

Book review

Nile Basin Politics: From Coordinated to Cooperative Peace

Steven C. Roach, Derrick K. Hudson, and Kaleb Demerew (Editors)

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Roach et al. (2025) argue a path to achieve long-term cooperative peace between the three primary riparian states (Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan) of the Nile River: short-term coordination within the context of a new framework on the joint use of the Nile waters. They accurately engage a nuanced context and expose contentions that continue to define the stalemate. They also did well to categorise and account for the viewpoints, stakes (well categorised), roles and foreign policy posture of other riparian states (see Chapter Five), thereby offering a more holistic view of geopolitical dynamics between and among the Nile's riparian states, which seldom appears in Nile Basin discourse.

Chapters One and Two offer a sound historical, political, legal and theoretical premise upon which we may enhance our understanding of Nile Basin politics and theorise on foreign policy in general. These two chapters give an in-depth analysis of the context within which the five Agreements (1902, 1906, 1929 and 1959) came to be and their implications. These agreements served colonial interests and legacies, anchored on an expansionist and hegemonic pursuit, as they entrenched

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Egypt's monopoly and prevented other riparian states from using the Nile to modernise. Additionally, the agreements, as the authors show, suffer three key shortcomings: (1) excluding Ethiopia; (2) underestimating the importance of the Nile as an element of geopolitical and developmental interest to Ethiopia as an upstream state; and (3) ignoring the legality of the agreements from Ethiopia's standpoint. Against this backdrop, the first major lesson of this book reiterates that historical injustices towards Ethiopia – perceived or real – are a structural fault line in the peace and mediation initiatives. This brings us to the realm of transitional justice (TJ) as both a theoretical and policy approach to sustainable peace. The authors provide sufficient premise to examine the Nile Basin geopolitics through a TJ lens to course correct if any sustainable solution to the stalemate is to have a positive prognosis.

The Nile Basin Initiative was instituted in 1999 to “open dialogue about the rules and principles that could regulate a fairer allocation of the Nile's waters” (Roach et al., 2025:6).

The journey and discourse of the politics and utility of the Nile moved straight from unfair allocation to fairer allocation. International and regional efforts to address the actual or perceived injustices that benefitted Egypt and Sudan took the backseat, if they attempted any at all.

In Chapter Three, for instance, the authors highlight how the 1929 and 1959 agreements instituted Egypt's and Sudan's monopoly of the Nile waters, as it restricted Ethiopia from profitably using the Nile waters. While the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA), as noted in Chapter Seven, indicates the untenability of the 1929 and 1959 agreements, their effects remain unaddressed. A remedial plan to institute the premise and an entry point for an inclusive joint sense of ownership of the Nile remains elusive. This framed and reinforced a subtle and unspoken but crucial political conviction and context for Ethiopia to remain insistent and consistent on its position on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which Akamo (2022) also argues. Egypt's and Sudan's negative and threatening response to Ethiopia's decision to build the GERD only encouraged Ethiopia's conviction (see Chapter Four, for example).

Why is the spotlight of fairness not directed at undoing the damage done by the actual or perceived injustices represented in the agreements that defined the framework and practice from the 1900s to the late 1990s? This speaks to the root of the disagreement of which the construction of the GERD is a fruit. Washington's

bias and mediator role under the Donald Trump administration in 2019 did not help (See Chapter Six). The position of the third-party intervener(s) tends to put the burden of fairness on Ethiopia who, in this case, is the victim of historical injustice. Driving remedial actions as a panacea to having common grounds would have been more profitable.

It would be a disservice to overlook another pointer that this book offers: a rise in Ethiopia's geopolitical posture. Although Ethiopia suffers internal fragmentation, coupled with economic and developmental challenges, its boldness to proceed with the GERD, as opposed to its rather careful approaches in the 1950s and 1960s, indicates that Ethiopia has found its voice for its Nile agenda; it is willing to speak, and it has a nationwide backing. One may explore the arguments in Chapter Two in view of the #It'sMyDam and #MyGERD campaign, which gained popularity in Ethiopia and among its diasporas.

While Chapter Three focuses on the technical dimensions of the debate, one thing remains sacrosanct: politics over science. This reinforces Aristotle's argument that politics shapes every aspect of the world we inhabit. As the authors of Chapter Three demonstrate, science cannot help us escape politics, as it may also sink us deeper into politics. Furthermore, as also highlighted in Chapter Three, the assertion of the riparian states that connection via natural flows (food, energy, products and other services) will bring them closer to more agreeable terms is questionable. Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan are not oblivious of this fact. It might be enough to prevent direct armed confrontation. But, as this book points out, using subaltern and structural realism along with the historical context, the stakes are beyond traditional and neoliberal thoughts we often employ to advance integration, interdependence and globalisation. It is problem prioritisation, not awareness, as the high politics takes precedence. Chapter Eight agrees with this contention and follows a logical flow to challenge the nexus approach and account for what decision-makers consider the realm of possibility and why (Roach et al., 2025:151–153).

The book further highlights the role of international actors in terms of how they use economic, financial and diplomatic tools to inform the region's trajectory. It also accounts for the fluctuations and consistencies in how Nile Basin actors are perceived in the same regard and the effect of divisive nationalist politics and civil war on the priorities of foreign actors. Between the 1900s and 2020s, external actors played the role of builders and spoilers. Also, if a post-GERD order is to


emerge, the Nile Basin states will split into blocs, and external actors will play a role in the defining (mis)alignments. Ethiopia's posture, positionality and geopolitical strength differs from the pre-2000s period. The book provokes us to ask, 'Why should an upstream riparian state on the grounds of actual or perceived injustice cooperate or coordinate when it can proceed with its project without cooperation or coordination with other riparian states and other previous actors?' We should also ask: 'Why should Ethiopia agree to a legally binding agreement on the dam's filling and operation following the unfriendly experiences over the years without respective remedial initiatives to build trust?'⁷

This is where a disconnection is found in the book between what it exposes and its recommendation for long-term cooperative peace. The book does not offer a satisfactory answer to the question concerning Ethiopia's incentive for coordination and cooperation. While the book does well to acknowledge the place of *realpolitik* and social construction – in terms of what they make of it – its recommendation suffers from a rationality dearth that considers the existence of an alternative. Case in point – Ethiopia continued to fill the dam, despite sanctions and international pressure. Thus, while the book offers a theoretical balance in its debate, its overarching recommendation is questionable. Even if the question concerning consent comes into play, as the authors alluded to in terms of having short-term coordination, the book does not offer a satisfactory argument on the sustainability of consent in terms of the lingering perceived or actual injustice. Will such consent last? If the answer is yes, why? Meanwhile, the book already shares why it would not last. There is also a contention between politics and law that this book stirs. Chapter Seven highlights the utility of a functionalist legal framework, citing a relevant instance. Through a TJ lens, this may be the proverbial 'putting the cart before the horse.' The political context must first be sorted, as politics will always take precedence. Unfortunately, this is one of the broader limitations of international law. The book highlights this in its account of the movement from legal positivism to idealism – both of which failed in the past. Thus, while the legal history and future discourse is critical, a political consensus and agreement based on trust must come first, and TJ approaches play a key role in this regard.

7 In ongoing work on conflict-intervention dynamics at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS), trust in such context is argued as the confidence of one or more parties in another (others) to be transparent, considerate and respectful of mutual interests while following the mutually agreed and inclusive laid-out normative and legal guides or frameworks concerning the issue at hand.

Politics between and among the Nile riparian states require a more nuanced and honest approach, and this book offers valuable intellectual guidance for policy- and decision- makers that are relevantly engaged. Through a TJ lens, which this book provokes, taking a step back to rethink all previous and current approaches that can help them arrive at a more efficient peace initiative between the three primary riparian states.

Meanwhile, some aspects of this book partly could be situated within decoloniality discourses by highlighting Ethiopia's geopolitical rise and how it informed bold foreign policy choices to actively reject colonial legacies in building the GERD (See page 107; also, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). The book also shows why classical theories like realism (and its offsprings) and Wendt's (1992) seminal work on identity and interest formation remain relevant in international relations. Though the liberal institutionalist approach is appealing with its optimistic outlook, it is crucial to consider diverse perspectives for accurate policy analysis. This has been a major pitfall in previous approaches to peace initiatives with respect to the GERD. Mediators must consider the lens through which other 'belligerents' view and interpret the world and find a common or an agreeable superior ground. On this premise, relevant institutions, policy- and decision-makers have a choice to make with regard to the GERD: will it be business as usual or will there be any political and technical investment for course correction using a TJ approach?

Overall, this book is an essential tool to deepen our understanding on the intersection of water and geopolitics, the natural resources–foreign policy nexus and foreign policymaking. It is therefore deemed as an important contribution to the literature in international relations. 

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