibiting Ethiopia from building on the Sobat River, Lake Tana, or Blue Nile without British approval.
Anglo-Egyptian Treaty	1929	Great Britain representing its East African colonies: Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda and Egypt	Outlined the boundaries between Ethiopia and Sudan and had a provision prohibiting Ethiopia from building on the Sobat River,

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Lake Tana, or Blue Nile without British approval. Nile Waters Agreement between Egypt and Sudan 1959 Egypt and Sudan Allocated 55.5 billion m³ of water to Egypt and 18.5 billion m³ to Sudan annually; gave both countries veto power over any Nile projects in other riparian states.

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Chourouk Mestour is a doctoral candidate in international relations, focusing on security and strategic studies across Africa, with a particular emphasis on North Africa, international relations theories, and postcolonial studies. Her research encompasses a range of outputs, including articles in Arabic, book reviews, English-language reviews of research papers, and translations in both Arabic and English.