

Navigating the Ongoing Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Negotiations

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Brief Analysis

The U.S. should take a stronger position on the ongoing GERD talks to prevent armed conflict, stabilize American interests and support Sudanese democracy.

Following the U.N. Security Council statement on the GERD negotiations earlier this month, which stated the settlement should be “a mutually acceptable and binding agreement,” Egypt and Sudan issued positive responses, while Ethiopia said it will not recognize any claim raised on the basis of the aforementioned statement. This latest development comes after years of failed negotiations between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt over filling the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which Ethiopia is building along the Nile. Other prominent recent developments came when Ethiopia rejected Tunisia’s draft resolution to the UNSC, and the African Union’s efforts to mediate the conflict were stalled. Meanwhile, the project continues to move forward; Ethiopia announced that the GERD reached the **targeted second filling (<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210719-ethiopia-hits-second-year-target-for-filling-nile-mega-dam-1>)** on July 19, accelerated due to unusually heavy rainfalls during the rainy season.

The Renaissance Dam, which began construction in April 2011, is considered the most important national project for Ethiopia in its modern history, as the country is pinning its hopes of economic development and power generation on the project. However, Egypt and Sudan are concerned about Ethiopia’s ability to control flow of the Nile via the dam, and therefore seek a binding agreement on its filling and operation. Cairo considers the Ethiopian dam an existential threat, as Egypt depends on the Nile for approximately 97% of its water resources.

With some cooperation and wisdom, it was initially possible that the ambitious GERD project could become both a great development project for the Ethiopian people and a model for cooperation between Addis Ababa and its neighbors. Instead, the project has become a constant cause for conflict as the various actors vie for regional hegemony.

All sides have publicly expressed an interest in avoiding conflict. In a September 8 interview, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry reiterated (<https://www.egyptindependent.com/egypt-reiterates-firm-stance-on-gerd-negotiations/>) that Egypt is eager to “avoid armed conflict.” Likewise, the Ethiopian minister responsible for water issues has stated that “conflict has never been an option for Ethiopia.” Yet this spring and summer, in anticipation of the second filling, Egypt and Sudan took steps towards diplomatic and military escalation. Tensions have been particularly volatile due to sporadic military clashes along the Sudanese-Ethiopian border.

While the previous U.S. administration was more actively involved in the negotiations, including hosting negotiations in 2019-2020 and former U.S. President Donald Trump's (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFpXz-Xbse4&t=25s>) controversial statement that Egypt may blow up the dam because they “could not live in this way,” the Biden administration has taken a more neutral stance on the issue. That said, in mid-June, the commander of the US Central Command General Kenneth McKenzie (<https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2021/06/19/us-central-command-comments-renaissance-dam-egypt-saudi-arabia-yemen-crisis>) expressed the United States' concern over the developments in the Renaissance Dam file, saying that Ethiopia's behavior “worries us,” and noting that “Egypt is exercising an enormous amount of restraint.”

The Biden administration dispatched Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman, the US special envoy for the Horn of Africa, to the region twice during the pre-second filling period, and the head of the CIA William Burns recently visited in Cairo (https://the arabweekly.com/us-turns-egypt-tensions-rise-middle-east?cf_chl_managed_tk__=pmd_GSS03.cZagYsnlZ.PKwVoCt909aLi8XiEw61jH75lHU-1631546125-0-gqNtZGzNAuWjcnBsZRAR) to discuss the GERD filling with President Sisi, among other issues.

Yet as the Biden administration has tried to adopt a more balanced role for the United States on the issue, the administration's position has been further complicated by the escalation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, which the U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of State Robert Godec said included “acts of ethnic cleansing.” (<https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/05/africa/ethiopia-tigray-humera-sudan-bodies-cmd-intl/index.html>) On September 17, President Biden signed an executive order (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/17/world/africa/biden-ethiopia-tigray-sanctions.html>) threatening sanctions against Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, among others responsible for the violence in Tigray. This comes after the Biden administration resumed U.S. aid to Ethiopia in September 2020, which had been frozen under the Trump administration when the Ethiopian delegation withdrew from Washington negotiations last year. However, Egypt has interpreted Washington's neutrality as support for the Ethiopian position.

Though the United States is navigating a series of issues in the Middle East, the intractability of this conflict and the danger of its potential outcomes demonstrate that the United States should do whatever it can to encourage a diplomatic solution. A further escalation of tensions in the Horn of Africa would threaten several key American interests. It could undermine international navigation in critical shipping lanes along the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, threaten oil supplies to the global economy and create a new launching point for terrorist groups.

A leaked U.S. embassy cable from 2010 published by WikiLeaks (https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/21/211372_re-egypt-source-.html) demonstrates that Cairo has a history of responding to perceived threats to the Nile with force. In the mid-seventies, the Egyptians blew up equipment that was on its way to Ethiopia to help create a dam. Moreover, an important source in the Egyptian government during Mubarak's rule told American officials that in the event of a crisis between Egypt and Ethiopia, “there will be no war—we will send a plane to bombard the dam and back in the same day, that simple.” Therefore, Egypt's massive military movements around Ethiopia this past year should not be understood as mere ‘saber rattling’ aimed at increasing pressure on the country.

Cairo's recent military maneuvers—named “Nile Eagles” and “Protectors of the Nile”—occurred as Sisi solidified support for Egypt's regional position. Since May, the Egyptian president met with the leaders of Uganda, Burundi,

Kenya and Djibouti—Ethiopia’s neighbors—to finalize military, security, and intelligence cooperation agreements.

High regional tensions increase the likelihood that the GERD negotiations will lead to conflict. In a recent meeting, the Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani said the Arab League may take “gradual measures” to support Egypt’s position on the matter, prompting Ethiopian government officials to state that the negotiations are an African issue, and any interference from external Arab states would be unacceptable. An advisor to the President of the Sovereign Council in Sudan, Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, warned that there could be a “water war” in the region.

In addition to preventing military escalation, taking a strong position on the GERD negotiations can enable the United States to fulfill its strategic interest of supporting the Sudanese government during its democratic transition. Moreover, as Russia and China seek to enhance their economic and political involvement in the Horn of Africa, American mediation in the Renaissance Dam negotiations will qualify Washington to play a greater role in the region, maintain security and stability, and—in the long run—undermine Russian and Chinese moves that threaten these vital interests. ❖

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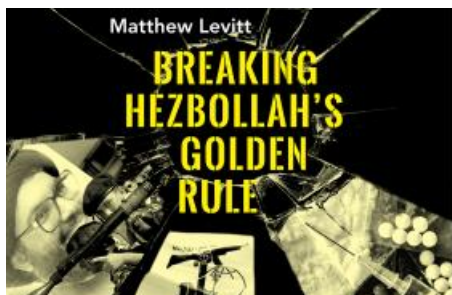
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