

Egypt and Ethiopia on the Brink of War

By [Lucas Leiroz de Almeida](#)

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The tension between Egypt and Ethiopia is worsening. Both countries are raising their regional rivalry and threatening the North African international security with the imminence of a new conflict. The cause of the tension is due to Ethiopia's intentions to build a large hydroelectric dam on one of the tributaries of the River Nile, the so-called "Blue Nile". The big problem around the issue is that several studies prove that the project would result in a series of devastating environmental effects for some nearby regions, mainly in Egypt and Sudan, where such consequences would annihilate all traditional farming systems.

Egyptian authorities are trying to prevent the project from advancing by legal and peaceful means. First, trilateral negotiations were established between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia, with the aim of reaching an agreement of common interest. But the negotiations were unsuccessful and the authorities in Cairo and Addis Ababa, the main antagonists in the conflict, were unable to reach a compromise. The next step taken by the Egyptian government was to appeal to the United Nations with its demand that Ethiopia be coercively prevented from building the plant.

Despite Egypt's efforts, the United Nations' inertia prevented the conclusion of an international agreement on the subject. Last Tuesday, Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia again met to try to resolve the issue with a common agreement. Again, the attempt failed, and countries left the meeting with even more disagreements. As a result, Ethiopia went ahead with the project and has already started filling the dam's reservoir. When this process is finished, traditional agriculture in Egypt and Sudan will be wiped out.

In fact, the Ethiopian project has come a long way. Since 2011, the country has been trying to build a dam to resolve its electricity issue. Currently, less than 45% of the Ethiopian population has access to electricity. The project, however, would not only solve the energy issue within the country, supplying the population entirely, but it would also allow the Ethiopian State to export surplus energy to other African countries, guaranteeing profits to the public coffers. All Ethiopia's international claims, both regionally and globally, depend fundamentally on the triumph of the hydroelectric dam project, even becoming a matter of national pride. In short, the project is a fundamental part of the consolidation of Ethiopia as a sovereign national state in the contemporary world.

However, for countries neighboring Ethiopia, the issue is quite the opposite. What would be a pride for Ethiopians would be a real humiliation for Egyptians and Sudanese. In Egypt, about 90% of the population lives on the banks of the Nile, where fertile lands feed all traditional national agriculture, in a millenary structure of organization and production. The triumph of the Ethiopian project would automatically represent the destruction of the Egyptian State, which would have to deal with a major escalation of hunger and economic losses.

There is yet another risk that the Egyptian authorities must consider: the risk of instantaneous release of the waters. If this happens, water currents could destroy more than 70% of the entire Egyptian population, resulting in a genuine genocide. According to evaluations by Egyptian experts, the project has a series of technical inadequacies, which raises concerns about this risk.

We contemplate then the current weakness of the African system for resolving regional conflicts. Ethiopia and Egypt are members of the African Union, which, being an international organization committed to African integration, should be strong enough to resolve these regional issues, creating an alternative between National States and the global system. It is necessary to avoid as much as possible submitting such strictly regional issues to the Security Council, when smaller organizations could resolve these situations because this delay can be fatal for millions of people. The lack of integration between countries and a strong regional supranational power could lead to a new war or to the end of the Egyptian state.

Now, it may be too late for a UN or African Union statement. Ethiopia is already filling the reservoir and with that the dam's activities begin. The impact on Egypt and Sudan will be inevitable and the responses will come soon. Sudan has been more patient and flexible than Egypt in relations with Ethiopia, but Cairo's position is different. Visibly, Egypt is currently trying to resume a posture of strong geopolitical relevance in Africa, as we can see with the country's important role in the Libyan civil war, aiming to guarantee its regional interests and to consolidate itself as a North African regional power. Certainly, therefore, Ethiopia will have to deal with aggressive responses.

Violent reactions are already inevitable, but a war is not. More than ever, international organizations must work together with the affected states and Ethiopia to reach a common agreement. If such an agreement is not possible, a gigantic conflict will break out in the region, and may even result in foreign military interventions.

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Lucas Leiroz is a research fellow in international law at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

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