The Myth and Reality of the North-Sub Saharan Split in the Nile Basin:
Empirical Evidence and Theoretical Explanations

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Introduction

Many assumptions about the relationship between North Africa and the rest of Africa need to be revisited. One such assumption is that North African and Sub-Saharan states interact with each other as two groups or blocs, or at least with a certain level of harmony within each group. This assumption, however, can hardly explain disharmony within each group, which empirical studies can demonstrate. In particular, studying the positions of North African and Sub-Saharan states in any conflict between a North African and a Sub-Saharan states is likely to provide us with ample examples falsifying the assumed divide between North African and Sub-Saharan states. I focus deliberately on conflicts, not cooperation, because conflicts provide harder tests of this assumed divide on the premise that conflict highlights, and cooperation covers, inter-state divides.

This study aims at testing the relation between the identities of conflicting states on one hand, and the identities of their allies on the other hand, as far as the assumed divide between North African and Sub-Saharan states is concerned. I compare the positions of North African and Sub-Saharan states in two conflicts between a North African and a Sub-Saharan states, namely, Egypt and Ethiopia respectively. These conflicts concern Egypt’s membership in the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), and the distribution of the Nile River water resources – a serious security and development concern for both states and the underlying cause of the first conflict. The study, however, begins with a theoretical section in which I develop four testable hypotheses based on the assumed divide between North and Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as two international relations theories that explain state international behavior, namely, realism and constructivism.
One important prerequisite of all tests in this study is to identify North Africa, which is by no means an easy task because ‘North’ here has to do with culture more than geography. North Africa usually refers to the predominantly Arabic speaking states, which include Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and less obviously Mauritania and Sudan. These two states have significant minorities that speak Arabic as a lingua franca, not as a mother tongue. Mali, Niger, Chad and Eritrea are predominantly non-Arabic speaking states with Arabic speaking minorities. Djibouti, Somalia, and the Comoros are members of the League of Arab states but predominantly non-Arabic speaking states. Thus, in this study North Africa refers only to Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and Sudan.

Section One: Realism, Constructivism, and the Assumed North-Sub Saharan Divide

Like all states, African states conflict over security, economic, symbolic, and other issues. To serve their conflicting interests, they form alliances and counter-alliances. I here use Walt’s rather loose definition of alliance as “a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states.”

Hypothesis 1: When a North African and a Sub-Saharan states conflict, the North African states ally together against that Sub-Saharan state, and the Sub-Saharan states ally together against that North African state.

Falsifying this hypothesis would be to find out that, in the statistics jargon, the variance within each group is more significant than that between the two groups. This means that the positions of a significant number of North African states in a conflict between a North African and a Sub-Saharan states is closer to the latter than the former, and, similarly, the positions of a significant number of Sub-Saharan states in a conflict between a North African and a Sub-Saharan states is closer to the former than the latter. Hence,
Hypothesis 2: When a North African and a Sub-Saharan states conflict, a significant number of North African states ally with the Sub-Saharan state, and a significant number of Sub-Saharan states ally with the North African state.

Thus, the assumed divide between North and Sub-Saharan Africa would be unfounded if the first hypothesis is falsified, and the second hypothesis is confirmed.

Neither the realist nor the constructivist scholars of international relations would agree with this assumed divide. Realists argue that states employ power to serve their interests, which include not only survival and welfare, but also hegemony and power maximization. As a result, states must conflict. Realists define states identities based on their positions in the international system. Thus, states are either major/powerful or minor/weak actors. Culture is not an important factor in this regard. On the contrary, constructivists argue that culture is a key in defining state identities, which in turn define state interests. They stress that identities are socially constructed, not fixed, and highlight the role of other ideational elements, such as ideology, norms, and principles, in shaping state foreign policies and international behavior. While realists argue that the ideational elements are mere justifications of power politics, constructivist argue that power has ideational elements, and international politics is constructed socially, as opposed to only materially.³

Realists and constructivists would therefore have different insights on the relationship between North African and Sub-Saharan states. Realists would argue that both North African and Sub-Saharan states act as minor states in the international system, and their positions must therefore be at least acceptable to, if not dictated by, their global major-power allies. Consequently, their alliance patterns must follow the alliance patterns of their global major-power allies in Africa. To test this realist proposition, I identify the major-power allies of Egypt, Ethiopia and their African allies in the conflict cases of this study. Hence,
Hypothesis 3: When a North African and a Sub-Saharan states conflict, states ally with the allies of their global major-power allies, regardless of their North African or Sub-Saharan identity.

Constructivists, on the other hand, would expect states with similar ideologies, principles and norms of international behavior to ally together. To test this specific constructivist proposition, I identify the ideologies, principles, and norms of international behavior of Egypt, Ethiopia, and their allies in the conflict cases of this study. Hence,

Hypothesis 4: When a North African and a Sub-Saharan states conflict, states with similar ideologies, principles and norms of international behavior ally together, regardless of their North African or Sub-Saharan identity.

Constructivists would also argue that North African and Sub-Saharan states act according to their particular definitions of Arab and Black identities respectively. Thus, North African states with similar definitions of Arab identity ally together, and Sub-Saharan states with similar definitions of their Black identity ally together. Testing this proposition, however, is beyond the scope of this study. It sets a research agenda for a larger project of Arab-African relations. Also beyond the scope of this study is testing if alliance with global major powers explains ideological and normative similarity, or the vice versa. This should concern scholars and students of international relations theories.

While the first two hypotheses are tested in the narratives of the second and third sections, the realist and constructivist hypotheses are tested in the fourth and fifth sections respectively.
Section Two: Conflict over Egypt's Membership in COMESA

Three North African states are members of COMESA: Sudan is a founding member, while Egypt and Libya are late joiners. Egypt joined COMESA in 1998, although it had exerted great efforts to join it since its establishment in 1994, not to mention Egypt's attempts to join COMESA's predecessor, namely, the Preferential Trading Area of Eastern and Southern Africa, established in 1981. Egypt was eager to join COMESA for several reasons, including to meet the African Economic Community requirement that every African state join at least one African regional organization, and to set off the failure of Undogo – the Swahili word for brotherhood.4

Egypt failed to join COMESA before 1998 because Ethiopia rejected its initial membership applications. Ethiopia's position was a result of its conflict with Egypt over the distribution of the River Nile water – a conflict discussed in the next section. This position changed positively in 1997, also as a result of easing its tensions with Egypt over the same conflict.

Although Ethiopia's position was sufficient to block Egypt's membership because consensus is required for admitting new members to COMESA, two other members sided with Ethiopia and explicitly rejected Egypt's initial membership applications. One was Rwanda; the other, Sudan. The alleged divide between North and Sub Saharan states may explain Rwanda's objections, but hardly explains the positions of Sudan as well as the approving Sub-Saharan states.

Why should one North African state block the membership of another? The answer is simple: at that time, the two North African states were foes, not friends. Throughout most of the nineties, the two ruling regimes in Egypt and Sudan were at odd with each other. Manifestations of their conflict were numerous, including notably their territorial claims over the disputed border area of Halayeb and Shalateen on the Red Sea, and Egypt's accusations
that Sudan supported Egypt’s Islamist militants fighting the government, and was involved in the failed attempt to assassinate the Egyptian president in Addis Ababa in June 1995.

Egypt was able to join COMESA only with Sudan’s explicit endorsement and direct assistance. It was Sudan that presented Egypt’s renewed membership application in 1997, urged the other members to vote for it, and played a key role to make successful the negotiations between the Egyptian delegate and the COMESA secretariat. Sudan’s new position was an indication that the relations between the two ruling regimes in Egypt and Sudan began to normalize.\(^5\)

In short, Egypt’s North African identity failed to make Sudan approve its initial membership application to join COMESA. And, except for Rwanda, it also failed to make the Sub-Saharan states disapprove Egypt’s initial membership application in conforming with Ethiopia’s initial position. Indeed, all other Sub-Saharan members approved Egypt’s initial and final membership applications.\(^6\)

**Section Three: Conflict over the Distribution of Nile River Water Resources**

The Nile River runs through ten African states: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt. These states are yet to conclude a comprehensive treaty defining their shares of the river water. The distribution of the Nile water is still regulated by bilateral agreements, including protocols, treaties and agreements dated to the colonial era, most notably those signed in 1891, 1902, 1906, 1925, 1929, 1934, and 1949-1953. In all these agreements, Britain was a party representing its African Nile colonies; the other party (or, in one case, parties) was another colonial power such as Italy or Belgium, or an African independent state such as Ethiopia or Egypt. The only agreement to distribute the Nile water signed by two African independent states is that signed by Egypt and the Sudan in 1959.\(^7\)
Nile basin states disagree sharply on the legitimacy and validity of these bilateral agreements as legal bases of distributing the Nile water. Although it is common to distinguish between the approving positions of the lower or downstream riparian states and the disapproving positions of the higher or upstream riparian states, this distinction is illusive. A close look at the changing positions of the Nile basin states illustrates the crosscutting alliances with Egypt and Ethiopia, which have historically persisted firmly on their conflicting positions, but sometimes seemed to move towards a compromise. The next three subsections outline the conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Nile water distribution, then discuss the changing alliance patterns of the other Nile Basin states in this conflict, with emphasis on the recent apparent escalation of the conflict.

Egypt-Ethiopia Conflict over the Nile Water Distribution

Egypt insists that it has acquired historical rights over the river. These rights, described as vested, ancient and natural, are sanctioned in all agreements regulating the distribution of Nile water. It stresses that the principle of fair distribution of river waters does not entail that all basin states use its waters equally; rather, the fair share of each state depends on geographic, hydrographic, hydrologic, climatic and ecologic factors; the social and economic needs of the populations who depend on the river; the impact of using the river in one state on the other states; and the existing and potential usage and alternatives of the river. By all these measures, Egypt has the right to continue enjoying the lion’s share of the river water resources.

On the other hand, Ethiopia sees itself as the water fountain or tower of the basin, but unfairly deprived from using its water resources because “hydro-politics of the Nile River Basin have been dominated by Egypt.” In addition, it considers itself unbounded by any
water-sharing agreements, especially the Egypt and Sudan Nile Agreement of 1959 according to which the Nile water is distributed between the two states.\textsuperscript{12} Faced by increasing demographic and development pressures to use its fresh water resources, it began in 1996 planning and implementing a series of irrigation projects on Lake Tana and the Blue Nile.\textsuperscript{13} Ethiopia also refuses to abide by the prior-notification condition sanctioned in the United Nations Treaty on Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, signed in 1997. Instead, it claims absolute sovereignty over the rivers running through its territories.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, it proposes equitable, instead of fair, sharing of the river water,\textsuperscript{15} and occasionally calls for treating water as tradable commodity, thus demanding Egypt and Sudan to pay for the water resources they receive from it.\textsuperscript{16}

Aware of its vulnerable position as the lowest riparian state and its total dependence of the Nile for fresh water, especially the Blue Nile which flows from Ethiopia, Egypt has taken Ethiopia’s demands seriously. In the late seventies, the Egyptian president threatened to go to war with Ethiopia if it stopped the natural flow of the river. In the eighties, Egypt moderated its language and emphasized the benefits of cooperation between all Nile basin states in all economic aspects, not just water sharing.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, in 1983, Undogo was established by Egypt, Sudan, Uganda, Zaire (Now, the DRC), and Central Africa. Although Ethiopia hosted the last two ministerial meetings of Undogo in 1990 and 1991, it was never a member of it. Rather, Egypt’s former ambassador to Ethiopia accuses it of inciting the other upstream states against Egypt, and playing an important role in establishing an alternative organization that includes most Nile basin states but excludes Egypt, namely, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development.\textsuperscript{18}

Nevertheless, Ethiopia was a founding member of the Undogo successors, namely, the Technical Cooperation Committee for the Promotion of the Development and Environmental Protection of Nile Basin, 1993-1998; and the Nile Basin Initiative, established
in 1999. One explanation of Ethiopia’s changed position is the pressures of international donors, who normally seek Egypt’s unobjectionable stand before funding any irrigation project on the Nile in Ethiopia. Another explanation is Egypt’s efforts to remove Ethiopia’s doubts about its intentions and highlight the possibility of reaching an agreement on the fair distribution of the Nile water resources. This is also allegedly explained by the pressures of international donors, especially the World Bank.

As a result, Egypt and Ethiopia signed a historic framework for general cooperation in 1993. Although Ethiopia suspended negotiations before a final agreement was concluded, Egypt did not object Ethiopia’s 1996 projects; instead, it agreed with Sudan to distribute the loss evenly. Nor did Egypt obstruct Ethiopia’s request of fund from the African Development Bank to build new dams on the Nile in 2001. Moreover, Egypt’s minister of water resources and irrigation stressed that the shared vision of the NBI is “to achieve sustainable socioeconomic development through the equitable utilization of, and benefit from, the common Nile Basin water resources.”

**Changing Nile Basin Alliances in Egypt-Ethiopia Conflict over the Nile Water Distribution**

The positions of other Nile Basin states have historically moved between the two poles of Egypt and Ethiopia. Neither Sudan, which is the only other North African state in the Nile basin, nor the Sub-Saharan states in the Nile basin, sided always with Egypt and Ethiopia respectively. The following are examples of their alliances that sometimes crosscut the alleged divide between North African and Sub Saharan states.

On the one hand, Sudan sometimes sides with Egypt because both are downstream states relative to the other riparian states, but other times sides against Egypt – the lowest riparian state. Thus, upon its independence in 1956, Sudan refused to abide by the 1929 agreement
between Egypt and Britain, and renegotiated with Egypt their water shares in their 1959 agreement, which has become the cornerstone in their positions against the other riparian states. Nevertheless, at times of tension between the Sudanese and Egyptian governments, some Sudanese politicians called for renegotiating this agreement or acting unilaterally to increase Sudan’s share of the Nile water. For example, when the relations between the two governments deteriorated sharply in the nineties, the Sudanese government threatened to decrease the Nile water Egypt receives from Sudan according to the 1959 agreement. In turn, Egypt’s president threatened that the Sudanese government would be confronted firmly if it obstructed the natural flow of the Nile water.

On the other hand, the Sub-Saharan states, all upstream relative to Sudan and Egypt, side with Ethiopia sometimes, not always, and to significantly different degrees. In fact, Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC benefitted from technical cooperation with Egypt, especially in the Hydromet project which they requested to extend for twenty five years, ending in 1992. In general, these states are not known for any anti-Egypt positions, and do not deny the historical agreements to which Egypt upholds.

Only Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, support Ethiopia’s demands, and have indeed superseded Ethiopia recently in leading the revisionist camp in the Nile basin. For example, prior to a March 2004 conference in Kenya under the auspices of the NBI, Kenya threatened to withdraw from the 1929 agreement which Britain signed on its behalf, and its parliament demanded the government to renegotiate that agreement. In turn, Egypt considered this position very serious and amounting to an act of war, and reiterated its refusal to renegotiate the historical agreements. At the conference, Kenya’s vice president insisted that “the Nile river is not the property of any one state,” and Kenya’s minister of water resources stressed the necessity of sharing the Nile resources as transboundary waters. Tanzania’s counterpart was more specific by demanding “equitable and reasonable use of
the Nile water” based on mutual benefits, not “what happened in the past.”31 He also declared his state unbounded by the historical agreements signed on its behalf.32 After the conference, the Ugandan president called for “putting an end to Egypt’s monopoly of using the Nile River water in irrigation,” and commented on the 1929 agreement saying that “we are not Britain; we all must sit together to conclude a new agreement on this water.”33 Moreover, Tanzania launched a multi-billion-dollars project to build a pipeline extracting fresh water from Lake Victoria, the main Equatorial source of the Nile. Another huge project, a hydroelectric dam, was under consideration by Kenya and Uganda.34

Uganda, however, has not always sided against Egypt. It was a founding member of Undogo, and the two states signed in 1991 an exchange of memoranda that recognizes explicitly the 1949-1953 agreements, and hence the 1929 agreement implicitly.35 In turn, Egypt cooperated with Uganda to elevate and enhance a dam on the Nile so that its electrical capacity increased by fifty percent in order for Uganda to meet its increasing needs and export its electricity surplus to neighboring states.36 In 1998, the two governments signed another agreement according to which Egypt aided Uganda, on a grant basis, to combat and control the aquatic weeds, especially the water hyacinth in the outlets and inlets of three lakes and in the Nile.37

Unexpected from the perspective of the North-Sub Saharan spilt, however, is Eritrea’s position, which hardly conforms to Ethiopia’s. Although part of the Blue Nile flows from Eritrea, which actively strives to retrieve larger shares of the Nile water, it is not a full member of the NBI.38 A likely explanation is Eritrea’s reluctance to cooperate, even in technical projects, with Ethiopia with which it fought two ferocious wars in the last three years of the twentieth century.
In short, Egypt’s North African identity failed to make Sudan always side with it, or the Sub-Saharan states of the Nile basin always side with Ethiopia against it. Rather, the positions of all states of the basin seem to be based on their water interests, and they ally with the states serving these interests regardless of their North African or Sub-Saharan identity. Therefore, this alleged divide provides no powerful explanation of their alliance patterns.

**The Cooperative Framework Agreement of May 2010**

The conflict over the Nile water distribution escalated in 2009 and 2010, as negotiations between all Nile Basin Initiative members intensified to conclude a Nile water distribution treaty before the NBI expires in 2012. They met three times (in Kinshasa, May 2009; Alexandria, July 2009; and Sharm El-Sheikh, April 2010) before four of the nine members, namely, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda, signed the Cooperative Framework Agreement on 14 May 2010. A few days later, Kenya signed the agreement, which remains open for one year in order for the other members to sign. The CFA seeks to establish a permanent Nile River Basin Commission which will set procedures of water sharing thereby replacing the disputed colonial-era pacts. Egypt and Sudan refused to sign the CFA, dismissed it as non-binding, and demanded a rephrasing of an article to protect their “current uses and rights” of the Nile water.

This development challenges my argument here that the assumed divide between North and Sub-Saharan states is more imaginary than real, because the five NBI members who signed the CFA are Sub-Saharan, and the two refusing members are North African. Nevertheless, a closer look is unlikely to refute this argument for three reasons.

First, Burundi and the DRC, which are Sub-Saharan members of the NBI, have not signed the agreement. During the euphoria of signing the CFA, the signatory states expected these Sub-Saharan states to sign shortly, claiming that they consider the 1929 and 1959
agreements as unfair, want a reasonable water-sharing pact, and promised to sign the CFA. For example, Rwanda’s environment minister said it was just a matter of time before these states put pen to paper, and “for Burundi, they are currently busy with preparations for elections but they will also sign soon.” He even expressed hope that Eritrea, which holds an observer status in the NBI, would join “in anytime soon.” Uganda’s state minister for water was more optimistic, hoping that Egypt and Sudan would change their standpoint and sign the CFA.

Nevertheless, none of these hopes materialized till the end of July 2010. Rather, Burundi and the DRC have moved in the opposite direction. Burundi already held local and presidential elections in May and June 2010 respectively, but made no clear signal it would sign the CFA. Moreover, the DRC signaled its unwillingness to sign the agreement. Shortly after opening the signing of the CFA, the DRC President Kabila met Egyptian President Mubarak in Cairo, and announced his refusal to sign any agreement that does not involve Egypt. The positions of the DRC and Burundi are very important because the CFA needs at least six signatories to come into force. Thus, the way for its ratification by individual states must go through the signature of one of these two states.

Second, the signatory states camp is not as solid as it may appear. Although ministers in all these states spoke sensibly after signing the CFA and expressed understanding of the concerns of the refusing states, it is possible to distinguish among them between hardliners and moderates in dealing with the refusing states. Specifically, Ethiopia and Tanzania are more adamant, while Kenya and Uganda rather flexible.

On the one hand, Ethiopia’s foreign minister once affirmed: “No earthy force can stop Ethiopia from benefiting from the Nile.” In the Sharm El-Sheikh meeting, Ethiopia accused Egypt of “dragging its feet” on a Nile water treaty more equitable than the colonial
agreements. On the same day the CFA was signed, Prime Minister Zenawi inaugurated a huge hydroelectric dam on the Nile, marking “the country’s success in using the Nile waters after decades of biased laws.” When the Nile Council of Ministers met in late June 2010 for the first time since the CFA was signed, Ethiopia’s water resources minister stresses that the CFA is final and irreversible. Tanzania, in turn, rejected Egypt’s and Sudan’s demand that the CFA recognize their current Nile water uses and rights, and deemed their proposed rephrasing of the controversial article unacceptable. It asserted that “times have changed, and ... the upstream countries are no longer colonies but free states, with international rights to enter into new pacts.”

On the other hand, Kenya and Uganda seem more willing to negotiate with the refusing states, especially Egypt. Kenya was absent at the signing meeting, and, immediately after signing the CFA, its prime minister, Raila Odinga, visited Egypt where he affirmed that Kenya would never cause any harm to Egypt’s water interests. In addition, he expressed willingness to negotiate the CFA article that angers Egypt. In turn, he received offers to fund a whole range of projects in Kenya, including environmental conservation, water harvesting, drilling of boreholes, and construction of dams. For other signatory states, the deal was so suspicious that Kenyan foreign affairs minister had to deny publicly that Egypt tried to entice Kenya to drop the CFA.

Uganda was also once viewed as a sellout. When Egyptian President Mubarak visited it in 2008, its water and environment minister said: “We are both an upstream and downstream country, so we are in a tight position and could be misunderstood.” Tanzania thus demanded Uganda to share minutes of the “secret meeting.” After signing the CFA, Ugandan President Museveni received Egypt’s international cooperation minister, said that Egypt and Uganda needed to work out a system for Uganda to have irrigation without affecting Egypt, and stressed that electricity was a pressing problem in Uganda, perhaps
hoping to win a deal similar to Kenya’s. In turn, the Egyptian minister reaffirmed her government’s commitment to develop the resources of the Nile basin for the benefits of the member countries.  

Third, the refusing states is not a solid camp either, as it is also possible to distinguish between Egypt’s and Sudan’s positions in the crisis. On the one hand, Sudan’s position developed more inflexible. At the NBI meeting in Addis Ababa in late June, 2010, its water minister announced that his government had frozen the NBI activities as long as the upstream states stick to the CFA which has serious legal implications that must be settled first.

On the other hand, Egypt adopted a double-edged diplomacy of stick and carrot. After the failed Sharm El-Sheikh meeting, Egypt’s minister of water resources and irrigation told the Parliament that “Nile water is a matter of national security to Egypt. We won’t under any circumstances allow our water rights to be jeopardized.” Then, on the eve of signing the CFA, Egypt’s foreign minister warned that its water rights were “red line” and threatened legal action if a partial deal is reached. “Any unilateral agreement signed by the upstream Nile Basin countries is not binding on downstream countries, Egypt and Sudan, and lacks legitimacy,” he said. After the CFA was signed, Egypt ruled out war over it, but lobbied the international community to nullify it, seeking international arbitration.

Although this strategy succeeded as key donors began to put pressures on the Nile Basin states to engage in more constructive dialogue to solve the impasse over the new treaty, Egypt opted for a parallel course of diplomacy with upstream states. In the Sharm El-Sheikh meeting, it proposed to establish the Nile River Basin Commission before concluding negotiations on the CFA. After the CFA was signed, top Egyptian officials continued to exchange visits with top officials in such upstream states as Uganda, Kenya and the DRC,
offering to support their development projects, especially in the water sector. Moreover, an Egyptian member of parliament asked the upstream countries to help maintain life in Egypt by restraining from moves that would deprive it the opportunity to use the Nile water.\textsuperscript{73} Egypt also approved the Arab League’s plan to arrange an Arab-African summit to solve the Nile water problem,\textsuperscript{74} after its General Secretary proposed to mediate.\textsuperscript{75} Months later, the Egyptian ambassador to Uganda denied the need for international arbitration, and reaffirmed his country’s determination to ensure that the NBI goals are achieved through dialogue and cooperation.\textsuperscript{76} Egypt outreached to hardliners as well; its foreign minister visited Ethiopia in July and agreed with its prime minister to renegotiate the controversial CFA articles.\textsuperscript{77}

To conclude, Egypt’s good and improving relations with three upstream states (namely, Uganda, Kenya, and the DRC) prove the North-Sub Saharan split in the Nile Basin unsubstantiated. Also significant are the increasing discrepancy between Egypt’s and Sudan’s positions, and the split of upstream states into three groups: Burundi and the DRC; Uganda and Kenya; and Ethiopia and Tanzania; with Rwanda somewhere between the second and third groups.

If the assumed divide between North and Sub-Saharan Africa is unable to explain politics in the Nile Basin well, what are better explanations? The next two sections discuss two international relations theories that claim to provide such explanations.

**Section Four: Realist Explanation – Alliance with Major Powers**

Throughout most of the Cold War era, Egypt and Ethiopia had the opposite global major-power allies. Between the mid fifties and mid seventies, Egypt’s Nasser regime was a key in the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM), which was welcomed by the Soviet Union, but suspected as Soviet-friendly by the United States. Though a NAM member, Ethiopia’s
The monarchy was largely viewed as an American ally. By the mid seventies, the two regimes has changed: in Egypt, President Sadat has reversed many of Nasser’s policies, including foreign policy; in Ethiopia, Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown and succeeded by a military regime that also reversed most of his policies, including foreign policy. As a result, the United States became Egypt’s new global major-power ally; while the Soviet Union became Ethiopia’s new global major-power ally, although both states continued as NAM members. This alliance pattern continued until the end of the Cold War in the early nineties. Realists would argue that the conflict between Egypt’s and Ethiopia’s global major-power allies explains of their conflict during the Cold War era.

In 1991, another regime change took place in Ethiopia where the military regime was defeated and overthrown by a coalition of militant fronts of oppressed nations or ethnic groups. The new regime turned to be an ally to the United States – then the only superpower. Thus, for the first time since their independence, Egypt and Ethiopia had the same global major-power ally – an explanation of their rapprochement after the Cold War. From the realist perspective the United States pressured both states, through the World Bank, to coordinate their positions.

The other Nile basin states have also shifted their global alliance networks, several times in some cases, since their independence. Nevertheless, the realist proposition on alliance formation is not always useful in explaining their Nile basin alliances, especially during the Cold War era. For example, shortly after the independence of Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya in the early sixties, all their governments expressed strong reservations on the 1929 and 1959 agreements, although Tanzania, and increasingly Uganda, were closer to the Soviet Union, while Kenya was closer to the United States. Specifically, Tanzania’s president Julius Nyerere declared a foreign policy principle, named Nyerere’s Principle, that the newly independent states are unbounded by the agreements and treaties signed by the
expansionist, colonialist powers on their behalf before their independence. Accordingly, Tanzania recognized neither the 1929 nor the 1959 agreements, and issued a statement that sounded like an ultimatum, giving Egypt and Sudan a two-year period, ending in mid 1964, to negotiate with the other riparian states an agreement on the distribution of the Nile water resources and each basin state's share of it. Kenya and Uganda accepted Nyerere’s Principle and issued similar statements.78 It was only Sudan that reached an agreement with Egypt to distribute the Nile water resources, although Sudan at that time was by no means an ally to the Soviet Union.

In short, Egypt’s strong relations with the Soviet Union in the sixties failed to make Tanzania and Uganda, which had also strong relations with Soviet Union, side with it. Rather, the two states, along with Kenya, allied with an American ally, namely, Ethiopia, to serve their interests in redistributing the Nile water. Egypt’s strong relations with the Soviet Union in the sixties failed also to prevent Sudan, which was not a Soviet ally, from reaching an agreement with it.

Testing the realist proposition on alliance formation in the post-Cold War era is difficult for both the realists who view the current international system as unipolar and the realists who view it as multipolar (henceforth, unipolar and multipolar realists).79 For the unipolar realists, all minor states, including the Nile basin states, have no choice but to ally with the United States. This is evident in their alliance with the United States in its war against terror, with the sole exception of Sudan. Although this exception explains Sudan's anti-Egypt position when it was furthest from the United States in the nineties, other American allies in the Nile basin also sided against Egypt after the Cold War – an anomaly from the realist perspective.

For the multipolar realists, the United States has to confront emerging rivals in the international system, such as China, the European Union, and perhaps Russia. These
confrontations, however, are by and large tacit, not as acute as that prevailed during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Thus, it is possible for minor states, including the Nile basin states, to build strong relations with the United States and one or more of its emerging major-power rivals at the same time. It is therefore not surprising that all Nile basin states – except Sudan – have strong relations with the United States and at least some of the emerging major powers. China, for example, has become a powerful economic partner of not only Sudan but other Nile basin states as well. 80

To conclude, although alliance with global major powers provides a reasonable explanation of the dynamics of the Egyptian-Ethiopian relations, it is not always a valid explanation of alliance formation in the Nile basin.

Section Five: Constructivist Explanation – Ideological and Normative (Dis)Similarity

Regime change in Egypt and Ethiopia have resulted in not only shifting their global major power allies, but also state ideologies. Between the mid fifties and mid seventies, Egypt’s state ideology developed gradually as revolutionary, absolutist, socialist, and pan-Arab unionist. A basic norm of its international behavior was revisionism, except in few issues, including the distribution of Nile water resources. Ethiopia’s monarchy was also absolutist but traditionalist, and more feudalist than capitalist. Its international behavior was status quo-oriented, except in few issues, including the distribution of Nile water resources.

After the two regimes changed in the mid seventies, Egypt’s state ideology moved away from the Nasser regime ideology towards pragmatism, restricted liberalism, foreign-oriented capitalism, and Egyptian nationalism. Its international behavior became status quo-oriented in most issues, including the Nile water distribution. In other words, its Nile distribution policy did not change. Ethiopia’s state ideology moved away from that of the
old monarchy, and became revolutionary and socialist. Revisionism became a basic norm of its international behavior in most issues, including the Nile water distribution. In other words, its Nile distribution policy did not change.

Although both states have always been Pan-African unionist, at least as far as their membership of the Organization of African Unity, then the African Union, entails, they have had different interpretations of pan-African unionism. Constructivists would thus argue that Egypt’s and Ethiopia’s conflicting ideologies and norms of international behavior is an explanation of their conflict during the Cold War era.

The regime change in Ethiopia in 1991 brought its state ideology closer to Egypt’s. The new regime admits to the principles of pragmatism, restricted liberalism, and foreign-oriented capitalism, but is still revisionist in international, especially regional, politics, although its foreign policy revisionism is sometimes shadowed by the foreign policy revisionism of its adamant regional rival, namely, Eritrea. Constructivists would argue that Egypt’s and Ethiopia’s close state ideologies currently explains their rapprochement after the Cold War.

Other Nile basin states have also shifted their state ideologies and basic norms of international behavior since their independence. Nevertheless, the constructivist proposition on alliance formation is not always useful in explaining their Nile basin alliances during and after the Cold War. For example, Sudan concluded the 1959 agreement with Egypt when their state ideologies were by no means close. Also, in the early sixties, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya demanded the Nile water redistribution when Tanzania’s, and to a less extent Uganda’s, state ideologies were closer to Egypt’s than Ethiopia’s.

After the end of the Cold War era, the state ideologies of the Nile basin states, perhaps except Sudan, became closer, although their norms of international behavior still diverge, especially on the regional level, as some are revisionist while others status quo-oriented. The
closeness of their state ideologies, however, did not impact their alliance patterns as far as the conflict over the Nile water distribution is concerned. For example, in the nineties, some Nile basin states that were ideologically closer to Egypt did not side with it against Sudan – an anomaly from the constructivist perspective.

To conclude, ideological and normative (dis)similarity provides a reasonable explanation of the dynamics of the Egyptian-Ethiopian relationship, but is not always a valid explanation of alliance formation in the Nile basin.

**Conclusion**

My argument in this paper is not that there is no conflict among the Nile Basin states; rather, that conflict must not be interpreted as a North-Sub Saharan one. The empirical analysis supports this argument as the results of testing the hypotheses in this study show. The results are summarized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Test Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hypothesis 1:</strong> When a North African and a Sub-Saharan states conflict, the North African states ally together against that Sub-Saharan state, and the Sub-Saharan states ally together against that North African state.</td>
<td>Falsified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hypothesis 2:</strong> When a North African and a Sub-Saharan states conflict, a significant number of North African states ally with the Sub-Saharan state, and a significant number of Sub-Saharan states ally with the North African state.</td>
<td>Confirmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hypothesis 3:</strong> When a North African and a Sub-Saharan states conflict, states ally with the allies of their global major-power allies, regardless of their North</td>
<td>Falsified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
African or Sub-Saharan identity.

| Hypothesis 4: When a North African and a Sub-Saharan states conflict, states with similar ideologies, principles and norms of international behavior ally together, regardless of their North African or Sub-Saharan identity. | Falsified |

In short, North African states do not act as one bloc and conflict with each other as they conflict with Sub-Saharan states. Similarly, Sub-Saharan states do not act as one bloc and conflict with each others as they conflict with North African states. The North African or Sub-Saharan identity of conflicting states is a nonfactor in their alliance formations. In other words, the alleged divide between North African and Sub-Saharan states is refuted.

Inter-state alliances crosscut this alleged divide. Sudan, for example, allied with Ethiopia against Egypt in the two conflict cases throughout most of the nineties. Its position is significant because it is the only other North African state in the Nile basin and COMESA at the time of Egypt’s applications. Also significant are Eritrea’s hostile position towards Ethiopia, Uganda’s frequent move between Egypt and Ethiopia, and the largely indifferent positions of Burundi and the DRC as far as the Nile water distribution is concerned.

Although realism and constructivism separately provide reasonable explanations of the dynamics of Egyptian-Ethiopian relations during and after the Cold War, they fail to explain powerfully their alliance formations. For example, neither alliance with global major powers nor ideological and normative similarity accounts for Tanzania’s and Uganda’s antagonistic positions towards Egypt in 1960s or 1990s. Nor do they account for Sudan’s agreement with Egypt in 1959.

Nevertheless, neither realism nor constructivism is totally refuted; rather, other, perhaps sharper, realist and constructivist hypotheses may be tested in the selected cases. For
example, analyzing the positions of the global major-power allies of the Nile basin states regarding the conflict over the Nile water distributing may demonstrate that those powers are uninterested in pushing their Nile basin allies to cooperate, or may even be interested in escalating their conflicts.

In addition, the hypotheses of this study may be tested in other conflicts between a North African and a Sub-Saharan states, such as Libya’s military intervention in Chad in 1970s and 1980s that split and paralyzed the Organization of African Unity for years. The results of all tests, however, are likely to prove the divide between North Africa and Sub-Saharan states imaginary, not real. Researchers are therefore invited to explore aspects of, and methods to improve, cooperation between North African and Sub-Saharan states for their mutual benefits, instead of reiterating malicious claims of their divide that serve the interests of external powers, not Africa’s peoples.

Notes and References

1 I select cases on the independent variable, namely, conflicts between a North African and a Sub-Saharan states, which is acceptable methodologically, because selecting on the dependent variable, i.e., alliances between states with similar or dissimilar identities, would bias the results to confirm or falsify the assumed divide respectively.


5 Ibid., pp 451-452.

6 Ibid., pp 448-450.


10 Ibid., pp 164-167.


12 Ashraf Muhammad Kishk 2006, pp 174-175.


15 Ibid., pp 244-246.

The idea of benefit-sharing as opposed to water-sharing is reintroduced in a recent discussion of cooperation in the Nile basin, see: Wondwosen Teshome B. ‘Transboundary Water Cooperation in Africa: the Case of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI)’, *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, vol. 7, no. 4, winter 2008, pp 34-43.


Mohammad Shawqi Abdul-Aal 2004, p 32.


Ashraf Muhammad Kishk 2006, p 178.


Mohammad Shawqi Abdul-Aal 2004, p 32.


See the controversial article and the demanded rephrasing in: “Tales of Political Intrigue Leading to the New Treaty,” The East African (Nairobi), May 2010.


“Kamanzi Dispels Fear of Aid Cut over the Nile,” The New Times (Kigali), 24 May 2010.

51 “Storm Hovers over Calm Nile Water,” The Monitor (Kampala), 2 May 2010.

52 “Will Egypt Go to War Over the New River Nile Deal,” New Vision (Kampala), 11 June 2010.


54 See, for example, the announcements of Ethiopia’s water resources minister, Rwanda’s water and lands minister, and Uganda’s water and environment minister at the signing ceremony in: “Govt Insists New Nile Treaty is Non-Binding,” The Monitor (Kampala), 17 May 2010; and the news conference of Tanzania’s water and irrigation minister in: “Dar Says ‘No’ As Row Over Nile Heats Up,” The Citizen (Dar es Salaam), 17 May 2010.


64 “Will Egypt Go to War Over the New River Nile Deal,” New Vision (Kampala), 11 June 2010.


“Egyptian MP Calls for Calm,” The Monitor (Kampala), 30 May 2010.


Mohammad Salman Taie 2007, pp 202-203.
