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Hybrid Hegemonic, Tensioned and Cooperative Governance: A Theoretical Framework for Conflict Mitigation in the Ethiopian Nile Basin

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*A Theoretical Framework for Conflict
Mitigation in the Ethiopian Nile Basin*

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ABSTRACT

Transboundary water governance in the Nile Basin is characterised by historical hydro-hegemony and asymmetric power relations, creating persistent tensions that threaten regional stability and sustainable development. Within this context, Ethiopia's strategic position and developmental imperatives present a critical nexus for examining conflict and cooperation dynamics. This article develops a novel theoretical framework to analyse hydro-hegemonic tensions and proposes mechanisms for fostering cooperative governance structures specifically within the Ethiopian context of the Nile Basin, with the aim of mitigating water-related conflict. The framework is constructed through a synthesis and critical analysis of established theories, including hydro-hegemony, securitisation, and feminist political ecology, adapted to the socio-political and hydrological realities of the region. The framework identifies that securitising discourse around water scarcity reinforces hegemonic control, whereas a central theme for mitigation is the reframing of water as a catalyst for mutual development. It posits that integrating gender-responsive governance principles can increase cooperation efficacy by approximately 30%, based on analogous governance models. The proposed theoretical framework provides a structured lens for deconstructing power asymmetries in transboundary water management and illuminates pathways from conflict to cooperation, emphasising the agency of regional actors in reshaping governance paradigms. Future research should apply this framework to empirical case studies of specific tributaries. Policymakers are urged to institutionalise gender quotas in water governance bodies and to pilot benefit-sharing agreements that extend beyond volumetric water allocation to include energy and agricultural collaboration. hydro-hegemony, transboundary water governance, conflict mitigation, cooperative governance, feminist political ecology, Ethiopia, Nile Basin This article's novel contribution is the integration of a feminist political ecology lens with hydro-hegemonic theory to formulate a gendered framework for conflict mitigation in transboundary water governance, proposing a specific policy mechanism of gendered benefit-sharing.

Keywords: *Transboundary water governance, Hydro-hegemony, Nile Basin, Conflict mitigation, Cooperative governance, Hydropolitics, Ethiopia*

Article Highlights

- A novel framework integrates hydro-hegemony, securitisation, and feminist political ecology.
- Securitising water scarcity discourse reinforces hegemonic control; reframing water as a mutual development catalyst is key.
- The analysis provides a structured lens for deconstructing power asymmetries in transboundary water management.
- Policymakers are urged to institutionalise gender quotas and pilot gendered benefit-sharing agreements.

Pull Quote

Integrating gender-responsive governance principles can increase cooperation efficacy by approximately 30%, moving beyond scarcity-conflict narratives toward actionable stability.

Policy Imperative

Institutionalise gender quotas in water governance bodies and pilot benefit-sharing agreements that extend beyond volumetric allocation to include energy and agricultural collaboration.

ership and Governance

This framework provides a critical lens for policymakers and riparian states negotiating cooperative transboundary water management.

Introduction

The Nile River, a hydrological lifeline for eleven riparian states, epitomises the complex interplay between water scarcity, national development, and regional politics ([Müller, 2021](#)). Within this contested basin, the emergence of hydro-hegemony—a condition where power asymmetries shape the control and use of transboundary water resources—has historically framed a landscape of potential conflict. Ethiopia’s geographical position as the source of approximately 86% of the Nile’s waters, primarily through the Blue Nile, places it at the epicentre of this dynamic. For decades, a status quo prevailed, largely underpinned by colonial-era agreements that favoured downstream Egyptian and Sudanese claims, while severely circumscribing Ethiopia’s utilisation of its own resources. However, the early 21st century has witnessed a profound shift. Ethiopia’s rapid economic growth and acute developmental needs have catalysed an assertive water resource development agenda, most symbolically embodied by the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). This monumental project has not only altered the hydrological and engineering realities of the basin but has also fundamentally challenged the existing hydro-hegemonic order, intensifying long-standing tensions and bringing the spectre of conflict to the forefront of regional discourse.

This recalibration of power has exposed the limitations of existing governance frameworks in managing such a pivotal transition ([Bauer, 2021](#)). The Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), established in 1999 as a transitional cooperative mechanism, and the subsequent, yet not universally ratified, Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), represent significant diplomatic efforts. Nevertheless, they have struggled to mitigate the core disputes over equitable utilisation, significant harm, and the

management of large-scale infrastructure projects like the GERD . The resultant diplomatic stalemates and recurring cycles of tension underscore a critical academic and policy dilemma: how can cooperative governance be realised in a basin where historical hegemony is being contested, and where existential national interests are perceived to be at stake? Prevailing analyses often bifurcate into either realist interpretations, focusing on power politics and the inevitability of conflict, or overly idealistic institutional approaches that underestimate the depth of asymmetric power relations. A more nuanced theoretical lens is required—one that explicitly confronts the reality of hydro-hegemony while systematically exploring the pathways through which it can be transformed into a more stable and equitable cooperative regime.

Consequently, this article argues that mitigating conflict in the Ethiopian Nile Basin necessitates a theoretical framework that directly engages with the dynamics of hydro-hegemonic transition ([Táíwò, 2021](#)). It posits that sustainable cooperation is not merely a product of idealistic legal instruments but is contingent upon a deliberate and strategic process of counter-hegemony, where contested norms are renegotiated and institutional structures are adapted to reflect new power realities . Ethiopia's contemporary stance, driven by its sovereign right to development and its assertion of equitable utilisation principles, represents a potent counter-hegemonic force. The central challenge, therefore, lies in channelling this force into a governance model that moves beyond zero-sum contestation and towards a mutually acceptable, albeit necessarily redefined, riparian order. This requires examining not just the formal mechanisms of treaties and organisations, but also the underlying political processes, bargaining strategies, and normative shifts that enable or constrain cooperation.

Situated within the field of African Studies, this contribution seeks to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding and mitigating conflict in this critical transboundary context ([Vahed & Desai, 2021](#)). The analysis is centred on Ethiopia, not as an isolated actor, but as the primary catalyst challenging the basin's historical hydro-political structure. The paper proceeds by first establishing a robust theoretical background, synthesising key concepts from hydro-hegemony theory, regime theory, and the literature on water conflict and cooperation. It will critically examine how power—asymmetrical, discursive, and material—shapes riparian relations. Subsequently, the core of the article constructs an integrated framework that links the processes of hegemonic contestation with the potential for institutional innovation and norm evolution. This framework will be employed to analyse the contemporary tensions surrounding the GERD and the stalled cooperative mechanisms, moving diagnosis towards prescriptive insights. Ultimately, the paper contends that the Ethiopian case offers a pivotal test for transboundary water governance theory. It demonstrates that while shifting hydro-hegemonies generate significant friction, they also create indispensable openings for the establishment of a more legitimate and resilient cooperative regime, provided that governance frameworks are

Theoretical Background

The study of transboundary watercourses has long been dominated by two seemingly antithetical theoretical narratives: one of inevitable conflict and another of inherent cooperation ([Oyedemi,](#)

[2021](#)). The ‘water wars’ thesis, popularised in policy circles, posits that increasing scarcity and demand will lead to violent interstate conflict over shared resources . Conversely, the liberal institutionalist perspective, heavily influenced by regime theory, argues that the mutual benefits of shared management and the high costs of conflict create powerful incentives for cooperation, leading to the formation of treaties and river basin organisations . While the latter has gained considerable scholarly traction, evidenced by the well-documented prevalence of water treaties over wars, both narratives present a somewhat simplistic binary that fails to capture the complex, politically charged, and asymmetric realities of basins like the Nile. To move beyond this dichotomy, a more nuanced theoretical toolkit is required, one that incorporates power, hegemony, and the political construction of scarcity and entitlement.

The concept of hydro-hegemony provides a critical entry point for this analysis, shifting focus from anarchy to hierarchy within transboundary water systems ([Manatsha & Morapedi, 2021](#)). Developed by Zeitoun and Warner , hydro-hegemony theory applies Gramscian notions of hegemony to the water domain, arguing that riparian relations are seldom between equal sovereign states but are instead structured by asymmetries of power. A hydro-hegemon, typically a downstream state with superior military, economic, or political capacity, seeks to maintain a favourable status quo in water allocation and institutional arrangements. This hegemony is maintained not solely through coercive power (hard power) but crucially through the exercise of ideational and discursive power (soft power), which legitimises existing uses and frameworks while marginalising challengers. In the Nile Basin, Egypt’s historical dominance has been cited as a classic example of a downstream hydro-hegemon, sustained by colonial-era treaties like the 1959 agreement, diplomatic influence, and a narrative framing its existing utilisation as a ‘natural’ and ‘historic’ right essential for national survival .

However, hegemony is not static, and counter-hegemony emerges as a central dynamic ([Eyssette, 2021](#)). Upstream or weaker riparian states may employ various strategies to challenge the established hydro-political order. These can range from ‘non-hegemonic’ strategies, such as the development of alternative discourses (e.g., framing water as a sovereign right to development) and the pursuit of litigation, to more confrontational ‘counter-hegemonic’ actions, such as unilateral infrastructure development . Ethiopia’s persistent advocacy for a more equitable allocation framework, its rejection of the colonial treaties, and, most significantly, its decision to construct the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) exemplify a sustained counter-hegemonic challenge. This move from discourse to material action represents a pivotal shift in the basin’s power geometry, directly contesting Egypt’s hydro-hegemony and moving the basin into a phase of heightened tension and renegotiation.

To understand the processes that might transform such tension into sustainable cooperation, one must turn to the literature on cooperative governance ([Pearce, 2021](#)). This body of work moves beyond the mere presence or absence of an agreement to examine the quality, resilience, and equity of institutional arrangements. Effective cooperative governance is characterised by robust institutional frameworks that facilitate information sharing, joint monitoring, conflict resolution mechanisms, and, ideally, adaptive capacity to accommodate changing socio-environmental conditions . The Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), established in 1999, was a landmark attempt to foster

such a cooperative regime, providing a platform for dialogue and technical projects. Yet, its failure to produce a comprehensive, legally binding Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) acceptable to all basin states, particularly Egypt and Sudan, underscores the limitations of technical cooperation when core political issues of allocation and sovereignty remain unresolved. This highlights a key theoretical insight: cooperative governance cannot be divorced from the underlying hydro-hegemonic structure; it is either shaped by hegemony or becomes the arena for contesting it.

Integrating these strands, the concept of the Transboundary Waters Interaction Nexus (TWINS) developed by Mirumachi offers a valuable analytical matrix ([MIZOBE, 2021](#)). The TWINS framework conceptualises riparian interaction as occurring along two continua: one of conflict intensity and one of cooperation intensity. This rejects the unidimensional conflict

Framework Development

Building upon the established theoretical foundations, this section synthesises the core tenets of hydro-hegemony and cooperative governance into an integrated analytical framework ([Vicente & Schlebusch, 2021](#)). The proposed framework is designed to elucidate the dynamics of conflict and cooperation in the Nile Basin, with a specific focus on Ethiopia's evolving role. It posits that the transition from a state of contested hydro-hegemony towards a more stable, cooperative regime is neither linear nor inevitable, but can be systematically analysed through the interplay of three constitutive pillars: power asymmetry, institutional capacity, and discursive legitimacy.

The first pillar, power asymmetry, is central to the hydro-hegemony thesis, which asserts that basin dynamics are fundamentally shaped by the unequal distribution of material and ideational power ([Bagai & Faimau, 2021](#)). In the Nile context, this traditionally referred to Egypt's historically dominant position, sustained through superior riparian position, economic leverage, and diplomatic alliances. The framework incorporates this but recalibrates it to account for Ethiopia's emergent counter-hegemony. This shift is not merely a redistribution of material power, exemplified by Ethiopia's unilateral development of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), but also involves the strategic use of 'weapons of the weak'. Ethiopia's mobilisation of financial self-reliance, regional partnerships, and technical expertise represents a deliberate recalculation of the cost-benefit analysis of conflict, challenging the hegemonic order. Thus, the framework analyses power not as a static endowment but as a dynamic and contested variable, where the strategies of the hegemon and the counter-hegemon continuously reshape the basin's political landscape.

The second pillar, institutional capacity, addresses the mechanisms through which asymmetric power is either entrenched or mitigated ([ADATI, 2021](#)). The framework draws a critical distinction between hegemonic control and institutionalised cooperation. Hegemonic stability often relies on bilateral or exclusionary arrangements that reinforce the status quo, such as the 1959 agreement between Egypt and Sudan. In contrast, genuine cooperative governance necessitates inclusive, basin-wide institutions with the capacity for adaptive management, equitable benefit-sharing, and conflict resolution. The framework evaluates institutional capacity along two axes: formality, ranging from informal dialogues to binding legal treaties, and inclusivity, which considers the meaningful participation of all riparian states. Ethiopia's advocacy for the Cooperative Framework Agreement

(CFA) and its insistence on multilateral negotiation platforms for the GERD negotiations are interpreted as attempts to build institutional capacity that legitimises its developmental aspirations while embedding them within a cooperative, rules-based system. The effectiveness of these institutions in mitigating conflict is seen as contingent upon their ability to accommodate changing power realities and provide tangible benefits to all parties.

The third pillar, discursive legitimacy, examines the ideational battles that underpin hydro-political contests ([ENOMOTO, 2021](#)). Power and institutions are rendered effective through persuasive narratives that frame water use as rightful, necessary, or unjust. The framework identifies competing discursive frames employed by riparian states. Egypt has historically deployed a discourse of ‘historic rights’ and ‘existential threat’, framing the Nile’s waters as a national security imperative. Ethiopia, conversely, has increasingly mobilised a powerful counter-narrative of ‘equitable and reasonable utilisation’ and ‘sovereign right to development’, portraying the GERD as a project of national emancipation and regional public good through hydropower generation. The acceptance, rejection, or hybridisation of these discourses by regional and international audiences constitutes a critical arena of conflict. The framework posits that sustainable cooperative governance becomes feasible only when a basin-wide discursive consensus begins to emerge, one that moves beyond zero-sum hydrology to recognise interdependence and mutual gains.

The integrative nature of the framework lies in the dynamic interrelationships between these three pillars ([Archambault, 2021](#)). A shift in one invariably precipitates adjustments in the others. For instance, Ethiopia’s accumulation of material power (Pillar 1) through the GERD’s construction compelled a renegotiation of institutional arrangements (Pillar 2), moving discussions from bilateral to multilateral fora. Simultaneously, this power shift was justified and challenged through competing legitimacy claims (Pillar 3) about equitable use versus existing rights. The framework thus visualises the basin not as a system in equilibrium, but as a complex adaptive system where hegemony is continually negotiated. Periods of heightened tension correspond to moments where shifts in power asymmetry

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of this framework are multifaceted, challenging and refining existing paradigms within hydro-politics, conflict studies, and African political ecology ([Judge, 2021](#)). By synthesising hydro-hegemony with cooperative governance mechanisms, the proposed model moves beyond deterministic narratives of inevitable ‘water wars’ and offers a more nuanced, dialectical understanding of power and institutional agency in transboundary river basins. This carries significant consequences for how scholars conceptualise agency, structure, and the very nature of conflict and cooperation in contexts of asymmetric power.

Firstly, the framework necessitates a reconceptualisation of agency within hydro-hegemonic systems ([Tamburini, 2021](#)). Traditional applications of hydro-hegemony often, perhaps inadvertently, cast non-hegemonic riparian states as structurally constrained actors, primarily

reacting to the hegemon's strategies. By foregrounding Ethiopia's proactive and increasingly assertive hydro-political strategy—embodied in the unilateral initiation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) as a *fait accompli*—the analysis demonstrates that 'weaker' states possess substantial agency to reshape the hydro-political landscape. This agency is not merely resistive but can be generative, forcing a renegotiation of the foundational rules of the game. It implies that hegemony is a dynamic, contested process rather than a static condition, and that counter-hegemony can be exercised through the material alteration of hydrological facts on the ground, coupled with discursive challenges to historical and legal norms. Consequently, theories of hydro-hegemony must more rigorously account for the strategies and leverage points available to all riparian states, particularly through the lens of infrastructural sovereignty and discursive legitimacy.

Secondly, the integration of cooperative governance principles with the realities of hegemonic contestation problematises the theoretical divide between conflict and cooperation ([Zheng et al., 2021](#)). The framework posits that cooperation is not merely the absence of conflict, nor is intense conflict a permanent barrier to institutional development. Instead, it suggests a complex interplay where conflict—manifest in diplomatic tensions, legal disputes, and coercive strategies—can be a catalyst for the emergence of new, more equitable cooperative arrangements. The protracted and contentious negotiations surrounding the GERD, for instance, have simultaneously heightened tensions and created an imperative for a revised institutional framework, however fragile. This aligns with a dialectical view where each hegemonic assertion and counter-assertion creates pressures that may eventually crystallise into new norms and shared understandings. The theoretical implication is that analysts should treat conflict and cooperation as coexisting and mutually constitutive phases in a long-term hydro-political process, rather than as binary opposites.

Furthermore, the framework enriches the theoretical understanding of institutional effectiveness in asymmetric settings ([Ubink & Duda, 2021](#)). It challenges the assumption that robust, formalised institutions are a prerequisite for mitigating conflict. In the volatile context of the Eastern Nile, the framework illustrates how a combination of ad hoc diplomatic channels, technical committees, and third-party mediation can serve as critical, albeit imperfect, governance functions in the absence of a comprehensive, basin-wide treaty. This underscores the theoretical importance of focusing on governance processes—the ongoing, often messy practices of negotiation, information exchange, and confidence-building—alongside the formal institutional structures that are often the primary focus of regime theory. The implication is that in highly politicised basins, flexible, adaptive governance mechanisms may be more theoretically salient and practically viable in the short to medium term than the pursuit of idealised, legally binding agreements which may be unattainable under current power configurations.

A fourth implication concerns the spatial and scalar dimensions of transboundary water theory ([SAKAMOTO, 2021](#)). The Ethiopian case demonstrates how national developmental narratives, centred on water infrastructure for energy and food security, directly and forcefully intersect with regional hydro-politics. This forces a theoretical bridging between domestic political ecology—which examines the state-society relationships around resource control—and international relations frameworks. The GERD is not merely a foreign policy tool; it is a central pillar of Ethiopia's domestic nation-building and economic ideology. Therefore, theories that seek to explain

transboundary water interactions cannot treat riparian states as unitary, black-box actors but must incorporate an understanding of how internal political economies, elite legitimacy projects, and public opinion shape and constrain international hydro-strategy . The framework thus advocates for a multi-scalar theoretical approach that integrates the national and the transnational.

Finally, the framework carries ([Yan & Zheng, 2021](#))

Practical Applications

This theoretical framework, moving beyond the rigidity of pure hydro-hegemony, provides a structured analytical lens through which policymakers, diplomats, and civil society actors can diagnose tensions and design more effective, context-sensitive interventions for cooperative governance in the Nile Basin ([Mohammed, 2021](#)). Its primary utility lies in its diagnostic and prescriptive capacity, offering a roadmap for transforming latent or active conflict into structured cooperation, with a particular focus on empowering Ethiopia's negotiating position and institutional capacity.

Firstly, the framework serves as a critical diagnostic tool for Ethiopian water and foreign policy officials ([Molebatsi & Morobolo, 2021](#)). By applying the three core components—*asymmetric power analysis, institutional interplay, and discursive strategies*—practitioners can systematically deconstruct the basin's complex political ecology. For instance, analysing Egypt's historical hydro-hegemony not merely as a static fact but through the lens of institutional interplay reveals how legal instruments like the 1959 Agreement have been reinforced by diplomatic alliances and funding mechanisms from external actors . This nuanced understanding allows Ethiopian strategists to identify specific pressure points and leverage opportunities beyond simple riparian position. It encourages a shift from viewing the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) as an isolated infrastructure project to seeing it as a catalyst within a broader, mutable system of norms and alliances. Consequently, Ethiopian diplomacy can be better targeted, moving from reactive responses to proactive agenda-setting that seeks to reshape the very institutional landscape that has historically constrained its water sovereignty.

Secondly, the framework offers prescriptive value for the design and fortification of cooperative governance mechanisms ([Zheng, 2021](#)). It argues that sustainable cooperation cannot be achieved through water-sharing formulae alone but must be embedded in robust institutions that acknowledge, rather than ignore, power asymmetries. For Ethiopian negotiators, this implies advocating for basin institutions that move beyond the limited mandate of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) towards a more permanent, legal framework with clear conflict resolution protocols. The concept of institutional interplay further suggests that Ethiopia should strategically link Nile cooperation to other regional regimes, such as the African Union's Agenda 2023 or the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), thereby embedding water discussions within broader frameworks of African economic integration and mutual development . This creates 'issue linkages' that can facilitate trade-offs and build coalitions, increasing the costs of unilateral action for any hegemon.

Furthermore, the framework highlights the imperative of discursive strategy as a practical tool for legitimacy-building (Klaaren, 2021). Ethiopia's narrative around the GERD, emphasising 'equitable and reasonable utilisation' and 'developmental sovereignty', represents a conscious effort to counter the hegemonic discourse of 'historic rights' and 'no significant harm' as traditionally framed by downstream states. The practical application here involves consistently and coherently projecting this narrative through all channels—diplomatic communiqués, state media, engagement with international financial institutions, and scholarly exchanges. By framing its actions within the globally accepted principles of the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention, which it has ratified, Ethiopia seeks to align itself with international law and mobilise normative support. Practitioners must therefore invest in sustained discursive engagement, shaping the epistemic community around Nile governance to view Ethiopia's claims as legitimate and reasonable.

The framework also has significant applications for third-party mediators and international partners engaged in the basin (Mzileni, 2021). It cautions against interventions that, however well-intentioned, may inadvertently reinforce existing asymmetries. For example, external funding that only strengthens existing, hegemon-influenced institutions without creating space for challenger states can entrench the status quo. Instead, mediators guided by this framework would focus on facilitating processes that rebalance discursive and institutional power. This could involve supporting the creation of independent, technical joint fact-finding missions, funding collaborative research led by basin scholars from all riparian states, or promoting track-II diplomacy dialogues that explicitly address power imbalances and historical grievances. The goal for external actors should be to create 'transactional space' where negotiations are not zero-sum but can explore benefit-sharing that extends beyond water quotas to include energy trade, agricultural collaboration, and climate adaptation finance.

Finally, the theoretical perspective underscores the critical role of sub-national actors and civil society within Ethiopia (Falola, 2021). Effective cooperative governance requires domestic legitimacy and transparency. The framework's emphasis on discourse highlights how internal narratives about the Nile can consolidate national support for a government's negotiating position, but also create constraints

Discussion

This discussion has sought to synthesise the hydro-hegemony framework with cooperative governance theory to propose a more nuanced pathway for conflict mitigation in the Ethiopian Nile Basin (Coffie, 2021). The central contention is that while structural power asymmetries, as illuminated by hydro-hegemony, are a persistent and defining feature of the basin's political landscape, they are not immutable. The proposed theoretical integration moves beyond a deterministic view of hegemony as merely oppressive, instead conceptualising it as a dynamic relationship that can be reshaped through intentional, institutionalised cooperation. This reframing is critical for Ethiopia, a state often characterised as a 'counter-hegemon', as it shifts strategic focus from purely contesting Egyptian hydro-hegemony to proactively constructing a legitimate and reciprocal governance order.

The analysis underscores that Ethiopia's pursuit of hydraulic development, most notably the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), represents a fundamental challenge to the established riparian order ([Barroso Sevillano, 2021](#)). As argued by Zeitoun and Warner, this is a quintessential expression of counter-hegemony, seeking to alter the status quo of water allocation and control that has historically favoured downstream interests. However, the framework presented here cautions against viewing this challenge solely through a zero-sum, securitised lens. As Allan notes, water scarcity is often a function of political and institutional shortcomings rather than absolute physical lack. Therefore, Ethiopia's strategy must encompass not only the material capability to build infrastructure but also the discursive and normative power to legitimise its actions within a cooperative context. The GERD, therefore, becomes not merely a tool of counter-hegemonic resistance but a potential keystone for a new, more equitable hydro-political regime, provided its operation is enmeshed within credible transboundary institutions.

In this regard, the role of cooperative governance mechanisms is paramount ([Tshuma, 2021](#)). The theoretical synthesis suggests that effective institutions do not simply manage water; they actively reconfigure hydro-political relations. By fostering transparency, facilitating benefit-sharing beyond water (such as in energy trade or regional integration), and creating predictable rules for conflict resolution, such institutions can incrementally erode the foundations of coercive hegemony. They achieve this by making cooperative compliance more attractive and reliable for all parties, including the established hegemon, than the costs and risks of perpetual confrontation. As Turton emphasises, the securitisation of water issues often leads to deadlock, whereas moving discussions into the technical and cooperative realm of 'hydropolitics' can open space for negotiation. The ongoing difficulties within the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) and the tripartite negotiations concerning the GERD reveal the fragility of current institutional arrangements, highlighting the need for mechanisms with greater legal authority and enforcement capacity, as envisaged in the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA).

Furthermore, this discussion highlights the critical importance of discursive strategies within this integrated framework ([Mostofa, 2021](#)). Ethiopia's narrative has progressively shifted from one of historical rights and riparian equity to one emphasising regional public goods, sustainable development, and mutual benefit. This aligns with the notion that legitimising discourses are a core pillar of stable hegemony. To build a sustainable cooperative regime, Ethiopia must continue to craft and promote a discourse that resonates not only domestically and within the Nile Basin but also with the broader international community. This involves consistently framing its projects within the context of international water law principles, such as equitable and reasonable utilisation, and demonstrating tangible commitment to causing no significant harm through adaptive management and data sharing. The work of scholars like Cascão and Nicol illustrates how such discursive shifts can alter the negotiation terrain over time.

Nevertheless, the path forward is fraught with complexity ([Chung & Gagné, 2021](#)). The theoretical framework acknowledges that hydro-hegemony is deeply entrenched, supported by decades of diplomatic precedence, legal instruments like the 1959 Agreement, and geopolitical alliances. Egypt's strategy, incorporating elements of what Warner would term 'coercive cooperation', is likely to persist. Therefore, the transition towards a more cooperative and equitable

governance structure will be non-linear and contested. It requires a long-term perspective from Ethiopian policymakers, where tactical concessions in negotiations are viewed as strategic investments in institutional credibility and regime stability. The goal is not the outright defeat of a hegemon, which could destabilise the entire region, but its gradual socialisation into a new, rules-based order where its core interests are secured through agreement rather than imposition.

Ultimately, this integrated framework offers a more realistic and agent-centric model for conflict mitigation than either theory in isolation ([Huynh, 2021](#)). For Ethiopia, it provides a strategic roadmap that leverages its growing material capabilities while

Conclusion

This theoretical framework has sought to advance a nuanced understanding of hydro-hegemonic dynamics within the Ethiopian Nile Basin, proposing cooperative governance not as a panacea but as a complex, contextually embedded process ([Suglo, 2021](#)). By synthesising critical hydro-politics with insights from African political thought and social theory, the analysis moves beyond simplistic binaries of conflict versus cooperation. It posits that Ethiopia's assertive pursuit of hydraulic development, while challenging a historically entrenched riparian order, does not inevitably precipitate outright conflict. Rather, it creates a contingent space where tensions can be navigated towards more equitable institutional arrangements. The framework underscores that the mitigation of conflict hinges fundamentally on recognising and addressing the underlying structures of power, legitimacy, and knowledge production that shape transboundary water interactions.

Central to this proposition is the re-conceptualisation of agency within the basin's hydro-political landscape ([Cheng, 2021](#)). Ethiopia's actions, particularly regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), demonstrate a deliberate recalibration of agency away from a posture of acquiescence. This shift, however, must be analytically separated from a mere replication of hegemonic tactics. As Táíwò might frame it, doing substantive scholarship on this issue requires an 'Akiwoṣo' sensibility—a turn towards endogenous frameworks that take local epistemologies and historical experiences seriously. From this vantage point, Ethiopia's stance can be interpreted not solely as realpolitik but as an assertion of a right to development framed within its own socio-historical narrative and hydrological realities. A theoretical approach that fails to account for this endogenous perspective risks perpetuating analytical frameworks that implicitly privilege the status quo.

Consequently, the pathway to cooperative governance is fraught with discursive and ideological contestation ([Adepoju, 2021](#)). The negotiation process is not merely a technical or legal exercise but a battleground for competing narratives of rights, needs, and historical justice. Here, the work of scholars like Bauer on the construction of the 'Other' in populist discourse offers a salient parallel. Hydro-hegemonic tensions are frequently sustained by the strategic 'blaming' and 'othering' of riparian states, where narratives of existential threat are mobilised to consolidate domestic support and justify intransigent positions. A sustainable cooperative framework must therefore develop mechanisms to deconstruct these adversarial narratives and foster a shared, albeit contested, vision of

the river as a system of mutual interdependence. This requires moving from a diplomacy of mutual suspicion to one that acknowledges legitimate, yet divergent, developmental aspirations.

Furthermore, the framework highlights that the legitimacy and sustainability of any cooperative institution will depend profoundly on its domestic social foundations ([Musisi, 2021](#)). A transboundary agreement, no matter how ingeniously designed, remains vulnerable if it is perceived as an elite project disconnected from the lived realities of citizens. The insights of Müller on the performance and memory of citizenship are instructive here. Just as political projects seek to cultivate particular forms of citizenship, successful water governance must foster a sense of riparian citizenship—a shared identity and responsibility that transcends the nation-state while being rooted in local experience. For Ethiopia, this implies that the domestic narrative surrounding the Nile must evolve from one of singular national endeavour to include a consciousness of regional obligation and shared destiny, a difficult but necessary discursive shift.

The internal dimensions of equity and participation are equally critical, a point underscored by analyses of exclusion within other spheres of African public life ([Faccia et al., 2023](#)). The work of Vahed and Desai on undressing entrenched privileges in institutional settings serves as a potent metaphor. For cooperative governance to be truly transformative, it must ‘undress’ not only inequities between states but also within them. This means ensuring that the benefits of hydraulic development and the burdens of compromise are distributed justly across different social groups within Ethiopia. A theoretical focus solely on the interstate level risks obscuring how internal power dynamics—along lines of ethnicity, class, or region—can undermine the social contract necessary to sustain long-term international commitments.

In conclusion, this article argues that mitigating conflict in the Ethiopian Nile Basin necessitates a theoretical and practical engagement with the multi-layered politics of water ([TSURUTA & KOMATSU, 2022](#)). It is a politics played out in the arenas of international law, diplomatic rhetoric, infrastructural symbolism, and everyday livelihood struggles. The proposed framework contends that durable cooperation will emerge not from the imposition of external models, but from a painstaking process that renegotiates hydro-hegemony, acknowledges agentive shifts from all riparian states, and consciously builds legitimacy through inclusive and equitable practice

Contributions

This article makes a dual contribution to the literature on hydro-politics and African Studies. Theoretically, it advances a nuanced framework for analysing water conflict mitigation, integrating concepts of adaptive governance with the specific socio-political dynamics of the Eastern Nile Basin. Practically, it provides a critical, evidence-based analysis of Ethiopia’s contemporary position (2021–2023), offering insights applicable to policymakers and riparian states negotiating cooperative transboundary water management. The study thus moves beyond simplistic scarcity-conflict narratives to identify actionable pathways for stability in this geopolitically crucial region.

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