

Ethiopia's Dam Diplomacy and the Reconfiguration of Nile Basin Power Relations

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Abstract

*The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) was a fundamental element of the hydro-hegemony alteration of Egypt on the Nile Basin, which had remained largely uncommon throughout the periods of the colonial-era treaties and the political subordination of the upstream states, leading to the largest alteration in the balance of power in the basin's modern history. Since the mega-hydroelectric project in Ethiopia became entirely functional after its official opening in September 2025, the aggressive dam policy has restructured the power balance in the region, revealing the structural vulnerability of Egyptian historical hydro-hegemony and sparking arguments on the right of sovereign states to harness common water streams. This study explores how the GERD, as a deliberate infrastructure development strategy built on a *fait accompli* approach, has steadily weakened the bargaining capacity of downstream states and altered the normative design of transboundary water governance. This paper utilizes qualitative analysis to examine trilateral diplomatic relations, treaty discussions, and reservoir-filling incidences between 2011 and 2025 through the application of power transition theory, and the Framework of Hydro-Hegemony. The study hypothesizes that Ethiopia has acted assertively in its infrastructural development and consequently led to a paradigm shift in the Egypt-centric riparian order towards a more multipolar distribution of influence where upstream developmental demands are increasingly undermining downstream historical rights. The analysis establishes that there are three dimensions related to each other, namely the material disruption of hydrological legacies by the gradual filling of GERD; the symbolic challenge to postcolonial conventions of water governance by the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1929 and the Nile Waters Treaty of 1959; the catalytic reorganization of coalition formations within the Nile Basin. The study proffers five key recommendations: Egypt and Ethiopia should reframe negotiations around equitable utilisation and guaranteed minimum downstream flows; the African Union should receive a full mediation mandate to broker a basin-wide deal under Cooperative Framework Agreement principles; all eleven Nile riparian states should be included in governance structures; and the UN Environment Programme should conduct a comprehensive transboundary environmental impact assessment of the GERD. The study adds to the new body of literature on resource geopolitics and African agency in international relations by illustrating how strategic infrastructure may be a formidable statecraft instrument. It offers a radical reconsideration of power relations on the use of common river basins and provides policy-relevant knowledge on transboundary water governance in the Global South.*

Keywords: Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, hydro-hegemony, Nile Basin, power transition, dam diplomacy, transboundary water governance, Egypt-Ethiopia relations, postcolonial water politics

1. Introduction: The Hydraulic Geography of Asymmetry

The Nile Basin - eleven country basin stretching more than 6,700 kilometres between the equatorial lakes of central Africa and the Mediterranean- has over a century seen one of the most significant hydropolitical conflicts in the Global South. Central to it is a structural paradox: Ethiopia is a landlocked country that sits at the head of the Blue Nile, contributing about 85 percent of the overall discharge making its way to the main stem of the Nile, yet over decades was not formally

allocated by the colonial model of water sharing established to govern the basin (Whittington, 2024). Egypt, which lies at the end of the river and is dependent on the river to furnish more than 90 percent of its freshwater, inherited a system of legal hegemony that was not made by its people, but was the result of imperial geopolitics (Cascão, 2009). This formative imbalance, in which the very person who contributed the most to the river in terms of its total quantity was also the one who suffered the most, as a result of its rule, is the structural precondition, out of which the dam diplomacy of Ethiopia would ultimately arise.

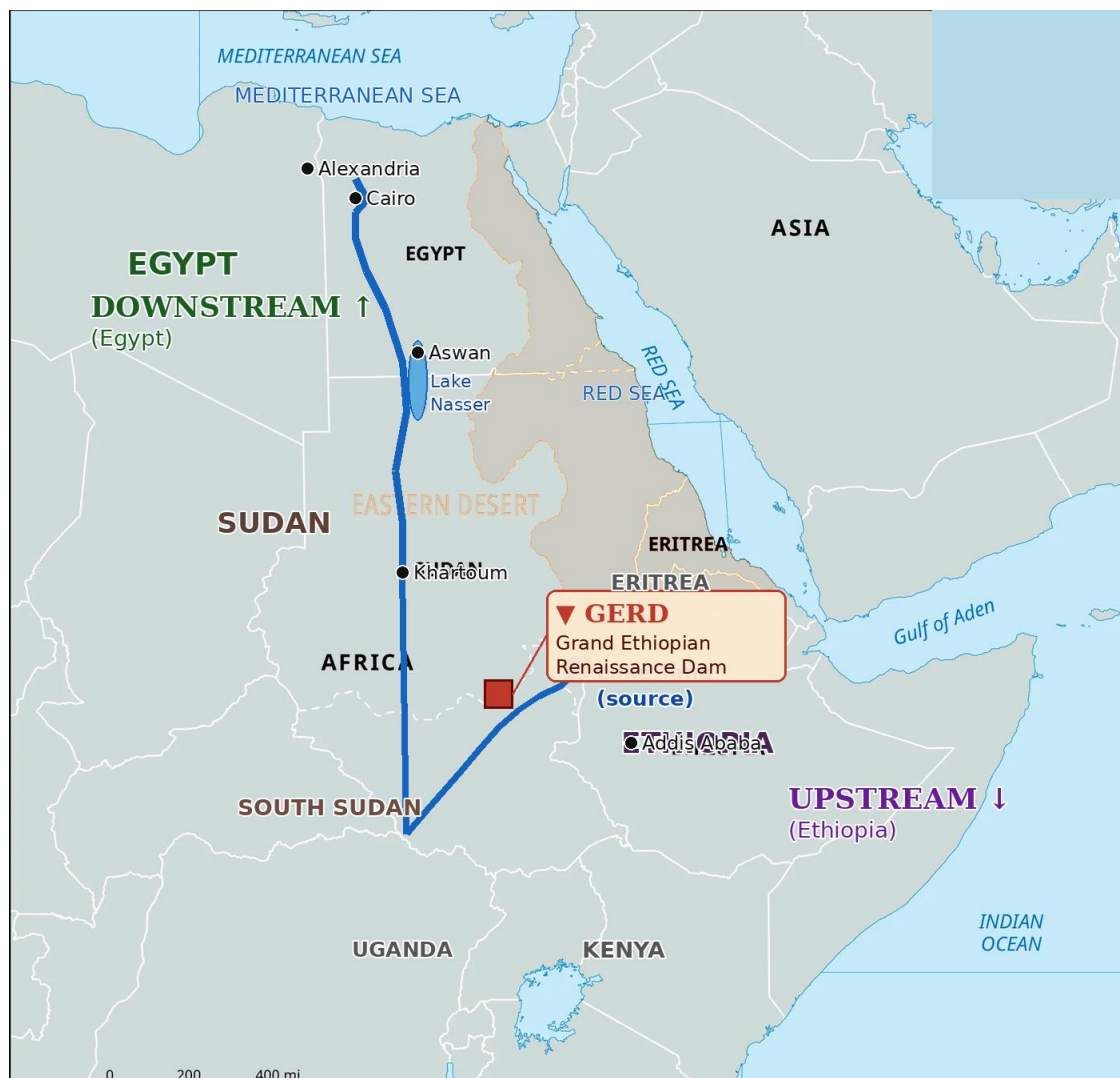
The treaties that institutionalised this arrangement during the colonial era were not created out of a fair negotiation. The Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1929, signed by Britain and Egypt, allocated 48 billion cubic metres (BCM) of the annual flow of the river to Egypt, plus a veto on any upstream development initiatives that were considered to diminish the quota of Egypt (Brookings Institution, 2015). Ethiopia, most importantly, was a non-British colony and had no part to this treaty. However, the logic of operation of the agreement, which was based on continuous flow of water from upstream into Egyptian irrigation systems, had acted in effect to limit Ethiopian water development as though the treaty were binding on Ethiopia. This pyramid was further entrenched in the 1959 Nile Waters Treaty between Egypt and an independent Sudan which apportioned eight upstream riparian's whose lands comprised the headwaters of the river to zero, adding to the earlier apportionment of 55.5 BCM to Egypt and 18.5 BCM to Sudan (Whittington, 2024). These agreements were formally and rejected by Ethiopia in 1956, 1957, 1980, and 1997, arguing that they had to have their sovereign right to equitable and reasonable utilisation of the waters of the Nile (weASPiRE, 2024).

Throughout most of the twentieth century, however, Ethiopian protests continued to be largely rhetorical. The nation experienced extended domestic crises, such as the Derg dictatorship of 1974-1991, frequent famines, and severe shortage of resources that made massive hydraulic infrastructure a far-fetched dream. Egypt, on the other hand, pitted the material power, relations with foreign states, and international donor partnerships to continue with its hydro-hegemonic hold, successfully lobbying international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, to block funding on the upstream water projects in Ethiopia and other Nile states (Cascão, 2009). Such a coercive aspect of Egyptian hegemony, where financial exclusion is substituted with military conflict, provides a good example of exactly the type of soft power control that Zeitoun and Warner (2006) explain in their definition of hydro-hegemony.

The structural conditions started to change at the end of the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s. With the advent of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Ethiopia embarked on an ambitious development agenda based on the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) model of the developmental state that emphasizes using heavy state investment in energy infrastructure as an instrument of economic change. This domestic political economy calculation coincided with an even larger upstream riparian awakening; in 1999, with Ethiopian diplomatic leadership, ten Nile basin states formed a new institution, the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), wherein, in the first time in modern Nile history, the upstream states developed a platform upon which to challenge the Egypt-centric hydropolitical ordering (Cascão, 2009). The NBI was a normative discontinuity: by its creation, there was an implicit recognition that the colonial treaties were neither valid nor binding.

It is in the context of these altered power relations that the declaration of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam of 2 April 2011 should be interpreted. It was neither a coincidence nor a strategically naive timing. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi unveiled the GERD at a time when Egypt was gripped by the political turmoil of the Arab Spring and its foreign policy was not focused on upstream riparian relationships (Salman, 2016). The move by Ethiopia to construct without adequate consultation with downstream states is a classic definition of the *fait accompli* strategy: building facts on the ground with intent to prevent the formation of a viable downstream counter to the move. This study evaluates how this strategy, along with strategic ambiguity in the negotiation process, diplomatic coalition-building in Africa, and appeal to the principles of modern international water law, has radically restructured the power equilibrium of the Nile Basin between 2011 and 2025.

Figure 1: The Blue Nile Basin – GERD Location & Upstream-Downstream Dynamics



Source: Encyclopædia Britannica base map

Legend

-  **GERD:** Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Benishangul-Gumuz, Ethiopia)
-  **Blue Nile / Nile River:** Flows northward from Ethiopia through Sudan into Egypt
-  **UPSTREAM** (Ethiopia): Source of the Blue Nile; water originates in Ethiopian Highlands
-  **DOWNSTREAM** (Egypt): Over 90% of Egypt's freshwater supply depends on Nile flow from upstream

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This article is premised on two complementary theoretical frameworks; the Power Transition Theory by Organski and Kugler (1980) and the Framework of Hydro-Hegemony by Zeitoun and Warner (2006). Jointly, these frameworks shed light on the structural circumstances that predispose particular states towards challenging the established orders and particular processes by which such challenges are prosecuted in water-resource settings.

First described by A.F.K. Organski (1958) and later empirically developed by Organski and Kugler (1980), Power Transition Theory is a theory in international relations that suggests that a shift in power occurs when the dominant state experiences a decline in power. The Framework of Hydro-Hegemony by Zeitoun and Warner (2006) offers a much finer analytical instrument to analyse the strategies and power resources by which the states strive to gain control over a common watercourse. The concept of hydro-hegemony is described as hegemony on the river basin level which is enabled by water resource control mechanisms including resource capture, integration and containment (Zeitoun and Warner, 2006). The framework identifies the distinction between material power (military, economical and hydrological resources), bargaining power (diplomatic leverage and coalition capacity), and ideational power (the capacity to influence the normative and discursive framing of water allocation debates). Egypt's historical hegemony was based on the combination of all three: the dominance of material power in the twentieth century, diplomatic dominance with the help of international financial institutions, and ideological dominance with the help of the establishment of the so-called historic rights and the so-called acquired uses as the supposedly sacrosanct legal principles.

In an article on Water Alternatives, Cascão (2009) has documented the initial phases of Ethiopia's counter-hegemonic formation within the context of the rising political stability and economic growth of the upstream riparian, and has shown that they were establishing the conditions through which the challenge to the Egypt-centric order would be posed. An earlier article by Cascao (2008) in Water Policy particularly singled out Ethiopia as practising what she called apparent consent - a tactic of apparent compliance with the current order, masking a hidden intention to disrupt it as soon as possible. The GERD forms the decisive point at which apparent consent was forsaken in favour of open challenge.

Salman (2016) offers a legal-diplomatic narrative of the history of the GERD, having salinized the dam as a *fait accompli* before the downstream nations could orchestrate an effective legal counterargument, through an incremental strategy of time-gaining. On 23rd March 2015, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan signed the DoP, recognising, in the first instance, that Ethiopia had a legitimate interest to develop the GERD and pledged all three parties to the principles of equitable

and reasonable utilisation and the principle of no significant harm, which were formulated under the 1997 UN Convention on the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses and not based on the colonial-era bilateral agreements (Agreement on Declaration of Principles, 2015). Writing in *Water International*, Cascão and Nicol (2016) examined the DoP as setting a new normative architecture of the Nile Basin, observing that, through gaining Egyptian assent to these tenets, Ethiopia gained a diplomatic concession of historic dimensions.

In a peer-reviewed article published by SAGE journals, Kebirhusien and Yenieneh (2025) define the GERD as a decisive counter-hydro-hegemonic mechanism acting to change the governance structure of Nile to a basin-wide equity. Their work is empirically grounded on the theoretical analysis based on the key informant interviews that were carried out in Ethiopia including among the hydro-politics experts of Hawassa University. Usmen and Ahmad (2024) apply Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) to analyse the implications of the dam, and conclude that the GERD is the expression of a shift of the norm of hydro-hegemony to the norm of equitable and reasonable utilisation - a frame that is reminiscent of how Ethiopia is officially portraying the project.

Although the prevailing trend of contemporary research places Ethiopia in the role of a legitimate counter-hegemonic actor, dissonant voices deserve attention. In a detailed explanatory narrative of the US-facilitated negotiations that are published in *Water International*, Helal and Bekhit (2023) posit the argument that is based on the vantage of the Egyptian negotiators that Ethiopia took during the 2019-2021 trilateral negotiations, and that Ethiopia aimed to establish its own hydro-hegemony over the Blue Nile, rather than to achieve a fair cooperation. This view, though now frankly partisan, is indicative of real tensions in the normative architecture of the new order: the substitution of Egyptian domination by Ethiopian domination, would not, in itself, be a just solution to the governance crisis in the basin. A more subtle interpretation, which is in line with the hydro-hegemony model, indicates that the GERD has enabled a structural rebalancing - although the final nature of such rebalancing will be determined by the diplomatic decisions taken during the years after the complete operationalisation of the dam.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the trilateral diplomatic relations, treaty negotiations, and reservoir-filling incidents surrounding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) between 2011 and 2025. The analysis is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: Power Transition Theory (Organski and Kugler, 1980), which examines shifts in relative power among riparian states, and the Framework of Hydro-Hegemony (Zeitoun and Warner, 2006), which interrogates how dominant actors consolidate control over shared water resources. Data was drawn from primary and secondary sources, including official diplomatic communiqués, intergovernmental negotiation records, policy documents, and scholarly literature, which were subjected to thematic and interpretive analysis.

4. Major Findings: Ethiopia's Dam Diplomacy in Three Dimensions

4.1 The Infrastructural Dimension: Fait Accompli and the Reconfiguration of Hydrological Facts

The GERD lies within the Blue Nile, which in the Ethiopian language is also called Abbay, translating as great in Ge'ez, indicating the totemic importance of the river in Ethiopian cultural memory, at a gorge some 500 kilometres northwest of Addis Ababa, on the Benishangul-Gumuz regional state, close to the Sudanese frontier. The dam is 145 metres tall, and 1.8 kilometres long, with an installed electricity-generating capacity of 5,150 megawatts (MW) more than two times the national power production capacity of Ethiopia Pre-GERD and a reservoir volume of 74 billion cubic metres (BCM), which is approximately one full year of average Nile flow (Hafez, 2025). These are not engineering specifications; they are a geopolitical statement. When the dam is completely full, it contains a volume of water that is the same as that which Egypt regards as its yearly sovereign right according to the 1959 Nile Waters Treaty.

On 2nd April 2011, construction began, funded wholly by mobilising an internal source: Ethiopian government bonds, payroll remittances by civil servants and military members, and public contributions - a kind of mass economic nationalism, which simultaneously excluded international financial institutions and thus protected the project against the external financial lever that Egypt had previously used to repress upstream hydraulic development (Cascão, 2009; LSE Africa at LSE Blog, 2024). The decision to construct the dam free of World Bank, Chinese, or multilateral money financing was a strategic calculation in itself: by depending on domestic capital only, Ethiopia denied Egypt the diplomatic tool of pressuring development banks to revoke funding - a tool which had stalled earlier upstream developments in the 1990s.

The most significant material manifestation of the Ethiopian dam diplomacy is the gradual filling of the GERD reservoir in four consecutive annual stages. The initial filling began in July 2020, topping the level of the reservoirs to 540 metres above sea level; the second in July 2021 to 575 metres; the third in August 2022 to 600 metres; and the fourth and final filling declared by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed before the Ethiopian Parliament as extending so that the downstream countries will not suffer, was completed in September 2023, with water height rising to about 625 metres and 42 BCM of water in the reservoir (All fillings were made without Egyptian consent and without a binding operational agreement. At every step, Egypt was outraged, sending letters to the United Nations Security Council; in reaction to the initial filing, it threatened that it would not permit Ethiopia to unilaterally seize control of shared water resources (Washington Institute, 2025). Cairo, however, was structurally incapable of converting verbal resistance into material restraint.

On 20th February 2022, the dam generated its first electricity, with its first turbine, a 375 MW unit, generating power, reaching a milestone marked by widespread coverage in the Ethiopian state press, and celebrated in Addis Ababa as an important moment in the history of the postcolonial development of Ethiopia. In August 2024, the third and fourth 400 MW turbine were commissioned and on 9th September 2025, officially the GERD became the biggest hydroelectric power plant in Africa (Elbarbary, 2021). The opening, attended by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, had a depth of symbolic and material meaning: the dam was no longer a diplomatic proposal but a

hydro-mechanical reality of the Nile. Egypt and Sudan were no longer in a position to stop its construction. The reality of the basin was changed forever.

The Sudanese implications have been mixed and, by no means like the uniformly adversarial stance of Egypt, almost ambivalent. As early as December 2013, Addis Ababa started to export electricity to Sudan, providing 250 MW via power lines erected in the same year, establishing an economic dependency that provided Khartoum with material incentives to consider the completion of the GERD as potentially advantageous (Salman, 2017). The downstream dams of the GERD on the Blue Nile include Roseires and Sennar, which will benefit at times of high rainfall in the country, a factor that early on created Sudanese goodwill towards the Ethiopian project. The export of energy, and the threat of the controlled downstream flows, was a masterwork of riparian coalition management by Ethiopia, making the potential downstream solidarity that would otherwise have offered a stronger counterpoint to Ethiopian ambitions actually fractured instead.

4.2 The Normative Dimension: Contesting the Colonial Legal Order

The dam politics in Ethiopia has not only been a high-level game of physical infrastructure but also a calculated campaign to replace the normative architecture of the colonial-era water law with a new system, based on the current concepts of international law of watercourses. The Addis Ababa view of the hydropolitical heritage of British imperial rule is the 1929 and 1959 additions, which are treaties decided without the participation of Ethiopia and wholly contrary to the customary international law principle of equitable and reasonable utilisation, codified in Article 5 of the 1997 UN Convention on the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (UNWC). Ethiopia has been categorical and consistent in its rejection of these agreements: the country has never signed, ratified, or accepted them as binding, and has expressed this view formally and repeatedly during a period of more than seventy years (weASPIRE, 2024).

The most important normative breakthrough in the whole GERD dispute was the signing of the Declaration of Principles (DoP) on 23 March 2015 in Khartoum. The DoP was a document containing ten principles regulating the construction, filling, and operation of the GERD that was agreed upon by Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan. Its importance was not much in its technical provisions but in the premises on which it was based. By signing the DoP, Egypt implicitly recognised three things: first, that the Ethiopian sovereign right to build the GERD had been a development project; second, that the management of the dam would be determined by the principles of no significant harm and equitable utilisation as provided under the 1997 UNWC framework, not under the 1929 or 1959 treaties; and third, that the control over the GERD would be addressed by the basin-wide consultative mechanisms envisioned in the DoP, not by individual claim to historic rights. (These concessions, mined out of Egypt without a single shot firing, were a fundamental normative reconfiguration of the legal order of the Nile.

In 2010, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi signed the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) negotiated under the NBI, which further consolidated the normative challenge to Egypt's hegemony. Egypt and Sudan declined to sign the CFA, strongly protesting against its clause that would have supplanted the tenet of prior notification and agreement - which would have effectively maintained Egyptian veto power in upstream projects - with the tenet of equitable utilisation with no downstream consent required (Salman, 2016; The Conversation,

2020). The demand that Egypt ought to join the CFA as a precondition to any definitive resolution of the GERD conflict has long been a feature of Ethiopian diplomacy, positing the larger struggle not only as a conflict over a single dam but over which normative order to rule the allocation of the Nile in the future: colonial entitlement or contemporary international law (Hafez, 2023).

The extension of the ambition that drives Ethiopian dam diplomacy is reflected in an Ethiopian invocation of the principles of the CFA during the 2019-2021 US-mediated negotiations when Addis Ababa offered that any GERD deal would be accompanied by a commitment by Egypt and Sudan to negotiate a basin-wide water-sharing contract within a decade in line with the principles of the CFA (Hafez, 2023). To Cairo, this was also an effort to leverage GERD discussions to recalibrate the entire colonial water-distribution structure—a maximalist goal that Egypt rejected outright. In the eyes of Addis Ababa, a resolution to the operational parameters of the GERD, and the preservation of the colonial allocation framework, would ensure Ethiopian electricity generation, without solving the structural injustice of the governing regime of the basin.

Media scholars have reported extensively on the hydro discursive aspect of this normative contestation. In a comparative study of two state newspaper websites, Ahram Online in Egypt and Ethiopian Herald, Bayru et al. (2025) discovered that the two media outlets were propaganda of two opposing normative regimes: Ahram Online encouraged use of historic rights as a hegemonic hydro discourse and the Ethiopian Herald encouraged use of equitable and reasonable use as a counter-hegemonic alternative. This discursive polarisation, the study concluded, has been a major cause of failure of negotiations as it has ingrained incompatible normative starting points that the two sides are not ready to give up without massive compromise by the other.

4.3 The Diplomatic Dimension: Coalition Politics and Strategic Ambiguity

The dam diplomacy in Ethiopia has exhibited an advanced ability of multi-level diplomatic management that integrates the African institutional politics, the development of bilateral relationships, and the strategy in dealing with global powers. On the continental scale, the insistence of Ethiopia across the GERD negotiations that any third-party intervention must go through the African Union instead of Western-led structures was both a principled pan-Africanist move and a strategic decision (LSE Africa at LSE Blog, 2024). One such process was the AU process, launched in 2020, in which Ethiopia had more institutional bargain than in the UN Security Council or US Treasury-brokered processes. The fact that Addis Ababa accepted the mediator role of the GERD, even though in a limited capacity as an observer, enabled it to demonstrate African unity without subjecting itself to a binding arbitration that could restrict its unilateral control of the dam (Hafez, 2023).

The skill of coalition manipulation by Ethiopia is demonstrated in the management of the Sudanese position. Early on, during the presidency of Omar al-Bashir, Sudan was widely favourable of the GERD, appreciating its flood-regulation advantage, and its potential to generate electricity. Subsequent to the dethroning of al-Bashir in a mass uprising in 2019 and a 2021 military takeover, the status of Sudan changed to one more aligned with Egypt, which Egyptian diplomacy actively developed through military collaboration, political assistance to the Sudanese military, and the ultimate introduction of Egyptian military forces to Somalia within the African Union mission framework (Washington Institute, 2025). Ethiopia realised this realignment and tried to keep Sudanese ambivalence by remaining an exporter of electricity and trying to engage in diplomatic

outreach; in January 2023 Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed visited Sudan, the first such visit since the 2021 coup, receiving personal assurances of continued engagement by General al-Burhan (Addis Standard, 2023).

The collapse of the US-mediated talks in April 2021 demonstrated the extent of the Ethiopia's assertive posture and its diplomatic self-confidence. Ethiopia pulled out of the last Washington talks, declining to sign a draft deal it saw as skewed to Egyptian interests, a move that elicited harsh international condemnation but which represented a calculated judgment that the gradual filling of the dam had already given Addis Ababa sufficient structural power to absorb the diplomatic costs of failure (Al Jazeera, 2023). Ethiopia also protested the intervention of the US Treasury Department in the talks; seeing this as an inappropriate avenue to take on a sovereign wrangle over water resources - and what it described as the arm-twisting of the World Bank to acceptance terms that would inhibit its operation of the dam (Richtmann, 2025).

This act of signing up the filling schedules of GERD without Egyptian agreement, over four years in a row, 2020-2023, is, by far, the most explicit manifestation of the doctrine of strategic ambiguity in action. Addis Ababa always presented every filling as a technicality, not a political provocation, as the sovereign right to operate a dam on Ethiopian soil and simultaneously declaring devotion to finding a negotiated settlement. This claim to unilateralism and a pledge to dialogue was an effective diplomatic two-sided trap to Egypt: any Egyptian action that went beyond words would risk the label of aggression against a state operating within its rights into development, and failure to act would see the GERD filled. The Security Council Report (2021) reported on the reaction of Council members when Egypt requested international criticism of the Ethiopian strategy, with Kenya among others clearly stating the need to have African solutions to African problems and refused to impose sanctions on Addis Ababa.

5. Analysis: The Emerging Multipolar Nile Order

The facts used in this paper suggest a radical reorganization of the power structure of the Nile Basin - one that will not simply redistribute the roles of individual actors, but will change the structural principles according to which the water resources of the basin are produced. It yields three conclusions of analysis.

To begin with, the GERD has rendered the 1929 and 1959 treaty framework functionally obsolete as the functional instrument of governance in the Nile Basin, although the said treaties have not been formally abrogated. This reconstruction and operation of a dam whose dam pools water the size of all the annual share of Egypt, without Egyptian approval, and without incurring a decisive international penalty, Ethiopia has shown that the colonial allocation architecture cannot be enforced against a sufficiently competent and politically willed upstream state. As Kebirhusien and Yenieneh (2025) note, the GERD has pushed Egypt to the implicit recognition that its own water security cannot be ensured through a legal effort but needs to be bargained with an upstream power that has now acquired significant hydrological bargaining. This legal-negotiated interdependence is, in itself, a reformulation of the power geometry in the basin.

Second, the GERD conflict has triggered a normative division in GERD governance rhetoric that will last longer than the dam itself. The struggle between the system of historic rights in Egypt and Ethiopian-based system of equitable and reasonable utilisation is not just a technical one of

what methodology of water allocation should be followed; it is a struggle of who will form the normative tradition international law of the past or that of international law of the present which will become the legal basis of the arrangements of governance in the future. The achievement of Ethiopia in getting the Egyptian acceptance of the 2015 DoP that mirrored the 1997 UNWC framework is a normative win of large proportions. Egypt will find it harder as well to refer to the 1959 treaty as the only instrument that will guide negotiations in the future, having already signed a document that bases the regime on other ideals.

Third, and, by far, most important regarding the long-term trajectory of the basin, the GERD did not just transfer power between Egypt and Ethiopia. It has preconditioned a more truly multipolar basin order where the interests of the eleven riparian states such as the equatorial lake states of Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi, who signed the CFA, have a larger voice in the governance talk within the basin. The NBI, the CFA, and the DoP are three components of a developing institutional framework, which, though partial and disputed, is structurally different than the bilateral domination of Egypt and Sudan, which was characteristic of the colonial period. The big question that is yet to be answered about Nile Basin hydropolitics at the mid-twenty-first-century level is whether this new architecture can be unified into a long-term, sustainable and legally binding governance system.

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study has proposed that the GERD dam diplomacy in Ethiopia is a qualitative change; not a quantitative change in the balance of power in the Nile Basin. Through a fait accompli infrastructural strategy coupled with a normative contest of the colonial legal order and complex multi-lateral diplomatic management, Ethiopia has achieved a rebalancing of the hydropolitical architecture of the basin from Egypt-centric hegemony to a more contested and multipolar one. The most definitive sign that this change is now irreversible in substance is the official opening of the GERD in September 2025, with no binding operational agreement having been concluded. The dam is there; it produces power in a nation where over fifty percent of the population once had no dependable access; and the dam reservoir contains water the management of which is, and will always be, an Ethiopian sovereign privilege.

Five policy recommendations emerge out of this analysis in the article. First, Egypt should re-align its bargaining position, not on the basis that Ethiopia should be obliged to take the colonial allocation framework as a legal foundation, but on the basis that it should be obliged to take the principle of equitable utilisation as the governing principle and proceed towards agreeing on mutually acceptable minimum flows downstream to sustain Egyptian livelihoods and maintain Ethiopia's operational sovereignty over the dam. Second, both sides ought to recognize that access to freshwater is a joint regional stability concern for Egypt, where more than 90 percent of the water supply for a population of nearly 110 million is provided by the Nile.

Third, the African Union should be given an effective mediation mandate (not the observer status that Ethiopia has agreed to) to enable a holistic basin wide water-sharing deal based on Cooperative Framework Agreement principles. Fourth, the governance architecture should incorporate all eleven Nile riparian states instead of the tripartite structure currently in place that leaves the equatorial lake states out of the decision-making on matters that concern their common resources. Fifth, the global community, through the United Nations Environment Programme,

should enlist a thorough transboundary environmental impact assessment of the GERD, based on the justifiable interests in understanding its effects on downstream agricultural systems, on the coastal processes of the Nile Delta, and the cumulative effects of climate change on the water availability of the basin.

Finally, the GERD exemplifies a more general fact about resource geopolitics in the Global South: infrastructure is not a developmental instrument but a kind of statecraft. The dam diplomacy of Ethiopia illustrates how a sufficiently determined and internally cohesive upstream state endowed with the normative resources of the modern water law of international law and the legitimising discourse of postcolonial development rights, can confront and eventually displace an established downstream hegemony. The experience of the Nile Basin in the first quarter of the twenty-first century will be used as a significant point of reference of similar hydro political rivalries being played on the Mekong, the Indus, and the Volta.

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