

From Water Dispute to Security Risk: The GERD, the Nile, and the Horn-Red Sea Security Nexus

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- The dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is no longer driven by questions of water allocation and technical management. It is increasingly shaped by regional security dynamics in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, including military alignments, maritime access disputes, and regional instability.
- This shift has stalled negotiations, as issues such as data sharing and dam operations extend beyond technical matters to questions of sovereignty, trust, and strategic balance. Final-status water diplomacy alone is therefore insufficient for preventing escalation.

The ongoing dispute over water security and competing legal claims to Nile water rights between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia took shape in April 2011, following Ethiopia's unilateral decision to begin construction of the GERD on the Blue Nile. Although negotiations have often been framed primarily as a bilateral confrontation between Egypt and Ethiopia, Sudan remains an important downstream stakeholder, balancing concerns about water security and dam safety with potential benefits from regulated flows and electricity imports. Initially centered on risks associated with reservoir filling and dam operations, the dispute has gradually evolved into a broader regional security challenge. Military alignments, competition over maritime access, and political instability across the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea now shape how Egypt and Ethiopia in particular approach the GERD project. This policy brief traces how this shift occurred and explains why efforts to prevent escalation will remain limited unless security risks and mutual distrust are addressed directly.

From Egypt's perspective, the dam is more than a development project. Egypt depends on the Nile for over 90% of its renewable freshwater resources, so any risks to river flows are [treated as a matter of national security](#). Egyptian leaders have raised this concern in international forums, including the UN Security Council, warning that unilateral actions on the dam could threaten Egypt's water security and national stability.

Ethiopia considers the dam to be a key project for its economic development towards [expanding its regional role, especially through](#)

[exporting electricity](#). Because it is landlocked, Ethiopia has increasingly integrated Nile diplomacy into its wider strategic efforts to enhance its regional position, including gaining access to the Red Sea. Since 2024, Nile politics have become closely tied to broader security developments in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia's pursuit of port access through Somaliland has merged with its dispute with Egypt over the dam, leading regional actors to interpret these previously separate disputes over Nile governance and maritime access through a single security lens.

Ethiopia's January 2024 memorandum with Somaliland, which focused on port access and possible recognition, marked this shift and led to a [regional diplomatic crisis](#) involving Egypt, Turkey, the Gulf states, the African Union (AU), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Egypt responded by deepening its relations with Somalia, including expanded security cooperation, illustrating how competition with Ethiopia has extended beyond Nile diplomacy into broader regional security questions.

Outside actors have also become more involved in the dispute. In mid-January 2026, the United States (US) signaled [renewed interest in mediating between Egypt and Ethiopia](#) over the Nile, a move that would help reduce tensions only if supported by clear safeguards. Meanwhile, [Israel's recognition of Somaliland](#) and the subsequent US defense of that position have further altered regional diplomacy and complicated de-escalation efforts.

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Why Have Negotiations Stalled?

Despite many years of talks, negotiations over the GERD have achieved little progress. The negotiating environment has only become more complex over time, as technical questions are frequently interpreted through political, sovereignty, and security lenses rather than treated as neutral engineering issues. Matters such as drought release rules, data sharing, and ways to resolve disputes were once seen as technical issues. Today, they are often understood as signs of trust or pressure and are approached as questions of sovereignty. In the absence of [agreed-upon standards, each side has tended to assume the worst of the other](#). This has hardened negotiating positions and increased tension.

[Domestic politics have also made compromise difficult](#). In Egypt, resistance to the dam is presented as protecting the Nile as a vital source of life. In Ethiopia, outside pressure is often described as a threat to national independence and development. These views help governments maintain support at home but leave little room for technical compromise. Egypt's engagement with Somalia and Eritrea, Ethiopia's efforts to gain access to the Red Sea, and shifting positions among the Gulf states further demonstrate that [water policy is now closely linked to regional security planning](#).

Routine operational decisions are also being interpreted increasingly through a security lens rather than being approached as cooperative measures. Delays in data sharing or ambiguous public statements are therefore often read as signs of pressure or hostility. In this context, even minor incidents related to routine operations can easily escalate by reinforcing existing distrust and suspicion.

Risks of Escalation

The current security environment increases the risk of rapid escalation. [A serious drought or an unexpected decision about dam operations could quickly cause alarm](#), especially when information is limited. Without clear communications, governments may assume hostile intentions and respond defensively.

Geopolitical [competition in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa adds further escalation risk to Nile relations](#). Ethiopia's pursuit of maritime access and Egypt's growing ties with coastal states increasingly link Nile diplomacy to wider regional rivalries, even when water management is not the immediate trigger.

[Instability in downstream Sudan has further increased the fragility of the situation](#). Ongoing conflict has weakened Sudan's capacity for technical coordination, data sharing, and dam safety monitoring, while limiting its ability to act as an intermediary between Egypt and Ethiopia. This reduces channels for cooperation and increases the risk of miscalculation during operational or political crises related to the GERD.

A Security- and Operations-Focused Approach

Because the dispute is now closely intertwined with security concerns, a final-status treaty focused only on water allocation is unlikely to be sufficient to resolve the dispute. This brief proposes a security- and operations-oriented approach to reduce tensions and prevent escalation. At the center of this approach is an operations-first package that manages security risks without requiring major political concessions. This includes agreeing in advance on clear rules for water releases during extreme conditions and sharing real-time data through agreed-upon systems. The GERD should also draw on independent technical verification supported by the AU and neutral experts. A clear process must link operational problems to political consultation before any military responses.

Effective crisis management will require reliable communication. Rapid contact channels should be established to address unexpected dam operational or security-related incidents in the Horn of Africa or the Red Sea that could also affect Nile relations. Targeted mediation can help support these steps. Priority should be given to creating binding operational commitments and technical oversight through incremental steps that build confidence. Over time, joint basin planning, especially around climate forecasting and drought preparedness, can deepen cooperation by creating tangible interests in stability.

Strategic Implications and Recommendations

Egypt's focus should shift from opposing the GERD to managing operational risks through clear, verifiable rules while linking Nile cooperation to broader regional stability efforts through the AU and IGAD. For Ethiopia, greater transparency and acceptance of independent monitoring would ease concerns among downstream countries, particularly Egypt and Sudan, whose heavy dependence on Nile flows makes them especially sensitive to upstream dam operations. Clearer communication about long-term plans for Red Sea access could also reduce overall regional suspicion. Sudan, despite internal conflict, should maintain basic technical coordination on dam safety.

Regional mediators need to connect water governance with security risk management to prevent the dispute from spreading into wider conflicts. Given their significant economic ties to both Egypt and Ethiopia, external actors like the US, the European Union, the Gulf states, and China can support this effort by strengthening verification and crisis management mechanisms. Japan, as a neutral and trusted partner with strong regional relationships, can contribute through quiet diplomacy, technical support, and confidence-building measures.

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