

The Grand Renaissance Dam: what's at stake and what could break the deadlock

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The Ethiopian Grand Renaissance Dam is inching closer to completion, rekindling the environmental and political controversies that have dogged the project from the start nearly 10 years ago. In addition, recent satellite [images](#) show a steady increase in the amount of water being held back by the new mega dam. Mahemud Tekuya explains what's at stake.



The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, a 145-metre-high, 1.8-kilometre-long concrete colossus is set to become the largest hydropower plant in Africa. (Photo by Eduardo Soteras/AFP via Getty Images)

The current dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is directly linked to colonial-era Nile treaties. During the scramble for Africa, controlling the source of the Nile was a major colonial goal for the British. In 1902, the UK and Ethiopia concluded the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty in which Ethiopia [agreed](#) not to arrest or totally block the flow of the Nile.

Then there was the [Anglo-Egyptian Treaty signed in 1929](#). This was between the British (on behalf of its colonies, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) and Egypt. The treaty prevented British East African colonies from using the Nile's water without the consent of Egypt.

The third treaty was the [1959 Nile Waters Treaty between Egypt and Sudan](#). This allocated the entire flow of the Nile between the two downstream states without considering the interests of upstream states, which vehemently rejected it. Instead they called for an equitable allocation of the Nile waters based on a basin-wide treaty.

All the basin countries at the time negotiated and [came up with the Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement in 2010](#). But Egypt and Sudan rejected the deal because it did not recognise their "historic right" and "veto power" over upstream projects.

In my view, this legacy meant that Ethiopia was left no option but to start constructing the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam by itself. The dam has the potential to change the status quo established in those treaties. At the same time any agreement also has the potential to maintain the status quo.

So, behind the ongoing talks is the struggle between changing, or maintaining, colonial legacies.

What are the views of Sudan and Egypt?

Generally, the dam confers enormous benefits to Egypt and Sudan. These include ensuring a regular flow of water, preventing siltation, reducing evaporation, and providing cheaper electricity. Sudan has supported the project since 2012 because of these benefits. But Egypt maintains that any upstream dam on the Nile River threatens the flow of the Nile. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam's reservoir can hold more than 70 billion cubic metres of water. Egypt initially [rejected the project entirely](#) and later demanded a reduction in the size of the dam.

The dam is being built by Ethiopians and is being financed solely by Ethiopia. Aimed [primarily](#) at generating power, the dam will also provide water for irrigation and flood protection for downstream countries

The three countries signed the [Declaration of Principles in 2015](#). This provides the framework for the talks about the first filling and annual operation of the dam. But Egypt's concerns seem to have changed towards ensuring it gets its "historic water share" as stated under the 1959 treaty. That would be 55.5 billion cubic metres, 66% of the river's total flow.

The treaty also gave Sudan 22% and left the rest (12%) for evaporation. It did not recognise the rights of nine upstream countries, including Ethiopia, whose territory contributes more than 85% of the Nile.

Egypt needs a guarantee that the filling and operation of the Renaissance Dam will not affect this arrangement and what it calls "existing use and rights". In other words, Egypt needs a guarantee that Ethiopia will not use the Nile waters for consumption purposes, including irrigation, in the future.

Cairo wants an agreement that the dam's reservoirs be filled over a long period, lasting about 20 years. And it wants veto power.

Apart from some safety-related concerns, Sudan supports the project.

What are the chances of an agreement?

Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt have been negotiating for five years over the filling and annual operation of the dam. They have not been able to strike a deal. In addition to the water allocation issue, they have yet to resolve issues on drought mitigation and mechanisms for resolving future disputes.

Three drought [mitigation mechanisms](#) have been spelled out. These cover drought, prolonged drought and prolonged dry years. But the proposal initially tabled by the US could make the dam nonfunctional and deny Ethiopia the right to consume Nile water.

Given Ethiopia's objection to the proposal, it is unlikely that the three countries will agree on how to mitigate future droughts.

As for dispute resolution, Egypt needs the forthcoming Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Treaty to give a third party the power to make binding decisions on the dam.

In the past, Egypt and Sudan constructed several dams and reservoirs without consulting – and even over [objections from Ethiopia](#).

Since these projects are not subject to compulsory dispute resolution, and since there is no mechanism in place governing the use and activities of downstream states (Egypt can export water to another country, Ethiopia can't do anything about it), Ethiopia will not agree to subject the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam to compulsory dispute resolution.

Besides, the Declaration of Principles requires the three countries to resolve future disputes only through negotiation, conciliation and mediation.

It's therefore also unlikely that the three countries will easily resolve this outstanding issue.

But I do see two slim possibilities in which agreement can be struck.

The first option is for the three countries to reach an interim agreement governing the first filling (over the next two years) of the dam. This piecemeal approach would give the three the time to build trust and confidence and to work out the details on drought mitigation and dispute resolution. The first filling is not among the sticking points. An interim agreement would be in the interest of Egypt and Sudan to avoid unilateral filling of the dam.

The one snag in this option is that Ethiopia appears to be determined to fill the dam – [with or without an agreement](#).

The other option is to restrict the forthcoming treaty to the filling and annual operation of the dam. The three countries can and should address the problems associated with the colonial and 1959 treaties by explicitly stating that Ethiopia can equitably use the Nile waters upstream of the dam.

The allocation of waters between the three countries, drought mitigation, and dispute resolution should be left to the [Nile River Basin Cooperative Framework](#). The framework has already established an organisation that can take drought mitigation measures and it has compulsory dispute resolution mechanisms.

What are the potential consequences of failure to agree?

At least for the coming two years, filling the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam without an agreement will not have any effect on the two downstream countries. [There is more than enough](#) water in the system to compensate for the amount Ethiopia plans to hold back.

Given the three countries' historical relations and their dependency on the Nile, it is unlikely that they will go to war. I do not expect that Egypt will use military force against the state that contributes 86% of the Nile water, Ethiopia. But because Egypt and Sudan do not want Ethiopia to fill the dam without an agreement, we will likely see more diplomatic spats – and verbal confrontation.

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