



Copyright © 2024

Natural Built Social Environment Health

ISSN 3085-461X

www.nbseh.org

BOOK REVIEW

Nile Basin Politics: From Coordination to Cooperation, edited by *Steven C. Roach, Derrick K. Hudson, and Kaleb Demerew*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025, 180 pp., £90 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-80392-716-9; eISBN: 978-1-80392-717-6.

The three main riparian countries of the longest river in the world have not created a regime for their shared waters in regard to each one's needs and climate change variations. This failure can be attributed to internal politics in these countries, economic and social dynamics, as well as their international relations. One must examine the situation through different perspectives. This is what Nile Basin Politics has to offer.

The book establishes that since the 1990s, a new era has begun in the Nile Basin, where new actors have challenged the colonial-inherited paradigm, bringing about a new reality that demands a new understanding, and joint actions to make cooperation over the Nile possible (p. 76). The book examines the challenges of long-term cooperation among the three main riparian states of the Lower Nile Basin, viz., Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan, dubbed the 'Big Three', by focusing on domestic nationalist forces and hydro-hegemonic factors (p. 2). It also discusses the importance of the role of other riparian states located in the Lake Victoria Basin and foreign powers such as the United States in the overall management of the Nile and in maintaining peace and stability in the area.

The contributors to the book maintain that the power of the nationalist forces in these countries has not been recognized in designing or hindering cooperation between the Big Three, nor has intervention by foreign powers (p. 13). (Some observers would see the United States as acting with imperial self-interest.) The book argues that successful agreements and frameworks for cooperation require understanding the changes and dynamics of power in those countries (p. 79) and taking a gradual multi-micro-macro approach to resolve the issue of sharing the Nile waters. Such an approach seems to be inherently difficult. States of the federal Commonwealth of Australia fail to work together on allocating the waters of the Murray-Darling river system.

Thus, for cooperation to succeed, there needs to be coordination. The book defines coordination as 'a process in which two sides learn to work with one another to forge commitments to cooperate with new rules of agreement.' It describes it as less regularized than cooperation, occurring in small and practical steps based on common understanding. Coordination can enhance trust and create goodwill. It lays the groundwork for long-term cooperation as it comes from within, i.e., not imposed by outside

actors, and is less prone to politicization since it occurs on a small scale in gradual and practical steps. Coordination and cooperation must be voluntary, not forced or imposed, so that trust is built between the parties (pp. 3-5,125-126). Some may find this obvious and banal. Others may consider that it requires an almost mystical imagination. Some may think coordination is more about ‘regularization’ and cooperation is more about goodwill.

There are factors to consider regarding the lack of cooperation and how cooperation can occur in the future between the Nile Basin riparian states: internal politics, political changes and upheavals, nationalism, socio-economic situations, and international relations. Sudan’s internal instabilities, for instance, have always influenced its foreign policy towards the Nile; they have improved relations with Egypt but worsened those with Ethiopia. Nationalism in the Big Three, particularly in Egypt and Ethiopia, pushes toward non-cooperation over the Nile. Domestic politics in Egypt and Ethiopia have been the most important factors in explaining variations in foreign policy toward the Nile over the past three decades (pp. 24-33).

The politics of the Nile River have also been affected by external stakeholders: governments, organizations, and influential individuals. The British colonial power established Egypt as the master of the Nile Basin through a diplomatic Note, i.e., the 1929 Agreement, which allocated Egypt 48 BCM of the Nile waters (out of the river’s total 84 BCM annual flow) and granted it the authority to inspect and veto upstream Nile water projects. This was reinforced by the 1959 Agreement between Egypt and Sudan, which increased Egypt’s share of the Nile waters to 55.5 BCM and allocated 18.5 BCM to Sudan. Together, these two allocations constituted 90 percent of the total Nile flow in a year. The result was that the countries at the Nile’s origins have no water for agriculture, urban use, etc. The agreements do not embody the spirit of equitable use of the shared waters, a principle upheld by many countries around the world (pp. 41,91).

Nevertheless, many changes in the region over the past decades have led to the decline of Egypt’s hydro-hegemonic power in the Nile Basin: the rise of nationalism in Ethiopia; the availability of outside expertise and funds for water development projects in the upper riparian countries; the presence of (neo-imperial) China as an economic and political power in the area; political instability in Egypt in recent decades; general instability in the region. The unfair arrangements of 1929 and 1959 disregard the interests of upper riparian countries and counter the spirit of the principles of equitable sharing of watercourses without harm to downstream countries. These changes have created a new reality that requires cooperation. According to Demerew and Hudson, the world has changed; so should the Nile Basin riparian countries’ policies, approaches, and perceptions.

This would mean increasing water resources and reducing reliance on the Nile, especially in Egypt, which depends on Nile waters for all its human and industrial needs – 98 percent of Egypt’s total renewable water supply is provided by the Nile (p. 67). This reliance has led Egypt to maintain the

claim of having a legal hydro-hegemonic power in the basin (which nowadays seems questionable); and it has made the country very vulnerable to changes in water flow because of the increasing influence and power of upstream countries and the variability of climate change. Egypt, as the last downriver country of the Nile waters, exerts power because of the 1929 and 1959 arrangements.

The international relations of the Big Three have affected the politics of the Nile waters. Sudan, for example, signed the 1959 Agreement with Egypt, which favoured Egypt to a great extent because a pro-Egyptian government was in power in Sudan. Similarly, for Egypt to maintain its hydro-hegemony over the Nile, it continued to support governments in Sudan and promised economic aid to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and other riparian countries (pp. 29,97-103). Egypt had been dominated by Britain until Gamal Abdel Nasser deposed King Farouk. In 1956, Britain with France and Israel attempted to regain authority by taking back control of the Suez Canal. Eisenhower threatened to bankrupt Britain, failed to support the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, and later invaded Lebanon with a spurious argument (a non-existent communist threat).

The United States became an influential power in the region, especially after Egypt, under President Anwar Sadat, signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1977. Egypt's strong ties with the US led a riparian country like Uganda to support Egypt's Nile policy, fearing that if it did not, it would negatively affect millions of dollars in aid it was receiving from the US (pp. 105-106). An exception to the US support for Egypt occurred when Sadat's predecessor, Nasser, drew Egypt closer to the Soviet camp, which provided for the Aswan High Dam (AHD), a structure which has produced many problems of its own. In reply, the US offered some support to Ethiopia in its ambition to gain some control over the Nile.

The US support for Egypt became very evident during Donald Trump's first term (2017-2021), jeopardizing future negotiations for an agreement. The US administration under Trump bolstered Egypt's hydro-hegemonic position at the expense of all the other riparian states. It sided with Egypt on many occasions and used 'coercive diplomacy' to subjugate Ethiopia when it tried to mediate among the Big Three (p. 122). Trump exacerbated the situation by stating that Egypt would blow up the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) if Ethiopia continued with its Nile policy (p. 111). The Biden administration attempted to correct Trump's policy but did not achieve much since it largely left the matter to the African Union to resolve (p. 127).

Ethiopia and other upper-Nile states attempted to gain legitimacy for their current and future developmental projects on the shared watercourses. They signed the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), which resulted in the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), in which Egypt is not a member (p. 78). The CFA did not succeed because, according to Udobong, it was based 'on ideal notions of equitable and shared use of the river [Nile] among all riparian states' (p. 133). Why should nation states exempt themselves from international law?

One major practical step that has changed the dynamics of Nile politics and calls for a new approach to the issue is the GERD on the Blue Nile in Ethiopia. GERD resulted from growing nationalism and internal state-building efforts in Ethiopia after the appalling years of Mengistu's revolution against Emperor Haile Selassie. The Ethiopian government was able to collect US\$ 350 million through domestic taxation and bonds. Demerew argues that the commencement of GERD's construction in 2011 brought about a dramatic change to Egypt's longstanding monopoly over the Nile, because it repudiated the arrangements of 1929 and 1959. An upper riparian state opposed Egypt and Sudan (pp. 21,27,28). The Big Three had split.

The Blue Nile flows through Ethiopia and supplies 86 percent of the Nile's total waters. The White Nile, which flows from Lake Victoria, provides the remainder of the Nile's waters. The Nile is about 6,700 km long, the longest river in the world (p. 41). The GERD's storage capacity peaks at 74 BCM; its annual average flow is estimated at 49 BCM. The GERD is highly contentious; it challenges Egypt's long-held hydro-hegemony over the Nile. Egypt views the GERD as a threat to its water security, national security, and dominance over the Nile (p. 10). This perception often leads to military preparedness and renders coordination and cooperation a distant possibility [1]. Egypt does not appear to think that its extraordinarily large population and its claim to receive so large a volume of the Nile threaten itself and other countries.

Similarly threatening to a future agreement on the operation of the GERD is the parties' reluctance to treat each other on an equal footing; to share information about water in their dams and canals; or take responsibility equally during droughts (pp. 47-49). The situation is related to national development and water security, which are inherently linked; therefore, the countries in the Big Three are unwilling to relinquish their historical rights, as in the case of Egypt, or territorial sovereignty rights, as in the case of Ethiopia, to the Nile waters (pp. 91-92).

This approach is political and security-derived, but it does not have to be. GERD can be 'what states make of it,' in line with social constructivism's view of international relations in an anarchical world that 'Anarchy is what states make of it' [2]. GERD can be very beneficial for all the riparian countries, except perhaps during the filling and re-filling stages. Among its benefits are redistributing water, especially now that climate change increasingly affects our planet, and reducing the evaporation of Nile waters. Other dams on the Nile have a higher evaporation rate than GERD; for example, the AHD in Egypt 'has 250 percent more evaporation loss than the GERD' (p. 56).

Ghebremichael and Asefa mention additional benefits of GERD. The dam reduces flood risks, minimizes sediments and silt that accumulate in millions of tonnes yearly and settle at the bottom of downstream dams – something that gradually reduces the storage capacity of the dam and incurs significant costs for cleaning and maintaining the canals. It creates a stable flow of water by decreasing peak flow during flood seasons and increasing low flow during drought seasons. It

generates clean and affordable electricity that can benefit both Ethiopia and Sudan, reducing the demand for wood fuel in Ethiopia, thereby improving the environment and increasing the likelihood of more precipitation.

GERD can help reduce current and future uncertainties owing to the impact of climate change. It can benefit the entire region more than it can harm it. This requires the parties to develop a positive view toward the dams in general and GERD in particular, treating GERD as a positive-sum game, not a zero-sum game or a zero-sum competition, as has so far been the case. Ethiopia's gain is not necessarily Egypt's loss. 'Egypt's water security can be achieved through cooperation and the efficient use of the Nile waters' (p. 12). The GERD can be the turning point for cooperation and reconciliation between the parties and become the basis of a new legal framework that accommodates existing international laws and treaties on sharing transboundary rivers, such as the United Nations 1997 Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (p. 15).

It is imperative to develop this understanding. From 1947 to 2010, Egypt has transitioned from 'water abundance' through 'water adequacy' to 'water scarcity'. It faces a water deficit of 21 BCM, which is expected to rise to 51 BCM by 2050 (p. 67). This means that Egypt will encounter significant challenges in producing food for its growing population, which stands at 118 million [3] and is projected to rise to 175 million by 2050 (p. 74), along with many other developmental issues.

Disagreements among the Big Three about the GERD initially focused on the construction of the dam; later, they centred on filling the dam, and now they concern the amount of water to be released during normal times and drought (p. 142). The construction of the dam is nearing completion [4], and the final phase of filling its reservoir has been achieved [5]. These developments occurred without a prior agreement, and irrespective of 1929 and 1959 arrangements (pp. 77,78). The release of water during both normal times and drought is the most contentious issue between the parties, and this will persist unless an agreement is reached. The book indicates that a temporary solution can be found, and a short-term plan can consolidate the foundation of a long-term agreement.

GERD is not the only dam on the Nile River; but, it is one of the largest. There are many dams on the river, including AHD, which can store 160 BCM, twice as much as the storage capacity of GERD. AHD was constructed without prior agreement with the upper riparian states. AHD and GERD can store more than 250 BCM of water combined. This water-saving capacity in the Nile basin increases if other dams and artificial ponds are added. The saved water can be used for the best interest of all parties.

An interdependent relationship among the Big Three through joint projects, investment, and trade can make the above dream a reality. Liberal International Relations theorists maintain that economic interdependence, which signifies mutual dependence, and a higher level of transnational relations

between states, is a necessity of modern times. It brings countries closer, fostering cooperation and promoting peace [6].

A shift in perception and a change in position are necessary for any coordination and cooperation over the Nile waters. The GERD and other dams need not be viewed in a negative light, and the regional watercourses can be understood as a common property owned by all, which should be used for the benefit of all. The principle of Absolute Sovereignty over the waters should be abandoned in favour of Limited Sovereignty, which should be incorporated into their negotiations and used as a principle for future agreements. There needs to be a water management protocol that promotes equitable and reasonable use while minimizing significant harm to Egypt and Sudan, the two downstream countries (pp. 79,82).

Udobong suggests that the ‘notions of equitable and shared use of the river [Nile] among all riparian states’ are very idealistic and were the reason behind the failure of previous attempts to resolve the issue. Instead, he proposes ‘functionalism,’ which is in the spirit of ‘coordination’: ‘iterative, project-specific, cross-country working groups would work better at enhancing global cooperation than broad ideals and supra-governance structures.’ Broad universal commitments may not be effective; ‘functional experiences of trust-building, policy sharing, and joint investments’ (interdependency) may prove successful (p. 135). Perhaps there is no real difference of meaning. Being functional with goodwill can produce coordinated actions which manifest cooperation.

As applied to water governance, this functionalist theory encompasses three tenets: (i) identification of well-defined working areas and common policy directions; (ii) pooling rather than encroachment of sovereignty toward joint and coordinated action on specific issues; and (iii) the possibility of building on selective agreements rather than only comprehensive ones (p. 135).

Perhaps as important as an agreement over the sharing of waters in the GERD and Nile is improving and expanding water resources and the efficient use of the available water, especially in Egypt. These include desalination, reuse of treated wastewater, rainwater harvesting, and more. The efficiency of water use includes conservation of water at all levels: irrigation, industrial, and domestic. Irrigation of agricultural land in general consumes approximately 85 percent of the water supply; hence, the improvement of irrigation by introducing and developing new methods such as drip and sprinkler irrigation, as well as planting crops that do not require much water, is a very necessary step, especially in Egypt and Sudan, where 97 percent of the irrigated land in the Lower Nile Basin is situated. ‘Recent studies indicate that a total of 40 BCM of water [in a year] can be saved in Egypt through the implementation of various water-saving measures.’ By moving away from water-intensive crops such as rice, Egypt can save about 12.4 BCM of water in a year (pp. 54,55). This may require Egypt to seek advice from Israel, which has practised such economy, looking back to Nabatean examples.

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States (2025-2029), after four years of Joe Biden's presidency, might not be beneficial for the Nile Basin water-sharing problem. The US, during Trump's first term, did not act as a stabilizing power in the Nile Basin. The region needed the US to serve as a mediator but also as a superpower to bring the Big Three to an agreement over sharing the Nile waters. Instead, the Trump administration sided with Egypt regarding the Nile waters. Trump did not have a coherent policy for the Nile Basin, and his approach to the issue exacerbated the situation. It created uncertainties and made an agreement a remote possibility (pp. 118-122). It is up to the Nile riparian states to change the situation. The basin belongs to all of them, and they need to act with coordination.

The final chapter of Nile Basin Politics sees a future for the Nile Basin where political leaders and nations collaborate for the benefit of all. Verhoeven and Tawfik believe that there is hope for change: a couple of decades ago, observers speculated about 'water wars' and 'climate conflicts,' yet these did not happen. The imperatives of climate change and future uncertainties must drive regional integration in the Nile Basin among Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan (pp. 150-170).

References

- [1] Abdulrahman, S. A., 2018, The River Nile and Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam: challenges to Egypt's security approach. *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 76(1), 136–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207233.2018.1509564>
- [2] Wendt, A., 1992, Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics. *International Organization* 46(2), 391–425. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706858>
- [3] Worldometer. Egypt Population. Available online at: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/egypt-population/> (accessed 3 April 2025).
- [4] Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, 2025, GERD Poised to Catalyze East and Southern African Economic Integration, Says Foreign Affairs Ministry. Available online at: <https://ebc.et/english/newsdetails.aspx?newsid=10662> (accessed 5 April 2025).
- [5] Reuters, 2023, Ethiopia says it has completed filling of disputed dam project's reservoir. Available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopia-says-it-has-completed-filling-disputed-dam-projects-reservoir-2023-09-10/> (accessed 5 April 2025).
- [6] Jackson, R., & Sorensen, G., 2007, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 97–128.

© Salam Abdulqadir Abdulrahman, 2025
salam.abdulrahman@uhd.edu.iq ; salam.abdulrahman@gmail.com

How to cite this article

Abdulrahman, S. A., 2025, *Nile Basin Politics: From Coordination to Cooperation*, edited by Steven C. Roach, Derrick K. Hudson, and Kaleb Demerew, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025, 180 pp., £90 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-80392-716-9; eISBN: 978-1-80392-717-6. *Natural Built Social Environment Health* 1(2), 168-174. <https://doi.org/10.63095/NBSEH.25.854092>
