# Management of Conflicts over Transboundary Water Resources: Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Blue Nile Basin

Moges Zewdu Teshome[1]

*Ph.D. student at the University of Vienna in Interdisciplinary International Studies.*

E-mail: mogeszewdu2013@gmail.com

## Abstract

How do riparian states manage water conflicts? Why countries in some river basins have been able to effectively manage the conflict whilst the riparians of the Blue Nile Basin failed to do so? These are the main questions this paper dealt with. Most scholars on water conflict disproportionately focused on the possibility of water war or cooperation among the riparians of the transboundary rivers, by adopting narrow theoretical frameworks, which resulted in the scant exploration of low-intensity water conflict. In short, the existing methodology is inadequate in explaining issues about water interactions among the riparians of the transboundary rivers and the dynamics of hydro politics. By applying a 'richer view of law and politics', this paper seeks to examine the theories, concepts, and strategies on the management of conflicts arising from the use of transboundary water resources, with a particular emphasis on the Blue Nile Basin. Accordingly, the paper argues that effective management of water conflicts depends, inter alia, on the power asymmetry among the Riparian States, the existence of and the extent to which the emerging water use norms are entrenched into the legal framework and state practices, the relative strength of and the mandate bestowed upon institutions regulating the Basin, and the level of convergence (divergence) of state identities and interests of the Riparian States. More particularly, within the Blue Nile Basin, Egypt has been able to establish and maintain an unstable hydro-hegemony in the Blue Nile Basin. To this end, it relied, among others, on colonial treaties, informal institutions, containment strategies such as international financial institutions, the discourse of 'historic rights´, and the securitization of the river. Over the last three decades, however, the upper riparian countries (mainly Ethiopia) have started challenging the Egyptian hegemony by using various counterhegemonic strategies, mainly through the combination of legal and political mechanisms and noticeably, following the construction of the GERD. It further asserts that the management of conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt has become intractable owing to the competing norms, incompatible

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[1] Moges Zewdu Teshome earned LLB from Addis Ababa University (2013), an LLM in International Criminal Justice and Human Rights from the University of Dundee (2017), and a Master of Advanced International Studies from the University of Vienna (2021). He previously served as a law lecturer at Haramaya University College of Law and currently, he is a Ph.D. student at the University of Vienna in Interdisciplinary International Studies. He can be reached via his email: mogeszewdu2013@gmail.com

state identity, and securitization of the Nile, coupled with weak institutions and ineffective conflict management efforts, as evidenced in the protracted negotiation process and the failed US-brokered mediation. It is, therefore, imperative that future Ethiopia-Egypt water conflict management endeavors should take the aforementioned necessary, albeit not sufficient, conditions into account.

**Keywords**: hydro-hegemony, hydro-harmony, transboundary water resources, water conflict management, securitization.

## 1. Introduction

Rarely do interstate conflicts; be it a dispute over borders, access to the Sea, economic competition, or conflict over the use of transboundary waters, involve a single issue (Wolf, 2007). It is in the nature of any conflict to encompass elements of competition and cooperation, to varying degrees. This denotes that the main difference between two conflicts lies in their *degree* of cooperation or competition. Consequently, effective management of a conflict depends, *inter alia*, on the underlying causes of the conflict, the issues involved, the identity of the parties, the strategies employed, and the role(s) of third parties in the resolution of such conflict.

In the case of conflicts arising from transboundary water resources (hereinafter water conflicts), interactions among riparian states are characterized by a high level of interdependence or what conflict theorists call ''positive linkage'' (Coleman 2014, 41). It entails the riparian states either swim or sink together (Tekuya 2020). When it comes to long rivers with many riparian countries, cooperation even becomes more difficult not least because it involves complex interactions, many issues, and competing interests, particularly in the absence of resilient institutions and shared norms. The Nile River is one such transboundary river typified by intractable conflicts and poor cooperation among riparian states.

Even though the Nile is a shared water resource, only Egypt and to a lesser extent, Sudan, have extensively utilized it. This could be *partly* explained by the following reasons. First, Egypt being a downstream country, is highly dependent on the Nile to meet more than 90% of its consumption. The Egyptian civilization is inseparable from the fresh water and fertile soils of the Nile Delta. Second, Egypt being a colony of Great Britain, has been able to safeguard its interests over the Nile through great power politics. Third, even after decolonization, Egypt remained one of the great powers in the region. For these reasons, it should not be surprising that Egypt has been able to establish and sustain *hydro-hegemony* (Warner 2006) over the Nile River.

This hegemonic order over the Nile was built by applying different mechanisms, through the combination of both hard and soft powers. Notably, Egypt relied on the international water law doctrines of prior appropriation (by building Mega Dams and artificial lakes), invoking the principle of 'not causing significant

harm' and the claim of 'historical rights' (Deng 2007), which were solidified in bilateral treaties. By virtue of these legal norms and existing power asymmetry, the vast majority of the upstream countries were excluded (until very recently) from claiming the fair share of the Nile water (Swain, 1997). Thus, the status quo could not be maintained due to the growing tension between the forces of change and continuity.

That is, the upper riparian states (as spearheaded by Ethiopia) have started challenging Egypt's hydro-hegemony over the last few decades (Casca˜o 2008). To do so, the upper riparian states have profusely relied on the contemporary international law norms of 'fair, equitable and sustainable utilization' of transboundary water resources and sovereignty over the natural resources within the territory of the riparian states as enshrined in various international instruments.

The Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) aimed at ensuring 'benefit sharing' (W. Teshome 2009), facilitating dialogues, and laying down the foundation for the subsequent negotiations for a comprehensive agreement. Unfortunately, and to the dismay of many, during the negotiations on the Cooperative Framework Agreement (hereinafter CFA), Egypt has introduced a 'water security' clause[2] that would be incorporated into the art. 14(b) of the agreement (Mekonnen 2010) as a tool to safeguard the status quo. It rather ironically, as Salman (Salman 2013) noted, solidified the differences between the upper and lower riparian states.

In the Blue Nile Basin, the water interaction between Ethiopia and Egypt is unique in many ways. Both countries are recognized as one of the oldest civilizations in the world, embodying rich history, culture, mythology, and state identity (Gershoni 2000); those historical interactions are marred with strategic cooperation and confrontations (Jesman 1959); (Erlich 2001) and most significantly, Ethiopia is the main supplier of the Blue Nile whilst Egypt is highly dependent on the continues flow of the river.

These interactions have taken a different form following Ethiopia's commencement of the construction of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in April 2011. The renaissance dam has as much symbolic value as its economic return for Ethiopia. This means that Ethiopia's move to reclaim the Nile River has led Egypt to *perceive* it as a unilateral measure to question its hydro-hegemony and significantly escalated the hitherto simmering dispute between the two countries (Mbaku 2020). As a result, in the ensuing years, the process of *securitization* of the Nile (Fischhendler 2015) has intensified, reaching its peak with the lodging of a complaint by Egypt to the UNSC on June 19, 2020, and subsequent complaints

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[2] Water security should not be conflated with securitization of the water resources (as Mekonnen did), although a perception of threatened water security may serve as an element of securitization.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

Within the general framework of the constructivist paradigm of international relations, this paper approaches water conflicts from a '*richer view of law and politics* (M. F. Toope 2001). This framework contends that legal norms have constitutive effects on riparian states. It has been argued that ''International law can and does result from *belief* and reasoning that compels a response'' (Zeitoun 2008, 110), emphasis added). But these beliefs and reasonings are found not only in the commonly identifiable foreground knowledge (treaties, national laws, court judgments, constitutive instruments, formal institutions, etc.), but also as embedded in the repertoire of background knowledge (customary norms, informal institutions, state practices, national discourses, historical narratives, etc.). Indeed, relations among States, including *transboundary water interactions*[8], are determined by multifaceted interactions at various levels. These complex interactions sustained over time, constitute the identities of the actors and by extension, national interests. It is worth noting that state identity, once formed, would tend to remain stable because of its institutionalization (Zehfuss 2001), subject to evolution through the intersubjective process (Wendt 1999) and *practical* intersubjective interactions and understandings.

Legal norms are one of the mechanisms used to establish *hydro-hegemonic* order. Once established, hydro-hegemony is sustained by entrenching into the common sense of the mass through a discursive practice (Hopf 2013) and through the effective use of power. Indeed, by imposing colonial treaties, institutions, and sanctioned discourses on other riparian states, Egypt has been able to effectively establish and maintain hegemony in the basin (Tekuya, 2018; Casca˜o 2008). As to the securitization moves, this research aims at unpacking the discourses of water security and the attendant practices in the basin, in light of the Copenhagen School (Buzan 1998) and its more refined version, the sociological approach ((Balzac(ed) 2011) on the social construction of *security*.

As depicted in table 1, power[3] lies at the heart of transboundary water interactions. Power is, in the words of Pouliot (2011, 30), ''not a capacity but a relation and that it is both material and symbolic.'' It is to say that, in addition to being material and symbolic, power is inherently *relational*. How much power is exercised, however, is constrained (or enabled) by other factors: norms, institutions, state identity, and water security.

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[3] Here, power refers to a smart power, which encompasses the combination of the hard power of coercion and the soft power of persuasion and attraction to achieve the desired goal. For a general background on smart power, see Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (Library of Congress, New York, 2010).

Thus, depending on the interplay between some or all of these factors, the water interactions among the riparian states could be more of hydro-hegemony or hydro-harmony.[4]

In short, this paper would seek to problematize state interests and preferences with a view to alleviating the "poverty of neo-realism and neo-institutionalism" ( (Ashley, 1984).

Table 1. Framework of Hydrohegemony vs. Hydroharmony

| Description | Hydro-hegemony | Hydro-harmony | Effects on Conflict Management |
|---|---|---|---|
| Legal Norms | Mostly no comprehensive and basin-wide legal frameworks, norms are rhetorically invoked for instrumental purposes (mainly to sustain hegemonic order), mostly predicated upon the inequitable distribution of water resource, and highly contested until such time it will be replaced by other competing norms. | Commonly there exist comprehensive basin-wide legal frameworks, norms are deeply internalized (taken for granted), they shape the preferences and identity of the actors, ensures equitable utilization of water resource, and tend to endure for a long period but evolves as practice selectively changes. | Divergent interpretations of existing norms (as driven by historical narratives and grounded in background knowledge vs. concordant interpretation (with the possibility of varying practical implementation) and the power of persuasion, resort to costly litigation vs. frequent informal deliberations and the use of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms. |
| State Identity and national interests | No or less common identification between the disputants, a community of practice within the basin is unthinkable and the prevalence of competing, at times mutually exclusive, interests. | Disputants tend to exhibit strong common identification, and a relatively high possibility of forming a basin-wide community of practice and relationship based on shared values and interests. | Characterized by a zero-sum game vs. win-win approach; preservation of relationship vs. winning the battle at any cost. |

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[4] Hydro-harmony: this is a term coined by the writer of this paper and it refers to a state of affairs whereby the conflicting riparian states move away from hydro-hegemonic order to a mutual and sustainable co-existence with each other and in harmony with the ecological system through an innovative basin-wide water management system. As such, it goes beyond cooperation among riparians to share the water resource, riparian relationships are forged on the basis of common identity and it encompasses ecological harmony. However, a related but conceptually different terminology, *hydro-solidarity*, has been widely used.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Institution | In most cases, there are no institutions, institutions with no or limited mandates, poor cooperation, hostile interactions among riparians, and no or weak dispute settlement mechanisms. | In most cases, strong and resilient institutions, extensive mandates, regular cooperation, positive interactions among riparians, and effective dispute settlement mechanisms. | Delegitimization of institutions (if there are any) vs. strong trust in the institutions, poor management of conflicts vs. effective management of conflicts. |
| Water Security | Securitization of water resources; unilateral approaches to water utilizations and competition to control of water resources. | Treating water scarcity as common security; integrated resource management and prioritization of efficient use of water resources. | Little room for compromises, hostility, and a threat of war vs. sustained dialogue, pacific resolution of disputes and a negotiated settlement. |
| The role(s) of power | Power over others: more hard power exerted, and coercive diplomacy used. | Power with others: more soft power exerted, and holistic diplomacy used. | Conflictual relationship and demonstration of power politics vs. acquiescence and common security framework. |

Therefore, the central *theme* of this paper is that, in addition to water scarcity, competing interests, lack of resilient institutions[5], and hydro-hegemonic order[6], competing norms and incompatible state identities among riparian states and securitization of water resources significantly contribute to the intractability of water conflict and make its management a complex project to deal with. This is because the bases for building ''trusting relationships'' (Hoffman 2002), cooperation in good faith, and establishing a strong institutional framework would be unlikely without bridging those differences.

In terms of methodology, this paper has employed an interdisciplinary approach, whereby International Law and International Relations disciplines are synthesized through a normative framework. It relied, extensively,

[5] Institutions and regimes play crucial roles in facilitating cooperation and providing for dispute resolution mechanisms. However, institutions are political constructs whose efficacy depends on, among others, common identifications, the normative strength of the constitutive documents, the existence of mutual trust among the members, the existence or lack of regional hegemon, the principal-agent problem, and the level of regional integration and thus, the transformative power of the institutions. In the Blue Nile Basin, for instance, there is the NBI, but its transformative power has been crippled by factors overlooked by conventional explanations. For a detailed discussion on this, see chapter two.

[6] According to the Neo-Gramscian approach, hegemony is generally conceived as consent manifested in the form of broad acceptance of ideas, norms, and ideologies and maintained by material resources and institutions.

on literature reviews, interviews with some selected government officials and analysts, international treaties, and government websites. In order to further bolster the depth of the analysis, case studies are devised. Even though Sudan is one of the riparian states of the Blue Nile Basin, it was excluded for three main reasons. First of all, Sudan´s hegemonic role is less pronounced as compared to Egypt. Secondly, adding Sudan to the mix complicates the causal mechanism, without adding extra value. And lastly, Sudan´s position has not been stable over the past few years, as it swings between supporting Ethiopia, serving as a balancing factor, and siding with Egypt.

## 3. The Role(s) of Institutions[7] and Mediation in the Management of Water Conflicts

It has been pointed out that ''building institutional capacity is the strongest method to prevent and resolve water conflicts, despite its imperfections'' (Petersen-Perlman 2017, 2). The efficacy of institutions in managing water conflicts is predicated upon the premises that ''International water conflicts may happen when there is no institution that delineates each nation's rights and responsibilities with regard to the shared body of water, nor any agreements or implicit cooperative arrangements'' (Petersen-Perlman , 7). This is the case because ''once cooperative water regimes are established through treaty, they turn out to be resilient over time, even between otherwise hostile riparians and even as conflict is waged over other issues'' (J. D. Wolf 2009, 23).

For the most part, it is the resilience of the institutions that help with the management of water conflicts. And of course, as international institutions are born to be mediators, they frequently involve in the conflict mediation process (Touval 1985, 34). Primarily, institutions provide forums for interactions, negotiations of water-sharing schemes, and mechanisms for dispute resolution. As a result, the starting point for conflict resolution is the negotiation between or among the riparians of transboundary rivers. For the process of negotiation is a learning avenue, it may also serve as a potent tool of socialization so that ''parties can educate each other in their interests and thus become re-educated in their own interests in the process'' (J. D. Wolf 2009, 33) through the process of intersubjective understanding. Then, this sustained dialogue will, to a great extent, help parties to re-examine their previous negotiation positions and modify their interests.

For this process to bear fruits, conflict mediators play important roles by helping parties move from a zero-sum game (position-based negotiation) towards interest-based negotiation strategies. Indeed, if what is hindering the parties from engaging in an integrative negotiation aimed at problem-solving is their irreconcilable positions and mutual distrust, which is very common in international negotiations, it stands to reason that a mediator can bring in fresh perspectives (proposals), enhance the legitimacy of the dispute

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[7] An institution is used in its broader sense, encompassing the rules on conflict resolution and regional and international organizations with the mandate to manage conflicts arising between or among its members.

settlement process through confidence building strategies such as informal interactive mechanisms, identifying problems and re-framing the issues (especially where water is subject to securitization).

More specifically, active mediation is more effective than simple facilitations for conflicts characterized by polarizations and involving high politics to break cul-de-sac and bring about constructive dialogue. Furthermore, the success of the mediation process depends on the complexity of the issue(s), the parties have reached a stalemate, the parties' own conflict management procedures have been exhausted and the adversaries show some level of cooperation and are ready to communicate ( Bercovitch 1985, 738). It is worth stressing that the overriding goal of mediators in any conflict is to modify the nature and structure of the dispute, thereby altering the behaviors and the mode of interactions between the disputants. A mediator with referent power, that is, ''the power to influence one or both sides because the parties to the conflict value the relationship with third party'' (Aall 2008), is more suitable to bring about a change of behavior and modify the structure of the conflict.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the mediator may manipulate the process (Touval 1985, 39), in addition to the roles of facilitating and framing the issues, to achieve a breakthrough. Thus, every strategy devised by the mediator to resolve the conflict should be geared towards achieving this goal; otherwise, there is no need to initiate the mediation process in the first place. The success or failure of the mediation process in water conflicts is contingent upon various factors, inter alia, the nature of the dispute such as issues at stake, duration of the conflict, distribution of power (the existence of hydro-hegemon in the conflict), the identity of the parties, and the legitimacy of and roles entrusted with the mediator.

That is, without the legitimacy of the process and the mutual trust of the mediator by the parties, the entire process is a fait accompli. Parties may not need to trust each other (mostly that is why they seek the help of third. In this context, mediation is understood as a continuation of the negotiation process with the involvement of a third party to enhance the parties' effort to reach a negotiated outcome, but the mediator. Equally important, the efficacy of international mediation also depends on the timing of the intervention. It seems that there is a general understanding that, for the mediation process to be more effective, it should follow adversaries' own settlement and not the other way around (J. Bercovitch 1985, 748).

At regional levels, the African Union (AU) is one of the organizations with its own conflict management architecture. It advocates for the norm of ''African solutions to African problems'', which denotes the capability of the African continent to manage its problems without external intervention (Lobakeng 2017, 2). The origin of this principle can be traced to Arts. III (4) and XIX of the OAU Charter which provided for a procedure of conflict management. According to this norm, member states are obliged to exhaust African solutions (if available) before resorting to international dispute settlement mechanisms (OAU 1963).

However, the AU appears to have shown a poor track record in managing African conflicts, especially interstate conflicts, though it has been presented with multiple opportunities on different occasions to lead the way. This deficiency partly stems from poor institutionalization of norms, lack of political will and commitment, and the mantle of ''non-interference in domestic affairs.'' Notably, the very notion of African solidarity hinders African Heads of State from taking initiatives to manage inter-state conflicts. Similarly, as a result of sub-regional competition, ''the tension and power politics at play between regional hegemons often prevent them [African States] from coming together and acting with one voice in times of conflict'' (Lobakeng 2017, 6), (emphasis added). And AU's capability to resolve water conflicts remains to be seen.

### 4. Hydro-hegemony and Conflict Management in the Blue Nile Basin

One of the major factors that hamper cooperation among riparian states in the basin is the existence of a hydro-hegemon. It has been pointed out that hydro-hegemony rests on three main pillars: *power*, riparian geographical *position,* and resource exploitation *potential* of the riparian state (Hanasz 2014, 98). At the core of hydro-hegemony lies the presence of a powerful actor in the basin. The mere presence of a hydro-hegemon within the basin is not problematic *per se* because interactions among riparians range from *benign* to oppressive, depending on the fairness of the outcome for the less powerful riparians and the level of control established over the shared resource by the hegemon (Zeitoun 2008, 112). I argue that hydro-hegemonic order is not stable[8] in the Blue Nile Basin owing to the following reasons: (1) perceptions do change and power configurations are bound to shift, (2) hegemonic order is mainly a social construct, it can be deconstructed, too, particularly by a 'rival' riparian, (3) shared resources are not amenable for stable hegemonic order, and (4) hegemony founded on a manifest injustice lacks a legitimacy.

Egypt has been a hydro-hegemon in the Nile basin for a long because it has created and maintained its 'historically acquired rights' through a combination of material, structural and discursive powers. To this end, it used its soft power to keep water issues off the regional and international agendas by virtue of sanctioned discourses and resorting to effective securitization. Fundamentally, Egypt has been able not only to utilize the river but also to prevent the upstream countries from claiming their fair shares (Dessu 2018). Thus, like many downstream countries with a preponderance of power commonly do[9], Egypt has maintained its hegemony through the strategies of resource capture, containment of upper riparians, and integration

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[8] For a general discussion on hegemonic order and its stabilising effects, see Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in World Political Economy* (Princeton University Press, 1984); Duncan Snidal, ''The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory,'' *International Organization*, Vol. 39, No.4 (1985), pp.570-614 and Michael C. Webb and Stephen D. Krasner, ''Hegemonic Stability Theory: An Empirical Assessment,'' *Review of International Studies*, Vol.15, No.2 (1983), pp.183-198.

[9] For example, that is what India had been doing on the river Brahmaputra before the rise of China.

(Warner 2006). Notwithstanding, the hegemonic order was not benign in nature or has never been regarded *as such* by the upper riparians. What has maintained the status quo is mostly the power asymmetry. If one applies a typology of hegemony (Lustick 2002), it is safe to contend that Egypt's hegemony was highly built on coercive and utilitarian hegemony than normative and ideological hegemony. What is more, given the unfairness of the colonial treaties that ignored the interests of all upper riparian states (Arsano 2007, 89), it is not and should be surprising that other riparians would challenge it, as soon as they get the means and *zeitgeist*.

Even though Egypt's hydro-hegemony had been partially questioned by Sudan as early as 1959, strong challenges have come from Ethiopia, which seeks to change the status quo and replace it with equitable, reasonable, and sustainable utilization of the water. At the end of the cold war, the China factor in the basin and the relative political stability and economic growth in Ethiopia have created a conducive political environment to challenge the status quo. As Casca˜o (2008, 21- 24) pointed out, Ethiopia used four strategies to counter Egyptian hydro-hegemony, which are reactive diplomacy such as the deconstruction of discourses, open protest, refusal to cooperate; proactive diplomacy such as agenda-setting in regional and international organizations, lobbying, garnering support from other riparians; cooperation (through the NBI, CFA negotiations, and bilateral relations) and securing alternative sources of funding. In addition, Ethiopia has also used the strategy of resource capture, notably through the construction of the GERD, public mobilization and diffusion of new norms and counter-narratives. This counter-hegemonic move by Ethiopia, along with other factors, fed into the intractability of the conflict, as will be elaborated further.

## 5. Water Interactions between Ethiopia and Egypt in the Blue Nile

### 5.1 Historical Water Interactions: Cooperation and Conquest

Thucydides (Thucydides 1972) described Egypt and Ethiopia as areas encompassing the vast geography spanning from the highlands of present-day Ethiopia through the Nile delta to the Arabian Peninsula. Although trade, cultural exchange, and ancient civilizations have formed part of the historical relationship between the two countries, the Nile served as the main thread connecting the two countries. For centuries, Ethiopia used to receive top religious leaders from Egypt in return for the natural flow of the Nile to Egypt. The Nile and the Cross, as Haggai Erlich argues, has always been inextricably linked from the time when Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia (5th century) until such a relationship severed (the 1950s) (Erlich 2001).

Hence, the Coptic Church had served as a traditional institutional arrangement through which the use of the Nile had been governed for a long.

With the advent of Arab nationalism and the seizing of power by the ultra-nationalist Khedive Ismail, the Egyptian dream of controlling the source of the Nile and uniting the Nile Delta reached its pinnacle. As Jesman succinctly noted, ''Just like the Egyptian extremists of today he [Ismail] was inflamed with the idea of the unity of the Nile valley from the great lakes [Lake Tana]to the delta under the green flag of Egypt'' (Jesman 1959), 77). This quest to control the entire Nile Delta led the two countries to devastating wars in the 1870s. The notable wars with far-reaching consequences were fought at the Battles of Gura (1875) and Gundet (1876), resulting in the total defeat of the Egyptian forces. Similarly, at the heart of the Ethio-Italian war of 1896 (Jonas 2011)101 lay the geopolitical interests of the major powers (Italy, France, and Britain) to control the source of the Blue Nile (H. G. Marcus 1994), 95). This geopolitical competition had emanated from the Anglo-Italian Protocol of 1891 (H. Marcus 1963) which provided for the British mandate to control the Blue Nile on behalf of Egypt and formal recognition of the Italian sphere of influence in the Horn of Africa. Soon after, the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 was undergirded by the geopolitical schism between Britain (to safeguard the rights of the two Arab nations over the Blue Nile) and Italy (to control the Lake Tana Project (McCann 1981, 667). Furthermore, all Egyptian Presidents have justified the need to go to war should Ethiopia tempers with 'Egypt's water'. In 1979, Anwar Sadat clearly stated: ''we are not going to wait to die of thirst in Egypt. We will go to Ethiopia and die there'' (New York Times 2020). A decade later, Hosni Mubarak warned: ''If Egypt thought about fighting Ethiopia, there will not be one Ethiopian after the war to tell the story'' (Deutsche Welle 2013). This rhetoric of water war has been more pronounced following the construction of the GERD (as will be discussed shortly).

Apart from the above-mentioned military confrontations and the constant beating of war drums, Egypt has also actively engaged in sponsoring proxy wars to destabilize Ethiopia. For instance, the government of Egypt openly admitted supporting Somalia's war of aggression (1977-78) in the eastern part of Ethiopia (Addis Zemen Gazette 1986) and the 2015-2018 mass protests against the Ethiopian government (by supporting political dissidents and Islamic movement factions). It could be argued that this is just a continuation of the water war through a different means. Compounding these historical animosities are the treaties which did not take the interests and rights of Ethiopia into consideration, i.e., all the colonial and the subsequent bilateral treaties have totally removed Ethiopia from the scene of the Blue Nile hydro-politics. As noted in chapter three, with a view to rectifying the historical injustice, Ethiopia has persistently objected on many occasions against what it calls the 'intolerable' state of affairs. For example, the statement from the government of Ethiopia addressed to Egypt and the UN in protest to Egypt's diversion of the Nile to the Sinai desert partly reads: ''…the measures taken by Egypt in regard to the use of the waters of the Nile will in no way affect its legitimate rights to the waters of the Nile…'' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia 1980), para.7). However, apart from denouncing the unequal treaties and inequitable utilization of the Blue

Nile, Ethiopia had (until very recently) remained a 'silent partner' (Waterbury 2002). Thus, from the foregoing, it is plausible to argue that the longstanding tensions and historical animosities between the two riparians over the utilization of the Blue Nile have played a significant role in shaping relations dominated by mutual distrust between the two riparians.

**5.2 State Identity and Intractable Water Conflict**

The most prominent factors that have shaped the identity of the respective states and contributed to the intractability of the conflict are (1) the Nile; (2) the nature of the two regimes: Egypt and Ethiopia; and (3) the discourses of Pan-Africanism vis-à-vis Pan-Arabism.

To begin with, the Blue Nile is not just water traversing boundaries and replenishing the ecosystem. The Nile (Abbay), beyond its geographical representation, has fundamentally shaped the Egyptian image of Ethiopia and *vice versa*. The Egyptians had considered the people living to the south of their ancient territory as *al-habasha* (Ethiopians in Arabic); who are intent to curtail the flow of the Nile. For Egypt, the people of the Nile Valley included the united Arabs (Egypt and Sudan), whose civilization had flourished based on the riches of the Nile. The best strategy to control the Nile, Egyptian nationalists assert, is to regain its lost historical territory of Sudan (Warburg 2000, 229) and neutralize any threat posed by Ethiopia. The common myth constitutes the identity of Egypt and has continued to inform the foreign policy of Egypt. About a century ago, Gemmill argued that ''Egypt is the Nile, and the Nile is Egypt, just as true today as two thousand years ago'' (Gemmill 1928, 311). Today, this assertion is equally relevant, if not more. As a result, the Blue Nile has become a nightmare of foreign policy for successive Egyptian Leaders (Rasheedy 2007). Moreover, the myth of Egypt as the Nile was grounded in spiritual practice, which holds that god *Hapi* would be offended if a drop of the Nile water is touched by the upstream countries.

All the same (though not to the same extent), Abbay occupies a unique place in Ethiopian culture, literature, folklore, history, and national symbols. It is common to hear from the Ethiopian people whereby they personify and (regretfully) call Abbay a notorious traitor, who endlessly washes the fertile soils from the Ethiopian highlands and constantly feeds the ungrateful Pharaoh and the unruly child of Ethiopia that should be tamed (Gershoni 2000, 9). Hence, it is no wonder that many parents name their children after the river; *Abbay*, *Abayneh,* and *Abbaynesh* are some of the common Ethiopian names. It has to be noted that Abbay is the symbol of the nation, not necessarily because of its enormous values (as many other smaller rivers have been utilized by far as compared to Abbay in the past), but for its unparalleled symbolic value of national identity (Tafla 2000, 154).

Nonetheless, there is one striking difference between Ethiopia and Egypt in regard to the perceptions of common identity and destiny in the Blue Nile. For Ethiopia, the Nile has always been regarded as a shared

resource. This has been pointed out in the letter of the 14th of May 2020 which states: ''We [the people in the Nile basin] are ancient civilizations *inseparably* linked by the Nile River'' (Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020, 1), emphasis added). This conception of common identity on the Blue Nile is rarely found in the official discourses of Egypt.

As to the nature of the regime, both Ethiopia and Egypt are dubbed as authoritarian states according to the latest report of the World Democratic Index, ranking 123rd and 138th, respectively. Authoritarian states have, in principle, poor records in regard to embracing the norms of peaceful resolution of disputes, including through third-party mediation. This argument is partly informed by the democratic peace hypothesis discussed in chapter one. Less constrained by democratic deliberations and institutional hurdles, both states have engaged in the securitization of the Dam (as further elaborated in section 4.4) to sway public opinion and consolidate their domestic political power. Moreover, Egypt's culture of aggressive militarism (Lokesson 2013) and Ethiopia's social-psychological makeup of constantly defending itself against foreign invaders, appear to have negatively affected the water interactions between the two countries.

Lastly and importantly, the competing discourses of Pan-Africanism (as propounded by Ethiopia) vis-à-vis Pan-Arabism (Egypt acting as its guardian) have noticeably affected the negotiation process over the GERD dispute. In fact, the modern state of Egypt is the assemblage of Ottoman Turks, Western influence, Islamic state, and Arab nationalism (Pratt 2005).

This is discernible from the press release of the Arab League Council on 5 March 2020 where it issued a strong resolution condemning Ethiopia for trying to temper 'Egypt's historical right over the Nile water' and regarded Egypt's water security as the collective security of the Arab nation. It called upon all the Arab countries to show pan-Arab solidarity towards Egypt and put every possible pressure on Ethiopia (Amin 2020). Similarly, the Congressional Black Caucus issued a press release, wherein it called upon the U.S. government and the international community to respect the sovereignty of Ethiopia, let the disputes between African states be resolved within the AU framework, and stressed that the US government should act impartially and fairly (Congressional Black Caucus 2020). Jesse Jackson, the Chairman of the Caucus went as far as asserting: ''No matter how much I tried, I found it harder to rule out race as a factor in the international play''(Congressional Black Caucus 2020).

In a nutshell, ''both a shared sense of identity and power interact with each other when influencing people's threat perceptions'' (Rousseau 2007, 751) and henceforth, contributed to the complex dynamics and intractability of the conflict.

### 5.3 Competing Norms and the Water Conflict

The water interactions between Ethiopia and Egypt are characterized by contending water use norms and/or irreconcilable narratives. Among others, Ethiopia heavily relies on and ruthlessly advocates for the norms of 'equitable, reasonable and sustainable use', of 'not causing significant harm' and 'sovereignty over natural resources and the narratives of 'win-win solutions and the right to 'sustainable development'. Egypt, on the other hand, has been constantly invoking the norms of 'historically acquired rights', 'not causing significant harm' and 'Egypt's water', and the official narratives of 'water security' and threat to 'regional peace and security'. It is interesting to note that both countries recognize the transboundary nature of the river and the duty not to cause significant harm to the environment and interests of other countries. In essence, the difference lies in the mode of assessment of what constitutes significant harm and how to share the common resource. For example, Ethiopia officially proclaimed that the Nile is a shared resource that belongs to all countries in the basin (Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020, 5), whilst Egypt has refused to sign a basin-wide multilateral treaty (the CFA) that explicitly acknowledges the interests of all the 11 riparian countries in the basin.

In support of its advocacy for equitable, reasonable, and sustainable use of the Blue Nile, Ethiopia has been persistently objecting to unilateral actions taken by Egypt. Ethiopia is of the view that it ''did not and still does not have any agreement with downstream countries over water utilization and management of the Nile waters'' (Arsano 2007, 90). With a view to persuading Egypt to abandon the colonial norms and come to terms with the new realities, Mr. Meles Zenawi contended that 'the Egyptians have yet to make up their minds as to whether they want to live in the 21st or the 19th century'' (Malone 2010).

Furthermore, beyond the official discourses, sustainable development has been incorporated into the national constitution of Ethiopia. The relevant provision reads: ''All international agreements and relations concluded, established, or conducted by the State shall protect and ensure *Ethiopia's right to sustainable development*'' (Federal Negarit Gazetta 1994, Art. 43(3)) (emphasis added).

Gedu Andargachew, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia boldly stated: ''Abbay used to be a wandering river. Now, we have tamed it such that it will serve both as an international river, which flows naturally and as a lake [referring to the reservoir of the Dam] that we (Ethiopians) will hereinafter be used for any developmental purposes. Indeed, now we can proudly say that we have reclaimed the Abbay River'' (translated by the author of this article) (Ethiopian Broadcasting Agency 2020).

The narrative of a win-win solution has been serving as the basis for foreign policy instruments as well as informing the negotiation positions of the Ethiopian government. This fact is reiterated by one senior Ethiopian Diplomat who stated a ''win-win negotiated outcome has always been our guiding principle and it

deeply reflects the official position of the Ethiopian government, because it is concordant with the principle of equitable and reasonable utilization of the Blue Nile''Yigzaw2021). And as the GERD discord continues, the narrative of 'It is My Dam' has gained more traction.

For its part, Egypt has argued that any utilization of 'its water' is tantamount to causing harm to its well-established national interests. More specifically, it asserts that more than 100 million people are entirely dependent on the Nile water for their survival and the GERD poses an existential threat (Foreign Ministry of Egypt 2020, 2). It has become a common practice that whenever negotiation processes falter or when the Egyptian elites believe that domestic pressures are mounting, they frequently revert to their extreme positions of historical and natural rights and the doctrine of territorial integrity by activating what (Senn and Kornprobst 2016) calls 'background knowledge or ideas'.

Moreover, in tandem with the narrative of Egypt as Nile and Nile as Egypt, Egypt has been frequently linking the Nile issues with broader regional security. In fact, it went as far as regarding any reduction in the flow of the Nile as an assault against the Arab civilization and a plan to exterminate the Egyptian people by denying them the right to life (Egyptian Ministry of Immigration 2020). This has continued despite Ethiopia's repetitive assurances that the GERD would not cause appreciable damages amid the unprecedented rainfall of the summer of 2020 that coincided with the first filling of the dam.

## 5.4 The GERD and Securitization of the Blue Nile

The securitization of the Blue Nile has been there for a long from the Egyptian side What the GERD brought about are the changing dynamics of the Nile hydro-politics and the escalation of the conflict due to mutual securitization processes.

Significantly, following the construction of the GERD, the perception of the downstream countries (especially Egypt), has dramatically worsened, even though it was observed that ''contrary to Egyptian and Sudanese perceptions, everyone would benefit from increased regulation of the Blue Nile flood in Ethiopia'' (Whittington 2007, 112). If anything, this partly proves the important role perceptions play in foreign policy (Neumann 1996); (Herrmann 2013).

Immediately following the commencement of the GERD in April 2011, Egypt threatened to defend its 'national security' by all necessary means, including destroying the dam and waging war. This statement infuriated Ethiopia and consequently, the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, warned Egypt in the following words: ''Nobody who has tried that [going to war with Ethiopia] has lived to tell the story. I don't think the Egyptians will be any different and I think they know that" (Malone 2010). Then, the coming into power of the Muslim Brotherhood to power further exacerbated the relationship. In 2013, Mohammed Morsi, the then President of Egypt, justified the morality to die while fighting for the Nile in his strong

statement. He said: ''If the Nile diminished by one drop, then our blood is the alternative'' (BBC News 2013). Thus, by treating one drop of the Nile as constituting the corresponding blood of the Egyptian people and in total disregard for the rights of the upper riparian countries to use the shared resource, the Egyptian government had set the stage for the embattled relationship with Ethiopia.

Nevertheless, with the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 2015, the relationship between the two countries has shown some signs of reproaching. This was achieved because of the depoliticization of the GERD, in which more discretion was given to the technical and legal teams. When the tripartite negotiation on the GER faltered in September 2019, the government of Egypt had fallen back to its default modus operandi; the threat of war. Ostensibly rebuffing Egypt's discourse of water war, Abiy Ahmed, the Prime Minister of Ethiopia responded forthwith: ''No force can stop Ethiopia from building the dam. If there is a need to go to war, we could get millions mobilized. But going to war is in nobody's best interest'' (Aljazeera 2019).

Needless to state, Egypt has been securitizing the Nile through the narrative of 'Egypt's water', as noted earlier, thereby discursively equating the Nile with Egypt. But since securitization does not happen in a vacuum, there have been enabling factors−the prevailing material conditions and the attendant discourses that made it possible. The material condition is related to Egypt's high dependence on the water which comes from beyond its border (Stetter 2011, 450) which made the discourse of 'Nile as a matter of survival for Egypt' easily resonate with the public. At a different point in time, all three elements for effective securitization; context, audience, and power of agency (Thierry 2005, 171), were readily available for the Egyptian government to use. For example, concomitant with the construction of the GERD, there was a global discourse on water security, the domestic audience needed political change (the Arab Spring) and the seizing of power by the military government brought water as a national security into the spotlight of the parliamentary debates, which was mostly used to divert public attention (Maher 2013). All of these culminated in the amendment of the constitution of Egypt, which incorporated the Nile water as one of the overriding national securities (The Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt, 2014, Art.44) to be defended by all means.

On the media front, the battle of narratives through what can be called the ''politics of blaming'' (Qiaoan, 2021) has intensified. It gave a new impetus to the hitherto conventional mechanisms of securitization. Cognizant of this fact, some argued that Ethiopia and Egypt are already at war through different means; a digital war or a war on cyberspace (Mersie 2020). The digital war employed strategies such as the dissemination of facts and figures, sensational stories, inundation of social media platforms with tailored messages, and well-coordinated mis(dis)information campaigns. Among multiple 'social media warfare', the campaigns of *ItsMyDam, FillTheDam, EgyptNileRights, and SupportEgyptSaveLives,* have been observed as

the prominent tropes. In one of the *ItsMyDam* campaigns, the symbolic value of the GERD was depicted as follows: ''The GERD is not just a dam. It is the structure that symbolizes the blood and sweat of millions of Ethiopians. The thrust of *ItsMyDam* campaign is to showcase the symbolic value of the GERD such that the GERD is not just a dam, but the structure that symbolizes the blood and sweat of millions of Ethiopians; it is not a mere water reservoir, rather it is the reservoir of history, survival, and life; it is a symbol of the Ethiopian renaissance.  A similar sentiment was reflected in the *EgyptNileRights* campaign which asserted: ''We appeal to the world to safeguard Egypt's Nile rights. Egypt is the gift of the Nile. The GERD will jeopardize our right to survival'' (Daily News Egypt 2020).

In addition to social media campaigns, regular debates, documentaries, and commentaries have dominated the major international media. Some of the headlines on the international media outlets read: ''Will Egypt attack Ethiopia?'', ''Could Ethiopia and Egypt go to war?'', ''Egypt and Sudan Are Ganging Up on Ethiopia'', ''Egypt and Ethiopia Are Heading to Conflict over the Dam Dispute'', and ''Water Conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt Will Destabilize the Entire Region.''[10]

At the same time, the power of the better argument was demonstrated at regional and international fora, albeit to a lesser degree. By seeking the intervention of the UNSC, Egypt wanted to internationalize the conflict, whereas Ethiopia argued for the doctrine of non-interference in domestic affairs and insisted on the resolution of conflict through the ADR mechanism under the rubric of the AU. On the other hand, the government of Egypt argued before the UNSC that the unilateral filling and operation of the GERD causes significant harm and such an act ''constitutes a clear and present danger to Egypt, which could have serious repercussions for that threaten international peace and security'' (Foreign Ministry of Egypt 2020, 3) and called upon the international community to intervene promptly. In response to this, the Ethiopian government asserted that ''The dam is a national project which is designed to help extricate the people from abject poverty and is *by no means a threat to peace and security*, justifying the invocation of the mandate of the Security Council under Article of 35 the Charter'' (Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020, 6) (emphasis added). Therefore, the process of *mutual securitization* has come into play.

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[10] For more information, see

https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Will+Egypt+attack+Ethiopia%3f&view=detail&mid=D5C86185AFDF74960A44D5C86185AFDF74960A44&FORM=VIRE., https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/egypt-ethiopia-grand-renaissance-dam-war., https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-03-09/blue-nile-dam-egypt-and-sudan-are-ganging-up-on-ethiopia?leadSource=uverify%20wall., https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50328647. and https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/water-conflict-between-egypt-and-ethiopia-a-defining-moment-for-both-countries/.

**5.5 The GERD Dispute and Conflict Management**

For more than a decade, various efforts have been made to resolve the dispute over GERD. To this end, political, legal, and technical avenues have been utilized, at different times and to varying degrees.

After many rounds of deliberations, the involvement of technical teams, and the help of AU facilitation, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan were able to craft the DoP, which was hailed as a great leap forward (Zeray Yihdego 2016). The DoP has envisaged dispute resolution mechanisms under Art. 10, with negotiation as the preferred avenue. Indeed, the parties have been negotiating in accordance with this stipulation and they commonly refer to the dispute settlement clause. However, its main achievement has turned out to be one of its major limitations in that the final arbiter of the dispute is the Head of State, the political body as opposed to the quasi-judicial or judicial organ.

The GERD dispute happened following Mr. Putin´s announcement to mediate Al Sisi and Abiy on the 24th of October 2019, which enticed the US's offer to mediate the parties upon the request of Egypt (VOA News 2019). From the outset, there had been confusion as to the role of the US government; it was not clear whether the US offered active mediation, conciliation, or good office. Ethiopia officially accepted the dispute settlement process, understanding that the role of the US government was merely facilitation or good office. However, during the course of the GERD negotiations, the Trump administration started acting as an active mediator. The U.S. team went as far as preparing a draft agreement and informing the parties to sign it. When the Ethiopian delegate requested further consultations, the other two parties categorically objected to it and the US government accused Ethiopia of refusing to sign the draft agreement. Consequently, on 12 February 2020, the US Secretary of Treasury, Steven Mnuchin, issued a press release critical of Ethiopia and warned that the ''final testing and filling of the dam should not take place without an agreement'' (VOA News 2020). This was a clear indication of the active mediation role of the Trump administration. After realizing this, the Ethiopian government officially pulled out of the tripartite talks.

A number of issues beg questions here. Why did the US government involve the Department of Treasury when mediation is within the mandate of the State Department? How could a mediator play the manipulator role without defining his/her roles? And even then, how could it be possible to blame one party openly and selectively while appearing as a neutral mediator? As pointed out in chapter one, it is not a necessary condition that the Mediator or a third-party intervener should act impartially at all times, for the *Insider-Partial Mediator* could be more effective than the impartial one under some circumstances.[11] Most certainly,

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[11] From the vantage point of Ethiopia, it is plausible to assert that it accepted the ''mediation'' offer in order not to risk the U.S. align itself more with Egypt for the obvious fact that all successive U.S. administrations have been by far

the close relationship between the US and Egypt would have greatly enabled the former to extract necessary concessions from the latter because ''closeness to one party implies the possibility of "delivering" it, thereby stimulating the other party's cooperation'' (Zartman 2008, 162). Instead, the main problem of the US-brokered mediation is the lack of a common understanding as to the role(s) of the mediator and the conditions attached to the negotiated outcome. For mediation, by its very definition, is a continuation of the negotiation process, the Trump administration must have respected that line unless agreed otherwise. In terms of leverage, which is one of the important elements of effective mediation, the U.S. government has both the carrots and sticks at its disposal to put the necessary pressure on the parties. The involvement of the Department of Treasury in the mediation process was used to attain this very objective.

 Nonetheless, economic incentives and manipulative strategies may not work for conflicts where sensitive matters embodying symbolic values, as is the case with GERD, are at stake. This is apparent from the official statement of the Ethiopian government and the public outcry that ensued immediately after the failed mediation (Seyoum 2020). To be more precise, the 'U.S. factor' has changed the tone of the official discourse; every Ethiopian citizen across the board started to say ''with or without an agreement, we shall fill the dam. It is our dam and we do not need anyone's approval.'' It should be stressed that the primordial role of the mediator is to change the behavior of disputants, but the Trump administration has failed to do so. Rather than bowing to the mounting pressures, the Ethiopian government instead used the opportunity to mobilize the public, rally round-the-flag effect. At any rate, the US-brokered mediation under the Trump administration has not achieved its intended purpose, if not worsened it.

Following the failed mediation process and amid the stumbling negotiations, the GERD dispute was brought to the attention of the UNSC by Egypt in June 2020, to put more political pressure on Ethiopia so that either (1) the parties reach a binding agreement on the filling and operation of the dam or (2) alternatively, the filling of the dam should be delayed until a binding agreement is reached. Concerning the involvement of the UNSC, two issues, namely the tension between the delegitimization of the regional conflict management efforts by Egypt and Ethiopia's insistence on the AU-led process and the politicization of the Nile, are worth emphasizing.

While Egypt submitted its complaint to the UNSC before exhausting the regional remedies as enshrined under Arts.33-37 of the UN Charter, Ethiopia advocated for the doctrine of African solutions to African problems and resolution of the outstanding issues through the ADR mechanisms as set out in the DOP and the UN Charter. This can be gleaned from the letter of the

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closer to Egypt than Ethiopia. Of course, that is what can be deduced from U.S. administration's subsequent actions, notably the harsh chastisement of the Ethiopian delegates and suspension of aids.

Office of the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, which stated: ''the GERD is an affirmation of Ethiopia's commitment for equitable and reasonable utilization of the Abbay River (…) The Prime Minister appreciates the resolve to African Solutions to African Problems undertaken through existing regional mechanisms…'' (Office of the Prime Minister 2020). This preference for regional primacy for the resolution of the GERD conflict was further reinforced by the AU Communique in the following words: ''The meeting of the Bureau of the Assembly of the AU Heads of State and Government was held in a fraternal spirit guided by the principle of *Pan-African Solidarity* and cooperation and the attendant desire to find an *African solution to an African problem''* (AU Commission 2020), emphasis added). The norm of Pan-African solidarity (Tieku 2013, 7) seems to have profoundly shaped the identity, interests, and dispute resolution preference of the vast majority of the African states, but Egypt has not fully joined the club due to its conflictual identities and since it actively advocates for the greater roles of the non-African actors (Davison 2021). To sum up, the intractability of the conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Blue Nile appears to be rooted in historical animosities, competing norms, and conflictual identities, as compounded by the securitization of the Nile, particularly following the construction of the GERD.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

This paper has attempted to shed new light on the theoretical framework of conflict and cooperation among riparian states over transboundary water resources and prevailing approaches to water conflict management. It has been shown that, although the existing theoretical frameworks can partly explain the transboundary water interactions, drivers of cooperation and conflict among the riparian states, and mechanisms of managing water conflicts, they suffer from some limitations and remain inadequate. The fundamental limitations of the existing theoretical frameworks and methodology are related to the narrow conceptualization of (water) conflict management; taking norms, the identity and preferences of the riparian states, the discourse of hydro-hegemony and water security as given; and the acute scarcity of interdisciplinary research on water conflict. Consequently, I have argued that the conventional cooperation or conflict approach to the management of water conflict falls short of accounting for multifaceted water interactions among riparian states: in reality, both cooperation and conflict co-exist (Mirumachi 2008, 312). Related to this and more problematic, is the conceptualization of water conflicts in terms of conventional military confrontation or an all-out war. One could find numerous conflictual situations if water conflict is broadly defined to encompass low-intensity hostility, proxy wars, digital warfare, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic frictions, securitization moves, and protracted legal and political disputes.

In this regard, the illustrative case study (the intractable conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia) has shown that a low-intensity conflict and limited cooperation can, indeed, co-exist. Yet, whether cooperative or conflictual relation prevails across time and space, depends on, among others, whether the water interactions are defined

by hydro-hegemony or hydro-harmony, the nature of the conflict itself, and conflict management approaches used. With regard to the norms governing the Blue Nile, though contestation is a common feature of norm evolution and may even enhance the robustness of the emergent norm (Zimmermann 2020, 70), the norm of equitable, reasonable, and sustainable utilization of transboundary rivers could not be institutionalized due to the fact that the contestation is more about the validity of the norm than to its discourse of applicability.

The water interactions in the Blue Nile are highly characterized by hydro-hegemony, which is not benign and unstable in nature; growing water scarcity; lack of constitutive norms and strong institutions, colonial legacies, unilateral utilization of shared water, and incompatible state identities; and poor conflict management practices. Furthermore, as I have tried to show in this paper, in addition to the problems that bedevil the basin, negative historical interactions, competing narratives and norms, and securitization of the GERD, have contributed to the intractability of the conflict, and made it difficult to resolve.

Finally, three caveats are in order. Firstly, while I have analyzed why Egypt and Ethiopia have, thus far, been unable to amicably resolve their differences, comparative case studies are necessary if general inferences are to be made. To this effect, further research projects need to be undertaken. Second, since the conflict is still ongoing (currently characterized by an impasse), a full assessment of the efficacy of the conflict management strategies is impracticable. And third, alternative explanations for some aspects of the conflict are plausible. I would like to suggest two of them here. The reason why the NBI has been paralyzed can be partly explained from the rationalist point of view in the sense that, for Egypt (as a hydro-hegemon and a downstream country), supporting basin-wide governance appears to be irrational, albeit in the short-term. And the rationale behind the mutual securitization of the GERD can be explained through the lens of a diversionary theory of war, in which states use fear-producing and greed-producing targets (Jung 2014) in order to consolidate their own domestic power, which is the case both in Egypt and Ethiopia. Although the diversionary tactics can be subsumed under the securitization moves, as I have tried to point out in this research, in-depth research into this issue is welcome.

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