

Beyond Political Union: Strategic Integration as a Pragmatic Response to Sudan’s Crisis and Egypt–Sudan Relations

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Abstract

Even though a full political union between Egypt and Sudan is very unlikely in the modern world, the two countries are working toward deep economic and strategic integration (African Union, n.d.; Ahram Online, 2025; Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 2025; Assefa, 2021). Right now, the goal of geopolitical efforts is to maintain Sudan’s internal unity and state sovereignty, not to combine the two countries into a single political entity (African Union, n.d.; Ahram Online, 2025; Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 2025; Assefa, 2021).

Keywords: Egypt–Sudan Relations, Political Union, Strategic Integration, Nile River Governance, Post-War Reconstruction, Four Freedoms Agreement, Sudanese Refugee Crisis, Functional Cooperation, Institutional Alignment, Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Gerd), Sovereignty, Economic Integration, Sudan Civil War, Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, Regional Geopolitics

1. Historical Connections and Condominium

The Muhammad Ali dynasty ruled Egypt and Sudan as one political unit in the 19th century [1]. Their goal was to keep the Nile Valley together. The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium was set up by the British in 1899 [2]. It officially shared administrative control, but in reality, it put Sudan under strict British imperial rule. Egyptian nationalists always opposed this split, and in 1951, Egypt declared that the two countries were now one under King Farouk.

state, but Sudan chose to remain independent and achieved full independence in 1956 [3]. The withdrawal of British and Egyptian troops made the separation official, and in the years that followed, the two countries took very different political paths. Different foreign policies and domestic problems, such as Egypt’s focus on pan-Arabism and Britain’s emphasis on maintaining its global influence, made it even less likely that a strong bilateral merger would occur in the middle to late 20th century [1,2].

1.1. Divergence After Independence

After the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, Egypt sought a unified

1.2. Models of Bilateral Relations

Dimension	Historical Unification	Present Strategic Integration
Structure of Politics	One central government rules over a single sovereign state.	Two independent, sovereign states with policies that are in line with each other [4,5].
Main Goal	Putting the Nile Valley together under Egyptian control.	Encouraging cooperation in business and safety in the area [4,5].
Status in the World	Disputed by British colonial authorities and left behind.	Supported by international diplomatic and humanitarian frameworks [3,6]

When you look at the historical push for unification and the modern framework of integration, you can see movement sought to eliminate borders, but today’s bilateral diplomacy is only about

working together on shared sovereignty and economic interests, often resulting in agreements that prioritize trade and security over complete political integration.

1.3. Effects of the Conflict in Sudan

The terrible civil war in Sudan has changed the focus of diplomacy from bringing the two sides together to keeping the Sudanese state from completely falling apart [7]. Egypt's current foreign policy is very strict about protecting Sudan's territorial integrity and will not accept any attempts to break up the country [8]. Egypt is working with international peace efforts to help make a long-lasting ceasefire and get urgent humanitarian aid to people in need, rather than expanding its own borders [4,7,8]

1.4. Future Geopolitical Prospects

The chance of a formal political merger is almost nonexistent because both countries fully respect each other's independence and national identity [9]. In the future, relations will likely be a close strategic alliance, with Cairo acting as a stabilizing force to help Sudan rebuild its national institutions after the war [3-6]

2. What Historical Problems Kept Egypt and Sudan from Coming Together in 1956?

In the beginning, nationalist groups strongly supported the merger of the two countries. However, the unification of Egypt and Sudan in 1956 was ultimately stopped by changing Sudanese political goals, British strategic interference, and decades of economic differences [1,2]. Sudanese leaders knew that full independence was more popular and practical than putting their new government under Cairo's control once they were given the right to self-determination.

2.1. Change in the Political Will of Sudan

Ismail al-Azhari and his National Unionist Party (NUP) won the first elections by running on the idea of merging Sudan with Egypt to bring the Nile Valley together. But when Azhari became prime minister, he saw that many Sudanese people wanted self-rule, so he changed his party's position to support full independence [3]. Sudanese leaders thought autonomy was preferable to a merger because they had to run the country right away and wanted to strengthen their own power.

3. British Strategic Interference

During the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, the UK worked hard to keep Sudan separate from Egypt to maintain its power in the region and protect its interests in the Suez Canal Zone [1]. British officials put "Sudanization" into effect, meaning quickly training local Sudanese civil servants and military officers to circumvent Egyptian power [2]. British officials also provided substantial support to the traditionalist Umma Party, which opposed Egyptian unification and sought Sudan to be its own republic.

3.1. Political Moves in Egypt

After the Egyptian Revolution in 1952, Egypt's new leaders tried to get the British out of the Nile Valley by giving Sudan the right to self-determination [3]. The Egyptian revolutionaries believed that if they removed the framework of shared Anglo-Egyptian sovereignty, the British would no longer have a legal basis to

remain in Sudan. After Gamal Abdel Nasser took over from Muhammad Naguib in 1954, Egyptian leaders privately admitted that taking in and financially supporting a poor Sudan would be very bad for Egypt's own national development.

3.2. Divergence in the Economy and Society

Egyptians say that there are deep historical, cultural, and geographic ties between the two countries. Still, British rule for more than fifty years had already broken up the economic unity of the Nile Valley [1]. Before 1956, British officials imposed strict rules on the purchase of land that made it hard for Egyptians to invest or integrate their farms into Sudan [2]. Because of this, the two states had already been functioning as completely separate entities by the time Sudan voted on its future.

4. Economic Benefits of Egypt and Sudan Working Together More Closely Right Now

Egypt and Sudan are currently benefiting greatly from closer economic ties because they can combine Sudan's wealth of raw materials with Egypt's industrial know-how [10,11]. Recent agreements between the two countries focus on increasing cross-border trade, ensuring there is enough food in the region, and helping Sudan's economy recover after the war [5,10,11].

4.1. Growth in Industry and Trade

In 2024, trade between the two countries reached about \$1.15 billion [10]. This led to new executive actions to fully integrate their markets. Recent agreements have established shared logistics zones along the border and standardised technical customs rules, allowing goods to move more quickly [10]. Egypt is actively sharing its knowledge of operating free zones and setting up single-window customs systems with Sudan to help the country modernise its business practices.

4.2. Food and Agricultural Security

Both countries are prioritising agricultural integration to protect the region from broader food insecurity and potential water-related issues on the Nile [11]. Joint projects include building mechanised slaughterhouses, modern tanneries, and agro-industrial projects to help Sudan's livestock and crops generate the most revenue [5,10,11]. Egypt is also providing Sudanese agricultural laboratories with advanced technology to help them work more effectively and make farming more productive overall [11].

4.3. Rebuilding After the War

As Sudan deals with the effects of its internal conflict, bilateral integration is a crucial lifeline for rebuilding its damaged national infrastructure [5]. Egyptian construction and engineering companies have been prioritised in Sudan's post-war rebuilding projects, which include key public services such as healthcare, electricity, and water [5]. Cairo has also promised to send direct technical assistance to repair and restart Sudanese factories damaged during the fighting.

4.4. What Do People in Sudan Think About Joining Egypt?

The idea of a united Nile Valley has long been around, but most people in Sudan today do not want to formally unite with Egypt politically [6]. Instead, most Sudanese people strongly prefer keeping their country's independence while working together on economic and humanitarian issues [6,12].

4.5. Feelings about Political Unification

Most Sudanese people do not want to merge into a single state because they think it would mean Egypt would take over [6]. Many people in Sudan think that a political union would make Sudan a smaller province rather than an equal partner because Egypt has a much larger population, military, and economy. Also, unresolved land disputes, such as the Halaib Triangle, and past diplomatic agreements over the Nile River make politicians doubt Cairo's long-term plans [12].

4.6. Concerns about Culture and the Economy

Differences in culture and society also make people less willing to come together [6]. Many Sudanese people view their culture as distinct from Egypt's and often feel more connected to other African or Gulf countries. The Sudanese people do not want to tie their resource-rich but developing country too closely to Egypt's heavily indebted economy. Instead, they want to attract independent foreign investment to modernise their own infrastructure.

4.7. Backing for Strategic Cooperation

Even though they do not want a political merger, many Sudanese people are grateful for Egypt's support as a key ally and haven during Sudan's ongoing civil war [7]. The fact that the Egyptian government is willing to take in millions of Sudanese refugees has made the two groups feel more like they are brothers and sisters with a common goal. As a result, the public strongly supports deep bilateral integration that respects each country's sovereignty, particularly in areas such as post-war reconstruction, trade facilitation, and agricultural development [8].

5. What the Nile Waters Might Do to Help Egypt and Sudan Merge

The Nile River's waters are the most important political link between Egypt and Sudan [11]. They are also a strong force behind their current strategic integration. Both countries are very dependent on each other for water security, so their foreign policies are naturally aligned, and they need to work together closely.

5.1. The Agreement on Water Sharing from 1959

The 1959 Nile Waters Agreement is the basis for Egypt and Sudan's modern water relations [11]. It was a bilateral treaty that set their respective quotas and treated the two countries as a single unit when it came to using the river. Egypt got the right to 55.5 billion cubic meters of water each year, while Sudan got 18.5 billion cubic meters. The Permanent Joint Technical Commission for Nile Waters is in charge of making sure that both countries work together when dealing with states upstream.

5.2. The GERD's Threat

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) being built on the Blue Nile has made Cairo and Khartoum's political and strategic ties much stronger [11]. Both countries see Ethiopia's decision to fill and run the dam on its own as a threat to their agriculture and national security. In response, Egypt and Sudan have effectively combined their diplomatic efforts and closely coordinated their military and political strategies to demand a legally binding agreement on how the dam will work.

5.3. What Sudan's Internal Conflict Means

Sudan's ongoing civil war has made this united front more difficult for the time being, putting more diplomatic pressure on Egypt to protect both countries' water interests [7]. Egypt has stepped in to speak for the entire downstream basin because Sudan's domestic institutions have been weakened by war. Egypt strongly opposes any unilateral actions upstream. Also, other countries in the Nile Basin, like South Sudan, have recently ratified the new Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), which Egypt and Sudan both oppose [11]. This puts more pressure on the two countries to stay politically united to protect their historical water rights.

5.4. What Went Wrong with the Four Freedoms Agreement?

The Four Freedoms Agreement between Egypt and Sudan in 2004 was a major diplomatic agreement that gave citizens of both countries the right to move, live, work, and own property without needing visas or permits [13]. Even though it had big demographic goals and was signed quickly, the agreement mostly failed because of long-standing security concerns, bureaucratic resistance, and recent geopolitical crises [13,14].

5.5. Worries about Safety and Lack of Trust in Politics

A lack of political trust, mostly because of fears about security in Cairo, was the main reason the agreement could not be put into action [13]. In 1995, relations broke down when Egypt accused the Sudanese government of hiding militants who were trying to kill former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. The Egyptian security forces were still very wary of people moving freely across borders, even after diplomatic relations were restored and the 2004 agreement was signed. They were worried that this would let extremists and criminals into the country. As a result, Sudan started following the agreement almost right away, but Egypt kept putting off doing so and set strict security conditions on its implementation [13].

5.6. Resistance from the Bureaucracy and Administration

At the administrative level, the agreement did not work because there was not enough institutional commitment to make policies work across borders [13]. Egyptian officials kept complicated layers of bureaucracy in place for Sudanese people who wanted to work, live, or own property, which went against the spirit of the "four freedoms." Instead of creating a seamless demographic zone, these restrictions kept Sudanese migrants in Egypt living in a very limited and legally dangerous way, which greatly reduced

the economic and social integration that the pact was supposed to promote.

6. What the Current Conflict in Sudan Means for the World

The start of the Sudanese civil war in 2023 was the last straw for the agreement’s ability to work [14]. As hundreds of thousands of people who had to leave their homes rushed to the Egyptian border, Cairo officially stopped carrying out the Four Freedoms Agreement. The Egyptian government started requiring strict visas for all Sudanese arrivals because they were worried about security and could not handle the huge influx of people in need of help [14]. This went against the basic principles of the 2004 agreement and made it effectively null and void [13,14].

6.1. How Is Egypt Handling the Stress of the Refugees Right Now?

Egypt is handling the huge stress of the Sudanese refugee crisis in early 2026 by tightening laws, stepping up security, and asking for international financial help [15,16]. Since the start of the 2023 conflict, about 1.5 million Sudanese citizens have fled to Egypt. This has put a huge strain on both the country’s resources and those of international aid groups [14,16].

6.2. New Asylum Law and Red Tape

Egypt recently passed its first national asylum law to formalize and control the number of refugees in the country [15]. This law gives the Egyptian government the job of registering asylum seekers and deciding who is a refugee. Critics say the law is very limiting, even though it is supposed to make protection better in theory [15]. It gives Egyptian officials a lot of freedom to deny or take away refugee status for vague reasons related to national security or “Egyptian values.” The bureaucratic registration system is also very slow; it can take months or years to get a valid residency permit, which leaves many refugees without papers and open to arrest [16]

6.3. Arrests and Deportations

The biggest change in Egypt’s management strategy has been a big increase in security crackdowns [14]. Since late 2023, and getting worse in 2024 and 2025, Egyptian authorities have stepped up sweeps deep inside major cities—not just at border crossings—looking for Sudanese people who do not have valid residency permits [14]. Human rights groups say that thousands of Sudanese refugees have been held without reason and sent back to Sudan illegally, including hundreds who had UNHCR papers that should have protected them from being sent back (refoulement) [14,15]. Authorities have also cracked down on projects run by refugees, forcibly closing dozens of Sudanese-run schools [16].

7. International Agreements and Lack of Funds

Egypt is enforcing the law more strictly at the same time that it is getting a huge amount of money from the European Union in exchange for stopping illegal migration to Europe [15]. Activists say that this deal has made the Egyptian government’s crackdowns stronger by focusing on managing refugees as a border control issue. At the same time, the humanitarian safety net is falling apart [16]. The UNHCR said that starting in May 2025, it would cut regular cash assistance for refugee families in Egypt by a lot because there is not enough money [16]. The combination of hostile domestic policies and less international aid has made life even harder for Sudanese people who have had to leave their homes [14-16]

7.1 Ways for Egypt and Sudan to Work Together

There are many different theoretical and practical models for how Egypt and Sudan can work together, but they all put strategic cooperation ahead of formal political unification [4,5]. These models focus on using geographic proximity, complementary resources, and shared geopolitical interests to make sure that both sides are stable.

Model of Integration	Key Mechanism	Implementation Today
Economic	Trading industrial know-how for raw materials and farm assets [10].	Joint business committees and customs systems that work together [5,10]
Functional	Connecting physical infrastructure and taking care of shared natural resources [4].	Shared electrical grids and better management of Nile water [4,11].
Institutional	Setting foreign policy goals and strategic development goals that are in line with each other [9].	High-level diplomatic cooperation on threats to regional security [7].
Demographic	Allowing workers and civilians to move freely [13].	The Four Freedoms Agreement, which is now limited by war [13,14].

8. Functional Integration Aids in Post-War Reconstruction

In the post-war world, functional integration between Egypt and Sudan is the most real and immediate way for the two countries to work together [4]. It connects the two countries physically through shared infrastructure, which speeds up recovery and makes it more permanent, instead of needing political negotiation or legal harmonization.

8.1. Connecting Electricity

The Egyptian-Sudanese electricity interconnection project is the most important way that different systems can work together right now [4]. The second phase of the interconnection grid is being built by Egypt’s Ministry of Electricity and Sudan’s Minister of Oil and Energy. The goal is to bring power to Sudanese population centers, agricultural areas, and industrial clusters that were destroyed by the war [4]. International experts agree that expanding this regional

energy grid is one of the best ways to achieve fair economic recovery after a conflict. This is because it directly allows for the resumption of manufacturing, food production, and healthcare services.

8.2. Rehabilitation of Transport and Ports

Functional integration includes rebuilding the physical transportation networks that make it easier for goods, people, and humanitarian aid to move between the two countries [5]. Egypt is currently working on rehabilitating the Wadi Halfa port, which is the main river crossing point between the two countries. This project is expected to greatly improve Sudan's river transport system, reopen important trade routes, and make it much easier for people to move around [5]. Both governments have also made it a top priority to finish railway interconnection projects that would connect their national rail networks, making a single transportation route through the Nile Valley.

8.3. Help for Agriculture and Industry in an Emergency

Egypt has stepped in to help Sudan's farmers by providing emergency electricity to important agricultural areas during harvest seasons [11]. This is because the conflict in Sudan has ruined its harvest cycles. Egyptian engineers are going to Sudan to help fix generation stations and transformers that were damaged or had to be shut down [5]. They are also directly restarting industrial plants that were damaged or had to be shut down [10]. This emergency technical cooperation gives us an immediate functional backbone on which we can build broader long-term reconstruction. It meets basic survival needs before more advanced economic models can be put in place [4,5,11].

8.4. Building Capacity in the Energy Sector

Functional integration includes deep knowledge transfer to help Sudan become self-sufficient in the long term, in addition to fixing its infrastructure [4]. Egypt is giving Sudan the skills it needs to use its own huge renewable energy resources by teaching them how to use solar and wind power. This part of functional integration that focuses on human capital makes sure that rebuilding after the war does not just rely on outside Egyptian contractors. Instead, it slowly builds up Sudanese technical skills that can support the country's recovery.

8.5. Alignment of Institutions

The most stable part of Egypt and Sudan's long-term integration is their institutional alignment [9]. This creates a layered structure of joint governance bodies that coordinate foreign policy, economic planning, and national security. This model builds integration from the ground up through shared administrative systems that respect the full sovereignty of both nations, rather than a top-down political merger.

9. Modern High-Level Strategic Committees

The High-Level Strategic Partnership Committee is the most important institutional body that guides Egypt-Sudan relations

today [9]. It meets regularly at the level of heads of state or senior ministers. These summits result in joint statements that officially set the agenda for cooperation in many areas, including water security, rebuilding after war, and geopolitics in the Red Sea [11]. In February 2026, the foreign ministers of Egypt and Sudan met in Cairo for formal political talks [9]. They came up with a detailed joint statement that coordinated their positions on Sudan's internal conflict, Nile water management, Palestinian rights, and Syrian stability. This showed how their institutional alignment affects a wide range of geopolitical issues.

9.1 Transfer of Institutions by Sector

One important modern aspect of institutional alignment is that Egypt is directly giving Sudan its administrative frameworks to help it build its own state capacity [10]. In February 2026, Egypt's Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise Development Agency (MSMEDA) hosted Sudanese government officials from the finance ministry, the justice ministry, and the Central Bank to share Egypt's laws and rules for helping small businesses grow [10]. Sudan is now using this type of institutional replication, where it copies Egypt's tried-and-true administrative systems, in many areas, such as customs management, free-zone governance, and platforms for helping investors [10].

9.2 Formation of Geopolitical Blocs

Aside from working together with each other, institutional alignment has grown into a larger regional bloc led by Egypt and Sudan [7]. These two countries are now at the center of a new axis that includes Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Somalia, which is becoming more and more important [8]. This axis coordinates foreign policy positions across the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, and the Nile Basin [11]. This bloc architecture turns the bilateral institutional model into a multilateral platform, giving Egypt and Sudan much more political power against upstream Nile challengers like Ethiopia and against instability along the Sudan-Libya-Egypt border [7,8]

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