

# 10. How ‘soft’ power shapes transboundary water interaction

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With monotonous regularity since the late 1980s nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), politicians or think tanks have predicted a water war. Recently, a UK minister predicted war in the coming decades (Harvey 2012). No such thing has happened, though, and prominent water scholars have argued a war fought strictly over water is unlikely in the future (Wolf 1996; Allan 2001).

That does not mean there is peace and harmony among co-riparians. Power differences and latent conflicts persist, usually under the radar of the basin hegemon (or dominant power), but in full view of those who live their effects. The state of affairs in many transboundary basins can be characterised as a mix of cooperation and conflict (Mirumachi and Allan 2007), with those benefitting from the status quo emphasising the former. Our first article on the subject called this the ‘ugly’ side of cooperation (Zeitoun and Mirumachi 2008).

A clue to understanding this situation, we argue in its sequel (Zeitoun et al. 2011), is to look at what lies beneath: how power is exercised. The ‘water wars’ discourse has simplistically focused on the exercise of hard power, predominantly violence and coercion. Both philosophical reasoning (Hannah Arendt) and empirically grounded hydropolitical work (Dinar 2009) has shown, however, that rule based on fear and brute power has little hope in the long term. Some kind of legitimacy and consent is needed to perpetuate any skewed transboundary water arrangement based on unequal power relations.

Empirically, we find relations between riparians to be governed by a wider spectrum of power instruments, from side payments and bribery to persuasion and inciting desire to emulating success. This wide range of nonviolent, co-optative power manifestations is collectively known as ‘soft’ power: getting others to want what you want. Nye (1990) sought to explain how relations

can be peaceful through the power of attraction without the need for a threat of violence. We find, however, that soft power not only contains the positive power of attraction, but also its negative, repulsion away from certain agendas and issues, and towards maintenance of a biased status quo.

Nye was reiterating Machiavelli's understanding of power as a centaur, half man (arguably rational), half horse (based on strength). He was far more optimistic than Machiavelli about human progress towards eternal peace, buttressed by freedom and trade. Fragmented evidence to support this hope exists in transboundary water contexts; many treaties never really came off the ground, and even in highly integrated Europe, diplomatic crises over water are not unheard of (Warner and van Buuren 2009).

A soft power perspective may not yet be sophisticated enough to explain power relations between riparians. Our analytical framework of 'hydro-hegemony' (Zeitoun and Warner 2006) highlights how conflict, even if it is not open and visible, can be structurally present between riparians (and groundwater users from transboundary aquifers). In an integrated transboundary water configuration, interests between dominant and subordinate are harmonious; in a distributed power configuration, they are fundamentally at odds. Cooperation by the non-hegemonic actor, or its compliance with certain states of affairs, does not necessarily mean consensus. Successful framing by the stronger party of the common good (soft power), however, can result in power differences going uncontested and countries signing treaties that bring highly differential benefits. Unqualified calls for and claims to transboundary cooperation 'of any sort, no matter how slight' (UNDP 2006) are therefore as wrongheaded as are alarms over water wars. Policy and programs promoting unqualified 'cooperation' were criticised on the grounds that negative forms of cooperation need reform or resolution, not management or encouragement.

The 'hydro-hegemony' framework is indebted to the Gramscian concept of hegemony as ingrained in material and ideational structures pervading social systems (Selby 2005; Davidson-Harden et al. 2007). River negotiations are multi-level power games (Warner 2008) in which state representatives are the lynchpin. Representatives of hydro-hegemony can deny there being conflict and appear magnanimous, while knowing full well that the odds are stacked in their favour. State representatives may frame their water interest in non-contestable security terms (Buzan et al. 1998). Whether picked up, amplified and given material support, or purposely backgrounded, such discursive framing of issues matters.

A useful example is that of Egypt's long claim of a veto on any upstream 'arrest' of Nile waters for consumptive use, through irrigation reservoirs, distribution systems and the like. Underpinned by one of the largest armies in the region, the

national government has previously declared upstream dam-building to be a *casus belli* (a legitimate reason to start a war) should it lead to lower inflow into Egypt (Warner et al. 2012). It could be argued that this threat has prevented Ethiopia, the Blue Nile upstream power, from building dams in the past; alternatively there is also the material reality that the country could hardly fund and realise its own dam infrastructure. This penury is worsened by the stipulation of (once) key multilateral funders that they will not fund transboundary projects lacking the endorsement of all riparian states. The balance of power in favour of Egypt relies on the moral and material support of the United States, to which it is one of the biggest allies in the region.

But it's not all about hard power. After Gamel Abdel Nasser's 1952 revolution, the nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the building of the Aswan Dam, Egypt became a respected southern leader. The government organised or condoned several cooperative, technical and political water fora about the river Nile (UNDUGU, TECCONILE, Nile 2002) on the unstated premise that these bodies would not tamper with Egypt's self-ascribed water rights, laid down in treaties agreed with Sudan, but none of the other Nile riparians, in 1929 and 1959. The government of Anwar Sadat signed a Camp David treaty with Israel, which anointed the country as a 'peacemaker' in the eyes of influential superpowers, and the country has seen prominent nationals (Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Mahmoud Abu-Zeid) ascend to leadership positions in multilateral institutions, bestowing upon Egypt an aura of authority and legitimacy in the United Nations (UN) world order. In everyday interaction, upstream states have for decades refrained from taking action against Egypt's interest without prodding.

A recent shift in the Nilotic water-sharing status quo over the past (half-)decade, however, seems to reflect a shift in the hegemonic power balance. Egypt is arguably not as important to American interests as it used to be, while its upstream neighbours do not appear to be as intimidated by Egypt as they once were. Opposition to Egypt's unilateral hegemony have been voiced by Tanzania and Uganda since the 1960s. It was not until 2010 that the upstream states signed their own agreement without Egypt (Nicol and Cascao 2011).

External direct investment, especially from China and the Gulf states, has dramatically improved the bargaining and economic position of upstream countries. China has used its own soft power through the provision of investment to these countries: buying oil in Sudan, supporting the giant Grand Ethiopian Renaissance (Millennium) Dam, and investing in land in several Nile states. China's non-interference in political relations and the persuasive example of its own economic success raises goodwill. Moreover, Egypt's relative international standing as an 'example' has also seen a slide, following allegations of human-rights violations, alienation from Israel, and failing megaprojects under Hosni Mubarak.

Nile politics telescoped in 2011. While Egypt was enmeshed in its February revolution, South Sudan gained independence and Ethiopia inaugurated its big dam. Ethiopia's 6000 megawatt hydropower dam, with an estimated cost of US\$4.5 billion, is largely self-funded from bonds and taxes. Two Egyptian governments have since protested loudly, first using the language of *casus belli*, then calling for negotiation and finally, in 2013, proposing joint funding. As the dam is located only 20 kilometres from the Ethio-Sudanese border, a dam collapse would flood the Sudanese capital of Khartoum. Overall, however, Sudan stands to benefit from the dam in terms of better flood regulation, irrigation and a nearby source of hydropower, and would gain from approximation to Ethiopia. Sudan, however, has so far sided with Egypt in its refusal to sign the Nile treaty, at least officially, suggesting Egypt's soft power is still palpable if dwindling (Hamzawy 2010). Egypt currently has little realistic alternative to joining the new arena of Nile negotiations and no longer holds de-facto veto power over major upstream projects like Ethiopia's dam.

Power dynamics, such as those noted in the above example, show that no matter how hegemonic or even dominant a state, its hard and soft power are ultimately fluid. Examination of the soft-power subtext helps us understand what's going on in basins around the world. Similar analyses are not only applicable to the familiarly contentious Euphrates/Tigris, Jordan, Ganges, Brahmaputra and Colorado basins, but also to seemingly peaceful European transboundary streams such as the Rhine and Scheldt (Zeitoun and Warner 2006, Warner and van Buuren 2009). The incorporation of soft power into the analysis of conflicts in hegemonic contexts provides insight into the choices riparian states (can) make or avoid in their transboundary water interaction; and into how negotiations and treaties can lead towards conflict management but not necessarily to conflict resolution.

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This text taken from *Global Water: Issues and Insights* by R. Quentin Grafton, Paul Wyrwoll, Chris White and David Allendes, published May 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.