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Egypt's Expanding Role in the Horn of Africa

Egypt is stepping up its military, diplomatic and economic presence in the Horn of Africa. In recent months, Cairo has signed a series of economic and security agreements with countries in the region and is preparing to deploy troops to Somalia. These developments come at a time when Egypt is locked in a long-standing water dispute with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which was inaugurated in early September this year. At the same time, Ethiopia's quest for a direct sea access has strained its relations with its neighbors, some of whom appear to be aligning with Cairo to counterbalance Addis Ababa.

If not carefully managed, these dynamics could have serious repercussions for regional stability. First, intensifying competition between Egypt, Ethiopia and other powers risks inflaming ongoing conflicts in Sudan and Somalia. Second, deeper Egyptian involvement could further strain Ethiopia's already tense relations with its neighbours. Most concerning, an Egyptian military presence in Somalia raises the risk of miscalculation and the possibility of direct confrontation between Egypt and Ethiopia.

The Horn of Africa, already beset by multiple conflicts and crowded with external actors vying for influence, can ill afford a further escalation of geopolitical rivalries. Instability in the region would also have consequences far beyond its borders. The African Union, together with the European Union, China and the United States, should therefore use their influence, individually or in concert, to encourage Ethiopia and Egypt to return to negotiations on Nile dispute, help defuse regional tensions linked to Ethiopia's quest for sea access, and prevent Somalia and Sudan from becoming arenas of proxy conflict.

Introduction

The arrival of two Egyptian C-130 transport aircraft in Mogadishu on 27 August 2024 marked the return of Egyptian military activity to the Horn of Africa after more than four decades. The delivery, which carried weapons and ammunition, followed a defense pact signed earlier that month.¹ The move came at a time

when the Somali government was engaged in a diplomatic standoff with its Ethiopian counterpart over a port-for-recognition deal that Addis Ababa had signed with the de facto independent region of Somaliland.² The event sent shockwaves through the region, particularly in Ethiopia, Egypt's regional rival, which vowed that it 'will not stand idle while

1 News24, 'Egypt sends first arms in decades to Somalia, after Ethiopia's deal with Somaliland', News24, 2024, <https://www.news24.com/news24/africa/news/egypt-sends-first-arms-in-decades-to-somalia-after-ethiopia-deal-with-somaliland-20240828> (accessed September 2025).

2 BBC News, 2024. 'Ethiopia-Somaliland deal: Can the Horn of Africa rift be healed?', BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67911057> (accessed September 2025).

other actors are taking measures to destabilize the region'.³

Somalia is just one of several countries in the region with which Egypt has been recently working to cultivate closer ties. Situated in Egypt's immediate southern neighborhood and bound to it by the two major water bodies, the Nile and Red Sea, the Horn of Africa received closer attention from successive Egyptian governments, and it remains a key foreign policy focus of President Abdel Fattah el -Sisi's government.

Egypt's engagement with the region is historically driven by strategic interests linked to the Nile and its influence in Sudan. The Horn of Africa contains many countries through which the Nile flows (riparian countries) and is a source of more than 86 percent of the river's water, an essential resource, since the Nile supplies over 90 percent of Egypt's total water needs.⁴ On the other hand Cairo sees its relationship with Sudan as key to its Nile interests and its own internal security.⁵

Cairo's regional strategy is therefore centered around two major pillars; containing Ethiopia, its main rival in the Nile Basin, and keeping Sudan's internal politics aligned with its interests. Recently, Cairo has seized upon the opportunity created by souring relations between Ethiopia and its neighbours to make inroads in the region at Addis Ababa's expense. President Sisi's government has moved to cement its advantage by signing a slew of economic and security

agreements with governments of Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti. Most importantly, it has come to establish a direct military presence in Ethiopia's 'backyard' through the planned deployment of its forces in Somalia. Meanwhile, Egypt's determination to maintain its sway over Sudan has drawn it deep into the country's ongoing civil war. Cairo has thrown its support behind the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), which it views as more aligned with its strategic interests in Sudan and the broader region.

This policy brief examines Cairo's regional strategy and the various tools it employs to advance its interests, particularly concerning the Nile and Sudan. It also analyses Egypt's recent diplomatic, military and economic overtures toward Ethiopia's neighbours. The brief concludes with key takeaways and policy recommendations for governments across the Horn of Africa, as well as for external partners, including the European Union (EU).

A struggle for water security

Maintaining unrivaled access to the Nile is a long-standing policy of Egypt and bedrock of its regional policy since precolonial times.⁶ After its independence from British rule, Egypt was able to achieve this goal with relative ease, as other Nile Basin countries remained too weak and impoverished to undertake major water projects on the river. Cairo's claims to the Nile waters are rooted in two key agreements: a 1929 treaty between Egypt and Great Britain on behalf of its East African colonies Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika, which recognized Egypt's 'natural and historical rights in the waters of the Nile' and gave it a veto over major projects by upstream countries; and a 1959 agreement between Egypt

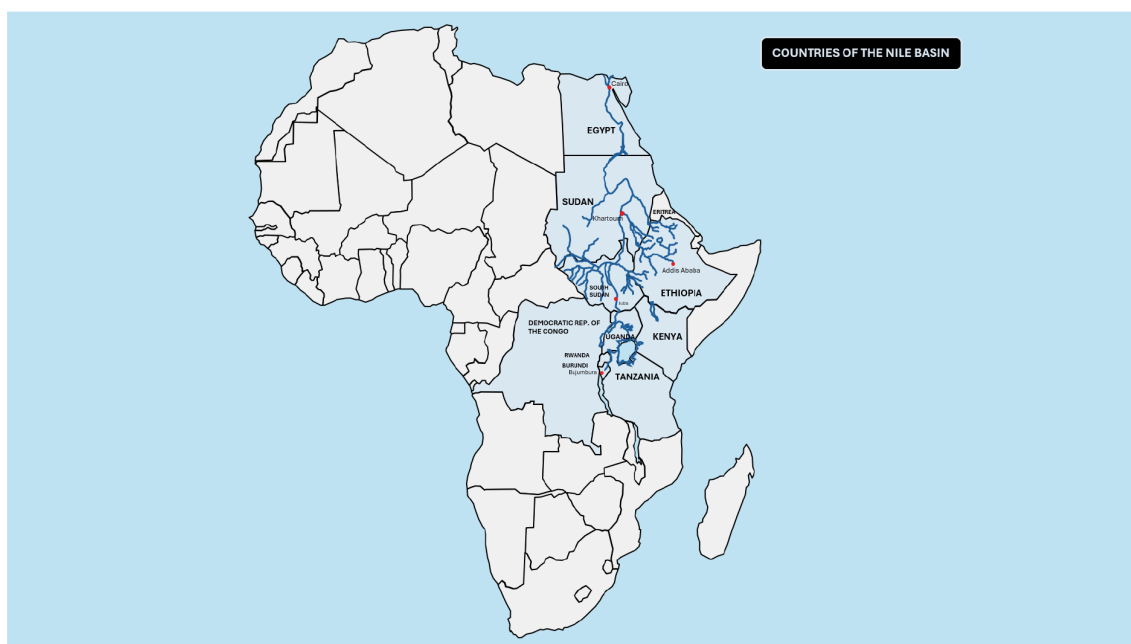
3 Birr Metrics, "Cannot stand idle" – Ethiopia warns of risks from Egypt's Somalia deployment', *Birr Metrics*, 2024, <https://birrmetrics.com/cannot-stand-idle-ethiopia-warns-of-risks-from-egypts-somalia-deployment/> (accessed September 2025).

4 Around 95 percent of Egypt's population lives within 20 km of the Nile River and its delta. *Egypt—The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency, 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/egypt/> (accessed September 2025).

5 Cafiero, G. 2023. 'Analysis: The War in Sudan Is a Problem for Egypt', *Al Jazeera*, 12 July, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/12/analysis-the-war-in-sudan-is-a-problem-for-egypt> (accessed September 2025).

6 Verhoeven, H. 2015. *Water, Civilization and Power in Sudan: The Political Economy of Military-Islamist State Building*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/water-civilisation-and-power-in-sudan/CBD2A3FD5224741D981860C7218124D8> (accessed September 2025).

Figure 1 Map of riparian countries of the Nile



and Sudan, which allocated the entire flow of the Nile between the two countries.⁷

What challenge there was to Cairo’s ‘hydro-hegemony’ mostly came from Ethiopia, which is the source of 86 percent of the river’s flow. Successive Ethiopian governments rejected both the 1929 and 1959 agreements on the basis that Ethiopia was not party to them and asserted the country’s rights to use the waters of the river. Egypt’s policy, therefore, largely revolved around the twin goals of preventing Addis Ababa from building major water infrastructures on the Nile and countering its influence among other basin countries.

Cairo used a mix of diplomacy, military pressure and regional alliances to achieve its objectives.

On the diplomatic front, Egypt’s efforts were concentrated on discouraging foreign

governments from providing financial and technical support for major water infrastructure in Ethiopia. Cairo’s warm relations with the United States since the early 1970s were particularly important in this regard, allowing Egypt to use Washington’s influence over the World Bank to deny Addis Ababa financing for its water projects.⁸ Other Western governments and Arab countries also refrained from supporting infrastructure projects over the Nile without Egypt’s consent.⁹

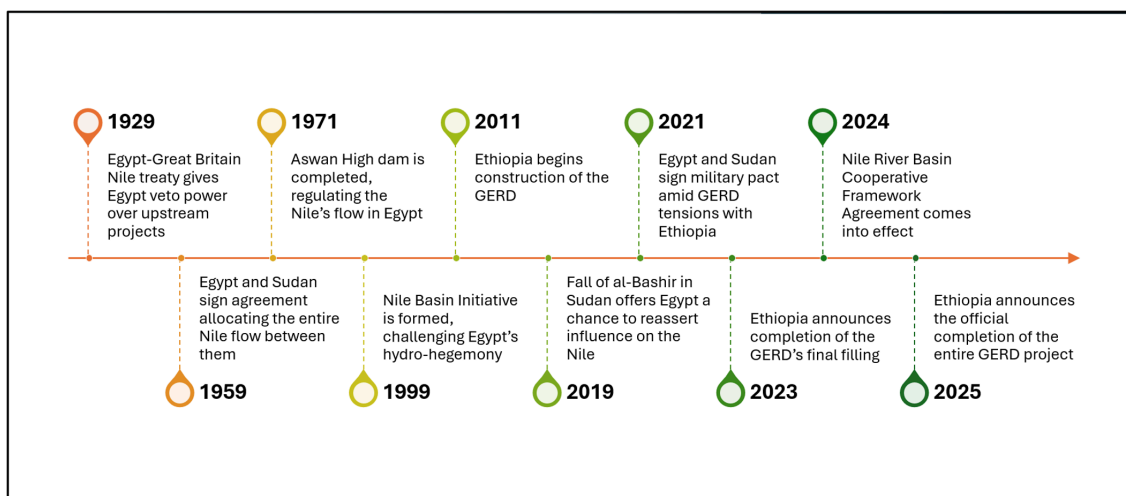
Regional alliances with Ethiopia’s adversaries and support for separatist movements in Ethiopia also featured prominently in Cairo’s approach towards Ethiopia. During the Cold War, Cairo was aligned with Somalia and supported it in the 1977–1978 war with Ethiopia and it also sponsored separatist movements

7 Yost, N. 2025. ‘Courts or compromise? Resolving the Nile River dispute under international law’, *American University International Law Review*, 24 March, <https://auilr.org/2025/03/24/courts-or-compromise-resolving-the-nile-river-dispute-under-international-law/> (accessed September 2025).

8 Demerew, K. 2025. ‘State-building on the Nile: Domestic Politics and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam’ in *Nile Basin Politics*, ed. Roach, S., Hudson, D., and Demerew, K., Elgar, 19–38, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803927176.00009> (accessed September 2025).

9 Verhoeven, H. op. cit. p.153.

Figure 2 Timeline of the Nile dispute



such as the Eritrean Liberation Front.¹⁰ Cairo combined such indirect military activities with occasional explicit threats of direct military action.¹¹ These factors, combined with Ethiopia's internal political and economic struggles and the absence of meaningful cooperation among upstream countries, ensured that Cairo remained the hegemon of the Nile basin at the turn of the century.

The formation of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) in 1999 provided upstream countries with a platform to mount a coordinated challenge to Cairo's longstanding dominance. Within the NBI, Egypt, backed by Sudan, insisted on maintaining

the status quo based on colonial era agreements while upstream countries, led by Ethiopia, pushed for negotiations for equitable water usage.¹² Tensions escalated when upstream states opened the Nile River Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) for signature in April 2010 despite Egyptian and Sudanese objections that it failed to safeguard their existing water rights and usage. Egypt and Sudan subsequently suspended their participation in the NBI.¹³ Though Ethiopia remained the main challenger to Egypt's hydro-hegemony, even after the formation of the NBI, the solidarity among upstream countries during the CFA negotiations marked a turning point with lasting consequences for Egypt's Nile policy.

It was in this context that Ethiopia began construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in April 2011, marking

10 During the Ethio-Somali war 1977-1978, which broke out when Somalia invaded Ethiopia, Anwar Sadat's government joined the US in supporting Somalia against Ethiopia's Soviet-backed communist government, including by providing USD 30 million worth of military aid to the Somali army. Earlier, under Gamal Abdel Naser, Egypt had been the principal backer of the separatist Eritrean Liberation Front, allowing it to set up a training ground near Alexandria. Horn Institute, *The HORN Bulletin: Egypt and Ethiopia: The Geopolitics of Resources and Security*, Horn Institute, V(VI), November–December 2022, <https://horninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/HORN-Bulletin-Vol-V-Iss-VI-November-December-2022.pdf> (accessed September 2025).

11 Zelalem, Z. 2017. 'Analysis: Nile diplomacy: Cunning arm twists and turns, but whose losing game?', *Addis Standard*, 10 February, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-nile-diplomacy-cunning-arm-twists-turns-whose-losing-game/> (accessed September 2025).

12 Tawfik, R. 2015. 'Revisiting Hydro-hegemony from a Benefit-Sharing Perspective: The Case of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam', *Politics and Governance*, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338209427_Revisiting_Hydro-hegemony_from_a_benefit-sharing_perspective_The_Case_of_the_Grand_Ethiopian_Renaissance_Dam (accessed September 2025).

13 Salman, S. 2017. 'The Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement: The impasse is breakable!', *International Water Law Project Blog*, <https://www.internationalwaterlaw.org/blog/2017/06/19/the-nile-basin-cooperative-framework-agreement-the-impasse-is-breakable/> (accessed September 2025).

Addis Ababa’s first concrete step to assert its interests over the Nile after a series of previous unsuccessful attempts. The timing of this decision, coinciding with the Arab Spring that overthrew Egypt’s long-time ruler Hosni Mubarak, was particularly notable.

Once Egypt’s internal political situation stabilised, Cairo responded by attempting to halt the construction of the dam through a combination of diplomacy and threats of military action.¹⁴ **Amid fractious tripartite negotiations involving Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia, Cairo ramped up diplomatic efforts to garner support from Ethiopia’s neighbours and other Nile Basin Countries.**¹⁵ While failing to halt the construction of the dam, those efforts have helped Egypt to gain some diplomatic ground. Notably, Egypt’s outreach towards South Sudan and Kenya helped it to cultivate closer diplomatic and security ties with those countries.¹⁶

Further South, Cairo’s efforts resulted in a change in tone from the Ugandan government, which had in the past supported Ethiopia’s position and had been among the loudest voices of the rights of upstream countries. Egypt also received a pledge from Joseph Kabila’s government in Kinshasa to **‘not sign any agreements that harm Egyptian interests’**.¹⁷

Cairo’s outreach to those governments involved economic incentives as well as diplomatic support and security ties. Besides growing trade and investment ties, Egypt provided financial as well as technical support for mostly small-scale water projects in those countries.¹⁸ At different times, Cairo also employed its diplomatic heft, including its nonpermanent membership of the UN security council between 2016 and 2017 and its influence in the Arab League, to back governments it was courting.¹⁹ **Moreover, Egypt signed a raft of military and security cooperation agreements with Ethiopia’s neighbours and other Nile Basin countries.**²⁰

Beyond diplomatic maneuvers, Egyptian leadership also employed military threats to pressure Addis Ababa in times of heightened tension. In one such moment in 2013, the Egyptian president Mohamad Morsi declared, *‘We will defend each drop of Nile water with our blood if necessary’* and that *‘all options are*

14 Tawfik, R. 2016. ‘Changing Hydropolitical Relations in the Nile Basin: A Protracted Transition’, *The International Spectator*, 51(3), 67–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2016.1197496> (accessed September 2025).

15 Soliman, M. 2021. ‘Egypt’s Nile strategy’, *Middle East Institute*, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/egypts-nile-strategy> (accessed September 2025).

16 President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi’s government cultivated close diplomatic and security ties with the young country from its early days. Cairo lobbied on behalf of South Sudan during its tenure in the Security Council and threw its support behind Juba’s March 2018 application to join the Arab league. *Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute: Africa Report N°271*, International Crisis Group, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/271-bridging-the-gap.pdf> (accessed September 2025). Egypt also partnered with Juba to revive the Jonglei canal, a colonial era project aimed at increasing the flow of the White Nile by draining the Sud Wetlands. The Jonglei Canal project aimed to divert water from the Sudd to prevent water loss through evaporation. However, the project was highly controversial because the Sudd is a vital ecosystem for millions of people and a wide variety of wildlife. The concerns from South Sudanese citizens and environmental experts centred on the potential for the canal to destroy local livelihoods by drying up grazing lands for cattle, devastating fisheries, and altering the region’s climate and rainfall patterns. Mayen, D. 2022. ‘South Sudan suspends dredging of Nile tributaries’, *The EastAfrican*, July 12, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/south-sudan-suspends-dredging-of-nile-tributaries-3877532> (accessed September 2025).

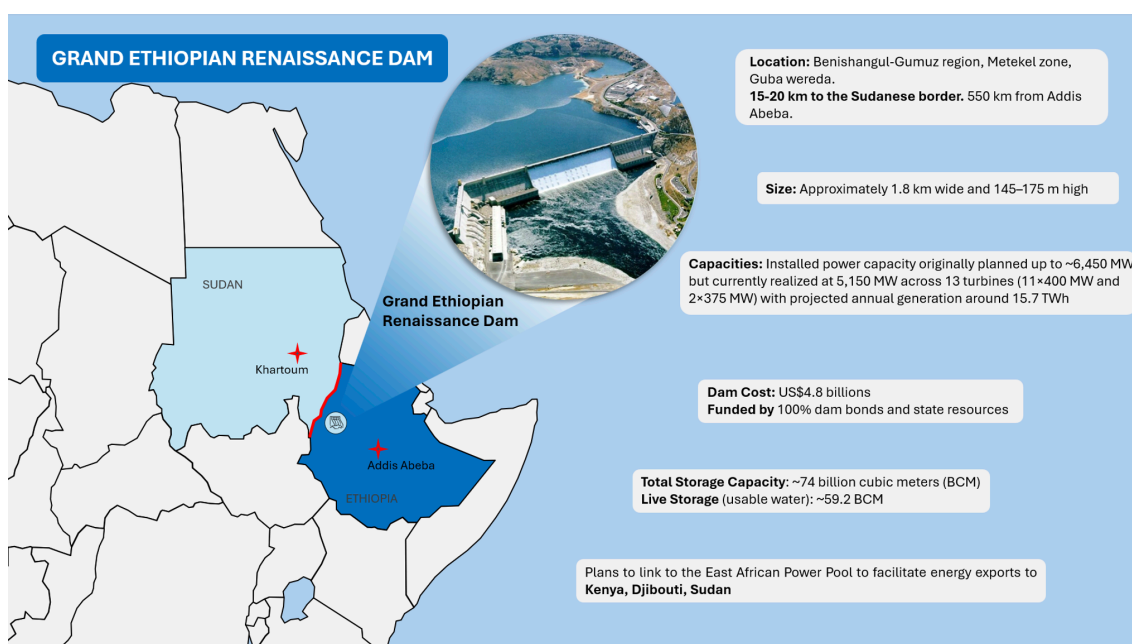
17 *Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute*, op. cit. Lawson, F. 2017. ‘Egypt versus Ethiopia: The Conflict Over the Nile Metastasizes’, *The International Spectator*, 52(1), 129–144, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2017.1333272> (accessed September 2025).

18 *Egypt and Kenya*, *State Information Service*, 20 December 2022, <https://us.sis.gov.eg/Story/173524/Egypt-and-Kenya?lang=en-us> (accessed September 2025). Lawson, F. op cit.

19 In its capacity as a non-permanent member of the Security Council between 2016 and 2017, Egypt also provided diplomatic support to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi by opposing calls for sanctions against the leadership of the two countries. *Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute*, op cit.

20 Mutambo, A. 2021. ‘Kenya and Egypt sign defence cooperation agreement’, *Daily Nation*, 26 May, <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/kenya-signs-defence-cooperation-pact-with-egypt-3415072> (accessed September 2025).

Figure 3 The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam



open'.²¹ While the el-Sisi government has made similar statements at various times and has carried out repeated joint military exercises with Sudan largely seen as targeted at Ethiopia (see next section), Cairo has so far relied primarily on indirect pressure on Addis Ababa, despite calls for direct military action from some segments of Egypt's political elite.²²

Alongside years of failed negotiations, Ethiopia has continued the construction and filling of the GERD, which significantly increased Addis Ababa's leverage. Moreover, with the dam now completed, the supply of cheap

electricity to its neighbours is expected to raise Ethiopia's influence in the region.²³ In response, Egypt is likely to intensify efforts to secure a binding agreement with Ethiopia on the management of the dam. To this end, in addition to regional diplomacy and indirect military pressure, Cairo is likely to try to draw support from the Trump administration. The latter could prove particularly decisive, given Ethiopia's growing dependence on US-dominated international financial institutions, the first Trump administration's support for Cairo's position, and President Trump's recent disparaging remarks regarding the GERD.

Meanwhile, the coming into effect in October 2024 of the Nile River Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement represents a fundamental challenge to the century-old legal basis of Egypt's hydro-hegemony and further complicates efforts to reaching trilateral

21 Ahram Online. 2012. 'President Morsi calls for Egyptian 'unity' in face of threats to Nile water', *Ahram Online*, 11 June, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/73683.aspx> (accessed September 2025).

22 Dunne, C. 2020. 'The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and Egypt's military options', *Arab Center Washington DC*, 30 July, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam-and-egypts-military-options/> (accessed September 2025). Ahram Online. 2025. 'UPDATED: Egypt will never allow Nile water to be touched: El-Sisi to Uganda president', *Ahram Online*, 12 August, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/1/551101/Egypt/UPDATED-Egypt-will-never-allow-Nile-water-to-be-to.aspx> (accessed September 2025). Tawfik, R. 2016, op. cit.

23 Donelli, F. 2025. 'In the Horn of Africa, Turkey and Egypt unfold a strategic alignment or potential rivalry', *Atlantic Council*, 23 January, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/in-the-horn-of-africa-turkey-and-egypt-unfold-a-strategic-alignment-or-potential-rivalry/> (accessed September 2025).

agreement with Ethiopia and Sudan over the GERD. Triggered by South Sudan's ratification, the CFA institutionalizes a new legal framework based on principles of 'equitable and reasonable utilization' and establishes a multilateral institution, the Nile River Basin Commission (NRBC), to govern the river. While Egypt itself has not ratified the CFA, the NRBC provides a powerful platform for the upstream coalition, challenging Egypt's long-standing preference for bilateral negotiations. While Egypt, aided by Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, has managed to temporarily delay the establishment of the commission, upstream countries are expected to push for its rapid realisation.²⁴

Maintaining influence in Sudan

While Cairo's diplomatic outreach to other upstream nations has been a key part of its strategy, its entire Nile policy had historically relied on one unwavering partner: Sudan.

The downstream alliance between Cairo and Khartoum was the backbone of Egypt's hydro-hegemony for decades. The decisive break came in 2012, when Sudan shifted its position to support Ethiopia's construction of the GERD, creating a strategic crisis for Cairo and forcing it to intensify its search for new allies.²⁵ Understanding Egypt's deep and often fraught relationship with Sudan is therefore essential to understanding its broader regional strategy.

In Omar al-Bashir's final years in power, Sudan took a more assertive posture towards Egypt partly due to growing interest from Gulf countries in Sudanese farmland following the 2007–2008 global food crisis, which diminished Cairo's role as the gatekeeper on relations

between Sudan and the Gulf monarchies.²⁶

Cairo's strategic interest in Sudan was put in jeopardy when Sudan sided with Ethiopia as it began construction of the GERD. Indeed, enticed by the potential benefits of the dam to Sudan, including cheap electricity supply and flood regulation, Bashir's government became a vocal supporter of the project.²⁷ For Khartoum, besides the benefits from the dam, aligning with Addis Ababa also offered leverage over Egypt in relation to the disputed resource-rich Halayib triangle.²⁸

The fall of Bashir's government in 2019 offered Egypt an opportunity to reassert its influence in Khartoum.

To achieve this, Cairo favoured the Sudanese Armed Forces, with which it has long-standing ties, over the civilian faction led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.²⁹ Egyptian officials also viewed the civilian leadership as too closely aligned with Addis Ababa on the GERD dispute. Thus, when the SAF under its commander Abdel Fatah Al-Burhan carried out a coup in 2021, it was with Cairo's blessing.³⁰ Following the coup, Egypt exercised its diplomatic influence to insulate the military leadership from mounting diplomatic pressure from the African Union and Western governments.³¹

24 Musoke, R. 2025. 'Ethiopia: From Nile Basin Initiative to the commission', *The Independent* (Kampala), 4 March, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202503040447.html> (accessed September 2025).

25 Sudan Tribune. 2013, 'Sudan's Bashir affirms support for Ethiopia dam project', *Sudan Tribune*. 1 May, <https://sudantribune.com/article/49656> (accessed September 2025).

26 Darwisheh, D. 2020. 'Egyptian-Sudanese Relations amidst Changing Geopolitics', *Middle East Review of International Affairs (IDE ME Review)*, 7, 2019–2020, Japan External Trade Organization (IDE-JETRO), 66–89, https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/mer/7/0/7_Vol.7_E-Art02/_pdf/-char/en (accessed September 2025).

27 Tawfik, R. 2016. op. cit. Sudan Tribune, op. cit. Tsega, A. 2021. 'The Geopolitics of Water Negotiations Succeeding the GERD Project in the Nile River Basin: The Case of Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan', *INSAMER, the-20geopolitics-20water-20negotiations-1.pdf* (accessed September 2025).

28 Lawson, F. op cit.

29 Al-Anani, K. 2023. 'Impacting elusive transitions: Egypt's policy toward Sudan and Libya', *Arab Center Washington DC*, March 1, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/impacting-elusive-transitions-egypts-policy-toward-sudan-and-libya/> (accessed September 2025).

30 Al-Anani, K. 2021. 'Sudan coup: the regional interference behind a faltering transition', *Arab Center Washington DC*, December 11, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/sudan-coup-the-regional-interference-behind-a-faltering-transition/> (accessed September 2025).

31 *Ibid.*

A fitful relationship: Egypt and Sudan

Egypt has maintained a ubiquitous presence in Sudanese affairs ever since the two countries officially separated in 1956. Owing to Egypt's superior economic and military capabilities as well as its diplomatic heft, especially its influence in Washington since the 1970s and in key Arab capitals, the relationship between the two countries remained largely asymmetrical. **Egyptian policy has consistently focused on two priorities: safeguarding its Nile water share and limiting the influence of Islamist groups in Sudan, viewed as a potential threat to domestic stability.**

Egypt maintained its influence in Sudan through a carrot and stick strategy. Cairo often provides support to governments favorable to it, mainly military governments due to the close ties between the military establishment of the two countries, through closer economic ties, diplomatic support and direct military assistance in times of crisis. Notably, Egyptian support, including repeated military interventions, was instrumental in sustaining the government of Jaafar Nimeiry (1969–1985). During this period, Egypt also facilitated financial backing for Sudan's ambitious economic projects from other Arab countries.³² In return for its support, Egypt received several concessions from the Nimeiry government including permission to undertake the Jonglei canal project.³³

Conversely, Cairo often put pressure on governments it saw as detrimental to its interests by imposing diplomatic and economic isolation as well as through overt and covert support to opposition factions. Instances of this include Egypt's support for the 1969 coup against Sudan's civilian-led government, intended to preempt a planned expansion of the Roseires Dam that would have increased Sudan's use of Nile waters.³⁴ In the 1990s, Egypt leveraged its influence in Washington and Arab capitals to isolate the Islamist government of Omar Hasan al-Bashir, successfully prompting the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Sudan following an unsuccessful assassination attempt on Egypt's then-President Hosni Mubarak by Islamist groups linked to the powerful Sudanese Islamist movement led by Hasan al-Turabi. Subsequently, Sudan was designated a state sponsor of terrorism by the United States.³⁵ Cairo also moved its troops to occupy the disputed Halayib triangle and provided support to Sudanese opposition groups under the National Democratic Alliance.³⁶

Economic incentives replaced diplomatic and military pressure in the late 1990s after Bashir purged Turabi and his hardline Islamist faction from his government. Not only did Egypt promote the international rehabilitation of Bashir and his government, but it also rewarded it by giving its consent to financial support to the construction of the Merowe dam from the Gulf countries.³⁷ However, the reproachment was uneasy one as Islamist elements remained important within the Sudanese government and due to Sudan's dissatisfaction over the Nile and the Halayib triangle.³⁸

32 Swain, A. 1997. 'Ethiopia, the Sudan, and Egypt: The Nile River Dispute', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 35(4),675–694, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232011013_Ethiopia_the_Sudan_and_Egypt_The_Nile_River_Dispute (accessed September 2025).

33 *Ibid.*

34 Verhoeven, H. op. cit. p.154.

35 Darwisheh, H. 2018. 'Egyptian-Sudanese relations amidst power struggles in the Middle East and Horn of Africa', *IDE Interim Report*, https://www.ide.go.jp/library/English/Publish/Reports/InterimReport/2018/pdf/2018_2_40_008_ch01.pdf (accessed September 2025).

36 Verhoeven, H. op. cit. p.156.

37 *Id.* p. 154.

38 Zhang, J. 2023. 'A study on the Relations between Egypt and Sudan (1899-2011)', Phd diss, *Macquarie University*, January, 217–220, https://figshare.mq.edu.au/articles/thesis/A_study_on_the_relations_between_Egypt_and_Sudan_1899-2011_/24330958?file=44905495 (accessed September 2025).

One significant outcome of Sudan's tumultuous transition, from Egypt's perspective, has been the reversal of its position on the Nile dispute.

Since al-Bashir's ousting, Sudan has remained closely aligned with Egypt, presenting a united front against Ethiopia in subsequent trilateral negotiations. Relations between the military leadership of the two countries have also strengthened.³⁹ The two governments signed a military pact in March 2021 during a military escalation between Sudan and Ethiopia over the disputed territories of al-Fashaga.⁴⁰ Between 2021 and 2023, the two armies conducted at least six military exercises including the 'Guardians of the Nile' exercise that took place in May 2021 when tensions were high following Ethiopia's decision to proceed with the third consecutive seasonal filling of the GERD, despite protests from Egypt and Sudan.⁴¹

Cairo's support for the SAF continued after the outbreak of civil war between the latter and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in early 2023. Egypt remains an important source of material and diplomatic backing for the army-led government in Port Sudan.⁴² **In this conflict, Cairo finds itself on the opposite side of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), one of the main economic**

patrons of President Sisi's government, which supports the RSF. Egypt's support for the SAF is rooted in its view of the military as the only guarantor of stability on its southern border and a reliable ally on Nile politics.⁴³ The divergence with the UAE underscores that, from President Sisi's perspective, long-term strategic interests in Sudan and the wider region, particularly regarding the Nile waters, take precedence over short-term economic considerations. Moreover, in pursuit of those strategic interests, Cairo is forced to compromise on its longstanding opposition to political Islam by acquiescing to the presence of Islamist elements within the SAF and allied militia.⁴⁴

The Red Sea: A new arena for an old rivalry

While the Nile dispute remains unresolved, Ethiopia's growing push for Red Sea access has opened a new opportunity for Cairo to apply pressure on its adversary. In the past two years, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government has grown increasingly assertive about Ethiopia's need for direct sea access amidst souring relations with Eritrea.⁴⁵ The Eritrean government, wary of a potential invasion from Addis Ababa, has in turn grown closer to Cairo.⁴⁶ Addis Ababa's quest for sea access has also been a source of concern for its other neighbours, Djibouti and Somalia, pushing them to seek allies to counterbalance Addis Ababa.

39 Africa Intelligence. 2020. 'Al-Sisi's spymasters plays guardian angel to transition in Khartoum', *Africa Intelligence*, May 11, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2020/11/05/al-sisi-spy-masters-plays-guardian-angel-to-transition-in-khartoum,109619125-art> (accessed September 2025).

40 Hendawi, H. 2021. 'Egypt and Sudan sign defence pact and blame Ethiopia for stalled dam talks', *The National*, March 2, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/egypt/egypt-and-sudan-sign-defence-pact-and-blame-ethiopia-for-stalled-dam-talks-1.1176240> (accessed September 2025).

41 Elhennawy, N. 2021. 'Egypt, Sudan to hold joint drill amid Ethiopia Nile dispute', *AP News*, May 21, <https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-sudan-africa-middle-east-egypt-41c42e2e5a13ac30f2e622076fac2630> (accessed September 2025).

42 El-Menawy, A. 2025. 'Egypt's three options in the Sudan civil war', *Arab News*, 18 April, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2597630> (accessed September 2025).
Elfadil, I. 2025. 'Unlikely foes: Egypt and the UAE's hidden battle for Sudan', *Responsible Statecraft*, 29 January, <https://responsibletatecraft.org/sudan/> (accessed September 2025).

43 Amin, S. 2023. 'Is Egypt planning a full-scale invasion of Sudan?', *Atlantic Council*, 1 June, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/egypt-sudan-military-invasion/> (accessed September 2025).

44 Sudan Tribune. 2025. 'Fractured triangle: How the Sudan War is dividing Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia', *Sudan Tribune*, 6 August.

45 Terrefe, B., 2025. *Ethiopia's Red Sea Politics: Corridors, Ports and Security in the Horn of Africa*, Rift Valley Institute, March, https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Red-Sea-Politics_FINAL.pdf (accessed September 2025).

46 Al Jazeera, 2024. 'Somalia, Eritrea and Egypt pledge to bolster security ties', *Al Jazeera*, 10 October, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/10/somalia-eritrea-and-egypt-pledge-to-bolster-security-ties> (accessed September 2025).

However, it was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in January 2024, aiming to give Ethiopia direct sea access through Somaliland territory in exchange for recognition, that brought Egypt to the centre of Horn of Africa politics. The agreement triggered an angry response from Somalia, which broke off relations with Ethiopia accusing Addis Ababa of violating its sovereignty.⁴⁷ Cairo seized on the opportunity by offering diplomatic and military support to Somalia. The two countries signed a military pact on 14 August 2024, which was followed by the arrival of a consignment of Egyptian arms and military experts in Mogadishu that same month, followed by a larger shipment by warship month later.⁴⁸ Moreover, Egypt's offer to deploy up to 10,000 troops to Somalia—1,019 soldiers as part the African Union Peacekeeping Mission—means it will have a military presence on Ethiopia's eastern border.⁴⁹

Egypt also managed to form a tripartite anti-Ethiopia security arrangement with Eritrea and Somalia.⁵⁰ However, the alliance was short-lived as a Turkish intervention led to de-escalation between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu, culminating in the signing of the **Ankara Declaration** between Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.⁵¹ While the declaration commits Ethiopia to respecting Somalia's sovereignty and pursuing sea access through bilateral talks, the original MoU with Somaliland has not been formally nullified, creating a state of strategic ambiguity.⁵² Despite the return of an uneasy calm in relations between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa, Egypt retains the foothold it gained in Ethiopia's immediate neighbourhood through its troop deployment.⁵³ Moreover, the implementation of the Ankara Declaration's provisions seems to have stalled, and Somalia

- 47 Abdisamad, M., and Yibeltal, K. 2024. 'Somalia calls Ethiopia-Somaliland agreement act of aggression', BBC News, 2 January, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67861390> (accessed September 2025).
- 48 Koth, M. 2024. 'Egypt and Somalia sign defense pact amid tensions with Ethiopia', *Egyptian Streets*, 28 August, <https://egyptianstreets.com/2024/08/28/egypt-and-somaliland-sign-defense-pact-amid-tensions-with-ethiopia/#:~:text=Egypt%20and%20Somalia%20have%20signed%20a%20significant%20defense,President%20Hassan%20Sheikh%20Mohamud%E2%80%99s%20two-day%20visit%20to%20Cairo> (accessed September 2025). Sondos, A., 2024. 'Egypt's military ties with Somalia defy Ethiopian ambitions and tilt power dynamic', *Middle East Eye*, 13 September, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-somaliland-ethiopia-ambitions-military-tilt-power> (accessed September 2025). News Agencies. 2024. 'Egypt delivers more weapons to Somalia amid rising tensions with Ethiopia', *Al Jazeera*, 23 September, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/23/egypt-delivers-second-stockpile-of-weapons-to-somaliland-amid-ethiopia-tension> (accessed September 2025).
- 49 Sheikh, A., and Paravicini, G. 2024. 'Egypt sends arms to Somalia following security deal, sources say', *Reuters*, 28 August, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/egypt-sends-arms-somaliland-following-security-pact-sources-say-2024-08-28/> (accessed September 2025).

- 50 Teklemariam, B. 2024, 'Eritrea, Egypt and Somalia cement "axis against Ethiopia"', *BBC*, 10 October, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdje7pkv1zxo> (accessed September 2025).
- 51 While Ethiopian officials have been mostly silent on the issue in the months after the signing of the Ankara declaration, Somaliland officials insist that the MoU is still valid and that they are working for its implementation. Donelli, F. 2025. 'In the Horn of Africa, Turkey and Egypt unfold a strategic alignment—or potential rivalry', *Atlantic Council*, 23 January, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/in-the-horn-of-africa-turkey-and-egypt-unfold-a-strategic-alignment-or-potential-rivalry/> (accessed September 2025). Garowe Online, 2024. 'Our MoU with Ethiopia remains intact, says Somaliland despite Ankara declaration', *Garowe Online*, 17 December, <https://www.garoweonline.com/index.php/en/news/somaliland/our-mou-with-ethiopia-remains-intact-says-somaliland-despite-ankara-declaration> (accessed September 2025).
- 52 *Ankara Declaration by the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Federal Republic of Somalia facilitated by the Republic of Türkiye*, Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 11 December 2024, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/etiyyopya-federal-demokratik-cumhuriyeti-ve-somali-federal-cumhuriyeti-nin-ankara-bildirisi.en.mfa> (accessed September 2025).
- 53 Hiiraan Online, 'Egypt committed to supporting Somalia: PM Madbouly at AUSSOM summit', *Hiiraan Online*, 27 April 2025m <https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2025/Apr/201303/egypt-committed-to-supporting-somaliland-pm-madbouly-at-aussom-summit.aspx> (accessed September 2025).

remains largely ambivalent in its attitude towards both Ethiopia and Egypt.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, Egypt has been growing ever closer to Eritrea. With rising tensions between governments in Asmara and Addis Ababa, there have been several high-level meetings between Egyptian and Eritrean officials.

The two governments have been exploring a potential military cooperation and intelligence-sharing arrangement to protect Red Sea shipping routes and counter Ethiopian influence.⁵⁵ Besides making a common front against Ethiopia, Cairo and Asmara also find themselves on the same side in the Civil War in Sudan. Eritrea has recently emerged as a key supporter of the SAF-led government. It has been reportedly hosting training camps for armed groups from eastern Sudan and Darfur that are allied with the SAF and facilitating arms transfers to the SAF through its ports.⁵⁶

Egypt also has strengthened ties with Djibouti, whose interests are also threatened by Ethiopia's quest for Red Sea access. For Djibouti, whose economy is highly dependent on port

services, loss of Ethiopia, its single biggest customer, could be disastrous. Thus, Cairo's attempts to curtail the latter's port ambitions are a welcome development. President Sisi's visit to Djibouti this April signalled relations between the two capitals have reached a new height.⁵⁷ During their meeting, President el-Sisi and his Djiboutian counterpart, Ismail Omar Guelleh, emphasized their rejection of the involvement of non-littoral states in the security and governance of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. This was a pointed message directed at Ethiopia, which at the time was ramping up its push for Red Sea access.⁵⁸

Most importantly the two leaders concluded a number of agreements during the visit including establishment of an Egyptian logistics hub in the Djibouti Free Economic Zone and cooperation on solar power generation.⁵⁹ Egyptian investment in Djibouti's logistics sector could give it an important leverage, at least in the short and medium terms, over Ethiopia that currently depends on Djiboutian ports for more than 90 percent of its maritime trade.⁶⁰ Moreover, planned power generation projects seem to be aimed at reducing Djibouti's dependence on Addis Ababa, which

54 Hiiraan Online, 2025. 'Turkey's mediation stalls in Somalia-Ethiopia sea access dispute', *Hiiraan Online*, 9 July, https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2025/July/202138/turkey_s_mediation_stalls_in_somalia%E2%80%93ethiopia_sea_access_dispute.aspx (accessed September 2025). Hiiraan Online, 2025. 'Somalia balances Egypt pact with Red Sea neutrality', *Hiiraan Online*, 7 July, https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2025/July/202106/somalia_balances_egypt_pact_with_red_sea_neutrality.aspx (accessed September 2025).

55 Hendawi, H. 2024. 'Egypt and Eritrea explore possible military deal amid regional tension', *The National*, 16 September, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/09/16/egypt-and-eritrea-explore-possible-military-deal-amid-regional-tension/> (accessed September 2025).

56 Plaut, M. 2024. 'War in Sudan internationalised: Eritrea trains army, Iran and UAE fly in weapons', *Martin Plaut*, 9 February, <https://martinplaut.com/2024/02/09/war-in-sudan-internationalised-eritrea-trains-army-iran-and-uae-fly-in-weapons/> (accessed September 2025). Agenzia Nova, 2024. 'Eritrea Increases Support for Regular Army in Sudan, Sends Weapons to Port Sudan via Asmara', *Nova.news*, 9 February, <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/Eritrea-increases-support-for-regular-army-in-sudan-send-weapons-to-Port-Sudan-via-Asmara/> (accessed September 2025).

57 Egypt State Information Service, 2025. 'President El-Sisi visits Djibouti and meets President Guelleh', *Egypt State Information Service*, 23 April, <https://africa.sis.gov.eg/english/africa-today/african-news/president-el-sisi-visits-djibouti-and-meets-president-guelleh/> (accessed September 2025).

58 Sakr, T. 2024. 'Egypt, Djibouti reaffirm Red Sea control amid Ethiopian maritime aspirations', *Daily News Egypt*, 16 September, <https://africa.dailynewsegypt.com/egypt-djibouti-reaffirm-red-sea-control-amid-ethiopian-maritime-aspirations/> (accessed September 2025).

59 Joint Statement by the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Republic of Djibouti the Arab Republic of Egypt Presidency, 23 April 2025, <https://www.presidency.eg/en/قسم-الأخبار-وتنمية-اقتصاد-البحر/23042025-5/> (accessed September 2025).

60 Demissie, S., 'Djibouti looks to Ethiopia to gauge its economic future', *Institute for Security Studies*, 3 May 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/djibouti-looks-to-ethiopia-to-gauge-its-economic-future> (accessed September 2025).

currently supplies more than half of its electricity needs.⁶¹

While Egypt's primary objective remains pressuring Ethiopia on the Nile issue, Cairo also views a potential Ethiopian naval presence on the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait as a direct challenge to its strategic control in the region.⁶² Such a presence would inevitably strengthen Addis Ababa's hand in any future dispute. Thus, for Cairo, containing Addis Ababa on the Red Sea front has become a strategic necessity. Cairo has already shown its commitment to this goal by successfully lobbying against Ethiopia's membership when the Red Sea Council was established in January 2020 under the leadership of Saudi Arabia.⁶³

Regional implications

Egypt's renewed engagement in the region presents an alternative diplomatic and security ally, and to a lesser extent, an economic partner for countries of the region. In Somalia in particular Cairo's security support including arms shipments and military training could prove to be valuable aid to the fight against Al-Shabab. On the other hand, cooperation with Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia could also improve

maritime security in the Red Sea and the Babel Mandeb Strait.

Nonetheless, Cairo's renewed foray into the Horn comes with some major risks. In a region rife with intractable conflicts and a complex mix of foreign actors with competing interests, Cairo's overtures could lead to negative consequences to regional stability.

First, competition between Egypt and other powers could further inflame existing conflicts in the region, particularly in Sudan and Somalia.

In Sudan, foreign involvement, including Egypt's, has been fuelling the civil war for more than two years.⁶⁴ Any deeper involvement by Cairo, especially if coordinated with Eritrea, could further exacerbate an already dire situation there by drawing in Ethiopia, which reportedly maintains positive relations with the RSF due to their shared ties with the UAE.

In Somalia, Egyptian competition with Ethiopia for influence could exacerbate tensions between the federal government and regional states. There are already signs to this effect. Ethiopia reportedly sent arms shipments to the autonomous state of Puntland, which was at loggerheads with Mogadishu following the announcement of the military pact between Egypt and the Somali Federal Government.⁶⁵ Such a trend, especially given the presence in the country of myriad foreign actors with conflicting security and economic interests, stands to further weaken central authority. It could also lead to open confrontation between the federal government and federal regional

61 Oxford Business Group, 2023. 'A second electricity interconnection link with Ethiopia marks another step towards regional integration', *The Report: Djibouti 2023*, <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/reports/djibouti/2023-report/energy-utilities/regional-linkages-a-second-electricity-interconnection-link-with-ethiopia-marks-another-step-towards-regional-integration-analysis/> (accessed September 2025).

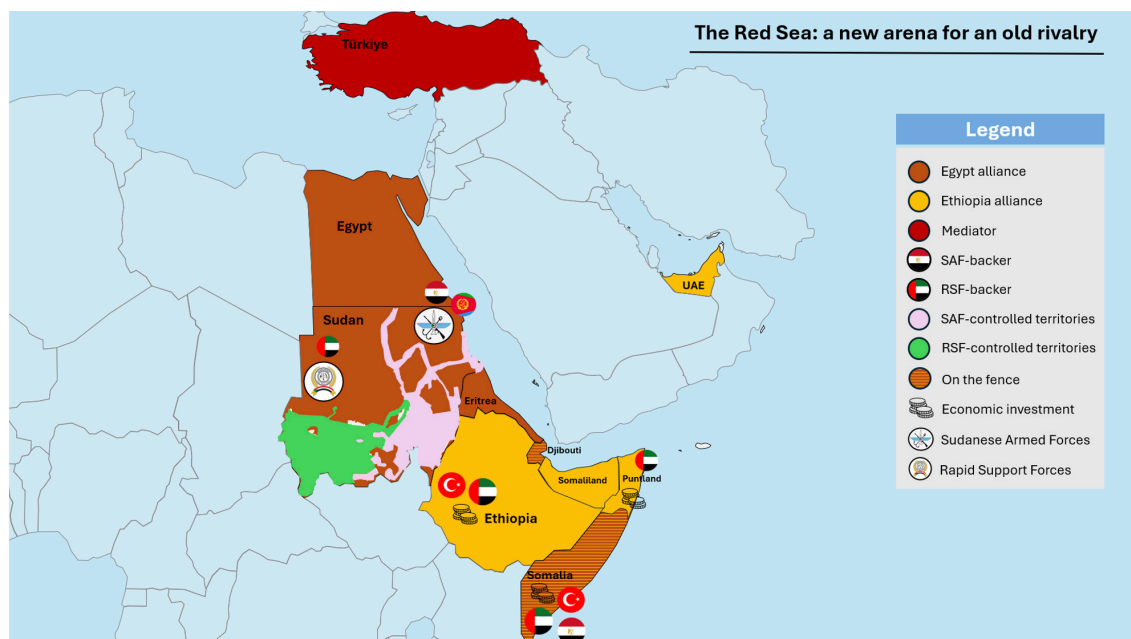
62 *Sailing Without a Coast: Russia's Role in Building Ethiopia's Navy Staff and Its Regional Implications*, Robert Lansing Institute, 10 June 2025, https://lansinginstitute.org/2025/06/10/sailing-without-a-coast-russias-role-in-building-ethiopias-navy-staff-and-its-regional-implications/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (accessed September 2025).

63 Current Red Sea Council Members are Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Egypt, Yemen, and Jordan. Custers, D. 2021. 'Red Sea multilateralism: power politics or unlocked potential', *Stimson Center*, 7 April, <https://www.stimson.org/2021/red-sea-multilateralism-power-politics-or-unlocked-potential/> (accessed September 2025).

64 Lanfranchi G., & Hoffmann, A. 'To stop the war in Sudan, bankrupt the warlords: cutting off finance to Sudan's generals can pressure them to stop the fighting', *Clingendael Institute*, 2023, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Clingendael_Alert_To_stop_the_war_in_Sudan_bankrupt_the_warlords.pdf (accessed September 2025).

65 Hiiraan Online, 2024. 'Somalia condemns unlawful arms shipment from Ethiopia to Puntland State', *Hiiraan Online*, 21 September, <https://hiiraan.com/news/2024/Sept/198108/somalia-condemns-unlawful-arms-shipment-from-ethiopia-to-puntland-state.aspx> (accessed September 2025).

Figure 4 Geopolitical competition in the Horn of Africa



states in addition to undermining the fight against al-Shabaab in a time where the group is making significant advances against the Somali National Army.⁶⁶

Secondly, growing Egyptian involvement could exacerbate tensions between Ethiopia and its neighbours. From Ethiopian perspective, recent Egyptian overtures are part of a grand strategy of encirclement against it.⁶⁷ For instance, any Egyptian action to undermine Ethiopia’s trade through Djibouti or a formal military alliance with Eritrea could push Addis Ababa towards radical path to respond to what it sees as an existential threat.

And worse, Egyptian military presence in Somalia raises the risk of miscalculation and dragging Ethiopia and Egypt into direct conflict. Given the long history of mutual suspicion, including past Ethiopian accusations that Cairo was attempting to destabilise it, any Egyptian military activity near Ethiopia’s borders is likely to be viewed with maximum alarm.⁶⁸ The reported deployment of Ethiopian mechanised divisions and anti-aircraft missiles to the Somali border in the days following news of Egypt’s military deployments suggests that Addis Ababa is already preparing for potential incursions from Somalia.⁶⁹ Within Somalia itself, the presence of Egyptian and Ethiopian troops in close proximity carries the risk of tensions or unintended incidents.

66 WardheerNews, 2025. ‘Al-Shabaab recaptures Xawaadley without a fight’, *WardheerNews*, 3 June, <https://wardheernews.com/al-shabaab-recaptures-xawaadley-without-a-fight/> (accessed September 2025).
 Houreld, K., and Gobobe, M. 2025. ‘How U.S. cuts in Somalia could imperil the fight against al-Shabab’, *Washington Post*, 27 May, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/05/27/somalia-al-shabab-american-troops-trump/> (accessed September 2025).

67 B. Terrefe, op. cit.

68 Africanews 2024. ‘Ethiopian official claims Egypt behind “destabilisation” campaign’, *Africanews*, 18 August, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/01/24/ethiopian-official-claims-egypt-behind-destabilisation-campaign/> (accessed September 2025).

69 Borkena, 2024. ‘Sovereignty day message: Ethiopian PM Sends warning to aggressors’, *Borkena*, 9 September, <https://borkena.com/2024/09/09/sovereignty-day-message-ethiopian-pm-sends-warning-to-aggressors/> (accessed September 2025).

Cairo's renewed ventures into the Horn of Africa also place it in competition with the UAE and Turkey, both of which are seeking to expand their influence in the region.

As in Sudan, Egypt finds itself on the opposing side of the UAE, which has significant investments in Somaliland's ports, notably through DP World's 30-year concession to manage Berbera Port.⁷⁰ Additionally, the UAE has been reported to train and equip Somaliland's security forces as part of a broader military cooperation agreement.⁷¹ The UAE's reported support for Ethiopia's quest for direct sea access further complicates regional dynamics.⁷²

On the other hand, Turkey might see Egypt's involvement in the ongoing tensions between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu as detrimental to its own interests. While

Turkey is a major backer of the Somali federal government and has secured significant oil and gas interests in the country, it also has substantial economic investments in Ethiopia.⁷³ For Ankara, stability in both Somalia and Ethiopia is key to its interests, hence its discomfort with Cairo's meddling.⁷⁴

Recommendations

The recent tensions surrounding Ethiopia's Red Sea ambitions have added another layer of complexity to Egypt's relations with its southern neighbours. **Nonetheless, the Nile River and Egypt's anxiety over water security remain pivotal to Cairo's relations with the Horn countries.** Therefore, a long-term solution to the ongoing dispute is crucial to preventing the potential repercussions of Egypt's renewed foray into the region.

Instability in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region carries significant repercussions far beyond the region. In addition to its strategic location along one of the world's busiest waterways, the region has become an important investment destination for Europe, China and others and remains important to the global fight against extremism. International partners therefore have a clear stake in preventing the current situation from escalating further.

1. Rebuilding Trust and Finding a Fair Solution for the Nile:

The constant tension over the GERD remains a major source of regional instability. To move forward, international partners including the AU, EU, China and the US **should focus on helping Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan build a new relationship** based on trust and shared benefits, rather than getting stuck on technical deadlocks. To facilitate this, international partners could implement these measures:

- **Restart Negotiations with a Focus on Cooperation:** The three countries should return to the negotiating table using the 2015 Declaration of Principles, the one agreement they have all signed, as a foundation for a new long term arrangement.⁷⁵ The goal should be to shift

70 Gebru, M., 2025. 'The United Arab Emirates engagement in Ethiopia: implications for the Horn of Africa's geopolitical and security landscapes', *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)*, March, https://www.swp-berlin.org/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA-PB35_UAE_Engagement_in_Ethiopia_Gebru_Korrektur.pdf (accessed September 2025).

71 Hiiraan Online, 2025. 'UAE expands military ties with Somaliland as Somalia looks on', *Hiiraan Online*, 20 February, https://hiiraan.com/news4/2025/Feb/200338/uae_expands_military_ties_with_somaliland_as_somalia_looks_on.aspx (accessed September 2025).

72 M. Gebru, op. cit.

73 Sema, Z. and Kamadan, Y. 2024. 'Türkiye's deal with Somalia on Hydrocarbon Exploration: why it matters', *Hiiraan Online*, 5 September, https://hiiraan.com/news4/2024/Sept/197878/t%C3%BCrkiye_s_deal_with_somalia_on_hydrocarbon_exploration_is_important_why.aspx (accessed September 2025).

74 Donelli, F., op. cit.

75 Horn Affairs, 2015. 'Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan Agreement on Declaration of Principles – full text', *Horn Affairs*, 25 March, <https://hornaffairs.com/2015/03/25/egypt-ethiopia-sudan-agreement-on-declaration-of-principles-full-text/> (accessed September 2025).

the focus from a zero-sum conflict over water to a cooperative plan for regional development and shared prosperity.

- **Promoting Projects Aimed at Improving Water Security:** In addition to supporting negotiations, international partners could promote water security, particularly in Egypt. Support for water desalination and water-efficient agriculture, in particular, could help mitigate long-term water insecurity caused by climate change, demographic pressures, and increased water usage in upstream countries. This could shift Egypt's calculation of its most strategic interests.
- **Fund Interdependence through Cross-Border Infrastructure:** In the long term, EU and its partners should offer financial support to fund cross-border power transmission lines to facilitate electricity trade from the GERD to Sudan and Egypt. This would transform the dam from a point of zero-sum contention into a source of shared economic benefit, creating a powerful incentive for cooperation. However, establishing trust between the three countries is key for such initiatives to work.

2. A Proactive EU Strategy to Mitigate Regional Conflict Emanating from Ethiopia's Quest for Sea Access:

- **Encourage Delinking of the Military Aspect of Ethiopia's Port Access Demands from Its Legitimate Push for Diversifying Port Access.** Ethiopia's anxiety partly comes from its dependence on the port of Djibouti which makes it vulnerable to any potential disruptions. Recognising this and encouraging the country's efforts to secure alternative commercial ports will highly reduce further regional escalations.
- **Champion and Fund Alternative Sea Access Corridors:** The EU, through the Global Gateway initiative and other mechanisms, should provide significant diplomatic and financial backing for regional initiatives such as **Berbera corridor and Lamu Port-South Sudan-**

Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor.⁷⁶

By investing in those and similar initiatives, the EU can help meet Ethiopia's economic need for diversified port access, thereby reducing the incentive for future destabilising deals. It could also support land corridors connecting Djibouti with other landlocked countries such as South Sudan and Uganda to compensate for potential loss from Ethiopia's port diversification.

3. Establishing Confidence-Building Measures in Somalia to Manage the Ambiguity of the Post-Ankara Declaration Environment and Prevent a Proxy Conflict.

The African Union, with support from partners such as the EU, China and the US, should establish a formal confidence-building and monitoring mechanism for all foreign forces operating in Somalia. The launch of the new African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) mission in 2025 provides a critical window of opportunity to integrate new confidence building measures. Even if AUSSOM does not materialise, these measures should still be part of any security arrangement in Somalia. Among others, this arrangement could include:

- **Geographic Deconfliction Zones:** Formalising a deployment scheme that keeps Egyptian and Ethiopian bilateral forces in designated, non-proximate areas to reduce the risk of accidental clashes.
- **A Multilateral Monitoring and Verification Team:** Staffed by the AU and supported by the UN, this team would report on troop movements and ensure compliance with agreed-upon rules of engagement, increasing transparency and accountability.

⁷⁶ The Berbera corridor is an initiative that predates the signing of the MoU, a planned multimodal transport corridor connecting Somaliland's Berbera port with Addis Ababa. It is one of the top priority economic corridors aimed at regional integration under the Horn of Africa Initiative. *Who We Are, Horn of Africa Initiative*, 2019, <https://www.hoainitiative.org/who-we-are> (accessed September 2025).

- **A Cap on Bilateral Deployments:**

The AU should negotiate a ceiling on the number of troops any single external country can deploy to Somalia outside the official AUSSOM mandate to prevent a destabilising military buildup.

4. Preventing the Sudan Civil War from Becoming Another Arena of Competition between Egypt and Ethiopia:

- The EU's strategy explicitly calls for supporting African-led peace processes; a key way to operationalise this is to raise the diplomatic cost for regional powers who are actively undermining such processes. EU should coordinate with the AU in putting diplomatic pressure on the UAE and Egypt that are currently the main backers of the warring parties.
- Moreover, any further Egyptian involvement in Eastern Sudan, especially one that involves Eritrea, should be discouraged as it risks drawing in Ethiopia.

About the Clingendael Institute

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