Ethiopia—Challenges to Egyptian hegemony in the Nile Basin

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Abstract

The Framework of Hydro-Hegemony (described by Zeitoun & Warner, in Water Policy 8, pp 435–460, 2006) challenges mainstream analyses of hydro-political relations in transboundary river basins and highlights the role of power. The approach asserts that asymmetric power relations represent the cornerstone of the analysis of hydro-political relations. Varying hegemonic configurations and the unequal control of water resources among riparian states are characteristic of these relations. The hegemonic riparian in a given international transboundary water setting deploys several strategies to attain and maintain control, sometimes unilaterally, over the shared water resources. But is the control always as deep and entrenched as it sometimes seems to be?

The starting point of this paper is that hydro-hegemony is not incontestable. An established hegemonic order may often be challenged and resisted through a variety of counter-hegemonic strategies. Through examination of Ethiopian contest and consent of Egyptian hydro-hegemony, this study attempts to provide insights into the condition of counter-hydro-hegemony and to provide a framework for further analysis in the field of transboundary water relations. The approach explores the options available for non-hegemonic riparians to challenge a particular hydro-hegemony and finds that these come from unexpected or unacknowledged sources. An assessment of these strategies shows how non-hegemonic riparians might challenge unequal hydro-political configurations and eventually contribute towards a more sustainable and equitable water and benefit-sharing regime.

Keywords: Counter-hydro-hegemony; Egypt; Ethiopia; Hydro-hegemony; Nile River Basin

1. Power relations in the Nile Basin

The Nile is a well-known and long river, though relatively modest in terms of volume. Flows are uneven across the Nile Basin and are often impacted upon by extreme climatic events. The main hydraulic and political features of the basin, however, are the asymmetric use of water resources. The downstream riparians (Egypt and Sudan) have consolidated their control over water resources. Egypt is the most powerful state in the basin; it has achieved a substantial degree of hydraulic, legal and political control over the Nile waters. Political and structural factors—regional and national circumstances—mean that upstream riparians do not currently use a great deal of the water resources inside their boundaries.


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They claim rights to utilise as-yet unmobilised water resources, and increasingly demand a more equitable distribution of the Nile waters. The Nile hydro-political scenario is characterised by ‘complex and often rapidly increasing demands for access to water by co-riparian states’ (Nicol, 2003, p. 168). In 1999 a multilateral cooperative framework, the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), was established among the ten Nile riparians. The debate over the shared allocation and management of the Nile waters is now partially framed by the NBI.

The concepts and tools provided by the Framework of Hydro-Hegemony are particularly useful to understand the past and present hydro-politics of the Nile Basin. Analysis of power relations helps to explain why power is more decisive than geography (riparian position) in the management and allocation of water in the Nile Basin. An analytical framework of counter-hydro-hegemony will be developed in order to demonstrate the strategies used by non-hegemonic riparians in challenging current power relations in the basin. The study focuses on Ethiopian challenges to Egyptian hegemony on the Nile.

Several authors believe that, historically, Ethiopia has not been as active as it may have been in challenging Egyptian unilateralism. Waterbury (2002), for instance, considers that in the past Ethiopia had been the ‘silent partner’ in the Nile Basin. The argument here is that Ethiopia has, in the past, signalled apparent consent, which has in practice been veiled contest in the Nile Basin hegemonic configuration. This ambiguous internalised outcome has come about primarily because Ethiopian governments neither prioritised the state’s water sector nor developed a coherent Nile policy. This study shows that strategies of resistance can nevertheless be revealed and operationalised. Consent and contest co-exist in the hydro-political relations between upstream and downstream riparians; they tend to be internalised by the hegemonised, whether they be upstream or downstream.

The second section of this study provides theoretical insights into both hydro-hegemony and counter-hydro-hegemony applied to transboundary river basins. The third section briefly highlights the Egyptian hegemonic position in the Nile River Basin and the prevailing asymmetric power relations. The fourth and main section, will discuss the counter-hegemonic strategies employed by Ethiopia in challenging Egyptian hegemony in the Basin.

2. Theoretical insights on hegemony and counter-hegemony

2.1. Hegemony

To understand the role of power relations in hydro-politics, and how power is exerted and potentially challenged, it is important to clarify the theoretical concepts of this analysis. These concepts are informed and influenced by Gramscian theory on hegemony and counter-hegemony and, further, by neo-Gramscian perspectives, closely related to critical international relations approaches and international political economy studies.

Gramsci defined hegemony as ‘political power that flows from intellectual and moral leadership, authority or consensus as distinguished from armed force’ (Gramsci, 1971). Power is relational, and the outcome of hegemonic power relations is determined by the interaction of diverse actors. The Gramscian concept of hegemony entails leadership, legitimacy and, above all, ideas, knowledge and consent. Hegemony flows mainly from the power of ideas and knowledge and is not a form of physical power. In a Gramscian sense, hegemony is different from dominance (Cox, 1983) which involves the use of coercion. Hegemony, in contrast, involves legitimacy and some form of consent. Hegemony is an
articulation of ideas with material forces, although it involves achieving consent via the force of ideas rather than military or coercive force and, from a Gramscian perspective, is more about leadership than dominance.

This paper argues that, in the Nile Basin case study, Egypt has adopted a hegemonic position rather than one of dominance. In recent decades, Egypt has in fact used coercive measures to ensure its Nile water allocations as defined by the 1959 Agreement; the threat of the use of force was used against upstream neighbours that might use significant amounts of water. However, Egyptian hegemony can be better explained by a combination of political leadership in the Basin, powerful negotiation skills and considerable capacity in the construction of knowledge and discourse. The Egyptian ability to influence the hydro-political relations in the Nile Basin is determined by power: both structural power and other more subtle power mechanisms. These subtle mechanisms include the ability to sanction discursive processes, to construct knowledge and to sign treaties to protect the Egyptian position.

On the other hand, Egypt could count on the ‘apparent consent’ of some of the upstream countries. ‘Apparent consent’ here means a lack of overt contestation of Egyptian utilisation of the Nile waters, along with an absence of alternative upstream water policies. In the case of Ethiopia, and to some extent Sudan, the apparent consent is seen in the non-prioritisation of the water sector in state policies, as well as other structural factors. For example, both countries have experienced long civil wars, several conflicts related with state maintenance, and the water sector has not represented a strategic or economic priority. Egyptian hegemony has been sustained by an overwhelming asymmetry in power, made easier through the enduring weaknesses of riparian competitors. However, that apparent consent has existed does not mean that the Egyptian hegemonic position has remained uncontested, as will be comprehensively discussed in the latter parts of this study. ‘Apparent consent’ co-exists with ‘veiled contest’ in hydropolitical configurations, as we shall see.

2.2. Power, ideas and knowledge

Ideas and knowledge are important explanatory variables in the analysis of power relations. There is a need ‘to attend to aspects of power that are least accessible to observation [that are the] most effective’ (Lukes, 2005, p. 1). Ideas are a crucial and influential factor on political power relations. Both knowledge and discourse have potential to reinforce a hegemonic context (Foucault, 1980; Cox, 1983; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). The production of knowledge is directly related to successful pursuance of material interests. This is the case in transboundary river basins, when the hegemon is usually the most powerful in terms of expertise and negotiation capacity and uses this power to reinforce control over water resources.

The construction of a discursive component is a vital piece of the hegemon game and an important part of the legitimation process of power relations. This idea has been widely applied in the field of water resource management, namely through the concept of a ‘sanctioned discourse’ (Allan, 2002, pp. 182–184). Egypt, like other states discussed in this issue, often employs discursive means to ‘control the agenda of politics’ (Lukes, 2005, p. 25).
2.3. Counter-hegemony

Mainstream water resources literature tends to focus on existing hydro-relations and how powerful actors drive their policies to maintain control of water resources. This literature does not question established systems nor does it capture the magnitude of the challenges of achieving new relations over shared waters. Literature challenging existing relationships is not common. This acceptance of the status quo may imply an embedded and enduring support for current situations, and indeed perpetuate them.

Power relations are not static or immutable. Non-hegemonic riparians are not necessarily powerless, and also have access to negotiation and pressure mechanisms. Resistance exists, as does challenge and the contestation of hegemonic hydro-political settings, and must be considered. Ultimately ‘hegemony always implies resistance (…) they are a dialectic pair’ (Cox, 1981). Hegemony and counter-hegemony shape and define each other. Figure 1 provides an abstract model of hegemony and counter-hegemony that demonstrates the dynamic. Hegemony and counter-hegemony mutually change over time in a kind of interdependent geometry.

Hegemony uses the construction of common sense and reinforcement through dominant beliefs, ideas, discourses and knowledge. Sanctioned discourse reinforces the legitimacy of the outcomes of hegemony. Co-option mechanisms are also employed in order to prevent the non-hegemonic parties developing successful counter-strategies. The hegemon’s main goal is to maintain and consolidate the status quo (clockwise in the diagram).

Counter-hegemony occurs when non-hegemonic parties partially or totally break the consent. Such processes involve the deconstruction of constructed common sense (undermining legitimacy) and the

![Diagram of hegemony and counter-hegemony]

Fig. 1. Abstract model of hegemony and counter-hegemony.
creation of alternatives. The main goals of the counter-hegemon’s are: (1) to challenge and (2) to change the status quo (counter-clockwise in the diagram). Consent (and apparent consent) legitimises and reinforces hegemony, while contestation confronts and resists it. The latter may be considered an expression of ‘apparent consent but actual veiled contest’. Consent and contest co-exist in power relations and their roles in the specific context of the Nile Basin are discussed in the following.

As shown in Figure 1, counter-hegemonic processes are typically based on three complementary features: (1) challenging the hegemonic status quo; (2) contesting hegemonic legitimacy and (3) the creation of alternatives. Counter-hegemony implies alternatives to existing configurations of power (Cox, 1981, 1983; Abbot & Worth, 2002). A counter-hegemonic strategy is usually twofold: (a) resistance to hegemonic pressures (reactive) and (b) the building-up of a counter-hegemonic alternative strategy (active).

Resistance and contest of a hegemonic configuration implies that ‘one understands what precisely needs to be resisted’ (Bieler & Morton, 2002, p. 103), in order to promote change to the existing status quo. The previous review of power relations in the Nile Basin and the role of Egypt as the hegemon during recent decades helps us to understand how downstream riparians were able to consolidate their control of water resources. If the hegemon, Egypt, bases its power on established strategies and sanctioned discourses, non-hegemons will tend to promote change by dispelling hegemonic fallacies and deconstructing mainstream narratives and discourses. But counter-(hydro-) hegemony is not just about contesting the status quo; it is also about the creation of alternatives to the current situation, namely a change in the basin regime towards shared control of the water resources. Such control might not be favoured by the hegemon but it is perhaps the outcome most favourable to the other riparian states, and a move away from the status quo.

2.4. Power relations—consent and contest

Hydro-hegemonic configurations must be analysed from a non-deterministic point of view. In other words, there are no clear or unambiguous dependent and independent variables. For example, an upstream position or generous endowment of water resources is not determining. Nor is power totally determining. The existence of resistance and challenges to the existing hegemonic order must be considered critically. The outcome of hydro-political relations is not just determined by the hydro-hegemon, even if it is the actor most capable of determining the rules of the game. As power is relational, all the riparian states are responsible for the hydropolitical situation. The final outcome emerges as a result of the actions and/or reactions of all the parties involved—of the hegemon, of the non-hegemons, of the ‘wait-and-see actors’ (Waterbury, 2002, p. 33)—and of external players too.

Thus the outcome of the competition over water resources also depends on the basin’s non-hegemonic parties. As mentioned in the first part of this paper, hegemony involves leadership rather than dominance (Gramsci, 1971) and entails forms of consent from the non-hegemonic parties. In this connection it is relevant to highlight that Ethiopia has, in the past, granted apparent consent to the hydro-hegemonic configuration, through the lack of developed water policies and of knowledge. In the past, the Nile issue had often been used by Ethiopian leaders, such as Haile Selassie and Mengistu Haile Mariam, merely as a regional diplomatic and political weapon. The first comprehensive studies on the Blue Nile in Ethiopian territory, for example, were conducted relatively late, during the 1960s and with the technical and financial support of the United States. This period coincided with the announcement that the Aswan
High Dam in Egypt was to be constructed, with the support of the Soviet Union. The economic importance of the Nile waters to Ethiopia was only realised after the intense droughts of the 1970s and 1980s. However, it was only in the 1990s that a Ministry of Water Resources and a comprehensive national water policy were established. The apparent consent in this case is the lack of overt alternatives to the status quo regime in the Basin.

However, apparent consent may veil the coexistence of consent and contest. A characterisation of Ethiopia’s apparent—but unwilling—consent does not imply passivity on its part. Ethiopian counter-strategies have been developed, as we shall see. Such counter-strategies start with the breaking of consent which tends to occur after the identification of the strengths and limitations of the existing hydro-hegemonic order and its analysis and deconstruction. Hegemonic weaknesses are targeted. In other words there is an ‘exposing and exploiting [of] the weaknesses, thus destabilising the hegemonic consent’ (Worth & Kuhling, 2004, p. 35). Ultimately the hegemonic order is no longer taken for granted and can be confronted through an array of strategies and mechanisms.

3. Hydro-hegemony in the Nile Basin

3.1. Egypt—the historical hegemon in the Nile Basin

Egypt’s hegemonic position on the Nile is rooted in history. Egypt has been labelled a ‘hydraulic state’ (Wittfogel, 1957) that has successfully mobilised the Nile water resources for millennia. It is possible to identify three main phases that have contributed to the recent Egyptian hydro-hegemonic position via a strategy of ‘resource capture’ (Homer-Dixon, 1994). The first phase was initiated by Muhammad Ali in the 19th century through an extensive expansion of irrigation infrastructure. The second phase was during the British colonial period, when several technological and political measures were pursued in order to launch a new hydraulic project intensifying Egyptian agricultural production. The third phase was the period of Arab nationalism, when Gamal Abdel-Nasser initiated projects that culminated in the building of the Aswan High Dam.

For Egypt, ‘securing an uninterrupted and stable Nile water supply has been the foremost concern of political leaders’ (Flintan & Tamrat, 2002, p. 297). In order to achieve a consolidated control over the water, Egypt utilised several approaches (economic, technological, legal, political) not just to mobilise the resources for its own benefit, but to prevent the upstream riparian states from mobilising water resources. Moreover, Egypt has benefited from overlay assistance provided by external actors. The current leadership position of Egypt in the basin is a by-product of the evolution in international relations and their impacts upon the region. During the colonial period, the British carried out several hydrological studies and developed hydraulic infrastructure in Egypt, and favoured these over potential water resource projects in East Africa. Cold War superpowers sustained and reinforced the Egyptian position and supported the construction of hydraulic infrastructure, most notably the Aswan High Dam. Since the end of Soviet presence in Egypt in 1974, and also after the end of the Cold War in 1991, Egypt has benefited from political and financial support from the United States and international organisations such as the World Bank.

The 1959 Agreement signed between Sudan and Egypt established the annual water allocations for the two downstream riparians — 55.5 bcm for Egypt and 18.5 bcm for Sudan. The Agreement is used by Egypt to claim ‘historical rights’ to the Nile waters and it has rewarded Egypt with ‘total control of the
Nile with huge economic benefits and the bonus of hydro-power’ (Allan, 1999, p. 4). Indeed the downstream riparian ‘has been successful in imposing the status quo for four decades’ (Waterbury, 2002, p. 167): although the legal treaty is merely bilateral, it has crystallised over time as the current status quo determining water allocations, which include water storage downstream. This status quo is in place despite the agreement not being recognised by the other riparian states. Moving storage upstream is not currently conceivable for water managers in Egypt, while development of infrastructure in Ethiopia or the Equatorial riparian states, especially if intended for irrigation, is not welcomed. This status quo situation has prevented upstream countries’ development of water resources. Despite the fact that Egypt is nowadays involved in a cooperative process with the other nine Nile riparian states, the 1959 Agreement is still considered to be not negotiable.

3.2. Extrapolating Herodotus

The statement ‘Egypt is the Nile and the Nile is Egypt’, to quote the famous Greek historian Herodotus, continues to be holds sway throughout Egypt today. This belief reveals some misconceptions about the current stake of Egypt in the basin. Egyptian civilisations certainly based their development on the utilisation of the Nile waters, and the river remains part of the cultural and historical identity of modern Egypt. At the same time, Herodotus’ insight clearly supports the powerful ‘securitisation’ tactics that partly enabled the capture and control of the water resources of the Nile. Such tactics were employed by Egypt during the last decades when water resources were seen to have ‘jump[ed] the queue of political priority’ (Buzan et al., 1998). Water resources are acknowledged as a strategic top element of the national security framework and ‘the first consideration of any Egyptian government is to guarantee that Nile waters are not threatened’, as Heikal’s (1978) analysis of the Egyptian foreign policy reveals. The ‘securitisation’ tactic together with the establishment of a strong ‘sanctioned discourse’ and the construction of expertise-based knowledge have been the recurrent modes adopted by Egypt to validate unilateral and hegemonic actions in the basin. In addition, Egypt has applied a panoply of approaches (including coercion) not just to keep the control over the resources, but also to confront and divert challenges to its power from upstream riparians, as we shall see.

The assertion that ‘Egypt is the Nile and the Nile is Egypt’ entails two fallacies. Firstly, Egypt is not just the Nile, i.e. Egypt is not as dependent on the Nile as it used to be. The ancient Egyptian civilization was strongly associated with the development of Nile water resources and the Nile waters were the only ‘internal’ water resources. But this is no longer the case and the Egyptian economy is not as dependent on the Nile waters as in the past. The contribution of the agricultural sector in GDP, for example, moved from 20.1% in 1981 to 16.8% in 2006, while the proportion of the population involved in agriculture dropped from 55% in 1965 to its current figure of 31.5% (Selby, 2005, p. 13). Furthermore, Egypt imports a significant proportion of its water in the form of virtual water ‘trade’ in food staples (Allan, 2002, p. 41). However, ‘Egypt continues to define its interests in the Nile much as it did in the 1950s, irrespective of the enormous changes since then in the Egyptian economy’ (Waterbury, 2002, p. 171). Egypt has been proportionately more dependent on the diversification of its economy than on its Nile waters in relation to the increase in its population (see Allan, 2002; Waterbury, 2002).

Secondly, the Nile is not just Egypt; the Nile is an international basin shared by ten riparian states (Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda, D.R. of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania, and Egypt). All aspire to use a quota of the Nile’s water resources, although specific allocations are not yet defined.
4. Counter-hydro-hegemony in the Nile River Basin—the Ethiopian case

This section provides an analysis of counter-hegemony applied to the Nile River Basin. The aim is to understand how Ethiopia, the state furthest upstream in the Blue Nile Basin, has contested and challenged Egypt’s hydro-hegemony. As previously discussed, a counter-hegemonic strategy is usually based on three pillars: challenging the hegemonic status quo; contesting hegemonic legitimacy and building creative forms of resistance. The extent to which counter-strategies have contributed to a change of regime in terms of water management and allocation at the basin level will also be analysed. We will note also how asymmetric power relations make the creation of alternatives to the current hegemonic regime difficult.

4.1. Scarcity of power

Zeitoun & Warner (2006) have detailed the three strategies (resource capture, containment and integration) available to states who seek to consolidate their control over transboundary water resources. Egypt in the Nile River Basin has adopted explicit and subtle mechanisms to reinforce its acquired hegemonic position: coercion, sanctioned discourse, privileged access to funding, and the use of treaties and other diplomatic manoeuvres. The analysis points out that ‘while the tools and tactics (...) are available to all competitors, the outcome of inter-state competition over water resources is determined in large measure by the balance of power between the states’ (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006, p. 12). Non-hegemonic riparians are not powerless but often face a scarcity of structural power, that is, military and economic power vis-à-vis the hegemon. Asymmetries of power arise from the lack of internal political and economic stability, the lack of international support and funding, relatively larger knowledge gaps, weak expertise, institutional and negotiating capacity. Asymmetric levels of expertise are decisive in decision-making process as they influence negotiation and bargaining procedures, as well as the implementation and monitoring of projects.

If non-hegemonic riparians possess limited structural power, it does follow that they do not engage in strategies to shift the balance of hydro-political relations. Upstream countries claim equitable shared control of the Nile water resources and their right to use the water resources flowing within their boundaries. The counter-hegemony strategies adopted by Ethiopia to challenge the existing power and hydro-hegemonic configuration are discussed in the following.

Before analysing the particular strategies available to Ethiopia, it is important to emphasise the distinction between ‘structural power’ (puissance) and ‘bargaining power’ (pouvoir) (Foucault, in Turton, 2005). Structural power is a material form of power, including military and economic might. Bargaining power is an immaterial form of power, based on diplomatic and ideational capacities to influence the negotiations and the decisions. If Egypt has both kinds of power to preserve its dominant position, Ethiopia has to rely on bargaining power, as the powers of Egypt usually trump that of non-hegemonic parties.

Ethiopia has fewer alternatives available and a restricted field of manoeuvre compared to Egypt, but some political and diplomatic mechanisms have been adopted. A number of approaches were taken to reinforce counter-strategies and counterbalance the relative lack of significant structural power. These approaches include holding the moral ground, investing in knowledge and expertise, and bringing influence to bear on the cooperative agenda.
4.2. Seeking ‘shared control’

Within the field of analysis that the analytical approach of hydro-hegemony has been defined to apply to (see Zeitoun & Warner, 2006), the goal of the hegemon may be to maintain ‘consolidated control’ over the water resources. The control comes despite the apparent consent of the weaker parties. Egypt has been able to consolidate control through the construction of hydraulic infrastructures and storage capacities, in particular the Aswan High Dam. The 1959 Agreement established specific water allocations for Egypt and Sudan, which Egypt now considers as an historical and irrevocable right. On the other hand, Ethiopia and the other upstream riparians have little or no control over Nile water resources, are not part of the 1959 Agreement, and have no specific water quantities allocated for their national needs. The goal of the upstream non-hegemonic riparians within this hegemonic configuration may be to achieve ‘shared control’ of the waters. To share control implies a challenge and limitation upon the hegemon’s almost unilateral control in the Nile Basin.

Ethiopia could, for example, benefit from the fact that it is the riparian furthest upstream of the Blue Nile River. Along with Sudan, conditions in Ethiopia—such as lower evaporation rates—are favourable to the construction of new hydraulic projects. Control of sedimentation and river erosion, and the potential production of hydropower are two significant advantages of moving dams upstream. However, as we have seen, Ethiopia’s geographical advantage is constrained by asymmetric power relations.

Ethiopia’s major goal is a ‘change of status quo’ (Waterbury, 2002, p. 33) and to put forward a new hydro-political agenda based upon more equitable principles, including a redefinition of water allocations. In the past, the position of the Ethiopian government was the development of unilateral infrastructures. The result of this unilateral counter-strategy contributed to the development of downstream countries’ mistrust, and conflict in diplomatic relations. Currently, the strategy is no longer so unilateral, as all riparians are involved in a cooperative framework of the NBI and are searching for more equitable basin-wide management regime. This regime is ostensibly one promoting shared control between downstream and upstream riparians. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian authorities have not ruled out the possibility of developing unilateral infrastructures, should cooperation fail to bring forward the new regime.

5. Hydro counter-strategies

The following section documents the counter-strategies that have been deployed by Ethiopia to challenge hydro-hegemony in the Nile Basin. It also seeks to explain past and current outcomes of these strategies, and whether or not they have contributed to effecting change in the Basin’s asymmetrical power relations. In identifying such strategies, no policy implications are intended. This work is analytical, not prescriptive, though it is hoped the insights provided by the power-based analysis will ultimately serve to improve our understanding of water-sharing dynamics.

5.1. First counter-strategy—reactive diplomacy

International diplomacy had been one of the key elements of Ethiopia’s counter-hegemony strategies. During the Cold War, Ethiopia presented the Nile issue at several international and regional conferences, notably in 1977 at the United Nations Water Conference in Mar de Plata and in 1980 at the Organisation of
African Unity Summit in Lagos, the two main cases of reactive diplomacy. In both cases Ethiopia openly denounced Egypt’s hydro-imperialist position and projects in the basin, while anticipating the implementation of several of its own hydro-projects in the Blue Nile. In both cases, Ethiopia used the Nile as a diplomatic instrument in regional politics strongly influenced by the superpower rivalry. It was around this period that the Cold War alliances shifted in the region. Ethiopia, on good terms with the US administration during the Haile Selassie period, now began to receive greater military support from the Soviet Union, in particular following the Ogaden War with Somalia. In the same period, Egypt fell under US influence. Ethiopia also used the diplomatic tactic of ‘aggressive silence’ (Waterbury, 2002, p. 71), by refusing to participative in ‘cooperative’ initiatives such as the Hydromet or Undugu projects because of the perceived domination of Egypt.

In the late 1990s, Ethiopia again displayed reactive diplomacy through numerous ‘letters of protest’ sent to international institutions condemning the new Egyptian New Valley Project and the Toshka Canal. This giant land reclamation project would divert water from Lake Nasser into the desert. Ethiopia pursued a ‘transnational lobbying campaign’ (Meissner, 2004, p. 7) denouncing the Egyptian hydraulic mission that was thought to utilise several billion cubic metres of Nile water annually, while Ethiopia was still unable to construct basic hydraulic infrastructure. Ethiopia reacted immediately and firmly against the out-of-basin transfer projects (see Al-Ahram, 2003; Collins, 2003, p. 15; Arsano, 2004, p. 172). Egypt refuted Ethiopian criticisms, however, arguing that water diverted to the New Valley Project would be part of its own water allocation established by the 1959 Agreement achieved by water-using efficiencies in irrigation. Reactive diplomacy has thus far not succeeded to promote radical changes in the hydro-hegemonic regime.

5.2. Second counter-strategy—active diplomacy

Ethiopia has not relied solely on reactive diplomacy, where Nile issues have been concerned. Since the 1990s, Ethiopia began pro-active diplomacy at both bilateral and regional levels. In 1991, Ethiopia and Sudan re-established good diplomatic relations and signed a cooperative pact which, along with economic issues, included cooperation concerning the Blue Nile and Atbara rivers. Bilateral cooperation over the Nile between Ethiopia and Sudan is usually regarded as a threat by downstream Egypt and is constantly scrutinised (see Williams, 2002; Waterbury, 2002). At the practical level, Sudan and Ethiopia have not yet pursued bilateral hydraulic policies or projects. In 1993, Ethiopia established good diplomatic relations with Egypt through the signing of a framework for general cooperation, but the Nile issues were only debated in general terms. The two riparians committed to avoiding ‘appreciable harm’ and on mutual consultation before the implementation of hydraulic projects. Several Ethiopian observers consider this a step back to the Ethiopian position instead of a step forward, towards hydropolitical diplomacy. Finally, this agreement can even be considered as a ‘commitment (…) to acknowledge and protect Egyptian acquired rights’ (Waterbury, 2002, p. 83).

In its pro-active bilateral diplomacy, Ethiopia emphasises the need to use the Nile waters for its own economic development, principally through the construction of hydro-power dams and irrigation. Ethiopia also highlights the advantages of moving dams upstream arguing, for instance, that ‘moving long-term storage upstream could provide water saving that can be shared’ (Waterbury & Whittington, 1998, p. 162) through infrastructure that would serve to regulate river’s flow (Allan, 2002, p. 70). Despite the improvement in diplomatic relations among the riparian neighbours, historical mistrust
remains: Egypt and Sudan still refuse to renounce the 1959 Agreement and the water allocations that it established; upstream riparians continue to reject it.

5.3. Third counter-strategy—cooperation

A further case of pro-active diplomacy is at the regional level, represented by participation in the basin-wide cooperative framework, the Nile Basin Initiative. To consider cooperation as a counter-hegemonic mechanism may at first appear controversial. Cooperative institutions might work, however, as a continuum in the pattern of hegemonic relations between countries or riparians. Selby considers that, in the case of the Jordan Basin, the hydro-political situation is one of ‘dressing up domination as cooperation’ (Selby, 2003). Cooperative institutions can represent an ‘opportunity for dominant forces to soften their factual domination’ (Sinclair, 1996, p. 11) and cooperation agreements can eventually incorporate a hegemonic integration strategy of control. Ethiopia has taken this to be the case in previous cooperative initiatives, participating as a mere observer rather than a member of the Hydromet or TeccOnile, for example. These were mainly technical initiatives and did not address the problematic issue, the basin-wide allocation of Nile water resources.

Since 1999, the ten Nile riparians have been involved in the Nile Basin Initiative. The NBI has benefited from strong support from external partners, such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and several bilateral donors. This was the first time that Ethiopia agreed to participate as a member in a basin-level cooperative initiative. The driving force and expectation behind this initiative was twofold. First, it may have been understood that downstream states would be ready to sign a multilateral agreement in the near future. Second, investment for the construction of large-scale hydraulic projects in the Ethiopian highlands would be facilitated. Ethiopia may thus have considered the NBI an opportunity to counter-balance the downstream power of Egypt.

Nine years have passed since the launch of the initiative. Diplomatic hydro-political relations have improved, decision-makers meet on a regular basis and capacity-building has been developed. Has a shift in the balance of power been experienced, or does the NBI still reflect asymmetric and hegemonic power relations?

Many authors consider the NBI a big step forward in improving hydro-political relations along the Nile (e.g. Allan, 1999; Mason, 2004). For Nicol et al. the NBI is considered ‘the most prominent transboundary initiative at present’ (Nicol et al., 2001, p. 21). Collins (2003) considered that ‘the NBI was indeed a new departure in the management of the Nile, for its objective was equitable utilization that would erode historic rights; (...) shared visions were not the stuff of imperialists, planners, or dam builders’ (Collins, 2003, p. 13). On the other hand, some Ethiopian analysts are more careful in analysing the evolution of the NBI. Some consider that Egypt retains too much control over the cooperative process and that the projects that are moving forward are those that do not substantially affect Egypt’s interests, while projects that are more advantageous for Ethiopia lag behind (Arsano, 2004; Tafesse & Wondwsoen, 2006). It can be argued that the Egyptian position in the cooperative process is strong. Consider, for example, Egyptian insistence on the protection of previous legal agreements and delay in the adoption of a new multilateral legal agreement which would present principles of equitable utilisation of the Nile waters and eventually revised water allocations (see Kendi, 1999; TFDD, 2002; Wahab, 2004; New Vision, 2007; East African Business Week, 2007).
Cooperative institutions can be ‘a battleground of opposing tendencies’ (Cox, 1981, p. 99), or even an opportunity to ‘serve also as agents of change’ (Sinclair, 1996, p. 10). Ethiopian participation in the NBI provides evidence of the fact that the decision-makers believe these cooperative institutions are mechanisms which will shift the hegemonic pattern to a more balanced hydro-political relation. The recent negotiations on the Nile River Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement (1997-2007) demonstrate that Ethiopia is using the NBI as a lever to change the fundamental dynamics of the basin and achieve a better outcome of shared Nile water resources. However, these negotiations were indeed a ‘battleground’ between upstream and downstream riparians and consensus was not reached. At the same time the downstream countries do not accept that the new agreement supersedes the 1959 Agreement, and upstream countries consider that the future of basin-wide cooperation depends on this change in the status quo, and the redefinition of the water allocations. For the moment, the single most fundamental issue on the utilisation of the Nile waters remains unresolved.

Is Ethiopia relying on the NBI as a counter-strategy to pursue ‘shared control’ of the Nile waters? Through the NBI, Ethiopia believes that it is possible to improve the international image of the country, attract investment and support from international donors, and develop hydraulic infrastructure in the country. The bottom line, and most difficult task, to achieve a new legal agreement on sharing the Nile waters, has to date been sidelined.

5.4. Fourth counter-strategy—mobilise international funding

Lack of funding has always been one of the main obstacles to Ethiopia’s attempts to develop her water resources (Waterbury & Whittington, 1998, p. 152). Ethiopia faces two obstacles: a lack of domestic public funding to develop infrastructures and carry out feasibility studies, and an incapacity to generate international investment. Developing internationally sourced financial resources is a crucial element of Ethiopian counter-hegemonic strategy. Unfortunately Ethiopian governments have faced several barriers to raising financial support for hydraulic projects, mainly in the Blue Nile Basin. For example, the Operational Directive 7.50 of the World Bank represented a crucial handicap for Ethiopia, because it allowed Egypt to object to the construction of hydraulic projects upstream. Waterbury considers that this situation granted Egypt a form of ‘veto power’ (Waterbury, 2002, p. 167). ‘Blocking funds from donors’ (Takele, 2004) was one of the greatest hegemonic tactics used by Egypt. Egypt has always safeguarded a significant influence in the World Bank, other UN agencies and in the African Development Bank. Such influence over international donors has always been one of Egypt’s greatest advantages and one of Ethiopia’s greatest weaknesses.

Ethiopia has attempted to attract international commitment from financial institutions and donors, particularly multilateral and regional banks. The construction of dams in the Ethiopian highlands involves substantial investment and considerable technical challenges. Another obstacle had been Egyptian opposition to these dams, especially those with irrigation purposes. More recently, Ethiopia has tried to diversify the potential financial sources and seek both private and public alternatives. Along with bilateral state donors such as Italy, France and Japan, international organisations are financing some water-related projects in Ethiopia. Water supply and sanitation, watershed management, irrigation in regions other than the Nile and national capacity-building are the main areas of investment. Conversely, international financial support to hydraulic projects on the Blue Nile or Atbara basins is still difficult to procure.
On the other hand, the involvement of Ethiopia in the NBI supports the idea that ‘international cooperation is seen as a way to access international financial resources’ (Mason, 2004, p. 169). Indeed the NBI had been attracting financial investment, with ‘several donors already supporting and many donors [expected] to make commitments through a Trust Fund’ (Nicol et al., 2001, p. 21). However, at present there is an impasse: to receive funds for projects, the NBI needs to have a legal status. This status depends upon the signature of a multilateral agreement after which the Nile Basin Commission would be created. As mentioned earlier, the future of the agreement is still uncertain. Meanwhile, the cooperative projects on the ground keep being delayed and implementation stages postponed.

5.5. Fifth counter-strategy—the construction of expertise-based knowledge

As previously mentioned, power and knowledge are closely tied in hegemonic strategies. Politics determine knowledge and hence discourse (Allan, 2002, p. 49). Hegemons are usually stronger in mobilising and constructing knowledge. Knowledge and policies are correlated, as ‘it is impossible to separate knowledge production from the realisation and definition of material interests’ (Warner, 2000, p. 247). Egypt has a long tradition of hydrological and hydraulic knowledge, both at the scientific and practical level. As the state furthest downstream, it has a long tradition of developing expertise in issues such as water engineering, irrigation for agriculture and water allocation. Ethiopia is just ‘at the beginning of Nile learning curve’ (Waterbury, 2002, p. 71) and in the recent past ‘there were few competent personnel within the principal agencies for planning and development of Ethiopian waters’ (Collins, 2003, p. 3). The knowledge gap is decisive as it allows the hegemon to reinforce its power, in both policy and decision-making processes. Moreover, a disparity in knowledge usually leads to unequal ability to manage, decide and negotiate. In the Nile Basin, there is a significant structural ‘knowledge gap’ between upstream and downstream countries.

Ethiopia is relatively weak in its ability to construct knowledge, as it has only recently been developing expertise in the water sector. Though several Ethiopian experts are currently being trained in technical, environmental and hydrological fields, this has not been the case until very recently. The past’s lack of expertise represented another compromise in terms of bargaining power. Currently, Ethiopia may have recognised that bargaining power is the tool of non-hegemonic parties and can be used to contest and challenge Egyptian hegemony. A crucial part of Ethiopia’s undeclared counter-hegemony strategy includes mechanisms for the construction and consolidation of knowledge and thereafter its creation, collection, interpretation and dissemination. The dissemination of knowledge is particularly important within the cooperative process, because it represents ‘institutionalised knowledge’ (Turton, 1999, p. 146). A good example of an informal cooperative process, in which Ethiopia was seriously involved, is the Nile 2002 conferences that successfully contributed to the effective construction and sharing of scientific knowledge.

With the NBI it is also expected that the cooperative processes will reduce the expertise gap between downstream and upstream riparians: several Ethiopian experts now have the opportunity to participate in regional workshops, courses and even enrol in PhD programmes in foreign universities. In the long term, the counter-strategy of knowledge and expertise construction might be the most successful, as it improves negotiation and decision-making processes.
5.6. Sixth counter-strategy—discourse alternatives

Discourse is one of the key factors of hegemonic strategies and, as Allan highlighted, sanctioned discourse is ‘a political tool in water policy-making’ (Allan, 2002, p. 10). As a hegemon, Egypt is able to protect its own position in the hydro-political situation in the Nile Basin. Knowledge and ‘sanctioned discourse’ are essential for the legitimacy of hegemonic configurations. The Egyptian-sanctioned discourse is based on achieving water security, food self-sufficiency and the promotion of iconic projects, such as those of land reclamation. Ethiopia has challenged the sanctioned perceptions disseminated by the more powerful Egypt, in particular with respect to the new Egyptian hydraulic projects. Ethiopia has attempted to delegitimise the dominant discourse. Nevertheless, Ethiopian strategy is still more reactive than constructive: it is still obliged to provide discourse alternatives and to emphasise information that tends to be overlooked by sanctioned discourses. To sustain discourse alternatives Ethiopia may need to focus on ‘new water knowledge’ (Allan, 2002, p. 30). For example, Ethiopia needs to highlight the optimal utilisation of the water resources including social, environmental, economic and political sustainable policies at the basin level. This counter-strategy is as yet under-developed, and Ethiopia still needs to propose ideas and a discourse providing an alternative and widely acceptable regime in the basin. Such a new direction should include specific well-articulated elements relating to its needs and entitlement to Nile waters. The power of discourse is one of the most important elements of the bargaining power available to non-hegemonic riparians (Daoudy, 2005).

Moreover, any discourse alternatives must entail a positive ‘water discourse’ even if it is critical of the existing order. If Ethiopia is able to extend the discourse to larger spheres of debate, namely national and international public arenas, it will perhaps be better able to develop a constructive discourse. Just as the hegemon may employ ‘discourse coalitions’ (Hajer, 1995, p. 13) to support a sanctioned storyline, the non-hegemonic countries could raise ‘counter-discourse coalitions’. These counter-discursive coalitions are starting to emerge slowly at the national level, gathering officials, academics, technicians and the media in support.

5.7. Seventh counter-strategy—claim for legal principles

Legal aspects of Nile water management have been important in shaping Ethiopian–Egyptian hydropolitics. Both riparians display contradictory positions and support opposing legal principles. On the one hand, the principle of ‘absolute territorial sovereignty’ (the Harmon Doctrine) was claimed by Ethiopia as a legal counter-strategy for several decades before more recently changing its position: Ethiopia now claims the application of the international legal principle of ‘equitable and reasonable utilisation’, as defined by the 1997 United Nations Convention on International Watercourses. In contrast, Egypt has claimed the principles of ‘historical rights’ and ‘prior use’ based on the 1959 Agreement.

During current negotiations for a new Cooperative Framework Agreement, Ethiopia stressed the need to recognise legally the principle of ‘equitable utilisation’. If the new framework is to be signed and ratified by the Nile riparians, recognition of the general international water law principles will be required. However, it is not expected that in the near future a multilateral agreement will, as Ethiopian leaders would like, include equitable water allocations. The 1959 Agreement is still the ‘quasi-regime’ (Waterbury, 2002, p. 33) concerning water allocations. Knowing that legal agreements relating to water can take years or even decades to be finalised, Ethiopia is prepared to continue negotiating with all the other riparians and advance calls for talks about equitable entitlements, i.e. volumetric water allocations, in the future.
6. Conclusion

Power asymmetry remains a determining characteristic in the competition over the Nile’s flows. In the past, regional hydropolitical relations have been characterised by conflict. During the 1990s, diplomatic relations among Nile riparians improved and a cooperative framework was developed. It is still not clear that there has been a real shift in the balance of power. Downstream riparians insist on the maintenance of the 1959 Agreement and its water allocations. This position maintains the well-established hegemonic status quo. Egypt is still the strongest riparian and the one most able to define the discursive process and agenda setting.

Nevertheless Ethiopia has developed counter-strategies to challenge the long-standing hegemonic configuration, whether or not the resistance is declared. This paper has identified and discussed some of the main elements of the counter-hegemony strategy through the tools of diplomacy, including bilateral and multilateral cooperation efforts. Though its contest of Egyptian hydro-hegemony may be veiled, Ethiopia’s contest primarily through the NBI may have improved its influence over the hydropolitical agenda. Discursive alternatives and greater expertise are important elements of the Ethiopian counter-strategy. Investment in education and knowledge-construction in the water sector have been shown as necessary to reduce the knowledge gap between upstream and downstream riparians. This improved knowledge and similarly improved negotiation tools are essential in order to increase Ethiopian bargaining power at the negotiating table and within the decision-making process.

The thorniest element in the downstream–upstream relations is the cooperative legal framework, still being negotiated under the auspices of the NBI. Currently there is not yet a new water management regime in the basin, although Ethiopia continues to develop its bargaining power vis-à-vis its downstream neighbours and within the Nile Basin Initiative. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation are now preferred to unilateral strategies. But a radical shift in the basin regime on water management and allocation may be yet to come.

References


