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Bridge Over Troubled Water

Towards Effective EU Engagement in the
Transboundary Politics of the Nile River Basin

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1. Introduction

On the 9th of September 2025, Ethiopia inaugurated the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the largest hydropower project in Africa.¹ Since the project's inception in 2011, the GERD has heightened tensions in the Nile River Basin, raising questions regarding the rights of upstream states to energy security and downstream states' access to the river's waters.² Despite greatly impacting transboundary water flows, Ethiopia is yet to have reached any conclusive agreements with downstream states Sudan and Egypt.³ This dispute has deep implications for riparian states' security, which depend on the river for freshwater access, agricultural production, and energy.

As a transregional river, linking the Horn of Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the Nile greatly impacts the stability of Europe's extended southern neighbourhood. Given the regions' strategic importance, the European Union (EU) has strong interests in promoting stability in the Nile River Basin. The heightened impacts of climate change, regional conflicts, and rising geopolitical tensions on the Basin's security and stability further pressure the EU to be an effective player in the Nile's transboundary challenges. However, despite promises to strengthen its involvement in water diplomacy and support a resolution to the GERD dispute, the EU's ability to ease transboundary tensions remains limited.

This snapshot explores why the EU been limited in its engagement in the transboundary politics of the Nile River Basin and how it can move towards an effective engagement strategy. It identifies three limiting factors behind the EU's failure to meaningfully engage in the Nile's transboundary disputes: (1) a turn from dispute resolution to crisis management, (2) a strategic re-alignment towards Egypt, and (3) a difficulty in mobilising its technical engagements. Based on these limitations, the snapshot proposes three strategic outlooks for the EU's engagement in the Nile River Basin:

- Prioritise long-term geostrategic interests in the face of crises.
- Build effective partnerships and ensure the EU's image as a legitimate actor.
- Strengthen coherence and invest in conflict-sensitive infrastructure development.

¹ Dawit Endeshaw, "Ethiopia Opens Africa's Largest Hydroelectric Dam to Egyptian Protest," *Reuters*, September 9, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/ethiopia-opens-africas-largest-hydroelectric-dam-egyptian-protest-2025-09-09/>

² Khalil Al-Anani, "Water Conflict Between Egypt and Ethiopia: A Defining Moment for Both Countries," *Arab Centre Washington DC*, June 16, 2020, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/water-conflict-between-egypt-and-ethiopia-a-defining-moment-for-both-countries/>

³ "Ethiopia Inaugurates GERD Dam Amid Downstream Tensions with Egypt, Sudan," *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/9/ethiopia-inaugurates-gerd-dam-amid-downstream-tensions-with-egypt-sudan>

2. Flowing Conflict: Strategic Implications of the GERD Dispute for Europe

A freshwater lifeline for multiple riparian states, the Nile River is inextricable from questions of national security and regional stability. As a downstream state with an arid climate, the Nile accounts for approximately 98% of Egypt's freshwater needs and plays a crucial role in its agricultural sector.⁴ Water insecurity remains a primary threat for the country, which is highly susceptible to the impacts of climate change, and was predicted to reach absolute water scarcity by 2025.⁵ For Sudan, also a downstream country, the Nile is a crucial part of its freshwater and agrarian needs.⁶ The Sudanese civil war starting in 2023 has increased its vulnerability to water and food insecurity, as well as to the weaponisation of food and water by conflict parties.⁷ For Ethiopia, an upstream state, the Blue Nile tributary represents an opportunity for development and national prosperity.⁸ The GERD was envisioned as a way for the country to counter its energy shortage and generate revenue by selling energy surplus to neighbouring states.

Ethiopia's decision to begin the dam's construction in 2011 significantly escalated transboundary tensions (for the position of the GERD vis-à-vis downstream states see *Figure 1*).⁹ While Ethiopia considers the building of the dam a right to its own energy security and a challenge to outdated colonial deals, Sudan and Egypt view the project as undermining binding regional agreements and threatening their access to vital freshwater resources.¹⁰ Egypt has opposed the building of the dam, naming it illegitimate.¹¹ Sudan, on the other hand, has urged Ethiopia to reach agreements with riparian states and respect downstream states' water access rights while not opposing the dam's construction.¹² While the GERD was officially inaugurated in 2025, parties have yet to reach an agreement regarding its consequences on the distribution of Nile waters.

⁴ Hamdy A. Hassan, "Egypt's Water Policy and the Challenges of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)," In *Nile Basin Politics*, (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025). doi: 10.4337/9781803927176.00011

⁵ Hassan, "Egypt's Water Policy"

⁶ Marwa Daoudy, "Sudan at the Nexus of Transboundary Cooperation on the Nile," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/05/troubled-waters-in-conflict-and-a-changing-climate-transboundary-basins-across-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>

⁷ CGIAR, "Sudan's Humanitarian Crisis: The Collapse of Food, Water, and Energy Security," CGIAR, June 11, 2025, <https://www.cgiar.org/news-events/news/sudans-humanitarian-crisis-the-collapse-of-food-water-and-energy-security>

⁸ Al-Anani, "Water Conflict Between Egypt and Ethiopia"

⁹ Al-Anani, "Water Conflict Between Egypt and Ethiopia"

¹⁰ Ron Matthews and Vlado Vivoda, "'Water Wars': Strategic Implications of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam," *Conflict, Security & Development* 23, 4 (2023): 333–66. doi:10.1080/14678802.2023.2257137, pp.338-340.

¹¹ "GERD is Illegitimate and Negotiations are Over: Egypt's Foreign Minister," *Egypt Independent*, 2025, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/gerd-is-illegitimate-and-negotiations-are-over-egypts-foreign-minister/>

¹² Matthews and Vivoda, "'Water Wars'", pp.343-344.

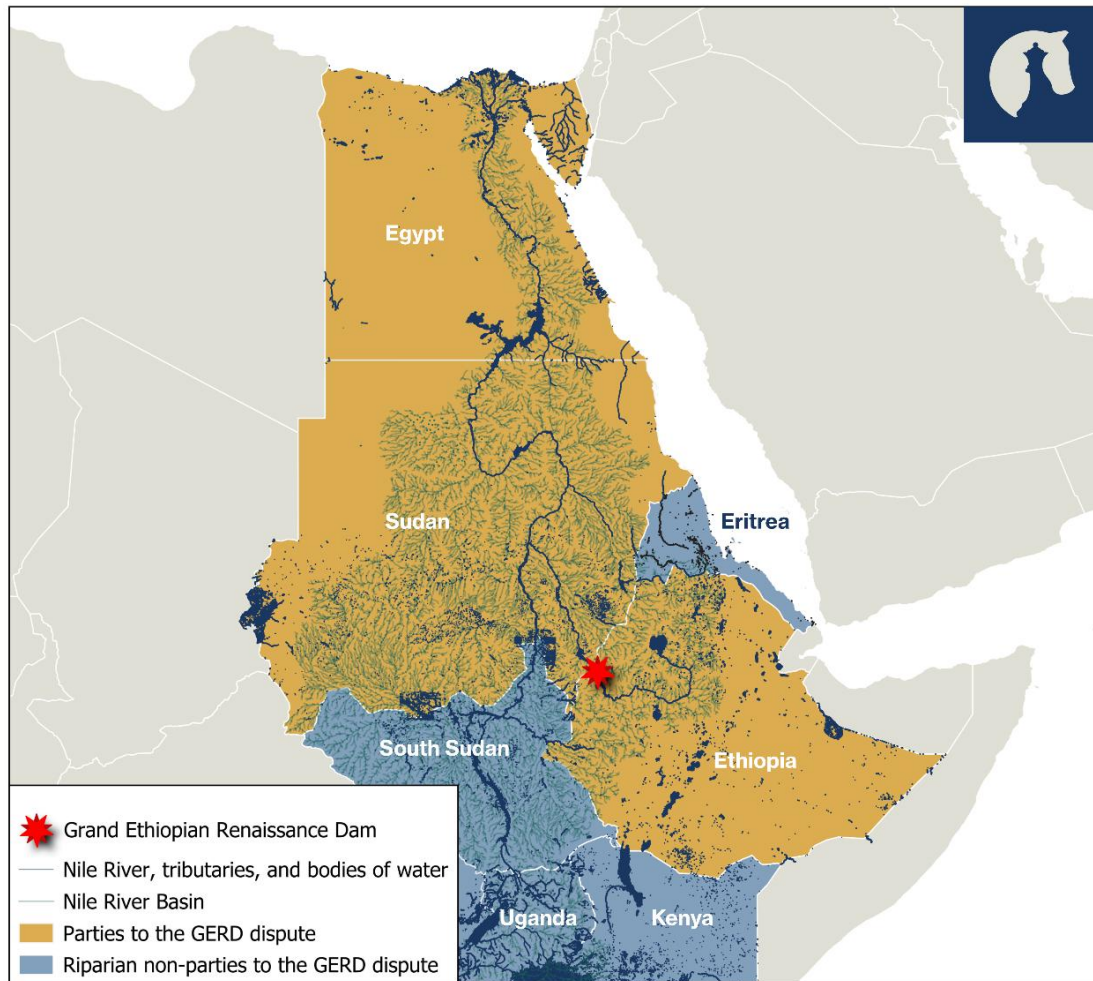


Figure 1: Map of the GERD Dispute¹³

Avoiding conflict and societal unrest in the regions affected by the GERD dispute – the Horn of Africa and the MENA – is of key strategic interest to Europe. Insecurity in Europe’s extended southern neighbourhood has direct consequences on the continent, including increased influxes of migration, the gaining of influence of geopolitical rivals, and pressures surrounding crucial trade routes. Continued tensions over the distribution of the Nile waters raise the risk of societal unrest related to water and food insecurity, (in)direct military confrontations between dispute parties, and the weaponisation of water infrastructure.¹⁴ As such, a resolution to transboundary water disputes warrants a place on Europe’s strategic agenda.

¹³ Map data retrieved from Open Street Map.

¹⁴ Luca Mieke, “Battle of the Basins: How the Nile Conflict Could Shape Africa’s Green Transition,” *Munich Security Conference*, 2021, <https://securityconference.org/en/media/msc-blog/article/battle-of-the-basins-how-the-nile-conflict-could-shape-africas-green-transition/>

3. Treading Water: Why the EU Struggles to Matter in Nile Politics

While the EU has promoted a negotiated solution to the GERD dispute and supported attempts at an agreement between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan,¹⁵ it has had limited success in achieving a resolution to the conflict. For the riparian states, effective EU engagement could prove mutually beneficial, given Europe's experience in conflict mediation, financial and investment capabilities, and expertise in water management. Nevertheless, EU engagement in the region poses questions regarding the agency of regional actors. The resolution of the GERD dispute is often discussed under the 'African solutions to African problems' paradigm, aimed at recentring African agency in negotiations.¹⁶ While an external actor such as the EU cannot replace regionally driven conflict resolution, it can be effective in supporting such processes. As such, EU engagement in the GERD dispute should be framed as supportive and complementary to regional engagements, rather than an alternative.

This section outlines three limitations to EU engagement: (1) a shift from dispute resolution to crisis management, (2) a strategic re-alignment towards Egypt, and (3) a difficulty in mobilising its technical engagements.

3.1. From Peacebuilder to Firefighter: Crisis Containment over Dispute Resolution

Compounding crises facing its southern neighbourhood have limited the EU's ability to meaningfully engage in Nile transboundary disputes in the past years. To begin with, regional and global dynamics have led to stalemates in negotiations. In 2021, Sudan attempted to resume negotiations and called for mediation by the EU, AU, United States (US), and United Nations (UN), which was supported by Egypt but rejected by Ethiopia.¹⁷ Other attempts at negotiations, such as mediation by the UAE and trilateral talks, have failed to reach a settlement. With civil war erupting in 2023, Sudan has been unable to continue pushing for a mediated GERD settlement, heightening tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia.¹⁸ Simultaneously, the US under the second Trump administration has become an unreliable actor in moving towards a negotiated solution.¹⁹ Therefore, regional and global conditions have led to a deadlock in GERD negotiations.

¹⁵ "The Horn of Africa: A Geo-strategic Priority for the EU – Council Conclusions," *Council of the EU*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49533/st08135-en21.pdf>, p.13; "The Nile and Beyond: Geopolitics of Water," *EEAS*, 2020, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/nile-and-beyond-geopolitics-water_en?s=143

¹⁶ "The AU Should Persevere on the GERD issue," *ISS*, April 28, 2021, <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/the-au-should-persevere-on-the-gerd-issue>

¹⁷ "Sudan Formally Requests Four-Party Mediation in GERD Row," *Al Jazeera*, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/15/sudan-formally-requests-external-mediation-over-ethiopian-dam-row>; "Sudan Says Ethiopia Rejected Invitation for Dam Summit," *Reuters*, April 23, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudan-says-ethiopia-rejected-invitation-dam-summit-2021-04-23/#:~:text=By%20Reuters,on%20its%20own%20water%20flows>

¹⁸ Daoudy, "Sudan at the Nexus of Transboundary Cooperation on the Nile."

¹⁹ Michelle Gavin, "The Danger of Renewed US Interest in the GERD," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 20, 2026, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/the-danger-of-renewed-u-s-interest-in-the-gerd>

International negotiations on the GERD dispute



Figure 2: Timeline of GERD Negotiations and European Engagement²⁰

In the context of increased geopolitical contestation, the EU has refocused its priorities on managing crises, placing the resolution of the GERD dispute on the back burner. Specifically, mitigating the effects of the Sudanese civil war on Europe, such as limiting the influx of Sudanese refugees to the European

²⁰ Abteu, “Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) Negotiations.”; Dana Attia, “The Political Deadlock on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam,” *German Institute for Global and Area Studies*, 2021, <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/the-political-deadlock-on-the-grand-ethiopian-renaissance-dam>

continent, has been a core driver of EU policy in its extended southern neighbourhood.²¹ Furthermore, countering blockades to crucial trade routes, namely the Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz, as well as escalations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, have risen to the top of the EU's priority list.²² As such, resolving the GERD dispute has been relegated down Europe's strategic priorities due to the intensification of regional crises.

A reprioritisation of long-term goals over crisis management is needed for the EU to become an effective actor in the GERD dispute. While the AU and regional actors must take the lead in attempting to re-establish a basis for negotiations, the EU can provide crucial support in guiding the conflict parties towards the negotiating table. This can include third-party analysis of the GERD's impact on regional water distribution after inauguration, working bilaterally with conflict parties to understand potential common grounds, and providing technical and political support to international actors such as the UN and AU in their attempts to re-open negotiations.

3.2. The Price of Alignment: Pivoting towards Cairo, Losing Addis Ababa?

Within this attempt to mitigate the impact of neighbouring crises on Europe, the EU has pursued a strategic realignment towards Egypt, weakening its positioning as a neutral actor in the GERD dispute. Egypt is viewed by Europe as a beacon of stability in a highly volatile southern neighbourhood.²³ Furthermore, the EU has sought to pursue its interests in the region in the face of geopolitical change through strengthening its bilateral partnerships. This has motivated Europe to invest in the country with the aim of maintaining stability and preventing further regional unrest and conflict spill-over.

In recent years, Europe has significantly invested in its partnership with Egypt. In 2024, the EU and Egypt launched their Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership, with the EU pledging 7 billion euros in financial aid to Egypt.²⁴ This partnership strengthened the relations and underlined the countries' commitment to security, stability, economic prosperity, and climate resilience.²⁵ It led to financial commitments to the Egyptian armed forces²⁶ and contributed to Europe becoming Egypt's primary arms import partner over the US in 2024.²⁷ The agreement also aimed to curtail migration towards Europe by supporting Egyptian containment of Sudanese refugees.²⁸

²¹ Angeliki Dimitriadi, "Migration Policies at the Core of the EU's Relations with Its Southern Neighbours," *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook* 2025, 2025, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/migration-policies-at-the-core-of-the-eus-relations-with-its-southern-neighbours/>

²² "Security and Freedom of Navigation in the Red Sea: Council Launches EUNAVFOR ASPIDES", *Council of the EU*, February 19, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/02/19/security-and-freedom-of-navigation-in-the-red-sea-council-launches-new-eu-defensive-operation/>; "EU Position of the Situation in the Middle East", *European Council*, December 18, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-position-situation-middle-east/#latest>; "Statement by the President von der Leyen on the Impact of the Situation in the Middle East on the European Union," *European Commission*, April 13, 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_26_800

²³ "Joint Declaration on the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the European Union," *European Commission*, 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-declaration-strategic-and-comprehensive-partnership-between-arab-republic-egypt-and-european-2024-03-17_en

²⁴ European Commission, "Joint Declaration."

²⁵ European Commission, "Joint Declaration."

²⁶ "Council Decision (CFSP) 2024/2843," *Council of the EU*, November 5, 2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2024/2843/oj/eng>

²⁷ Mathew George et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2024," *SIPRI*, March 2025, <https://bijlagen.nos.nl/artikel-22320911/sipri.pdf>, p.6

²⁸ Christian Jakob and Stavros Malichudis, "Egypt: The EU's Unexpected Ally Against Migration," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, January 20, 2025, <https://eu.boell.org/en/2025/01/20/egypt-eus-unexpected-ally-against-migration>

This rapprochement has helped the EU support stability in Egypt, but strained relations with Ethiopia. Tensions between the EU and Ethiopia had already arisen due to the EU's position towards the Ethiopia-Tigray conflict (2020-2022)²⁹ and Ethiopia's perception of the EU favouring downstream states, contributing to Ethiopia's rejection of EU mediation in 2021. Rapprochement between the EU and Egypt furthered distrust. The concluding Joint Statement of the first EU-Egypt summit in October 2025, for example, included strong European support for Egyptian water security rights, including with regards to the GERD.³⁰ Ethiopian authorities have criticised the statement, expressing the view that Europe is biased towards Egypt and negatively portrays Ethiopia's right to energy security and development of its own infrastructure.³¹

Few advances have been made in rebuilding the EU's image as a legitimate partner in GERD dispute resolution. Although the EU and Ethiopia maintain strong commitments with regards to development and infrastructure projects,³² Ethiopia continues to view the EU as a biased mediator when it comes to the GERD. With Sudan facing civil conflict and unable to draw a strong policy line towards the dispute, Europe has further lost a potential partner supporting its mediating efforts. At the same time, the Sudanese conflict has heightened tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia,³³ further rendering the EU's commitment towards Egypt divisive.

Regaining trust with all dispute partners is crucial for the EU to effectively engage in the GERD dispute. While EU-Ethiopia relations have been strained, both have potential regional interests in common, such as pushing for infrastructural integration and development. As such, engaging in trust-building with Ethiopia, looking for common interests in regional infrastructure development, can potentially ease tensions. Furthermore, the EU needs to continue to work with international partners such as the AU and UN to reach acceptance as a mediator or observer by all dispute parties. Last, the EU could support Sudanese partners in re-establishing a strong positioning towards the GERD dispute, as a cohesive Sudanese voice is necessary in bridging tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia.

3.3. Engineering Cooperation: The Potential and Limitations of EU Technical Engagement

The deadlock in GERD negotiations and its strategic re-alignment towards Egypt have led the EU to prioritise national-level technical engagements. With Egypt, the EU has signed the 2023 Water Partnership, establishing high-level dialogue and policy exchanges on water security.³⁴ It has further supported investments in food security and climate resilience,³⁵ as well as technological advancements allowing the country to further mitigate the effects of climate change and increased freshwater demands.³⁶ In Ethiopia, the EU has been supportive of the development of several infrastructure and

²⁹ Abel Abate Demissie, "Navigating the Regionalisation of Ethiopia's Tigray Conflict: How Regional and International Actors Can Help Consolidate Peace," *Chatham House*, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/2023-09-07-regionalization-tigray-conflict-abate-demissie.pdf>, p.29; Chrispin Mwakideu, "Can Berlin, Paris Reset 'Strained' EU-Ethiopia Ties?" *DW*, December 1, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/can-berlin-and-paris-reset-strained-eu-ethiopia-ties/a-64343852>

³⁰ "Joint Statement EU-Egypt Summit," *Council of the EU*, October 22, 2025, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14383-2025-INIT/en/pdf>, p.8

³¹ "Briefing: Ethiopia Condemns EU Position on Nile Dam Row with Egypt," *BBC Monitoring*, October 16, 2025, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0004tz3>

³² "EU and Ethiopia Advance Partnership for More Trade and Investments at the Global Gateway Forum," *European Commission*, October 8, 2025, https://global-gateway-forum.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-ethiopia-advance-partnership-more-trade-and-investments-global-gateway-forum-2025-10-08_en

³³ Daoudy, "Sudan at the Nexus of Transboundary Cooperation on the Nile."

³⁴ "Joint Declaration by the Arab Republic of Egypt and the European Union on an Egypt-EU Water Partnership," *EEAS*, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/egypt/joint-declaration-arab-republic-egypt-and-european-union-egypt-eu-water-partnership_en?s=95

³⁵ "Team Europe Initiative at Cairo Water Week 2024," *EEAS*, October 13, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/egypt/team-europe-initiative-cairo-water-week-2024_en?s=95

³⁶ "Egypt – Digital, Energy and Transport," *European Commission*, https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/resources/team-europe-tracker/partner-countries/egypt/egypt-digital-energy-and-transport_en

investment projects, principally through its Global Gateway strategy through which it signed an agreement in 2025.³⁷ While the Tigray war impacted the EU's delivery of certain projects, the EU has remained active in the country.³⁸ In Sudan, the EU has taken a riskier high-profile role as a mediator in the Sudanese civil war.³⁹ However, its engagement mostly relates to the provision of humanitarian aid and the negotiation of a ceasefire (for further details on EU technical engagements in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan, see *Table 1*).⁴⁰

Table 1: Overview of EU Technical Engagements in Water, Food and Energy Security (Non-Exhaustive)

Project	Launch Year	Description
Egypt		
Two-year work programme (Cairo Water Week 2025) ⁴¹	2025	Integrated water resources management, circular economy solutions, climate adaptation and risk management, safe reuse of treated wastewater in agriculture, private sector investment and financing.
TEI Integrated Water and Food Security ⁴²	2024	Create long-term resilience and sustainability, support the Egyptian Nexus Water Food Energy platform.
EU-Egypt Water Partnership ⁴³	2023	De-risking large infrastructure projects, supporting transparent PPP frameworks, technical and regulatory assistance, supporting legislation.
TEI Digital, Energy, and Transport ⁴⁴	2021	Support digitalisation, sustainable mobility and connectivity, sustainable energy transition and energy connectivity.
Sudan		
TEI Enhancing Food Security and Resilience of Rural Communities ⁴⁵	2023	Increase food security and livelihood resilience, sustainable growth, and employment in rural communities.
Ethiopia		
RISED Ethiopia ⁴⁶	2025	Improving the reliability, efficiency, and security of electricity supply, promoting renewable energy integration, regional power integration, energy sector professionalisation and digital connectivity.
Cool Port Addis ⁴⁷	2025	Promote sustainable Agri-Food Value chains through the establishment of a cold-storage facility for perishable goods.
Regional engagement		
Transboundary Water Management in Africa ⁴⁸	2022	Strengthen regional development and integration through improved water management across borders.

³⁷ European Commission, "EU and Ethiopia Advance Partnership."

³⁸ Mwakideu, "Can Berlin, Paris Reset 'Strained' EU-Ethiopia Ties?"

³⁹ EEAS, "The European Union and Sudan."

⁴⁰ EEAS, "The European Union and Sudan."

⁴¹ "EU and Egypt Deepen Cooperation on Water at Cairo Water Week," *European Commission*, October 13, 2025, https://environment.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-egypt-deepen-cooperation-water-cairo-water-week-2025-10-13_en

⁴² EEAS, "Team Europe Initiative at Cairo Water Week 2024."

⁴³ EEAS, "Joint Declaration."

⁴⁴ European Commission, "Egypt – Digital, Energy and Transport."

⁴⁵ "Sudan Agri-food Value Chains: Vector to Food Security and Rural Livelihoods' Resilience," *European Commission*, 2023, https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/resources/team-europe-tracker/partner-countries/sudan/sudan-agri-food-value-chains-vector-food-security-and-rural-livelihoods-resilience_en

⁴⁶ "RISED Ethiopia," *European Investment Bank*, October 24, 2024, <https://www.eib.org/en/projects/all/20240192>; "Global Gateway in Ethiopia," *EEAS*, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ethiopia/global-gateway_en?s=98; European Commission, "Rehabilitation and Modernisation of the National Transmission Grid in Ethiopia," https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/rehabilitation-and-modernisation-national-transmission-grid-ethiopia_en

⁴⁷ EEAS, "Global Gateway in Ethiopia."; "Cool Port Addis in Ethiopia," *European Commission*, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/cool-port-addis-ethiopia_en

⁴⁸ "Transboundary Water Management in Africa," *European Commission*, https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/resources/team-europe-tracker/partner-countries/sub-saharan-africa/transboundary-water-management-africa_en

Although the EU has developed strong technical partnerships, it has struggled to mobilise its technical engagements towards regional infrastructural integration and, ultimately, a resolution to the GERD dispute. At the same time, the People's Republic of China has asserted itself as a key actor in infrastructure development in the Horn of Africa, partially funding the GERD.⁴⁹ Similarly, other regional actors such as the Gulf monarchies have managed to gain influence in the infrastructure sector.⁵⁰

The EU's struggle to mobilise its technical engagements stems from a combination of internal and external dynamics. Internally, the EU has struggled to find alignment between member states and institutions to achieve common objectives. Crucially, while the EU has objected to unilateral action on the GERD without negotiations and promoted regional cooperation, the Italian company Webuild has been the primary contractor for the dam's construction.⁵¹ Furthermore, since 2024, Italy has pushed its own strategy, the 'Piano Mattei', aimed at deepening partnerships between Italy and key African states through development cooperation.⁵² While member states can operate their foreign policy independently from the EU, this raises questions regarding the coherence of the European position regarding the GERD dispute.

Externally, the EU has struggled to effectively push for conflict-sensitive infrastructure development and promoting cooperation between conflict parties through its technical engagements. The EU has instead focused on national-scale projects which allows it to promote regional stability and water security while avoiding politically sensitive transnational aspects (for an overview of EU technical engagement at the national and transnational levels see *Table 1*). Focusing on national water security issues can be an advantage, as it allows for on-the-ground engagement while avoiding political pushback, but can also limit the EU's impact in promoting conflict resolution. Further pushing for conflict-sensitive development and the incorporation of salient political issues in infrastructure projects might be a necessity for the EU to regain a strong footing in the regions' infrastructure development landscape and promote a resolution to the GERD dispute.

While technical engagements can be a basis for pursuing alternatives to high-level mediation, the EU needs to further strengthen coherence and conflict sensitivity to be able to mobilise them as pathways for a resolution to the GERD dispute. With the conflict parties not being currently open to negotiations, infrastructure development can form a basis for cooperation and integration. The EU, with its strong technical expertise, can be an effective actor in pushing for regional integration through infrastructure development and connectivity. However, it needs to prioritise coherence amongst the member state. Moreover, the EU can strengthen the impacts of technical engagements by pushing for the integration of national projects into transboundary water management systems when possible, fostering knowledge-sharing and the development of regional tools that support water sharing, and furthering conflict-sensitivity assessments and stakeholder dialogue.

⁴⁹ Matthews and Vivoda, "Water Wars", pp.341-342.

⁵⁰ Maddalena Procopio and Corrado Čok "Diversification Nations: The Gulf Way to Engage with Africa," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, March 24, 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/diversification-nations-the-gulf-way-to-engage-with-africa/>

⁵¹ Andrea Ducci, "Wbuild, La Nuova Diga Svolta per l'Africa, "Produce Tanta Energia Quanto Tre Centrali Nucleari," *Corriere Della Sera*, 2025, September 10, https://www.corriere.it/economia/aziende/25_settembre_10/wbuild-la-nuova-diga-svolta-per-l-africa-produce-tanta-energia-quanto-tre-centrali-nucleari-71d392fa-09f9-40b1-a32f-f8556b30cxlk.shtml; "Nota Stampa – Webuild: Inaugurata La Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) Il Piu Grande Progetto Idroelettrico Mai Construito in Africa.," *Wbuild*, 2025, September 9, https://media.wbuildgroup.com/sites/default/files/2025-09/20250909%20NS%20GERD%20Inaugurazione_def_ITA.pdf

⁵² Giovanni Carbone, "Africa: Il Pit-Stop Etiope del Piano Mattei," *ISPI Online*, February 12, 2026, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/africa-il-pit-stop-etiope-del-piano-mattei-230015>

4. Conclusion

This snapshot identified three constraints on EU engagement in transboundary water disputes in the Nile River Basin: (1) A prioritisation of crisis management over dispute resolution, (2) a strategic realignment towards Egypt, and (3) a difficulty in mobilising its technical engagements towards effective regional integration and conflict resolution. Based on these constraints, the snapshot proposes the following strategic outlooks:

- **Prioritise long-term geostrategic interests in the face of crises.** While the EU has recognised the need for long-term strategic engagement for climate resilience in its southern neighbourhood, including water security, it needs to prioritise these issues even in the face of crises. In the case of the GERD dispute, the EU should aim to build a basis for future negotiations, such as through providing third-party analysis of the GERD's impact on regional water distribution, working bilaterally with riparian states to identify common ground, and providing technical and political support to international actors such as the AU and UN in their efforts to re-open negotiations.
- **Build effective partnerships and ensure the EU's image as a legitimate actor.** Building effective partnerships with dispute parties is crucial for the EU to present itself as a legitimate supporter of a negotiated solution to the GERD dispute. Supporting Sudanese partners in strengthening their water diplomacy and developing a coherent strategic position, could help break tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia. Furthermore, engaging in trust-building with Ethiopia on the dispute and identifying common interests in regional infrastructure development could help the EU rebuild legitimacy.
- **Strengthen coherence and invest in conflict-sensitive infrastructure development.** Technical engagement can be a strong alternative to mediation in the absence of high-level negotiations. Nevertheless, the EU needs to strengthen internal alignment to ensure a cohesive strategy towards third parties. While EU member states have their own national foreign policies and cooperation strategies, it is imperative to ensure a streamlined EU-level approach through further internal coordination. Moreover, to advance regional cooperation, the EU needs to address politically salient issues and further integrate conflict-sensitivity into its projects. This can include promoting the integration of national projects into transboundary water management systems, fostering knowledge-sharing and the development of regional tools that support water sharing, and furthering conflict-sensitivity assessments and stakeholder dialogue.

However, for tensions over the GERD to subside, external factors have to be taken into account. There needs to be an opening for negotiations, which is partially outside of the EU's control and depends on the political willingness of the parties in dispute. Furthermore, the ability of a streamlined Sudanese voice to be present in the face of a civil war would have to emerge.

Nevertheless, the Nile River Basin and its transboundary dispute remain at the core of the EU's interests in its extended southern neighbourhood. The GERD is also not an isolated case for Europe, which risks facing more disputes over water resource sharing in its neighbouring regions given the growing impacts of climate change.⁵³ Water resources and infrastructure have become part of geopolitical contestation. The EU must ready itself to face increased transboundary tensions, pressures due to climate change, and water-related security challenges in its neighbourhoods.

⁵³ Miehe, "Battle of the Basins."



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