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Reconceptualizing Hydrohegemony: The Dynamics of Sudan-Egypt Relations Over the Nile Hydropolitics

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Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of changes in domestic power structures and regional and international transformations on hydropolitical configurations of the Eastern Nile Basin. The paper follows a multi-disciplinary approach – drawing on the framework of hydrohegemony (FHH) and politics of regime survival. It argues that although the FHH provides a useful analytical tool for understanding Egypt's relations with Sudan and other upstream states in the Nile basin, it does not sufficiently question the impact of regime security and leadership survival on the formation of hydropolitical interaction between states. This missing dimension may be of particular relevance in authoritarian contexts, where the most pressing threats to the ruling elites typically emerge from internal political challenges such as mass uprisings, rebellions, and military coups. Hence, without dismissing the importance of the FHH, the paper elucidates the impact of long-term dimensions of regime survival strategies on the transboundary hydropolitical interaction between Egypt and Sudan.

Keywords: Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Arab Gulf, the Nile River, Hydro politics

JEL classification: F59, N55

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Mohamed Omer ABDIN & Housam DARWISHEH

Abstract

For a long time, Egypt contained and influenced the behavior of its southern neighbors, particularly Sudan, over issues pertaining to the utilization of the Nile River waters through a combination of material, ideational, and geopolitical powers. Crucially, Sudan's continued support for the hydropolitical status quo, which privileged Egypt, was crucial for maintaining the latter's hydro hegemony in the Nile basin. However, geopolitical shifts in the regional order and domestic transformations in Egypt and other Nile basin states since 2011, challenged Egyptian hegemony and created a new hydropolitical landscape that positioned Sudan and Ethiopia as influential actors in the Nile basin. This paper attempts to analyze the implications of these changes on the hydrohegemonic configurations in the eastern Nile basin. In doing so, the paper follows a multi-disciplinary approach – drawing on the framework of hydrohegemony (FHH) and politics of regime survival in Sudan. The study contends that the theoretical preoccupation with a state-centric analysis of transboundary water relations, emphasized by the FHH, has frequently led scholars to overlook other critical variables of the domestic political realm such as the interests of the ruling elite and the salience of regime security as a unit of analysis. This argument may be of particular relevance in authoritarian contexts, where the most pressing threats to the ruling elites typically emerge from internal political challenges such as mass uprisings, rebellions, and military coups. Hence, although it utilizes the FHH to examine Egyptian hydrohegemony at the Nile Basin, the study also elucidates the impact of the long-term dimensions of regime survival strategies on the hydropolitical interaction between Egypt and Sudan.

Keywords: Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Hydropolitics, Nile River

1. Introduction

The Nile River and its aquifers are nearly the sole source of drinking and irrigation water in Egypt (Ashour et al. 2009). Central to the identity and existence of Egypt, the Nile plays a crucial role in the development of a highly centralized Egyptian state along its fertile banks. Historically, Egypt was able to exercise control over upstream Nile waters through access to a combination of material, ideational, geopolitical resources and external support. The majority of the upstream states could use less of the Nile waters; therefore, the Nile policy in Egypt has almost entirely focused on its relations with Sudan due to its vast agricultural potential. Hence, controlling Sudan remains a cornerstone of the Nile strategy of Egypt. For a large part of its contemporary history, Sudan remained a faithful ally regarding the Nile waters even when diplomatic relations between the two states were strained. However, the unconditional support by Sudan to Egypt has recently waned as geopolitics in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa began to shift in favor of upstream riparian states. Furthermore, Sudan has increasingly realized that its water-resource management schemes and economic development lie in strengthening ties with upstream riparian states and regional and international actors vying for influence and foothold in the Nile Basin and Horn of Africa.

The framework of hydrohegemony (hereafter, FHH (Zeitoun and Warner 2006, Cascão and Zeitoun 2010) provides a useful analytical tool for understanding the relations between Egypt and Sudan and other upstream states in the Nile Basin. However, this study argues that it has not sufficiently questioned the impact of regime security and leadership survival on the formation of hydropolitical interaction between states. FHH highlights the role of the state in exerting and maintaining asymmetrical relations of power in international watercourses by not only employing coercive power but also manufacturing consent via the force of ideas and production of knowledge. FHH focuses on the state as the dominant unit of analysis and assumes that foreign policy and decision-making processes seek to primarily serve national interests. Moreover, the study contends that preoccupation with a state-centric analysis of transboundary water relations has frequently led scholars to overlook other critical variables of the domestic political realm such as the interests of the ruling elite and the salience of regime security as a unit of analysis. This argument may be of particular relevance in authoritarian contexts, where the most pressing threats to the ruling elites typically emerge from internal political challenges such as mass uprisings, rebellions, and military coups. Hence, although it utilizes the FHH to examine Egyptian hydrohegemony at the Nile Basin, the study also

elucidates the impact of the long-term dimensions of regime survival strategies on the hydropolitical interaction between Egypt and Sudan.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: First, it reviews hydrohegemony in Egypt in relation to the Nile and briefly explores Egyptian–Sudanese relations from the historical perspective to understand the long-term influence of Egypt on Sudan and its ramifications. It then examines the decline of Egypt’s hydrohegemony in the region, particularly in the previous two decades, as Egypt experienced several dramatic political convulsions. Finally, the study explores the shifting hydropolitical position of Sudan away from Egypt given the geopolitical realignments occurring in the Middle East, the rising influence of non-riparian states in the Nile Basin, and the impact of the leadership survival strategies of Sudan on its foreign policy behavior.

2. Egyptian Hydrohegemony in the Nile Basin

In their conceptual FHH at the river basin level, (Zeitoun and Warner 2006) suggested that hydrohegemony or control over river resources is acquired, sustained, and transformed on the basis of three pillars, namely, (1) riparian position or geography (upstream versus downstream country), (2) hard power, such as military strength, and (3) material power, such as infrastructural, economic and technical clout, which enable even downstream states to control and exploit river resources. A subsequent, revised analysis of hydrohegemony by Zeitoun and Cascão (2013, 27) argued that hydrohegemony is based on four forms of power, namely, “geography; material power; bargaining power; and ideational power.”¹

In the Nile Basin, Egypt has the least favorable geographical location as a downstream country. Furthermore, the water resources in Egypt, which lay the crucial foundation for its national security and sustainable development, originate outside its borders and enter its territory from Sudan. Until recently, the Aswan High Dam (AHD), which was completed in 1970, provided Egypt with the capacity to regulate and utilize the flow of the river more than any other state in the region. Crucially, the vast reserve of water stored in Lake Nasser maintained water security within Egyptian borders.

The material power of Egypt vis-à-vis its southern neighbors is derived from its military, economic, and technological development schemes. Egypt possesses one of the largest armies

¹ Ideational power is mainly bound up with a narrative through which actors seek strategies to legitimize their ideas and defend their claims to the river waters.

in the region and, therefore, the ability to mobilize military power against any interference by other upstream states in the flow of the Nile. However, republican Egypt does not need to use military power to protect its waters. Nasser's confidant, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, once wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that, "fortunately, with the political conditions and technological limitations in Central and East Africa, this threat (tampering with the Nile waters) is unlikely to materialize. Politically friendly Sudan provides Egypt with an additional degree of security" (Heikal 1977, 715). For a long time, Egypt continued to enjoy influence and supremacy at a time when certain upstream states suffered from structural weaknesses due to proxy wars, political instability, and lack of technical capacity and international support for developing their economies. In a sense, Egypt could have remained the Nile Basin hegemon by profiting from the political instability of upstream riparian states. Scholars long assumed that the sources of the Blue Nile, particularly Ethiopia, which provides nearly two-thirds of the Nile water flowing through Egypt, will always be embroiled in internal conflicts. As a result, its leadership will be unable to undertake any meaningful development projects on the Nile. Through its western allies, Egypt also succeeded in ensuring that no international lending institutions would support any infrastructural developments in Ethiopia (Verhoeven 2015, 153). Unable to maximize their use of the Nile River, previously upstream states effectively ceded monopoly over their waters to Egypt. However, this is no longer the case, because the rapid population growth and urbanization needs for economic development have pushed upstream riparian countries to assert their claims over the Nile River.

In addition, Egypt previously enjoyed strong bargaining power vis-à-vis its riparian neighbors. It possessed the capability to control the rules of the game and set agendas. The former dominance of Egypt over the Nile was entrenched in colonial agreements, such as the recognition afforded by Great Britain in 1929 of the "historical and natural rights" of Egypt over the river waters (Crabitès 1929). The bargaining of Egypt power stems from the status quo that institutionalized its veto power in the 1929 and 1959 water agreements with Sudan and the support for these agreements given by powerful states and international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and African Development Bank (Waterbury 2008). Egypt also deployed other resources for controlling a "securitization tactic" (i.e., water as an existential national security issue) to strengthen its bargaining position and mobilize regional and international support against any state that would tamper with the Nile waters (Jacobs 2012, 137, Rubin 2014, 90-91). The securitizing approach helped Egypt shift any debate about the equal utilization of the Nile waters among riparian states into the

realm of emergency politics in which exceptional actions (e.g., the use of force) are rationalized in response to urgent threats.

Furthermore, Egypt previously enjoyed a measure of acceptance of its regional leadership through its ideational power, which stems from its ability to shape, impose, and manipulate perceptions and ideas about the Nile. For example, Egypt, under the rule of Nasser, opened its universities to African students and provided them with scholarships in subjects ranging from engineering to theology. They benefited from technical expertise of Egypt to provide guidance in water usage and related land resource management techniques. This initiative enabled Egypt to monopolize the production and dissemination of information on the Nile. In this manner, Egypt imposed its ideas and narratives on the riparian states and determined the agenda, discourse, and timing of negotiations and projects in the Nile Basin (Awulachew 2012, 230).²

Crucially, Egypt exercised various types of power to secure its *water rights* and guarantee the adherence of Sudan to the 1929 and 1959 water agreements. In this context, Egypt kept a close eye on Sudan which, due its vast agricultural lands, held the potential to influence the water flow of the Nile into Egypt. These contexts explained why Cairo heavily invested in establishing bilateral water agreements with Sudan and not with Ethiopia, which is the primary source of the Blue Nile. The following section examines the peculiar socio-political relations between Egypt and Sudan, which enabled the former to guarantee the compliance of the latter with the water agreements in the Nile Basin.

3. Egypt and Sudan: A Peculiar Relationship

Since the 19th century onward, the modern history of Egypt and Sudan grew increasingly intertwined in complex ways. The outcome of their historical interactions altered between amity and enmity, which were influenced by a complex constellation of domestic, regional, and global factors. However, the distribution of power remained asymmetrical to the advantage of Egypt. For the majority of the 20th century and into the 21st century, Egypt succeeded in locking Sudan into an asymmetric dyad over the Nile waters through institutional arrangements, which mainly constituted of two Nile water agreements (NWAs) of 1929 and 1959. These

² Presently, however, African students educated in agriculture, hydrology, modern farming, and other technical fields go to China, the land of mega-infrastructure projects and hydrological engineering. “China Surpasses Western Government African University Scholarships,” *Financial Times*, June 24, 2020.

water-sharing schemes enabled Egypt to sustain water supply and favorably maintain its hegemonic claims over the Nile.

The foreign policy in Sudan in general and the security of the Sudanese ruling elite in particular were frequently susceptible to Egyptian influence, which were molded through historical experiences and the longstanding power asymmetry in terms of military, economic and political capacities between the two countries. For instance, Egypt previously possessed the capacity to exert considerable influence on the post-independent political development in Sudan due to the varied sources of power of the former. In contrast to Sudan, which was embroiled in prolonged civil wars and failed to maintain a centralized and stable state, Egypt held a history of a highly centralized system and enjoyed a relatively ethno-religious homogeneity that enabled state institutionalization and a stable rule (Elnur 2009). Its superior force, coercive diplomacy, and strong relations with great world powers afforded the Egyptian political elite influence over the internal and external affairs in Sudan and enabled it to effectively maintain a close watch over the compliance of Sudan with the obligations of the existing water agreement.

For a long time, Egypt regarded Sudan as an integral part of its territory. The historical and political foundations of the claims of Egypt over Sudan lies in the fact that the former played an immensely important role in shaping the modern history of the latter. It began with the Turco–Egyptian invasion and rule of Sudan in 1820 by Muhammad Ali Pasha, *the founder of modern Egypt*, who aspired to build an Egyptian empire. Egypt’s first period of domination over Sudan ended in 1885, when Muhammad Ahmad Ibn Abdullah proclaimed himself the Mahdi (Dekmejian and Wyszomirski 1972), led a Sudanese rebellion against the Egyptian rule, and established an Islamic state (1885–1898).³ However, Egypt’s rule over Sudan was restored due to the Anglo-Egyptian invasion in 1898, which defeated the Mahdist state and made Sudan a condominium in 1899 under a joint British and Egyptian rule. The condominium, which “recognized Sudan as an Egyptian possession administrated by the British officials on behalf of the King of Egypt” (Johnson 2011, 21) ended in 1956, when Sudan gained independence from Britain.

Control over Sudan expanded the influence of Egypt from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea deep into Sub-Saharan Africa. The Egyptian ruling class long considered that the political

³ The Sudanese Muhammad Ahmad Ibn Abdullah declared himself the Mahdi, the redeemer of Islam who came to establish a just Islamic world order. However, in the Sudanese context, the Mahdist rebellion is a nationalist military revolt against the Anglo-Egyptian rule.

and economic control of Sudan guaranteed their mastery of the Nile Valley and its resources (Crabitès 1934). as expressed by an Egyptian army general in 1949 when he wrote,

No politician can ignore Egypt's interest in the Sudan. Its permanent and vital interest concerns Egypt's life. Egypt gets its water from the Nile which flows in the heart of the Sudan. The Nile to Egypt is a matter of life and death. If the water of the river were controlled by a hostile state or a state that could become a hostile state, Egypt's life is over. Of course, whoever controls the Sudan naturally controls the Northern Nile Valley. Egypt in this era of conflicting political doctrines cannot trust the neighbors of the Sudan. Today's friends may become tomorrow's enemies. For this reason, all of Egypt's efforts are to secure life in the coming future (Ismael 1969, 1).

In other words, control over Sudan was key to the expansion of Egypt as a geopolitical entity and guaranteed the flow of the Nile waters. Even after gaining independence, Sudan remained within the sphere of influence of Egypt. Although their bilateral relations were mainly uneasy and occasionally fraught with tension, Egypt succeeded in containing and shaping the behavior of Sudan regarding its position on the Nile waters.

In addition, the hegemonic position of Egypt in the Nile Basin and political dominance over Sudan stem from the fact that the colonial policies of Great Britain favored Egypt for being an important agricultural asset. Moreover, Suez Canal was vital to the economy and maritime power of Britain. Through water treaties, Britain assured Egypt "historical rights" to the Nile waters. For instance, a treaty between Britain and Ethiopia in 1902 to settle the boundary between Ethiopia and Sudan stipulated that Ethiopia must not construct any infrastructural projects on the Blue Nile, which would limit the flow of the waters, without consent from Great Britain and Sudan. Another NWA regarding the utilization of the Nile waters in 1929 between Egypt and Great Britain on behalf of Sudan allocated 4 and 48 billion cubic meters (BCM) of river water per annum for Sudan and Egypt, respectively. Crucially, the 1929 agreement awarded Cairo with the right to veto any projects higher up the Nile beyond its national borders to secure the flow of the Nile. It also led to the construction of the Jebel Aulia Dam in 1937,⁴ which is located in the south of Khartoum in Sudan, to store water for later use in Egypt (Yihdego, Rieu-Clarke, and Cascão 2017). In other words, the hegemony of Egypt over Sudan is a path-dependent outcome of a multitude of historical processes. Although

⁴ The Jebel Aulia Dam was later returned to Sudan in 1977 after it became obsolete due to the completion of Aswan High Dam in 1971.

one of the most important processes was the military reform and expansion by Muhammad Ali into the Nile valley in pursuit of empire-building, the second was British colonialism, which cemented Egyptian hydrohegemony in the Nile Basin. Eventually, the rapid decline of the British empire after the Second World War as a global power and the chronic instability, which mainly characterized the upstream states, rendered Egypt as the dominant political, economic, and military power in the Nile Basin despite being the most downstream state.

4. Hydropolitical Relations Between Egypt and Sudan After Independence

Briefly after seizing power in Egypt on July 23, 1952, and without consulting the Sudanese government or other riparian countries, the new Free Officers' regime decided to build the AHD on the southern border of Sudan. Its reservoir, Lake Nasser, was expected to extend 150 km into Sudan (Negm 2017) and flood Sudanese towns and villages. Hence, the consent of Sudan was necessary for the construction of the AHD. For the Free Officers, securing the flow of the Nile and swiftly building the AHD (1960–1970) were crucial to accumulate support of the peasantry (fellahin) for their new revolutionary government.

After gaining independence from Britain and Egypt in January 1956, Sudan became a parliamentary republic, although it had severe political instability and deep north–south divisions based on historical, cultural, religious, economic, political and ethnic differences (Hasabu and Majid 1985, Warburg 2003, Daly 2003). After its independence, an unresolved territorial dispute over the Halaib Triangle on the Red Sea (border area between southeastern Egypt and northeastern Sudan) led to mistrust and resentment between the two states. In addition, the 1929 NWA was essentially concluded between Egypt and Britain (on behalf of Sudan and other colonies in the basin). Thus, Sudan could have unilaterally repudiated the agreement on the ground that it was enacted by the former colonial power. In addition, historically rooted anti–Anglo-Egyptian sentiment among segments of the population, which dates back at least to the Mahdi revolt, constituted a form of political capital for the Sudanese ruling elites to broaden their political base within Sudan. As such, standing up to Egypt was a powerful source of authority and popular legitimacy by the newly elected post-independence Sudanese government (1956 and 1958). In fact, the then newly formed Sudanese parliament challenged the domination of Egypt over the Nile waters by demanding the abrogation of the 1929 NWA and refusing to consent to AHD. It perceived that Egypt endeavored to achieve its water security at the expense of the future water needs of Sudan. The Sudanese move

threatened to hold up the construction of the AHD. Hence, Egypt urgently needed a new legal water agreement with Sudan, which would respond to the demands of western financiers, the World Bank, and the United States and Britain (Saleh 2008, 39-41), to construct the AHD.

The Sudanese challenge to the Egyptian domination over the Nile waters came to an end when General Ibrahim Abboud overthrew the anti-Egyptian Umma government of Sayed Abdullah Khalil in November 1958. Abboud was a pro-Egyptian who served in the military before independence and needed support to cement his rule. Dissolving the parliament and banning all political parties and associations, the coup ended the first experiment of Sudan with parliamentary democracy. Only then could Egypt conclude the 1959 Water Bilateral Agreement with the new Sudanese rulers, which allocated the entire flow of the Nile to both countries as measured at Aswan while excluding other Nile riparian states. Crucially, the agreement granted Egypt the right to construct the AHD (Deng 2007). The 1959 Agreement effectively enforced the provisions of the 1929 Agreement and granted both states larger quotas of the river flow. Egypt and Sudan were allocated 55.5 and 18.5 BCM, respectively, out of the total 84 BCM in which 10 BCM is lost to evaporation from the reservoir of the AHD. As a result, the AHD and other projects on the Nile submerged the old Sudanese town of Wadi Halfa and displaced tens of thousands of people, mainly Nubians, living on both sides of the state line (Wiebe 2001, 737).

With a total storage capacity of 162 BCM, the AHD was Egypt's road to national development, because it provided energy and regular water for its agriculture and protected the Egyptians from the dangers of annual floods and droughts (Shama 2013, 27). The 1959 Agreement expanded the influence of Egypt south of its borders and granted it with the power to monitor the use of the Nile water in Sudan and veto any water development projects that would impact the flow of its water allocation (Deng 2007). The Agreement secured the hydrohegemonic position of Egypt by reinforcing its claim over *natural and historic* rights to the Nile and by limiting the future demands of Sudan for more water and irrigation development. Since then, Egypt entrenched a hydropolitical dyad with Sudan that remained strong until the early 1990s. However, the alliance was not one between equals: Sudan continued to be the weak partner in the exploitation and use of the Nile waters, and Egypt needed to ensure that its influence over Sudanese affairs remained strong. However, the exclusive nature of the 1929 and 1959 NWA sowed discord between Egypt and upstream riparian states. At the same time, securing consent from Sudan to the construction of the AHD reduced the need for Egypt to venture beyond Sudan to guarantee water flow from the Nile

River. In addition, the bilateral water agreement with Sudan and the construction of the AHD enabled Nasser to shift his attention to the Fertile Crescent to pursue his ambition of leading the Arab world toward unity under his leadership.

Relations between Sudan and Egypt were favorable during the construction of the AHD (1960–1971). They reached new heights when a Sudanese military group, which called itself the Free Officers Organization, staged a bloodless coup on May 25, 1969, brought General Ja'far al-Nimeiri to power. The Nimeiri regime identified with the cause of pan-Arabism, which was modeled on Nasser's revolution in Egypt. A special relationship between the two countries flourished under Egyptian President Anwar Sadat when they signed the Alexandria Agreement on their political and economic integration in February 1974 followed by a joint defense and security cooperation, which was the strongest between Egypt and any other country (Khālid 2003, 173). In the same year, Sadat and Nimeiri signed an accord that launched the construction of the Jonglei Canal to divert water downstream from the Sudd wetlands/swamps of South Sudan. However, southern rebels forced the project to a halt when the civil war reignited in South Sudan.

A stalwart United States ally during the Cold War, Sudan under Nimeiri followed Egypt in expelling its Soviet military advisers in June 1977 and replacing them with Egyptians, Chinese, and Yugoslavs (Hoffmann and Fleron 1971, 498-499). Good relations with Egypt, the United States, and Saudi Arabia made Sudan the second-largest African recipient of US aid after Egypt. Nevertheless, the Egypt–Sudan relations hit a new low as Brigadier Umar Hasan al-Bashir (hereafter, Bashir) overthrew the democratically elected coalition government of Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi on June 30, 1989, which dissolved the parliament and banned all political parties. The National Islamic Front (NIF) instigated the coup, which later evolved into the National Congress Party (NCP).

5. Egypt and Revolutionary Sudan in the 1990s

The new military regime under Bashir established an Islamic republic with external revolutionary agendas that sought to undermine the stability of other states in the region, including Mubarak of Egypt. Bashir's Islamist foreign policy led him to an alliance with Hasan al-Turabi, a prominent Islamist ideologue of the NIF who supplied the ideological underpinnings of the new regime and considered the Iranian revolution a model (Burr and Collins 2003). The new regime embarked on a multi-pronged strategy of power consolidation

by enforcing a fully-fledged Islamization project at home called the Civilization Project (*al-Mashro' al-Hadari*) and the so-called Empowerment and Solidification Policy (*Siyasat al-Tamkeen*), which aimed to suppress dissent by placing loyalists in the highest military and civilian leadership positions (Gallab 2016, 116-18). The regime strategy aimed to create a dedicated and loyal ideological cadre of fighters to coup-proof itself and consolidate its rule.

On the external front, the regime sought to export its *Islamic revolution* and purge the Arab world of what it called *corrupt secular governments* by supporting Islamists throughout the region. Hasan al-Turabi had ambitious plans to change regimes in neighboring countries and across the Muslim world to Islamist-oriented ones. To achieve this goal, he established the Popular Arab and Islamic Congress in Khartoum in 1991 by inviting prominent opposition leaders from these countries to Sudan and providing Islamist groups with a safe haven for the majority of the 1990s. Cairo's fear of Sudan expanding its Islamist ideology in the region coincided with the emergence of the militant Islamic group known as *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* in Egypt during much of the 1990s. As a spate of attacks by militant groups devastated the tourism industry in Egypt, Cairo watched with alarm as Khartoum imposed strict sharia law on Muslims and Christians alike, hosted Osama Bin Laden of Al-Qaeda, provided refuge and training to militant Egyptian Islamists, and declared a brutal war with the south of Sudan under the pretext of *Jihad* (De Waal and Salam 2004).

The 1989 Islamist revolution and its ideological underpinnings brought Sudan into deep trouble with its neighbors and made Sudan isolated on the regional and international scenes. Bashir was further isolated for supporting the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991, thus losing US military and financial assistance. Sudan instead partnered with Iran, the regional adversary of the US, Saudi Arabia, and UAE. The two states reached a security pact by which Tehran provided Khartoum with oil, weapons, and financial assistance (Tekle 1996, 503-504). These developments isolated the Bashir regime from the west and its Arab and African neighbors and cut the regime off from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and foreign investments (Kevane and Gray 1995, 274). Sudanese-Egyptian relations got palpably worse when a Sudanese-backed militant Islamist group in 1995 attempted to assassinate former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa. Egypt accused the Sudanese government, particularly Hasan al-Turabi, of involvement in the assassination attempt while the Ethiopian government severed diplomatic relations with Sudan. In response, Egypt managed to have the United Nations Security Council impose sanctions on Sudan which the USA later added to its list of State Sponsors of Terrorism (Woodward 2016, 30-31). When in 1992, a Canadian oil

company received a concession from Sudan to conduct oil exploration in the disputed Halaib Triangle region, Cairo swiftly deployed its troops to annex the area (Barltrop 2011, 115). Since then, Sudan has failed to restore its sovereignty over the region.

The material power and international alliances of Egypt succeeded in containing and isolating the regime in Khartoum throughout the 1990s. Despite escalating bilateral tensions, Sudanese officials failed to implement their threat of interfering with the flow of the Nile River to resolve the Halaib border dispute (Adar and Check 2011, 52). However, Sudan succeeded in challenging the status quo of the regional order that Egypt wanted to maintain. Furthermore, Sudan undermined the security of the Mubarak regime by supporting Islamist militant groups and aspiring to build a united Muslim front against the United States and its allies in the region. Importantly, deterioration in relations between Egypt and Sudan further distanced the former from the Nile Basin and Africa. Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011) became mainly preoccupied with the maintenance of regime security and hold on power than with foreign policy, which especially aimed to preserve the status quo to solidify its alliance with the United States and meet the badly needed economic development at home (Shama 2013, 41-42). Egypt displayed little enthusiasm for the African Union and viewed Africa through a security prism. After the assassination attempt on his life in 1995, Mubarak ceased attending African summits except that in Abuja in 2005 (Landsberg and Van Wyk 2012, 245). During these summits, Ethiopia rallied upstream Nile Basin countries to review the 1929 and 1959 NWAs and obtain recognition of their right to demand equal share and utilization of the Nile waters.

4.1. Adjustments in Sudan's Policy Toward Egypt

The second decade of Bashir's rule witnessed dramatic shifts in the foreign policy in Sudan. Isolated and under mounting international pressure, Bashir realized that entering an alliance with Egypt's adversaries was economically and politically unsustainable. The only way for Khartoum to manage its deteriorating economy and change its status as an international *pariah* after years of isolation was to mend its relations with Egypt and its allies. The regime began to modify the domestic and external manifestations of its ideology, such as support for Islamists, to expand the flow of aid and funds from regional and international actors. At home, Bashir adopted a series of pragmatic decisions to please Cairo and consolidate his political power. The rise of factional fighting between Turabi and NIF core activists on the one hand and Bashir and his followers in the NIF and the armed forces on the other hand triggered these decisions. After

months of increasing political tension, Bashir's faction strengthened its grip on power by removing Turabi and his faction (Verhoeven 2013). Furthermore, Osama Bin Laden and a number of Islamic groups and al-Jihad leaders were asked to leave Sudan. Such moves served as a signal to the West and other regional powers that the Bashir regime had cut ties with radical elements represented by Turabi and his cohort. In response, Egypt rallied the Gulf Arab states and other African countries behind Bashir's new alignments. Another factor underlying the political shift initiated by Bashir also deserved attention. Sudan resumed exporting crude oil in 1999 from the war-torn region of South Sudan with help from China.⁵ Turabi's removal and the economic opportunity provided by oil revenues enabled Bashir to bring Sudan into closer integration with the world economy, withstand Western sanctions, and expand oil exploration agreements with Western companies (Toft 2010, 138).

Bilateral relations between Sudan and Egypt improved in 1999, when Khartoum transferred to Cairo a suspect in the attempted assassination of Mubarak and arrested Hasan al-Turabi. Sudan's moves signaled a retreat from its confrontational Islamist foreign policy toward Egypt and the region. In 2000, Khartoum and Cairo exchanged ambassadors after a five-year break. In September 2001, with Egyptian support, the UN Security Council voted to lift its sanctions on Sudan.⁶ The attacks of September 11, 2001, on World Trade Center and the subsequent US strategy of military intervention against "rouge states" pushed Sudan's political elite to mend relations with the US by providing information on Islamist networks and individuals. The removal of al-Turabi was also essential to holding peace talks with the Sudanese People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) which later led to the peace process (De Waal 2004) that culminated in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005. Bashir took further steps to end the isolation of Sudan by agreeing to the principle of self-determination for the people of Southern Sudan. That led to the Machakos Protocol of July 2002, which was signed between the Congress National Party (NCP) and the SPLM/A. Bashir's unprecedented compromise of accepting the possibility of southern secession, as an outcome of the peace process, led to improved relations between Khartoum and Washington.

⁵ For a detailed account of Sudan-China relations, see Daniel Large and Luke A Patey (eds.), 2011, *Sudan Looks East: China, India & the Politics of Asian Alternatives* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer Ltd), especially Daniel Large's contribution in chapter eight and Daniel Large, 2007, "China and the Changing Context of Development in Sudan," *Development* 50, 57-62. I suggest that Chinese interests did affect the decision-making process in Sudan and pushed it toward a more rational foreign policy.

⁶ "Security Council Lifts Sanctions against Sudan," *United Nations*, September 28, 2001.

In addition, continued progress on the southern question pushed Western countries to engage with Khartoum and compromise with Bashir to bring the CPA to a successful conclusion.

For decades, Egypt could exert a considerable influence on the post-independent political development in Sudan due to the varied sources of power of the former. However, Egypt will see its influence diminished on Sudan due to domestic security challenges, geopolitical alignments in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, and regime survival strategies. As the following sections demonstrate, this scenario will adversely influence the decades-long Egyptian–Sudanese hydropolitical alliance in the Nile Basin.

5. Egypt and Sudan After the 2010–2011 Arab Uprisings

The last decade of the rule of Hosni Mubarak witnessed mounting political disruption within Egypt, which culminated in an uprising on January 25, 2011, that forced Mubarak to step down on February 11, 2011. The uprising ended authoritarian stability and ushered in a turbulent *transition* presided by the armed forces, which exacerbated the economic woes of Egypt and increased its dependence on foreign powers and external sources of financing from the Gulf states and international financial institutions.⁷

Bashir was one of the first heads of state to visit Cairo and express his support for the *revolution* by sending 5000 cows as a gift to Egypt to resolve meat shortage. Khartoum welcomed change in Cairo for several reasons. First, Egypt was more preoccupied with domestic challenges and political pressures in the aftermath of the revolution and was unable to interfere in the internal affairs in Sudan. In fact, nearly two weeks after the fall of Mubarak, Burundi joined the Nile Cooperative Framework Agreement, which Egypt opposed (*Ahram Online*, March 10, 2011). The most serious threat to Egypt was when Ethiopia announced plans in April 2011 to build the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which was the largest hydroelectric power project in Africa and located 20 km from its border with Sudan. With a total storage capacity of 74 BCM, the dam is expected to generate 5,000 to 6,000 MW, which is three times more than the capacity of the AHD in Egypt. However, the announcement of the GERD, just two months after Mubarak’s fall and three months before South Sudan’s

⁷ Whereas Qatar and Turkey gave strong financial support of almost \$8 billion and diplomatic backing to Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia pumped billions of dollars in the forms of investments and cash deposits to help stabilize al-Sisi’s regime.

independence⁸ marked a radical change in power relations between the upstream and downstream riparian states. In addition, Egypt had barely any role in the negotiation process that led to the secession of South Sudan in July 2011, which it had long opposed, fearing the emergence of a new riparian state in the Nile basin that would demand a share of the Nile's waters (Prendergast and Mozersky 2004, 72).

Second, Khartoum anticipated the ascent of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in a free and fair election and, hence, sought friendly relations with a likeminded Islamist regime in Cairo. Since the coup of 1989, the regime in Sudan was ruled by an alliance of military generals and Islamists, who shared their origins and ideology with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Third, by publicly expressing support for revolutions across the Arab region, declaring that he will not run for the 2015 presidential election, and promising to craft a new constitution after forming a new cabinet in which all political parties participate, Bashir sought to distance himself from regimes beset by popular protests (*Sudan Tribune*, November 23, 2011).

Bashir was a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood movement and provided refuge to many of its members in Sudan. However, the much-anticipated victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 2011 parliamentary election and 2012 presidential election did not result in a substantial improvement of the relations between Egypt and Sudan. Amr Darrag, Egypt's former Minister of Planning and International Cooperation in Morsi's government, argued that Egypt's foreign policy under Morsi continued to be controlled by the Egyptian military whose generals were worried about the shared Islamist background of both governments and Bashir's close ties with Iran.⁹ In fact, Egyptian–Sudanese relations under Morsi soured after Khartoum protested meetings that allegedly occurred between Darfur rebel leaders and Egyptian officials. Moreover, Khartoum accused Cairo of stalling the implementation of the Four Freedom Agreement.¹⁰ However, the unexpected advantage of frosty relations with Morsi's government rendered welcoming another major political change in Cairo easy for Bashir, namely, the military's ouster of elected President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013.

⁸ Based on the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Bashir regime and the southern rebel forces of SPLM, Sudan was split into Sudan and South Sudan in January 2011.

⁹ Author interview with Amr Darrag, Istanbul, February 22, 2018.

¹⁰ Signed in Cairo and published in the Official Gazette on January 9, 2004, the Four Freedoms Agreement guarantees to Egyptian and Sudanese citizens freedom of movement and residence, right to work and property in either country without a permit. The Agreement has not been seriously implemented.

The welcome given by Sudan regarding the ouster of Morsi led to the improvement of relations among Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf Arab patrons of Egypt, which consider the Muslim Brotherhood as an ideological and security threat to their rule and regional stability. Briefly before attending the greatly publicized Egypt Economic Development Conference, which was held in Sharm al-Sheikh in mid-March 2015, Bashir condemned the Muslim Brotherhood movement as a *terrorist organization* in an interview with the *Al-Ittihad*, a newspaper published in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). By doing so, Bashir joined the Saudi-led counter-revolutionary/anti-Muslim Brotherhood bloc in the Middle East and North Africa region along with the UAE. The Sudanese regime succeeded in benefiting from the post-2011 regional upheavals to boost its security and to position itself as an influential actor in regional politics. It signed several defense and economic agreements with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, helped Libyan rebels oust Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, and deployed thousands of Sudanese troops to join the 2015 Saudi-led war in Yemen. Meanwhile, Egypt was forced to prioritize between fighting against a long-running insurgency in Sinai and protecting its western border with Libya. Egypt frustrated Riyadh by calling for political dialogue, which severely limited its participation in the Yemen war to the symbolic deployment of air forces and naval ships. Egypt took this measure despite being closely allied with the Saudis, which generously backed the Sisi government with billions of dollars after the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in July 2013.

The Libyan uprising in 2011 provided Bashir with an opportunity to benefit from newly emerging patterns of changing international and regional alignments. The military and security forces of Sudan played a vital role in providing substantial political and military assistance to the post-Gaddafi National Transitional Council and deploying its forces in the southern part of Libya. Khartoum also coordinated its activities with NATO forces and provided its aircrafts with free access to Sudanese airspace. Moreover, Sudanese intelligence services provided information on targets inside Libya, which helped NATO conduct air strikes (De Waal 2013, 376-378). Bashir's perception of political threats and opportunities, which drove him to actively assist the rebels against Gaddafi in Libya, was informed by the following considerations. First, Bashir sought to maintain strong relations with Qatar, which was a major player in the anti-Gaddafi campaign and provided Khartoum over the years with substantial financial aid to overcome economic problems in the aftermath of the secession of South Sudan. Second, Sudan's cooperation with the NATO-led military campaign in Libya was an opportunity for Bashir to break away from its prolonged international isolation since 1993.

Third, by supporting the revolt and overthrow of Gaddafi's regime, Sudan sought to cut off the financial, military, and logistical support Libya provided to Darfur's armed groups over many years.¹¹ The Libyan war stirred further divisions between Sudan and Egypt, as they supported rival armed groups, at a time when the latter badly needed the former's support in the dispute with Ethiopia over the GERD.¹² In addition to their rivalry in Libya, other underlying causes of tension and conflict between Egypt and Sudan included Bashir's full endorsement of the GERD, Sudan's joint military exercises with Saudi Arabia, which coincided with the growing tension between Egypt and Saudi Arabia over Syria, and Sudan's expanding ties with Egypt's rivals, Qatar and Turkey.

5.1. Sudan's Endorsement of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

Since 2011, Sudan began changing its hydropolitical position toward the GERD. Sudan previously rejected not only the construction of the GERD but also all water project development on the tributaries upstream of the Nile.¹³ However, several factors contributed to the change in Sudan's hydropolitical position. First, in early May 2011, the transitional government in Egypt sent a 48-member popular diplomacy delegation to Addis Ababa to obtain assurance that the GERD would not affect the waters of Egypt. This initiative was followed by the visit of Egypt Prime Minister Essam Sharaf to Addis Ababa on May 13, 2011 (*Ahram*, May 13, 2011). Sudan was not included in the meetings and both countries agreed to form an international panel of experts to review the GERD. Later, the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation in Egypt visited Sudan on May 25, 2011 and notified Khartoum of the panel. The formation of the *international panel* was based on technical grounds without any legal framework, which would guarantee the allocation of Nile water shares prior to the completion of the GERD. In response, the chief negotiator and legal adviser in Sudan, Muhammad Mufti, resigned from the Sudanese delegation as a legal consultant in the GERD negotiation in 2011 and refused to participate in the international panel without a legal basis. In fact, the failure of the international panel to meet regularly signified the differences in opinion between Egypt and Sudan regarding affairs related to the Nile Basin. Crucially, bypassing the Sudanese

¹¹ Pike, John "Sudan-Libya Relations," *GlobalSecurity.org*.

¹² "Bashir accuses Egypt of arming Darfur rebels," *Daily Sabah*, 23 May 2017.

¹³ Author Interview with former Sudanese Minister of Irrigation and Water Resources, Kamal Ali Mohamed, December 28, 2019.

involvement fueled speculations in Sudan that Egypt was seeking for a unilateral deal with Ethiopia without considering Sudanese interests in the Nile waters (Charles 2018).

Second, the Islamist movement in Sudan, which continued to occupy an essential part of Bashir's ruling coalition until 2013, considered the military removal of Morsi as well as the quashing and banning of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a threat to its rule. In response, decision-makers in Khartoum sought to attain leverage over Egypt by siding with Ethiopia on the GERD issue. Third, influential members of the Sudanese economic elites concluded that the construction of mega water impoundment structures in Ethiopia would exert positive effects on the development of the agriculture and industry in Sudan. They argued that the GERD would regulate the Nile water flow and enable Sudan to utilize millions of hectares of uncultivated land and import electricity from hydropower in Ethiopia.¹⁴ However, Sudanese experts on water-resource management, who emphasized the political factors underlying Sudan's shifting position on the Nile, challenged such assumptions.¹⁵ Alternatively, Egypt had little room for maneuver following the military ouster of Morsi in 2013, which forced the African Union Peace and Security Council to suspend Egypt from participating in its activities until the *restoration of constitutional order*.¹⁶ The African Union (AU) was the only major international actor to sanction Egypt for Morsi's overthrow. Hence, Egypt prioritized the reversal of its suspension from the AU in negotiating an agreement with Ethiopia over the GERD. Crucially, Sudan's public support for the GERD in 2013 forced Egypt to seek a negotiated settlement, which decisively tipped the diplomatic balance of power in favor of Ethiopia as a result.¹⁷

Khartoum's endorsement of the GERD and the resultant hostile media campaigns between the two states brought Egyptian Sudanese relations to a new low. At the peak of their tensions, in January 2018, Sudan recalled Ambassador Abdel Mahmoud Abdel Halim in protest against massive anti-Sudan campaigns in Egyptian media, following reports that Egypt sidelined Sudan from talks with Ethiopia over the dam project (*Mada Masr*, 8 March 2018). Without Sudanese support, Egypt was in no position to pressure Ethiopia over the GERD. In fact, the

¹⁴ خط حدودي للربط الكهربائي بين السودان واثيوبيا (Electricity border line between Ethiopia and Sudan) *Arabi21*, 5 December 2019.

¹⁵ Author interviews with Haidar Yusuf, a Sudanese environmental expert and hydrologist, 25 December 2019, and Kamal Ali, former Sudanese minister of irrigation and water resources, 28 December 2019.

¹⁶ See "Communiqué of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (AU), at its 384th meeting on the situation in the Arab Republic of Egypt," July 5, 2013.

¹⁷ "No political motive" behind Sudan's support for Ethiopia's Nile dam: ambassador," *Sudan Tribune*, 14 December 2014.

Sudanese–Ethiopian rapprochement and convergence of interests on the GERD increased, which culminated in the establishment of a joint military force in August 2014 to secure their common border. This scenario forced Egypt to reach a compromise on the GERD to contain the loss of its dominant position over the hydropolitics of the Nile. On March 23, 2015, Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia met in Khartoum and signed a document entitled “The Declaration of Principles,”¹⁸ which accepted the GERD project and bestowed Ethiopia with the legal right and legitimacy to continue building the dam (Yihdego, Rieu-Clarke, and Cascão 2016). The agreement did not refer to the Nile Basin Initiative, which is an intergovernmental organization founded in 1999, and lacked any mutually accepted mechanisms for implementation and enforcement. Importantly, the agreement did not recognize Egypt’s past *rights* as claimed in the 1902 Treaty and other water agreements (1929 and 1959), or any defined water allocation or distribution policies with Ethiopia and Sudan after the completion of the GERD. In other words, Ethiopia succeeded in reducing the agenda of Egypt to negotiations over the timetable for filling its reservoir instead of the discourse on legal rights, *water security*, and water allocation, which was long held by Egypt.

5.2. Egypt and the Saudi Arabia–Sudan Realignment

Sudan’s shifting position in the Nile Basin can also be examined from the perspective of its increasing regional role in the post-Arab uprising context, in particular, its realignment with the regional alliance of Saudi Arabia. The relations between Sudan and Saudi Arabia witnessed a breakthrough in 2015, when the former participated militarily in the Saudi-led war in Yemen and eliminated all diplomatic relations with Iran. However, the relations between Saudi and Egypt reached their lowest point, when Egypt refused to engage in the Yemen war militarily and backed a Russian resolution in the UN on Syria, which removed the demand to end the air strikes on Aleppo. This placed Egypt at odds with Saudi Arabia, which opposed the support of Russia for Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. Saudi Arabia played a number of cards to pressure Egypt. For instance, Saudi Arabia gave implicit support for the GERD amidst strained relations with Egypt, when a high-level Saudi delegation visited Ethiopia in December 2016 and expressed their interest in supporting the dam project. The construction of the GERD on the Blue Nile is expected to increase irrigated agriculture in Sudan, which is an attractive sector for Saudi Arabia and public and private investments in other Gulf states who intend to achieve

¹⁸ “Full text of “Declaration of Principles” signed by Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia,” *Ahram Online*, 22 March 2015.

food security. In November 2015, Saudi Arabia agreed to provide Sudan with 1.7 billion USD for dam projects (*Sudan Tribune*, November 5, 2015). Expanding agricultural areas in Sudan implies that Khartoum would need much more than its current share of water allocated in the 1959 bilateral agreement, which evidently would be at the expense of the Egyptian share.

In fact, Sudan ranks first in Arab Gulf investments in agricultural projects and animal-based industries. Foreign countries, such as China and the Arab Gulf states, are building regional influence by supporting major hydraulic projects in Sudan to irrigate farms and generate electricity. Examples of these projects include the Merowe Dam in 2009, the heightening of the Roseires Dam in 2013, and food companies, such as the Kenana Sugar Company, which is a joint venture among the Sudanese government, the Kuwaiti government, and other state and corporate partners (Verhoeven 2016). Importantly, the investments of Gulf states in agriculture in Sudan and the increased dependence of Egypt on assistance from the Gulf region for economic and political stability gave Khartoum confidence to chart its Nile Basin policy away from Egypt. In addition, the Saudi endorsement of the GERD opened the way for Bashir (Sudan) to openly support the right of Ethiopia to the Nile waters.

The Saudi–Sudanese realignment following the Saudi-led war elevated the status of the Sudanese regime in the region. Since 2015, Riyadh increased military cooperation and joint military exercises with Khartoum. The “North Thunder” exercise on maneuvering in January 2016, the Navy joint exercise in the Red Sea on January 2017, and the 12-day joint air force exercise in Merwe, North Sudan, were clear signs that Saudi Arabia may help Sudan defend itself against any hostile Egyptian activities.¹⁹ Similarly, the expansion of Sudan of its bilateral relations with powerful states in the Middle East increased its regional leverage and emboldened Bashir to increasingly push over territorial disputes with Egypt. In so doing, Bashir aimed to divert internal discontent against the regime and deteriorating economic conditions to an external crisis by exploiting the anti-Egyptian popular sentiments in Sudan. During his visit to Addis Ababa in January 2017, Sudanese Foreign Minister Ibrahim Ghandour called for direct negotiations on the disputed territories with Egypt. Moreover, he protested the demarcation of the sea border between Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which recognized Egyptian sovereignty over the Halaib Triangle. Khartoum intensified its confrontational policy toward Egypt when it announced the ban on the import of Egyptian agricultural and animal products in 2017. The two countries also exchanged accusations of backing opposition groups in each other’s countries.

¹⁹ “The Growing Military Ties between Sudan and Saudi Arabia, *Israel Defense*,” April 23, 2017.

Furthermore, Cairo was alarmed when in December 2017 Sudan signed a 99-year lease of Suakin Island to Turkey, a key port in the Red Sea. After a few months Qatar reportedly agreed to provide Sudan 4 billion US dollars to develop Suakin (*Reuters*, 27 March 2018). The lease allows Turkey, which already has military bases in Somalia and Qatar, to enhance its strategic influence in the Red Sea area and develop military cooperation between the two states. These military bases give Turkey leverage over the freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and allows it to expand its financial interests. Crucially, the Turkish presence made the Egyptian Sudanese divide thornier with the current Nile water dispute. Egypt saw Qatar, Turkey, and Sudan as pro-Muslim Brotherhood countries and believed that their alliance would lead to closer ties between Sudan and Ethiopia, which would result in stepping up pressure on Egypt with respect to the Nile dispute. In fact, in May 2018, Sudan agreed on a deal that allowed the landlocked Ethiopia to take a stake in Sudan's largest sea gateway port of Port Sudan.²⁰ They also agreed in December 2019 to construct a cross-border oil joint pipeline to connect the two countries.²¹

However, the strategic reorientation or, at least, a diversification of the foreign relations of Sudan with Saudi Arabia and the regional rivals of Egypt was an insufficient condition for regime survival in Khartoum. The following section discusses the effects of key domestic and international factors that constrained the foreign policy of Sudan and reduced considerably Bashir's room for survival.

6. Internal and External Constraints on Sudan's Foreign Policy Behavior

In the previous sections, the study demonstrated how changes in the regional balance of power after the Arab uprisings provided Bashir's Sudan with several political opportunities for regime survival and strengthened its position in the hydropolitics of the Nile. However, Bashir's continued survival was contingent on satisfying opposing poles of power (Saudi Arabia and the UAE vs Turkey and Qatar), which were engaged in fierce regional rivalries in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. This section illustrates that important dynamics and interplays occurred between the domestic and international spheres, especially in terms of Bashir's survival strategies and its effect on the internal politics and foreign policy behavior of Sudan in the last years of his rule. This section reveals the external and internal factors that exerted severe effects on Bashir's behavior by examining the implications of three main issues,

²⁰ "Ethiopia to take a stake in Sudan's main sea gateway port," *Reuters*, May 2, 2018.

²¹ "Sudan, Ethiopia to construct a joint cross-border oil pipeline," *Construction Review Online*, October 17, 2019.

namely, the arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for Bashir; the 2017 Gulf crisis, which pitted Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar; and constraints to the normalization of relations between Sudan and the United States.

6.1. Bashir and the ICC

The 30-year reign of Bashir featured multiple civil wars on several fronts such as South Kordofan, Darfur, and the Blue Nile states. The most intense fighting began in February 2003 in the Darfur region of western Sudan when rebels launched an insurgency against the Sudanese government. Bashir responded with a brutal crackdown that killed more than 200,000 and forced millions from their homes. The ICC issued arrest warrants for Bashir on allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The arrest warrant created a new precedent for international law. For the first time since the beginning of the operation of the Hague tribunal in 2002, its prosecutors raised genocide charges against a sitting head of state. With the issuance of two ICC arrest warrants in March 2009 and May 2010, Bashir became the first head of state to be wanted by an international court. Despite the fact that the UN Security Council referred the situation in Darfur in 2005 to the ICC via Resolution 1593, Russia, China, the Arab League, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the African Union opposed the ICC arrest warrant for Bashir. These countries highlighted the potential negative impact of the indictment on the peace process in Darfur (Huikuri 2019, 262). Although Sudan is not a member state of the Rome Statute, as demonstrated in this section, the arrest warrants largely impacted the internal politics and foreign policy behavior of Sudan.

The timing of the arrest warrant was controversial because it coincided with preparations for the post-conflict election in Sudan, which was scheduled for April 2010 and a referendum regarding the possible secession of South Sudan in January 2011. The arrest warrant posed a threat to Bashir; however, he was aware that the international community needed the collaboration of his regime to ensure the completion of the north–south peace agreement and acceptance of the potential secession of South Sudan. Despite widespread reports of rigging, western powers, especially the United States, prioritized that that Sudanese regime enabled the referendum on the possible secession of South Sudan to occur as scheduled.²² In addition, Bashir found strong support from Ethiopia and the African Union, which mobilized the African continent against the ICC and its indictment of Bashir for being *anti-African* and *neo-colonial*.

²² “US official says Darfur’s Nur forfeited peace opportunity,” *Sudan Tribune*, March 13, 2010.

This scenario is another dimension of the context in which Bashir declared his endorsement of the GERD in Ethiopia and the position of the Nile River to expand his anti-ICC allies in Africa, which resulted in waning ties with Egypt. Ethiopia became the key regional ally for Khartoum, which mediated conflicts in South Sudan and provided peacekeepers in the disputed oil-rich region of Abyei between Sudan and South Sudan.

Domestically, the ICC indictment of Bashir created tension between the president and the influential members of his regime. After the arrest warrant, Bashir became increasingly isolated despite efforts to normalize relations with the west. Examples of these efforts include cooperating with the United States in its war on terrorism, providing valuable intelligence on al-Qaeda, combating migration to Europe, promising to play a constructive role in the post-Gaddafi Libyan conflict, and reaching peace with South Sudan. Crucially, the ICC-indicted Bashir became a burden on his regime, which aims to improve relations with the United States and other western powers. The Sudanese regime realized that Bashir had to step down voluntarily or by force to allow any major diplomatic breakthrough with the West. Thus, to protect himself from the ICC arrest warrant, Bashir needed to re-entrench his power. As a result, an intractable contradiction emerged between the personal interests of Bashir in sustaining himself in power and the interests of his regime in easing tension with the United States and lifting sanctions. This scenario led to the emergence of internal divisions within the ruling elite. Until 2011, the presidency, the ruling NCP, and security forces remained key pillars of regime stability. According to leaked documents in 2013 and 2014, the aforementioned institutions collaborated to solve problems and reach consensus on important guidelines regarding the decision-making process and implementation of foreign policy.²³ However, after the ICC issued its arrest warrant for Bashir, the decision-making process became concentrated in the hands of the president and his closest allies.

After the 2010 reelection, Bashir announced that he was not seeking reelection in 2015. Rabie Abdel-Aati, a senior NCP official, claimed that Bashir even offered to step down as head of the NCP to *democratize the county*. However, Abdel-Aati elucidated that Bashir was not under any pressure from the uprisings that were sweeping the region (*Sudan Tribune*, February 20, 2011). Notably, Bashir underwent surgery in November 2012, which also gave rise to speculations that he may step down from power at the 2015 election. These rumors were accompanied by increasing political uncertainty and intense factionalism in the NCP as

²³ “Leaked Document Alleges Sudan Planned Mass Murder,” *Medium*, February 28, 2015.

potential successors jockeyed for the presidency.²⁴ Internal divisions within the NCP further increased when Bashir announced in December 2014 that he would run for a new term to achieve a self-declared goal of completing the *economic and political renaissance* of Sudan. The refusal of influential leaders in the NCP, such as presidential assistant Nafie Ali Nafie and Vice President Ali Osman Taha, to nominate the incumbent president as the official candidate of the party for the 2015 presidential elections revealed the strained relations between Bashir and the NCP. A few months prior to the presidential election, Bashir approved constitutional amendments that aimed to strengthen his authority at the expense of the ruling NCP. The amendments afforded the president with the authority to appoint state governors who would be directly accountable to the executive and transformed the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) into a regular force to legitimize the creation of its militia, which is known as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).²⁵ These measures enabled Bashir to fragment the security forces and undermine their line of communication to coup-proof himself.

In other words, ICC indictment of Bashir complicated the power structure in Sudan. No longer trusting the ruling party, Bashir became increasingly preoccupied with his personal survival instead of the interests of the ruling regime. As a result, Bashir sought to sideline all potential rivals to prevent them from plotting together. Senior NCP members were sacked or appointed in less important positions in 2013 and 2014 after opposing Bashir's desire and eventual selection as the candidate of the ruling party for the presidency. In early 2018, Bashir sacked the Army Chief of Staff, General Emad al-Din Adawi and Intelligence Chief Mohamed Atta as part of a *major* shake-up. In June of the same year, Minister of Foreign Affairs Professor Ibrahim Ghandour was fired shortly after successfully breaking the international isolation of the regime by convincing the United States to lift its economic sanctions on Sudan. In addition, major reshuffles in the government consolidated the power of the beleaguered president against his party. First, the RSF, which is a paramilitary force under the command of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, began operating under the direct supervision of the office of the president. In so doing, Bashir aimed to counterbalance the power of the NISS and the Security Armed Forces, where an opposition faction of senior NCP officials exercised strong influence. In other words, the RSF assumed the role of protecting Bashir who feared the declining loyalty of the military. Second, Bashir appointed a few of his relatives to influential government posts regardless of competence or ability. In June 2018, Mutaz Musa, a cousin of Bashir, was appointed as Prime

²⁴ "Analysis: Sudan's Bashir plays to hardliners to stem succession debate," *Reuters*, July 3, 2013.

²⁵ "Sudan's NUP rejects constitutional amendments," *Sudan Tribune*, January 7, 2015.

Minister, and Kamal Hassan Bikheit, another cousin, was assigned to the post of the Head of Presidential Offices despite his Baathist orientation.²⁶ On February 22, 2019, First Vice President General Bakri Hassan Salih was replaced by Military Intelligence Chief Awad Ibn Ouf, and Ahmad Haroun was appointed as acting chief of the NCP until the next convention of the party; both were indicted by ICC for war crimes.²⁷ These reshuffles were intended to ensure that officials who were similarly indicted for war crimes would not betray Bashir. Paradoxically, the survival strategy of Bashir, that is, eliminating internationally accepted officials, who enjoyed popularity at home and abroad, intensified his international isolation and internal dissent.

6.2. Bashir and the Gulf Crisis

In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain (followed by Egypt) cut diplomatic ties with Qatar and imposed a comprehensive sea, air, and land blockade, accused Doha of supporting Iran and financing terrorist organizations, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other Islamic groups in the region. The crisis shed light on a multifaceted and complicated geopolitical rivalry and competition between Arab Gulf states for allies and influence in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. As such, the crisis fundamentally changed the existing alliance structure of the GCC, which was previously considered the most resilient in an unstable Middle East. The crisis also turned into a proxy between Ankara and Riyadh, when the former sided with Qatar and accelerated its deployment of troops to Doha. The governments in Turkey and Qatar shared an affinity for Islamism and opposition of the military government of Egypt and enjoyed strong influence in Sudan. Additionally, Iran supported Doha and provided substitutes for embargoed food exports. This situation indirectly strengthened a Turkish–Iranian rapprochement despite their disparities regarding Syria and Iraq. The opposing sides in the crisis pressured their allies to take sides in the conflict.

Although Egypt joined the blockade and severed its diplomatic ties with Qatar, Sudan took a neutral stance by seeking a mediating role to avoid alienating any of them. However, Saudi Arabia and UAE perceived that Bashir opted not to break from its longstanding ally in Doha. Neutrality was a two-edged sword. On the one hand, Qatar was Bashir’s strong financial and political partner for decades. Over the years, Doha helped Bashir overcome many economic

²⁶ “Sudan’s Omar Al Bashir sacks entire cabinet, appoints new PM,” *The National*, September 10, 2018.

²⁷ *Arab News*, March 3, 2019; “Sudan's President Bashir hands party leadership to newly appointed deputy,” *Financial Times*, March 1, 2019.

and political crises²⁸ and sponsored a long and complex peace process to end the armed conflict in Darfur by pledging 500 USD million toward the Darfur Development Strategy to finance reconstruction in Darfur. On the other hand, Sudan's alliance with Saudi Arabia was critical for its ailing economy, because the country lost the majority of its oil revenues after South Sudan seceded in 2011. As previously mentioned, Saudi Arabia became one of the largest financial supporters of the regime in Khartoum as a reward for the decision of the latter to join its military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen in 2015 and severe ties with Iran. The Saudi-led military coalition began bombing Yemen in 2015 and Sudan deployed tens of thousands of Sudanese fighters to the war. In addition, by maintaining a strong alliance with Saudi Arabia and commitment to counter Iran in the region, Sudan expected Riyadh and the UAE to persuade Washington to lift its economic sanctions and remove Sudan from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Domestically, by remaining neutral during the Gulf crisis, Bashir also intended to avoid backlash from Islamist movements at home, which made a strong base of regime support in Khartoum and maintained strong links with Qatar. Although siding with Saudi Arabia would turn Islamists at home against Bashir, siding with Qatar would potentially undermine the relations of Sudan with the west and complicate the prospect of lifting the United States sanctions. Faced with this dilemma, Bashir maintained a neutral position and offered to mediate the dispute along with Kuwait and Oman. However, by committing himself to neither camp, Bashir exposed himself to the risk of losing continued financial and diplomatic support from Saudis and the Emiratis. They both wanted Bashir to join their camp against Qatar and crack down on Islamists at home and within the region. When the economic crisis that engulfed Sudan deteriorated under the pressure of acute liquidity shortage in late 2018, Saudi Arabia and the UAE did not step in to shore up the Bashir regime. Instead, the UAE decided to pressure Bashir by halting fuel supplies to Sudan in December 2018.²⁹ Bashir's mishandling of the relationship with the UAE and Saudi Arabia eventually led to his downfall in 2019. Saudi Arabia and the UAE pledged their strong support for the military government of the country only after his ouster. In conclusion, regional dynamics and shifting alignments in the Middle East led not only to new opportunities for Bashir but also to important risks that undermined his ability to play off the regional and international actors against one another to ensure his survival.

²⁸ Doha initially stood by the Sudanese regime during the 2019 anti-government popular protests which led to the Bashir's downfall.

²⁹ "Abandoned by the UAE, Sudan's Bashir was destined to fall" *Reuters*, July 3, 2019.

6.3. Sudan–United States Relations: Between Domestic and International Constraints

The United States–Sudan relations improved under Bashir; however, the ICC indictment constituted a major obstacle to rapprochement efforts between the two states. Increasingly coming under domestic pressure to hold Bashir accountable for war crimes, the US administration and European governments could not push for the full normalization of relations with Sudan until and unless Bashir steps down. Recognition of this reality motivated Bashir to seek ways to cement his authority. In the aftermath of the lifting of sanctions, Washington signaled a clear preference for an alternative leader to assume power in Khartoum as a precondition for further progress toward the normalization of relations. US Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan visited Khartoum on November 17, 2017 but did not meet with Bashir. Instead, he met with then Sudanese Foreign Minister Ibrahim Ghandour and First Vice President and Prime Minister General Bakri Hassan Saleh. Sullivan’s visit sent a strong message to Bashir about the preferred choice of Washington in leadership in Sudan and its opposition to Bashir’s candidacy for the 2020 presidential election. In response, Bashir addressed large crowds in the Gazira State in central Sudan and declared his support for the candidacy of Mohamed Tahir Eila for the 2020 presidential election. Bashir aimed to send an unequivocal message to his Cabinet Ministers that he is the one who will choose the candidate of the ruling party for the 2020 presidential election.

On November 23, 2017, only a few days after Sullivan’s visit to Khartoum, Bashir visited Russia and asked President Vladimir Putin for protection from the interference and *aggressive acts* of the United States. He offered Russia a military base on the coast of the Red Sea and praised the role of Russia in Syria.³⁰ In fact, one year later, Bashir became the first Arab president to visit Syria since the war broke out in 2011. Bashir’s tactic was a sign of increasingly desperate struggle for survival. His policies also reflected factional quarrels within the ruling regime in Sudan. Bashir’s visit to Moscow and condemnation of the United States occurred a few weeks after the latter lifted its sanction on Khartoum in October 2017. At the same time, negotiations between the United States and the Sudanese government were underway for the second phase of talks on the full normalization of bilateral relations and the removal of Sudan from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism. Crucially, Bashir’s visit to Moscow posed a challenge to his relations with GCC member states, which are Sudan’s largest

³⁰ “Sudan’s President Bashir asks Putin for ‘protection’ from ‘aggressive’ US,” *France 24*, November 23, 2017; “Sudan’s PCP criticizes al-Bashir remarks against the U.S.” *Sudan Tribune*, November 26, 2017.

financial donors, particularly when he declared his support for Russia in Syria and expressed opposition to any Arab war with Iran.

Bashir's survival strategies created a serious fissure within the regime. Prominent members in the ruling party and security forces, who formed the backbone of the Sudanese regime, distanced themselves from Bashir in an effort to seek better relations with the United States. In this manner, the isolation imposed by the West could be broken, and the country can be integrated with the rest of the world. However, other factions of the regime deemed that ties with Qatar and Turkey as well as solidarity with the Muslim Brotherhood networks are crucial for keeping internal rivals at bay and ensuring regime security. Intra-elite competition and factional conflicts within the regime tactically and in the short term widened Bashir's scope for playing them against one another to remain in power. However, he strategically mismanaged his relations with the rapidly changing political landscape in Sudan, regional patrons (mainly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar) and the United States. As a result, Sudan was unable to achieve any significant diplomatic breakthrough with the United States government under leadership of Bashir.

Ironically, Bashir's tactics of fragmenting the security forces and undermining their line of communication to coup-proof himself by empowering paramilitary forces or the RSF, came back to haunt him. Following the widespread protests in 2019, Bashir asked for Egyptian support for his rule. Out of a fear of a potential ripple effect if the Sudanese protesters succeeded in toppling Bashir, Egypt backed Bashir. Cairo hoped that support for Bashir will lead Sudan to withdraw support for the GERD and force the Sudanese government to trade Egyptian support for territorial concessions over the disputed Halaib Triangle.³¹ Ironically, however, during a popular uprising, Saudi Arabia and the UAE backed RSF under the command of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, which joined the army in deposing Bashir on April 11, 2019, and emerged as key a player in the ruling Transitional Military Council.

7. Conclusion

This paper examined the mechanism in which geopolitical competition and constantly shifting domestic, economic, and geopolitical interests in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa continue to reconfigure hydropolitical interactions in the Nile Basin since 2011. The study employed a multidisciplinary approach by drawing upon FHH and the politics of regime

³¹ Mahmoud, Khaled. "What Sisi Wants from Sudan," February 14, 2019, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

survival to examine the decline of Egyptian hydrohegemony and Sudan's shift in hydropolitical position away from Egypt between 2011 and 2019. The study argued that FHH is useful for understanding the relations between Egypt and Sudan and other riparian states to a certain extent. Studies that consider the impact of regime security and leadership survival on the formation of hydropolitical interactions in the Nile Basin and the foreign policy behavior of riparian states, particularly Egypt and Sudan, are lacking. Although the FHH identifies and prioritizes a range of concerns from a state-centric perspective, which emphasizes the important role of *national* interests and conceptualizes governments as purposeful actors, it neglects other important variables, such as the interests of the ruling elite and the salience of regime security, which can also influence and shape the conduct of hydropolitics among riparian states. Our argument is particularly relevant to the authoritarian context, in which the most pressing threats to the ruling regime stem from internal political challenges such as mass uprisings, rebellions, and military coups.

The academic literature and news coverage of the current water dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia overlook the strategic position of Sudan as a midstream state that accelerated the hydropolitical shift of the basin toward Ethiopia. Egypt long enjoyed a near hydromonopoly in the Nile through water agreements with and influence over Sudan despite the lack of agreement from upper riparian states. The adherence and unconditional support of Sudan for the *historic rights* of Egypt in the Nile waters enabled the latter to maintain a water regime that was beneficial to the country for decades. The 2011 uprising in Egypt and the ensuing political and economic turmoil, as well as the rising power of upstream riparian states enabled Sudan to break away from its previous alliance with Egypt. However, we find that the shifting hydropolitical position of Sudan was mainly driven by the survival strategies of Bashir, instead of national interests, which also exerted effects on the foreign policy behavior of Sudan toward Egypt and Ethiopia. Moreover, these strategies created fissures within the Sudanese regime, undermined Bashir's ability to respond to the changing political landscape in Sudan, and satisfy rival poles of power in the region, which led to his downfall in 2019.

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