

POWER POLITICS AND THE NILE: ANALYZING ETHIOPIA'S *FAIT ACCOMPLI* APPROACH IN THE GERD CONTROVERSY

Dr. Idris Mahmoud Mogadishu, Somalia²

Idris Mohamed^{1*}, University

^{1*}Faculty of Social science, department of political science and international relations, Simad

²Email ID: idrism@simad.edu.so, ihasaballah11@gmail.com

Abstract

The Nile River Basin has long been governed by asymmetrical water arrangements that privileged downstream states and constrained upstream development, shaping persistent hydro-political tensions among riparian countries. Against this background, the present study aims to analyze Ethiopia's strategic use of a *fait accompli* approach in the construction, filling, and early operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and to assess its effects on power relations and governance dynamics within the basin. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on systematic document analysis of official statements, policy documents, and scholarly sources related to the GERD process since 2011. The findings reveal that Ethiopia's unilateral advancement of the dam functioned as an effective *fait accompli*, creating irreversible material conditions that significantly altered the strategic balance among Nile Basin states, particularly weakening Egypt's historically dominant hydro-hegemonic position and reshaping Sudan's strategic alignment. While this approach strengthened Ethiopia's sovereignty, energy security, and upstream bargaining power, it also contributed to increased mistrust, securitization of water resources, and diminished prospects for consensus-based cooperation. The study concludes that although the GERD has redefined regional power relations and challenged entrenched governance hierarchies, its long-term sustainability will depend on a transition from unilateral control toward inclusive and cooperative water governance frameworks. Given the irreversible nature of the project, the GERD must be managed simultaneously as a national development asset and a shared regional resource to mitigate conflict risks and support durable basin-wide stability.

Keywords: Power Politics, Nile Basin, GERD; Ethiopia, *Fait Accompli*, Hydropolitics, Regional Security, Controversy

1. Introduction

The Nile River Basin is among the most controversial transboundary water systems in the world, in which water access is drawn directly to the concerns of sovereignty, the existence of a nation, and regional influence. Over the past one hundred years, the Nile was ruled in an asymmetrical setup that favored the downstream states, especially Egypt, by treaties and regional diplomatic influence at the time of colonialism. Such arrangements yielded a lasting type of hydro-hegemony, which restricted upstream development and turned unequal access to common water resources into an institution (Tayia et al., 2021; Merem et al., 2020). Although Ethiopia supplied most of the Nile flows, it was nevertheless excluded from the meaningful influence in the decisions affecting the basin, which continues to support the historic imbalance between hydrology input and political influence (Demerew, 2021).

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) under construction was a salvo that broke this long standing order. The project was launched in 2011 as an initiative on the basis of Ethiopian energy security, economic growth, and infrastructural independence, but quickly

transformed into a centre of geopolitical conflict in the region (figure 1). Egypt has always presented the GERD as an outright challenge to the national water security, food production, and human survival, and the stance of Sudan changed between the cooperation and concern based on the domestic political and economic factors (Hijazi, 2020; Almesafri et al., 2024). The lack of a detailed and legally binding trilateral agreement turned GERD into a development project into a sign of conflicting sovereignty and strategic competition.

The GERD was further developed on the basis of unilateral construction, staged filling of the project, instead of negotiated agreement, which radically changes the hydrological and political situation in the basin, for example, in Ethiopia. This strategy is consistent with the notion of *fait accompli* in international relations whereby states induce irreversible conditions to change the bargaining surroundings and limit the strategic choices of opponents (Di Ngo, 2024). Strategic behavior scholars stress that *faits accomplis* are effective when asymmetries of power are becoming less stable, and when the systems of institutional enforcement are weak or divided (Hastey, 2020). Large-scale infrastructures are, in the case of transboundary water governance, some of the most powerful tools, as they have a material permanence and can significantly influence the distribution of resources (Hertogen, 2020).

The GERD explains how unilateralism can act as a strategic tool and not as a reactive policy decision. Every step of construction, filling, increased the irreversibility of the situation and diminished the downstream leverage and stabilized the Ethiopian control upstream of the Blue Nile flows. This dynamic increasingly undermined the historically leading role of Egypt and re-established the bargaining power in the basin (Demerew, 2022; Ayalew, 2025). Comparative analysis of Nile hydro-politics shows that the infrastructural aggressiveness is a sign of a larger shift of exclusionary hydro-hegemony and the development of more conflicting and multipolar modes of governance (Elijah, 2024; Kebede et al., 2025).

Although the available literature provides comprehensive legal, hydrological, and technical evaluations of the GERD, a significant part of the literature analyzes the conflict as the failure of coordination but not a conscious exercise of strategic power. Research on cooperative management structures highlights institutional design, benefit-sharing, and adaptive governance systems but does not emphasize the importance of material power in facilitating the results of a negotiation process (Wheeler et al., 2018; Zeitoun et al., 2020). On the same note, water diplomacy and game theory-based analysis emphasize strategic interaction but often ignore the fundamentally irrevocable nature of the infrastructure-based process of power concentration (Barua & Baruah, 2025).

Hydro-hegemony has generally been conceptualized focusing on downstream dominance and compliance-generating processes, which provide minimal conceptual frameworks to investigate upstream problems to established hierarchies (Merem et al., 2020). According to the GERD case, one may consider the necessity to extend this framework to consider the instances in which the upstream states use the infrastructure as the source of redistributing power and not just challenging the norms of law. Similar trends in the other world, such as East Asia, show how the rising powers are utilizing increasingly aggressive approaches to redefine the regional orders in the circumstances of changing balances of power (Yeo, 2020).

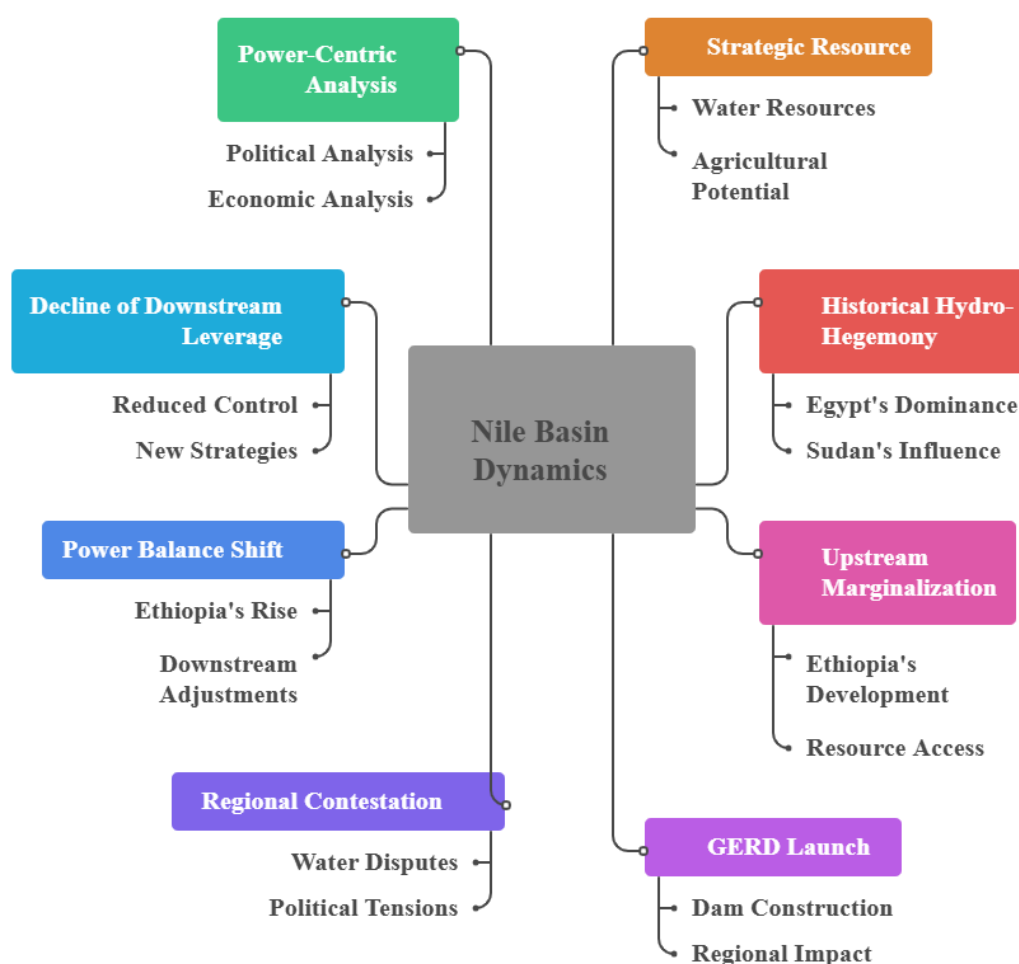
This analysis takes a step forward to an understanding of the GERD through power-centricity by thinking about Ethiopian actions as a strategic *fait accompli* that is entrenched in realist and hydro-hegemony thinking. Instead of examining the project based on all legal compliance or technical risk, the analysis emphasises the changes in the dynamics of the negotiation process under the influence of unilateral infrastructural development, and the redefactions of sovereignty claims and reorganization of regional governance. The research adds to the bigger discussion of the emergent power behavior and the future prospects of cooperative governance in the conflicted resource systems by incorporating the findings of the research on

Nile Basin politics, strategic security, and transboundary environmental law (Demerew, 2021; Hertogen, 2020; Hmoud, 2024).

The GERD emerges not only as an energy project but as a material manifestation of shifting power relations within the Nile Basin. Understanding its implications requires moving beyond normative prescriptions toward a realistic appraisal of how infrastructure, sovereignty, and strategic assertiveness interact to shape transboundary water politics in an era of regional transformation.

Figure 1: Power Reconfiguration and Strategic Dynamics in the Nile Basin

The figure illustrates how the Nile Basin's strategic water resources, historical hydro-hegemony, and upstream marginalization converged around the GERD, producing a shift in power balance, declining downstream leverage, intensified regional contestation, and the need for a power-centric analytical framework.



Research Objectives

1. To analyze Ethiopia's use of the *fait accompli* strategy in advancing the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
2. To examine changes in hydro-political power relations among Nile Basin states following the GERD
3. To evaluate the implications of unilateral dam development for transboundary water governance and regional stability

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The qualitative and interpretive research design will be used to investigate the strategic application of the fait accompli strategy by Ethiopia in the construction and operationalization of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and the resulting effect of the same on the hydro-political relationship in the Nile River Basin. The qualitative design is suitable because the study focuses on the state behavior, strategic intent and reconfiguration of power and not on the quantifiable hydrological outcomes (figure 2). The study takes the form of a detailed case study, where the GERD is used to be the instrumental case whereby the analysis is conducted using the broader dynamics of unilateralism and transboundary water governance.

2.2 Theoretical Orientation

The case is informed by a combined body of theory of realist theory and the theory of hydro-hegemony. Realism gives the analytical framework on how to think about the actions of states in an anarchical environment, in which sovereignty, survival and relative power determine the choices of strategy. This school of thought is supplemented by the hydro-hegemony theory which allows a systemic evaluation of the discrepancies in power, the means of control and questions the established dominance in joint river basins. In this context, fait accompli is defined as a strategic process according to which material acts of dam construction, reservoir fill-up, premature operation, etc., destroy the negotiation process and limit the options other riparian states can pick.

2.3 Data Sources

The researches utilise solely secondary data that can be found in authoritative and public sources. The main sources are official policy statements, diplomatic messages, and populist statements of Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan since 2011. These statements give firsthand information on national stances, narratives of sovereignty and security issues as expressed in the GERD process. Secondary sources would include peer reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, doctoral dissertations and policy reports of international organizations and research facilities which specialize in Nile Basin governance, water security and international conflict.

2.4 Data Selection Criteria

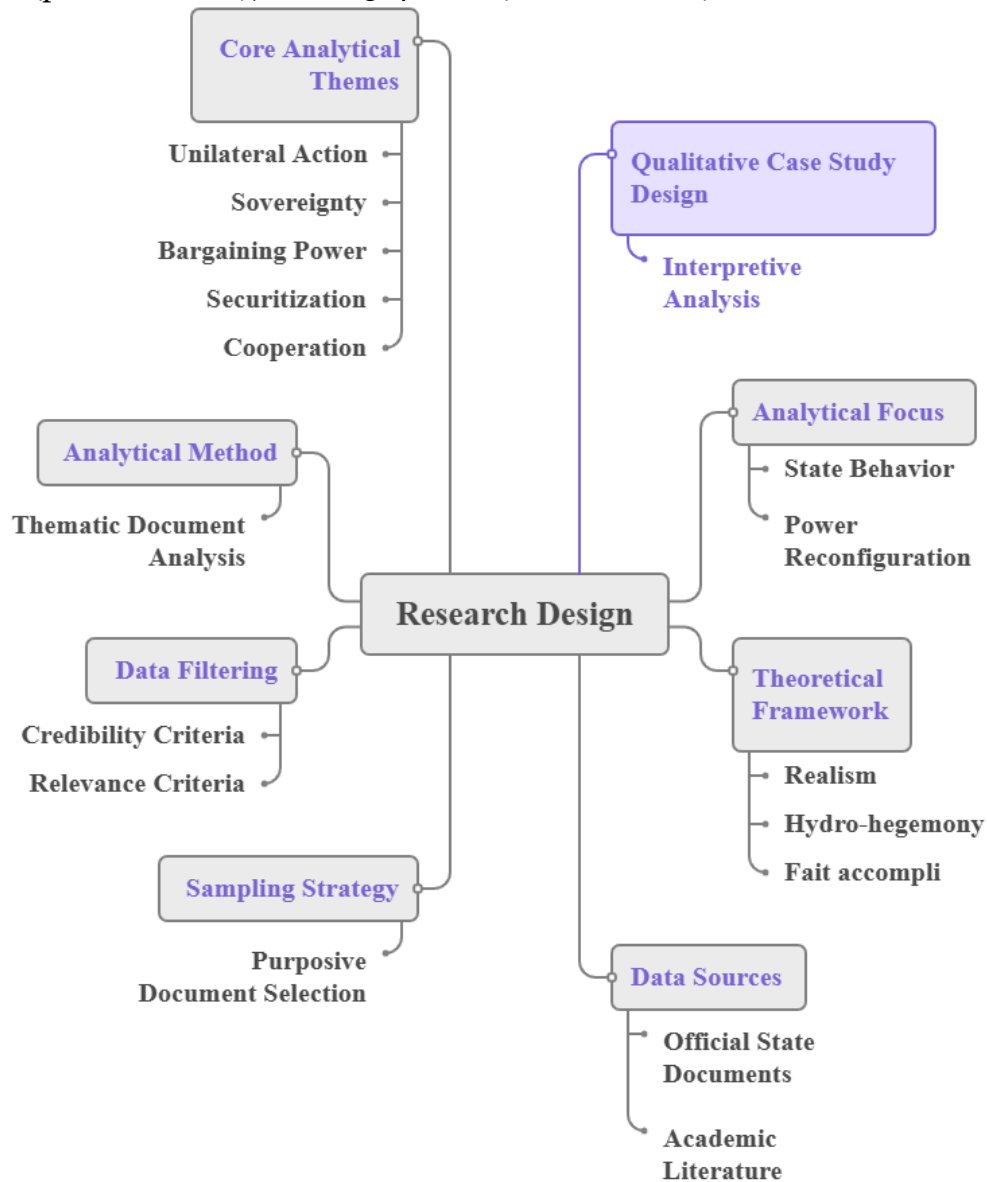
The purposive sampling strategy was utilized to be able to include documents as direct as to the research objectives. The sources were chosen according to the relevance of analysis, scholarly the credibility and their direct interaction with the GERD, hydro-political power relations, or unilateral approaches to transboundary resource environments. The media coverage was also not utilized on a random basis but when supported by governmental or scholarly sources to make sure that the descriptive accounts did not replace analytical evidence. This choice made the data corpus consistent, relevant and deep.

2.5 Analytical Procedure

The research uses the thematic document analysis as the main analytical tool. All the chosen documents were reviewed in a systematic way to draw major themes associated with taking unilateral action, sovereignty assertions, bargaining power, securitization of water resources, and discourse of cooperation. Coding was done repetitively and the themes were developed inductively but with the guidance of the theoretical framework. There was a specific stress on following the chronological lines, analyzing the role of subsequent phases of construction and filling the reservoir in the oil well in the stability of an irreversible strategic reality.

2.6 Analytical Rigor and Validation

The analytical rigor was also strengthened by the use of triangulation of the sources, such as using governmental documents, academic literature, and institutional reports to cross-check interpretations in order to eliminate bias. Interpretation of findings using the realist and hydro-hegemony prism also helped in carrying out theoretical triangulation, which allowed



gaining a multidimensional perspective of power transitions in the Nile Basin. The credibility and reproducibility of the study is also enhanced by transparency in the choice of sources and methods of analysis.

2.7 Scope and Limitations

The paper specifically leaves out hydrological modeling, environmental impact analysis, and technical engineering analysis and concentrates on the political and strategic aspects of the GERD. Although such an approach restricts access to confidential records of negotiations, the scope and reliability of the publicly available information offer a powerful empirical basis to study strategic behavior and power reconfiguration. These are the limitations that are recognized without compromising the analytical goals of the study.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

All data used in this research were drawn from publicly available documents and published academic sources. No human subjects were involved, eliminating concerns related to informed consent or confidentiality. All materials were cited appropriately in accordance with academic standards to ensure transparency and ethical integrity.

Figure 2: Methodological Framework for Power-Centric Analysis of the GERD

The figure presents a qualitative case study methodology integrating realism, hydro-hegemony, and *fait accompli* concepts, supported by purposive document sampling, thematic analysis, and triangulation to examine state behavior, power reconfiguration, and governance dynamics in the Nile Basin.

3 Results

3.1 Operationalization of the *Fait Accompli* Strategy

The results show that the activities of Ethiopia with regard to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam have a temporal and progressive trend that is in line with a *fait accompli* approach. Based on official documentation and diplomatic records, construction, filling and operational decisions were made before a binding trilateral agreement was established. These acts increasingly diminished the possibility of suspension or reversal and this changed the dam from a controversial proposal into an objective material fact. The action-before-consensus pattern altered the negotiations to damage limitation and coordination rather than giving authorization. Table 1 presents the major steps of the implementation of the *fait accompli* strategy, which illustrates the interconnectedness between material actions and the strategy implications.

Table 1. Operational Stages of the GERD as a *Fait Accompli*

Project Phase	Strategic Action	Diplomatic Context	Resulting Effect
Project initiation	Commencement of construction without agreement	Ongoing objections by downstream states	Establishment of irreversible infrastructure
Construction phase	Accelerated building timelines	Inconclusive negotiations	Reduced leverage for project suspension
Reservoir filling	Unilateral filling stages	Absence of binding rules	Shift from legitimacy debate to mitigation
Early operation	Transition to power generation	Continued diplomatic stalemate	Consolidation of upstream control

3.2 Shifts in Hydro-Political Power Relations

The analysis shows there is a distinct rearrangement of the hydro-political power structure between the states around the Nile Basin due to the development of the GERD. The traditionally dominant role of Egypt in the region based on the legal precedence and the political influence became weaker when the material control over the flows of Blue Nile shifted towards the upstream. The leverage provided by infrastructures in Ethiopia became the determinant in the course of negotiations, whereas in Sudan the role of the country changed in accordance with the perceived benefits and shifting regional alliances. Table 2 shows a comparative analysis of the pre- and post-consolidation of the GERD in regard to hydro-political positioning.

Table 2. Changes in Hydro-Political Power Relations in the Nile Basin

Actor	Pre-GERD Position	Post-GERD Position	Observable Change
Ethiopia	Structurally constrained upstream state	Agenda-setting upstream actor	Increased bargaining power
Egypt	Dominant downstream hydro-hegemon	Reactive downstream negotiator	Erosion of leverage
Sudan	Aligned downstream state	Strategically adaptive	Flexible positioning

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3.3 Transformation of Negotiation Dynamics

The discussion shows that there has been a significant change in the negotiation dynamics as the GERD advanced. In preliminary discussions, the focus was on authorization of the project, legal conformity and prevention of risks. There with the further development of construction and filling, the field of diplomatic activity became more concentrated on technical coordination, exchange of data and operational transparency, a manifestation of the reduction of the range of results of negotiation. Table 3 shows the change in the negotiation focus between project stages.

Table 3. Evolution of GERD Negotiation Focus

Negotiation Phase	Primary Focus	Scope of Negotiation	Outcome
Initial phase	Project legitimacy	Authorization and consent	No agreement reached
Mid-construction	Risk assessment	Impact mitigation	Limited technical dialogue
Filling stages	Operational coordination	Data sharing	Reduced scope for control
Early operation	Consequence management	Damage prevention	Acceptance of status quo

3.4 Securitization and Regional Tension

The findings demonstrate that the securitization of Nile waters has been observed to increase after the GERD consolidation. The discussion of the policy started viewing water access through the lens of national security and strategic vulnerability. Such securitization did not lead to the open confrontation but added to the increased mistrust and risk-sensitivity of the riparian states. Table 4 is a summary of the prevailing securitization narratives that we found within the data.

Table 4. Securitization Narratives in GERD Discourse

Actor	Dominant Narrative	Security Framing	Strategic Implication
Ethiopia	Sovereignty and development	Defensive security	Normalization of unilateral action
Egypt	Existential water threat	Survival security	Diplomatic escalation
Sudan	Risk management	Conditional security	Strategic ambiguity

3.5 Implications for Transboundary Water Governance

The results show that the one-sided infrastructure development imprinted structural constraints to the collaborative governance systems in Nile Basin. Even as formal agreements of cooperation were still maintained, the actual governance was showing an increasing amount of asymmetrical control of water flows as opposed to consensus-based management. Table 5 compares the principles of governance through a formal governance with the practices of governance after the GERD.

Table 5. Governance Norms versus Practical Outcomes

Governance Dimension	Formal Principle	Observed Practice
Decision-making	Consensus-based	Infrastructure-driven
Power distribution	Legal equality	Material asymmetry
Cooperation	Shared management	Reactive coordination
Compliance	Negotiated rules	De facto acceptance

3. Discussion

The results of this paper emphasize that the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam must not be seen as an controversial infrastructural project only but a strategic tool with the help of which Ethiopia has been vigorously reorganizing the power relations within the Eastern Nile Basin. According to the realist perspective, the GERD can be perceived as a tangible expression of state interests in the situation of structural constraint, where the unilateral move became the most important tool in chaining the long-running downstream dominance. According to realism, because the states are anarchic in a particular international system, states are focused on autonomy, survival, and relative power, especially in the cases when the institutions are unable to adapt to changes in material capacity. The move by Ethiopia to go ahead with the dam despite the unremitting opposition is an example of a calculated strategic decision which was based on the finding that infrastructural control would provide more long-term leverage than additional dependence on negotiation process which is viewed to be unresponsive to upstream interests. The stories about Ethiopian policies, which were based on sovereignty, development, and self-determination, are aligned with the analysis that indicated domestic political players, developmental priorities and legitimacy of the regime as key factors in GERD decision making (Akamo, 2022). The solidification of the dam into an irreversible material fact indicates further the ways in which physical infrastructure may take the place of legal and institutional power in situations where the legal and institutional structures are out of step with the changing power relations.

The results of the study also support and build up on the current body of literature regarding the deterioration of traditional hydro-hegemony in the Nile Basin. Past studies reported the overall control of the dominance of Egypt by colonial-era treaties, diplomacy, and the control of the discourses of water security and the historical rights (Endaylalu, 2019; Mahlakeng, 2018). In this context, Egypt acted as the main agenda-setter which determined the normative and institutional aspect of Nile governance. The GERD however depicts an evident shift of discursive and institutional dominance to material counter- hegemony. Through control of upstream infrastructure, Ethiopia managed to change the allocation of bargaining power such that it weakened the impact of downstream legal claims. Such a change helps argue that hydro-hegemony is becoming more an activity that attains physical regulation and infrastructural concentration, instead of being a solely normative contestation (Ali, 2025). Thus, hydro-hegemony should be perceived as a dynamic process which reacts to the material investment, technological capacity, and sequencing strategy, but not as the fixed state based on the only historical agreement.

The nature of negotiation and its dynamics in relation to the GERD also helps to understand the changes in the asymmetric bargaining conditions in the scenario, when the fait accompli

has been already established. The results show that the downstream states had a slowing loss of information and strategic advantage as the construction and dam filling made progress. The first stages of negotiation were directed at permission, legality, and the prevention of harm, which gradually took a back seat as material factors tightened the scope of possible results. This trend is consistent with the studies that reflect the importance of asymmetric information, commitment issues, and lack of credibility in the GERD negotiations (Michael, 2025). The situation remained in which the downstream actors had little ability to affect the results other than providing technical coordination and damage mitigation once the control of the upstream in Ethiopia was operational. Consequently, negotiations became more and more seen as a game of consequence management, as opposed to decision-making, which strengthened the strategic efficacy of unilateral action in the circumstances of irreversible material change.

The adaptive nature in which Sudan is positioned in the trilateral system provides a deeper understanding of the reactionary nature of middle riparian states to the changing power arrangements. In contrast to Egypt, whose reaction was still built around the existential threat perceptions, Sudan experienced the pragmatic recalculation based on the expected technical advantages, internal political transitions, and regional alliances alterations (Mohamed & Abdalla, 2025). Such a conduct also underscores how hydro-political alignment is not fixed and dependent on legal commitments but rather conditional on the changing cost benefit analysis and uncertainty. The wavering position of Sudan disintegrated the downstream opposition and undermined the ability to collectively bargain power, effectively enhancing the bargaining power of Ethiopia. These results imply that the middle riparian states are key actors in the power transitions mediating, strategic pivots the decisions they make to align with or disrupt the order of hydro-political structures.

The securitization of Nile water that is found in the Results is an indication of larger trends of strategic signaling and status assertion in modern international politics. The discourse of the GERD began to be framed more and more within the context of national revival, technological success, and national self-development, and an image of increasing national status in the region began to be projected. On the other hand, Egyptian discourses focused on existential risk, national survival, and strategic vulnerability, aimed to stir the international anxieties and diplomatic pressure. This deviation reflects the outcomes of the literature on security studies that associate infrastructure growth, information management, and signaling behavior with changes in the status hierarchy within the region (Smith, 2021; Pu, 2025). Instead of leading to direct military conflict, securitization was used as a deterrence mechanism and an instrument of signaling the audience, cementing positions and reducing the diplomatic space. The continuity of securitization discourse therefore led to the increased mistrust and the lack of confidence in cooperative results.

In the governance dimension, the GERD reveals structural constraints to the prevailing transboundary water management systems. The models of cooperative governance are usually based on the assumptions of relative symmetry of bargaining power, mutual commitment to compliance and efficient enforcement. The Nile Basin situation is a growing disruption of these assumptions as the material asymmetry created through the large-scale infrastructural projects jeopardizes the decision-making process based on consensus. The discrepancy between the principles of formal governance and practices is related to more general criticism of water governance practices and frameworks that focus on normative cooperation without adequately explaining power disparities and strategic actions (Julio et al., 2021). Despite the continuing influence of cooperative rhetoric, practical governance is being characterized more by de facto control than negotiated equality and this begs the question of the flexibility and applicability of the current institutional structures.

The results are also echoed by the studies of the exhaustion of the bargaining process and the bureaucratic wastefulness in the context of the GERD. Although the mediation by regional and international actors was done repeatedly, because there were no enforceable mechanisms, the negotiations were prone to strategic delay, procedural fatigue, and symbolic engagement (Abtew, 2025). This finding reiterates the view that the institutional design is not sufficient to balance the material power imbalances in cases where control over vital resources is concentrated. The danger of the negotiation forums being less transformative than performative arises when the infrastructural realities actually predetermine the outcomes.

The paper will also add to the development of the hydro-hegemony concept by showing how the upstream states may use the infrastructure-based *faits accomplis* to weaken existing dominance without the overt conflict or the legal break. According to the GERD case, power transitions in transboundary river basins are becoming more and more incremental material consolidation, technical competency, and sequencing of strategy, as opposed to escalation of coercion. This observation is not limited to the Nile Basin and can be applied comparatively to other troubled river systems as other emerging powers aim to re-negotiate the right to access and control by establishing a development-centered assertiveness.

The sustainability of the legacy of GERD will be decided based on whether unilateral control will be transformed into cooperative institutionalization. Although the dam has essentially altered the states of power and has shattered the prevailing domination structures in governance, it has been a matter of time to see whether the area will stabilize on the basis of material dominance being transformed into inclusive and adaptive governance structures. Otherwise, the danger is that mistrust and unilateralism as a matter of course will take root, and opportunities of sustainable cooperation in transboundary resource management will be lost in the context of changing regional orders.

4. Conclusion

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is the first of its kind to drastically change the hydropolitics in the Nile Basin, not only as a project in the hydroelectric infrastructure, but also as a strategic tool with which Ethiopia re-established old power dynamics. Through further development of construction, reservoir filling and early operation in absence of binding trilateral arrangement, Ethiopia was successfully able to utilize a *fait accompli* approach to limit downstream bargaining possibilities and redirect negotiations out of the questions of legitimacy to the questions of consequences management. The results show that the long-established downstream hydro-hegemony, especially the dependence of Egypt on the power of the treaty and diplomatic pressure, was obviously eroded because material control over the flows of the Blue Nile became the dominant source of power. The adaptive and situational positioning of Sudan also demonstrates how the middle riparian states re-tune the alignments as a response to variable power structures and the perceived national interests. Theoretically, the research builds on the realism and hydro-hegemony schools of thought by showing how states at the upper level can contest the existing hegemony by adopting incremental and infrastructure-based approaches instead of direct confrontation, emphasizing the increasing role of material development in determining the modern transboundary power dynamics. The application of *fait accompli* to a water governance scenario expands both the analytical applicability and relevance of the concept far beyond its usual context in terms of security conflicts and also highlights the strategic importance of large-scale infrastructure in place of institutional imbalance. On the governance level, the results show a growing discrepancy between the formal principles of cooperation and the real results, where the consensus-related systems remain on the rhetorical level whereas practical control is becoming more and more centralized. This deviation begs critical issues about the survival of

the current transboundary water governance models. The determination of long-term regional stability in the Nile Basin will be determined by the extent to which post-GERD engagement can be transformed to be based on unilateral consolidation and inclusive, rules-based cooperation that recognizes material realities, as well as mutual dependency. It is important to realize that the dam should be seen both as a national development accomplishment and as a regional asset because of the need to lessen securitization, restore trust, and avoid the normalization of unilateralism in transboundary water management.

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