STUDY NOTES · BASIC CONCEPT

What is the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)?

International Relations

26 Jan 2017

BACKGROUND

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), located on the Blue Nile River in Ethiopia, is Africa's largest hydroelectric project, with a capacity to generate over 5,000 megawatts of electricity. Construction began in 2011, and the dam was fully completed and inaugurated in September 2025, with its reservoir filling finalized in 2024.

The dispute primarily involves Ethiopia (upstream) and Egypt (downstream), with Sudan also affected as a riparian state. At its core, the conflict revolves around water rights, allocation, and the potential impact on Nile River flows, which are vital for the region's economies and populations.

Key Elements of the Dispute

Ethiopia's Perspective

Ethiopia, which contributes over 85% of the Nile's water from its highlands, views the GERD as essential for national development, poverty alleviation, and energy security—over half its population lacks reliable electricity. The country argues the dam is non-consumptive (focused on hydropower, not irrigation), won't significantly reduce downstream flows, and is a sovereign right. Ethiopia has rejected colonial-era treaties and insists on flexible, sovereign management, preferring African Union-led talks over external mediation.

Egypt's Perspective

Egypt relies on the Nile for about 97% of its water needs, supporting agriculture, drinking water, and a population exceeding 100 million. It sees the GERD as an existential threat, fearing reduced water during reservoir filling (especially rapid filling) and droughts, which could exacerbate projected water scarcity by 2025.

Egypt demands a legally binding agreement on filling timelines (preferring 12-21 years vs. Ethiopia's 6 years), operations, drought mitigation, and dispute resolution, citing potential violations of international law and historical rights.

Sudan's Role

As a middle riparian, Sudan shares concerns about water security and flooding but also sees potential benefits like regulated flows and cheap electricity from the dam. However, it aligns more with Egypt in demanding guarantees.

BECOME IAS
AI-Powered UPSC Preparation by ZINKPOT

Historical Context

The roots trace to colonial-era agreements: the 1929 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty and the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement between Egypt and Sudan, which allocated nearly all Nile waters to them (Egypt getting 55.5 billion cubic meters annually) but excluded Ethiopia.

Ethiopia rejects these as outdated and unfair, leading to decades of tension. A 2015 Declaration of Principles among the three countries committed to equitable use, but disagreements persist on implementation.

Escalations and Current Status

Tensions peaked when Ethiopia unilaterally began filling the reservoir in 2020, contrary to Egypt's calls for a binding deal. Egypt has appealed to the UN Security Council, threatened military options (including statements about "blowing up" the dam), and sought international support, while Ethiopia has accused Egypt of hegemony. Multiple mediation efforts (U.S., EU, African Union) have failed, with no agreement as of 2026.

Recent U.S. offers under President Trump to restart mediation highlight ongoing risks of conflict, potentially the

first modern war over water.

The dispute underscores broader challenges in transboundary water governance, with climate change and population growth amplifying stakes. As of January 2026, no resolution is in sight, but diplomatic channels remain open.

BECOME IAS
AI-Powered UPSC Preparation by ZINKPOT