Beyond the Nile's Banks:
A Conflict That Runs Deeper Than Water

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Introduction

This essay explores resource scarcity, regional power struggles, and historical grievances fueling the Nile Basin Dispute.

The Nile — the world's longest river — is an indispensable water source for several African nations, including Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan. It has also been a source of their conflicts and interstate (and intrastate) wars for over a century (Palios, 2019). The struggle for water between these countries is recognized internationally as a significant cause of recent armed conflicts. Exacerbating the situation are the ancient religious and mythological beliefs attached to the river (Milicich, 2019).

The conflict intensified in 1821, rooted in competing claims to the Nile's waters. Power struggles stemmed from each country's entitlement to the river's water. Each country's need to control the river's flow and resources led to an invasion of Sudan and, in 1875, to Egypt's occupation of Ethiopia. Thereafter, the Anglo-Egyptian War broke out, which instigated the British colonization of Egypt (Acquafredda, 2021). British rule persisted until 1952.

The Treaties and Attempts to Delineate Equitable Rights

Although treaties were drawn, such as the Nile Treaty of 1902 (developed by the British, who considered themselves guardians of the Nile) and the Nile Waters Agreements of 1929 (Crabitès, 1929) and 1959, history tells us that they favored Egypt, giving Cairo "almost total control over the Nile" (Palios, 2019). The treaties discussed the building of dams and water restrictions, and were insufficient at settling the disputes. Again, the parties' interests hinged on their belief about who deserved more shares. Egypt considered itself more deserving, having a more extensive history with the River. Ethiopia claimed geographical rights because 95% of the river's water flows through its territory, specifically its wetlands. Sudan argued that its geographical location between the other two countries made it a key player in negotiations.

After years of mediation, fair and equitable terms were left unmet. Instead of coming together to understand the need for water availability for all, their competitive conflict style and self-interests, combined with European influence and interests, blocked any viable options that would have allowed all three countries to access the Nile more advantageously. In 1999, the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) was created, stating it sought "to develop the river cooperatively, share substantial socioeconomic benefits, and promote regional peace and security" (Nile Basin Initiative, n.d.; Abawari, 2011; Wendl, 2016).

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and Rising Tensions

The initiative was eventually considered a failure because each actor, still maintaining a state-centric attitude, was unable to delineate clear goals and timeframes. In 2010, Ethiopia

announced its plans to build the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). This was perceived as a threat to Sudan and Egypt, potentially shutting down their water supply. Egyptian statesmen claimed they would have no options other than force to stop the dam, which has remained an ongoing threat.

The dam was finally completed in the summer of 2024, and Egypt maintains that filling its reservoir and inducting its power turbines will constantly threaten 98% of Egypt's water supply. Egypt considers the dam a "violation of international law," claiming that Ethiopia should prevent substantial harm to those relying on the Nile's resources (United Nations Press Release, 2020, June 29). That same year, the United States, under President Trump's orders, cut aid to Ethiopia over the dam (Zengerle, 2020). Egypt's attempts to employ international diplomatic pressure were partially successful. Nevertheless, to further ensure their domestic water usage, Egypt instituted country-wide measures to provide and save water more efficiently (El Bedawy, 2014).

Economic Cooperation and Incentive Compatibility

In a peer-reviewed case study of the Nile Basin, Wu and Whittington discussed "incentive compatibility" and the prospective gains through riparian cooperation (2006). They purported two conditions necessary for an allocation of water to be acceptable. First, individual rationality, requiring that "benefits of cooperation allocated to any participating country must at least equal what that country would obtain by acting unilaterally (Wu & Whittington, 2006, para. 6). They went on to claim a distinction between acting unilaterally and maintaining the status quo, which they consider a reference point that insinuates a favored distribution to the countries already benefiting heavily. At that time, Egypt and Sudan were taking more water. The second condition that must be reached for international cooperation is explained by the scholars: "…that the aggregate benefits allocated to any subgroup of riparian counties be at least the same as what that partial coalition could achieve on its own (Wu & Whittington, 2006, para. 7).

Incentive compatibility, according to the authors, is the only way the ten countries they cite (Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Eritrea) will be able to achieve their goals (get what they need from the Nile) since there is such a gap between the "Quantity of water available in the basin and the amount of water sought by individual riparian countries for water resource development projects" (Wu & Whittington, 2006, para. 11).

Did incentive compatibility work? Some scholars argue that benefit-sharing has not yielded satisfactory large-scale solutions for the region. In April of 2024, in the abstract of their article titled "*Energy trade tempers Nile water conflict*," authors Etichia et al. state, "Although benefit-sharing of water resources in the Nile Basin has been promoted to counteract water volume disputes, it has not yielded actionable solutions to the toughest negotiations over the past two decades" (Etichia et al., 2024, para. 1). There is a lack of quantifiable data to support benefit-sharing proposals. However, through a spatial multisector simulation, they showed quantifiable results for reallocation (Etichia et al., 2024, para. 1).

From Benefit-Sharing to Energy Trade

Rather than dividing the Niles flow into percentages, researchers Etichia et al. (2024) focused on how each country relies on the water to grow food, generate energy, and trade power. By looking at utilization rather than division, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt could all benefit. Etichia et al. argued that the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has the potential to

alleviate agricultural water shortages in Egypt, increase hydropower production in Ethiopia and Sudan, mitigate energy restrictions in Sudan, generate revenue for Ethiopia through power trade, and contribute to overall reductions in CO_2 emissions. Since the region's population is expected to reach one billion by 2050 (Etichia et al., 2024), the authors warn that the Nile's resources will come under even greater pressure. Without resolution, the consequences could threaten the very health and survival of the countries that depend on it (Etichia et al., 2024).

Then, on October 13, 2024, a significant shift occurred. The Nile Basin States (2024) announced that the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) had officially gone into effect, after more than a decade of negotiation (Nile Basin States, 2024). The CFA was ratified by six Nile Basin states—Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Sudan—which replaced the Nile Basin Initiative with a permanent body: the Nile River Basin Commission (NRBC). The Commission's goal was to promote the fair and sustainable use of the river, foster cooperation, and establish a peaceful process for resolving disputes (Nile Basin States, 2024).

Egypt and Sudan agreed to nearly all the terms, leaving one article to be reopened within six months. During that time, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali tried to secure access to the Red Sea through Somalia, reigniting conflict as it was widely viewed as an attempt to destabilize the Horn of Africa (Karr, 2024). In response, Egypt had deployed military forces in an attempt to help Somalia (Sheikh & Paravicini, 2024), while Somalia looked to Turkey, signing two new deals. To secure his influence and form new alliances, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed seemed willing to risk war.

Abiy Ahmed Ali's strategies eventually paid off. In January 2024, Ethiopia and the independent government of Somalia signed a controversial "Memorandum of Understanding" to create an access route through the port of Berbera from Addis Ababa. After a year of heightened tensions, Turkey mediated the final maritime agreement, the Ethiopia-Somalia Ankara Declaration, signed on December 11, 2024 (United Nations Press Release, 2024, December 12). Although the countries declared they had resolved their differences through "friendship and mutual trust," it became clear that after years of treaties and pacts urging international diplomacy, the conflict had evolved into a far-reaching, multi-continent dominance play while still framed as a water dispute.

Conflict Theories and Power Dynamics

When applying conflict theory to this multifaceted human predicament, one could look to Bartos and Wehr (2002): "A situation in which actors use conflict behavior against each other to obtain incompatible goals and/or to express their hostility" (Swarbrick, 2024). Resource conflict arises from competition for limited resources (Gallo, 2013), which becomes exacerbated by naturally occurring events and environmental issues (Wils et al., 1998; Stanton, 2010). Those in conflict will often resort to extreme measures to retain or acquire scarce resources, including repressing those who are less powerful and financially less capable of accessing the resources themselves (Swarbrick, 2024). Environmental security and increased resource scarcity cause social effects, unequal access, deprivation, and ethnic conflict (Stanton, 2010). Scarcity in a country can weaken its government, making it easier for other countries to take advantage (Stanton, 2010). Additionally, where there is a history of different types of conflict (religious, geopolitical, territorial, etc.), resource availability can instigate more hostility and power plays among actors (Stanton, 2010).

To fully comprehend any conflict, then, it is essential to understand the key actors involved. Oberschall (1978), in his *thesis "Theories of Social Conflict*," states the difference

between autonomous goal formulation and the mobilization of resources. The first postulates that outside forces are not manipulating the controlling leader, and the latter suggests that this leader has control over their organization. Control as an underlying factor implies that a resource conflict could be vertical, not horizontal, meaning that the actor with the most power has the most control, resulting in a more power-based conflict than a resource-based one. In this case, he suggests that initially, Egypt instigated more conflict between its neighbors by having the upper hand. Eventually, Ethiopia began its vertical climb by building the dam, thus restricting Egypt and tying its hands.

Relative Deprivation and Historical Animosities

This posturing to harness more power and control seems like a gorilla move, whereby puffing and rapidly punching one's chest shows the enemy who is in control. The question is, was it long coming? Building a dam might be symbolic, showing how Ethiopia's frustration has been "damming up" for a century. Since their bold act threatens their neighbors by hindering goal attainment and survival, a new insight emerges: the potential for relative deprivation and moral disengagement among the actors. Relative deprivation theory (Mamasani et al., 2024) posits that the perception of disadvantages and an inability to achieve one's goals leads to anger and frustration (Galtung, 1953, 2009). It causes deep resentment toward the actor in power responsible for their deficit, and in this case, the suffering of these nations and their people. Within social cognitive theory, Bandura (2018) suggests that moral disengagement arises from the regulation of self-sanctions. When actors rationalize harmful behavior and overlook its negative consequences, they disengage from moral reasoning. This leads to dehumanizing the object of their criticism and disdain (2018). Human predispositions and innate tendencies lead nations to commit egregious acts against one another, often stemming from a sense of self-righteousness and entitlement.

Gurr (1970, 2015) suggested that there is a potential discrepancy in an actor's value expectations, which lies between what they have and what they believe they are entitled to. In this case, as previously discussed, the actors are disputing the justness of their claim to the water, based on their religious, geographical, and longstanding historical claims (Gurr, 1970, 2015; Wendl, 2016). Some actors feel more and more deprived since the installation of the GERD. To gain more power and balance between actors, they are seeking alignment with more commanding and sympathetic nations to stabilize and enhance their economic and political stability.

In July 2025, Ethiopia declared the official completion of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Associated Press, 2025). The nation considered it a leap toward energy independence. This was met with obvious disapproval from Egypt and Sudan, and both countries continue to claim that Ethiopia violated widely held international standards. Egypt claims to rely on the Nile for 98% of its water and has intensified its international appeals for support. Most recently, state officials welcomed U.S. President Trump's re-involvement and his urging of the global community to support a legally binding agreement (Associated Press, 2025; Elkabany & Yilmaz, 2025).

Meanwhile, the region's tensions continue to ripple. Clashes in South Sudan—another Nile-dependent nation—caused critical humanitarian aid to be blocked from tens of thousands of children. Their decision to bring harm to innocents underscores the extent to which the need for water has instigated broader regional instability, anger, and resentment (Reuters, 2025a). Recently, Egypt announced plans for a new desert city that will divert part of its Nile allocation

(Reuters, 2025b), which is another indication that infrastructure and water policy are at the center of national survival strategies (Reuters, 2025b). These developments further cement each nation's adamant foothold, not only hindering symbiotic resolution but potentially instigating more intense conflict.

Conclusion

Toward Resolution or Prolonged Stalemate?

There is no doubt that this conflict is about resources, but for the Egyptians, how politically and religiously driven were they initially (Milicich, 2019)? The colliding forces between Ethiopia and Egypt can be seen as a robust and long-standing hatred and animosity stemming from their war in the late 1870s. Is Ethiopia trying to cripple its neighbors, especially Egypt? Ethiopia's actions forged an allegiance between Somalia and Egypt, which, some pundits believe, could perpetuate "more than a war of words (Wafula, 2024). It seems there is no end to this battle because there is no clear beginning. Azar (1990) believed that conflict was protracted when the "genesis of the conflict" is not brought to the surface. Lederach (1996) advises against pushing past historic events. To move forward productively, actors need a better understanding of shared events, which will reshape their perception and influence how they negotiate. Mitchell (1989) takes the concept further, positing that understanding the origins of a conflict is essential to "charting" its resolution. Without bringing meaning to the onset, efforts made to resolve the conflict may misfire, backfire, or fail to address the underlying grievances that perpetuate it.

Frey (1993) offers a valuable lens through which the complexities of conflict and cooperation can be understood. He explained that the political and social factors—power struggles, threat perception, and imbalances—underlie resource conflicts and will significantly influence the level of cooperation. In the Nile dispute, where layers of psychological trauma, political competition, religious dogma, and existential interests intersect, no single conflict theory can fully account for the depth of tension. Moreover, if a conclusive conflict theory does not hold, what negotiation theory should be applied? Can any strategy beyond praying for rain resolve this conflict and promote long-lasting cooperation and peace? Kurt Lewin said, "If you want to truly understand something, try to change it" (Swarbrick, 2024). In this case, perhaps it is not just understanding that leads to change, but change itself that deepens our understanding.

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