



# Time Out for the Millennium Dam?

By Gurjit Singh



The African Union-led process to arrive at a conclusive agreement on the filling and subsequent operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) did not yield the expected results. Negotiations between legal and technical experts from Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan to draw up a binding document [concluded without consensus](#) at the end of August. Meanwhile, with the heavy rains, the dam has started filling up naturally.

This is a major issue around which Ethiopians have unified as the country confronts existentialist challenges to its federal polity. Sudan perhaps hopes for the best deal as it grapples with internal upheavals, a reduction in oil prices and the aftermath of its separation from South Sudan. Egypt is the most stable of the three countries but seems to be trying to reach out to Libya and possibly Ethiopia.

The reaction in Egypt and Sudan is quite different from the #It'smydam social media campaigns in Ethiopia where nationalist fervour is being stoked, with idolised singer [Teddy Afro](#) creating a new song celebrating the GERD as Ethiopia's pride. Egypt on the other hand is focusing on getting international opinion on its side and has released a [short video](#) in several languages.

Constructed in the western [Benishangul-Gumuz Region](#), in 2011, the GERD was initially named the Millennium Dam. Scheduled for completion in 2022, its 6.45 GW generating capacity will make it the world's seventh largest and the biggest dam in Africa.

The White Nile and the Blue Nile meet in Khartoum in Sudan and flow into Egypt. The White Nile rises in the Great Lakes of East and Central Africa. The Blue and shorter Nile rises in Lake Tana in the Amhara region of Ethiopia and flows to Khartoum, gathering waters from the Dinder and Rahad rivers. Ethiopia had never previously tapped the Nile resources while Sudan has the Al-Ruṣayriṣ and [Sannār](#) dams on the Blue Nile. Egypt on the other hand has almost its entire economy dependent on the River Nile having harnessed it through the gigantic Aswan dam project.

Egypt opposed the GERD from the start as it felt that its share of the Nile waters would be diminished. Up until now the waters of the Nile have flowed unchecked through Sudan to Lake Nasser. Ethiopian reports indicate that the GERD will have no impact on annual flows to Egypt but this issue has yet to be resolved and even though the differences between the two countries have been narrowed down, mutual suspicion between the two populous neighbours has been revived, with Ethiopia fearing that Egypt might sabotage and undermine the project.

Moreover, both Egypt and Sudan fear that water flows will reduce to below their requirements during the dry season, negatively impacting the two countries. For its part, Ethiopia believes that it has patiently negotiated but that a common position on dry season flows is difficult to achieve. The country wants to start operating the dam as filling the reservoir may take up to five years, and considers that the dry season issues can be dealt with concurrently. And although the three countries seem to agree that , how to deal with this issue is now in contention.

The GERD project was of particular interest to the former prime minister of Ethiopia, the late Meles Zenawi, who foresaw that environmental factors would prevent Ethiopia from obtaining the support of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries and the World Bank. Ethiopia therefore opted to fund GERD fully from its own resources. Borrowing from the Indian example, the country issued development bonds, tapped into the diaspora and obtained small domestic contributions.

The US\$4.8 billion GERD contract was awarded to Salini Impregilo of Italy. The novel fundraising contributed US\$3 billion while China provided US\$1.8 billion for the turbines. Ethiopia has committed nearly 5 per cent of its GDP to GERD and is therefore unlikely to want a delay or disruption in the completion of the project.

Meles had often discussed Ethiopia's development with me when I was India's ambassador to Ethiopia and the African Union from 2005 to 2009. He showed great interest in India's large hydroelectric projects and we discussed the country's engagement with its diaspora for development, Diaspora Bonds, and India's terms of engagement with donors following the sanctions that were imposed after the 1998 nuclear tests. Our discussions on the Great Ethiopian Railway plan also focused on carbon-neutral electricity and since Ethiopia is not endowed with coal or oil (unlike Sudan and Egypt), harnessing water resources has become the country's focus. The smaller dams on the Tekeze, Finchaa, Gilgel Gibe, Awash and Omo rivers are the trendsetters; located in the south of the country and close to Kenya, Djibouti and South Sudan, [power exports](#) are under consideration.

Ethiopians recall that Egypt has since the 4<sup>th</sup> century monopolised the use of the Nile waters and used the edicts of the Coptic Church, whose Patriarch was shared with Ethiopia until 1959, to curtail their usage. Ethiopia's development plans include exploiting the waters of the Nile but the Nile Basin Initiative and its regional version, the Eastern Nile Technical Regional Office, have been unsuccessful in convincing the partners that the project is technically sound and beneficial to all. In 2015, the three countries signed a declaration to abide by "the spirit of cooperation". Egypt in particular thinks this spirit is lacking; it has committed itself to a negotiated process but the caveat that "all options remain on the table" causes anxiety in Ethiopia.

Egypt seeks access to 55 bcm of water as its Nile rights in perpetuity, based on its increased share in the 1959 treaty with Sudan. The 1929 Anglo-Egypt Treaty ceded almost all [Nile rights to Egypt](#), overlooking the rights of British colonies in Sudan, Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika as well as Ethiopia. Technical discussions indicate a flow of 49bcm to Egypt, slightly more than the 48bcm provided in the 1929 Treaty. Ethiopia refuses to agree to a fixed figure and wants *ad hoc* decisions since droughts may not allow for such flow levels. It views the Egyptian stand as based on colonial treaties that were signed without Ethiopia's agreement. Egypt is facing serious challenges due to pollution, climate factors and a growing population but it too did not consult Ethiopia when it built its giant Aswan High Dam. Technical discussions have taken place in various forums for the last eight years where Sudan has been assiduously wooed by both its neighbours. The need for a dispute settlement mechanism on technical issues remains a core concern.

In June 2018 Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed made a visit to Cairo and [pledged mutually beneficial regional cooperation](#) on the basis of scientific evidence. Although the confidence-building visit seemed to have been a success, by 2019 Prime Minister Abiy was talking of mobilisation to counter Egyptian threats. Between November 2019 and February 2020, US President Donald Trump interceded with an initiative, pursued by Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, but it reached an impasse with Ethiopia leaving the final negotiations. Egypt approached the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in June 2020 but the UNSC was informed that the AU had been seized of the matter. It is this AU effort which now needs to succeed but is faltering. Meanwhile, the [US has suspended aid to Ethiopia](#) in an effort to coerce the country to accommodate Egypt.

Ethiopia and Egypt are well placed to lead an African development process through the use of water resources for mutual benefit. An inclusive regional perspective which will bring the Nile basin countries into a sharing of knowledge and resources is vital for [having sufficient water, energy, and food for all Nile Basin countries](#). Egypt depends on the river for 97 per cent of its water requirements and Ethiopia has invested in its future. Can the northeastern quadrangle of Africa create a new paradigm? The concept of an [Eastern Development Corridor proposed by former Egyptian Assistant Foreign Minister Mohamed Higazy](#) seeks multipronged cooperation for a development corridor with dams, irrigation, riverine transport, power distribution and access for Ethiopia to Egypt's Mediterranean ports.

While Egypt is committed to negotiations and will seek the best possible deal, its occasional jingoism is matched by Ethiopian exhilaration. Egypt believes that the other countries have failed to restrain Ethiopia from filling the dam. This is why the country keeps [returning to the UN Security Council](#) option and, with Sudan, will play the Arab card unless the AU is able to bridge the differences.

It appears that South Africa as AU Chair is keeping the UNSC from acting until the AU effort is complete. Meanwhile it is a challenge to South Africa's ability to keep aligned AU members whose animosity pre-dates the AU itself. Egypt's twin identities as a member of the Arab League and as an African country are being tested. The country persuaded the [League to support its stance](#) when it went to the UNSC in June. Djibouti and Somalia, two Arab countries which border Ethiopia, did not concur fully with the resolution while [Ethiopia remains critical of "blind" Arab League support for Egypt](#). The Arab Committee that was formed to follow up on the matter at the UNSC includes Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, countries which now have weightier US-Israel-Arab matters at hand.

Has Ethiopia outrun Egypt as Emad Al-Din Hussein wrote in the *Al-Shorouq* newspaper? Or is Egypt running too fast for its own good? Its options may expand if belligerence is replaced with a more visionary approach rather than a zero-sum game. Will Egyptian calm meet with the appropriate Ethiopian response?

The countries involved in the GERD are three of the largest in Africa and they could all benefit from coordinated action. The GERD exists and will function as Ethiopia has determined. Meanwhile the mistrust is deepening as Ethiopia feels empowered to alter past equations. The dry season issue is best left to a technical committee which will monitor the real situation during every season and work on actual water flows. If trust is restored and public belligerence diminishes, the mutual interests of the three countries may be served. With their large populations and growth indicators, Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan could be the growth segment of Africa. The immediate need is to avoid diplomatic disagreements from degenerating into physical conflict. In the medium term the three countries could be persuaded to be partners for growth and in this Kenya can play a positive role by engaging all parties, since in 2021 South Africa will cede the AU leadership to DR Congo, a country which may not have an abiding interest in the issue.

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