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Examining the Political Disputes Surrounding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) Project & the US Foreign Policy Direction in the Greater Horn of Africa, especially towards Ethiopia and Egypt

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***Abstract:** The longstanding dispute between Ethiopia, on the one hand, and Egypt and Sudan, on the other hand, over the equitable allocation of the Nile River waters dates to 2011, when Ethiopia, the upstream state, began the construction of a*

multimillion-dollar dam, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Of the two main Nile River tributaries (i.e., the Blue Nile and the White Nile), the Blue Nile, which hosts the GERD project, is the most vital contributor to the Nile waters.

The GERD, expected to cost around USD4 billion, is meant for hydroelectricity generation with an expected capacity of 6,000 megawatts (United Nations Security Council) (UNSC) Report, September 15, 2021). Ethiopia argues that the GERD is part of the broader growth agenda to drive industrialization and alleviate energy poverty, dividends which will also accrue to neighbours. Although the Nile is shared by eleven countries within the Greater Horn of Africa region, the GERD dispute is mainly confined to Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. Tensions over potential water scarcity escalated in 2019 when Ethiopia announced that it would, in 2020, begin to fill its 18.4 billion cubic meter GERD reservoir. Sudan and Egypt argued that the GERD poses a threat to their agricultural peasants, who largely depend on the stable flow of the Nile waters. This study critically examines the political intrigues surrounding the GERD disputes using a realist international relations (IR) theoretical conception of foreign policy as a framework of analysis of state behavior vis-à-vis national interest pursuits. In particular, the study examines whether the involvement of the US as a mediator in this matter has eased or exacerbated the tensions. The GERD disputes could have ripple effects that cut across the Greater Horn of Africa region on human security. The study recommends that a sustainable solution to this challenge should be channelled through local conflict management institutions because such a position aligns with the aims and vision of the African Renaissance agenda. This agenda (a homegrown program) seeks to promote Africa's growth and security using local solutions, rather than relying on foreign mediations that often transition into foreign meddling in local affairs. Data for this study were

gathered through document analysis and online descriptive analyses of literature on the geopolitics of the Greater Horn of Africa region.

Keywords: *AU, Egypt, Ethiopia, GERD, Greater Horn of Africa, Nile River, Sudan, US.*

Introduction

This study aims to examine the political intrigues surrounding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) among three main parties, i.e., Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan, and to interrogate the role of the US mediatory efforts to establish whether such involvement eased or simply exacerbated those tensions. Since the commencement of the GERD construction in 2011, the project has experienced several phases of cooperation and disagreements (UNSC Report, September 15, 2021). The Nile River has two main tributaries: the Blue Nile, which starts from Lake Tana in Ethiopia, and the White Nile, which starts from Lake Victoria in Uganda. The Blue Nile, which hosts the GERD, is more essential as it contributes at least 85% of the water flow to the downstream states of Sudan and Egypt (International Rivers, January 24, 2014).

The research questions for this study are: (1) What reciprocal benefits will accrue to stakeholders once the GERD is fully operational? (2) To what extent have foreign mediators, in this case, the US, helped or exacerbated the GERD disputes? (3) From a postcolonial analytical prism, have African states learnt historical lessons from foreign mediations, or otherwise, foreign meddling in local conflicts?

In 2010, a year before the beginning of the GERD construction, the Entebbe

Agreement of 2010 was signed in Uganda by six upstream states of Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Burundi, and Kenya to increase cooperation in sustaining the Nile water security. The Entebbe treaty also *invalidated* the colonial treaty of 1929 (signed between Egypt and Britain), and the treaty of 1959 (signed between Egypt and Sudan), all of which were endorsed by colonial Britain. Those treaties had granted Egypt and Sudan the authority to *veto* any Nile River project that they deemed could potentially reduce/disrupt water flow downstream. The fear of water disruption emanates from the fact that peasant agriculture is the main economic activity among the downstream states. As such, a reduction in the water flow could negatively affect their irrigated farmlands that solely depend on the stability of the Nile water flow (Suter, 2016). Thus, Sudan and Egypt rejected the Entebbe Agreement, arguing that the upstream states should seek their consent before any projects on the Nile could be undertaken. In this way, they could have the opportunity to evaluate potential negative effects that may affect their irrigated farmlands (Bayeh, 2016).

Despite those disagreements, in 2011, the three main contenders (Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan) agreed to study the impact of the GERD project through a Tripartite National Committee (TNC), and in the years that followed, the parties continued to negotiate through the TNC framework. In 2012, a panel of experts, the International Panel of Experts (IPoE), was constituted to get impartial sharing of information on the impact assessments, such as the potential benefits and challenges of the GERD construction. The IPoE consisted of ten expert representatives, two from each of the three states, plus four experts from abroad/overseas. One of the most significant findings of their final report of 2013 was that if the filling of the

GERD reservoir were to be done during the years of average rainfall, there would be little or no impact on the downstream states. Likewise, if the dam were to be filled during the years of poor rainfall, the downstream states would be adversely affected (International Panel of Experts (IPoE) Report, 2013).

In 2014, the three states further reaffirmed their cooperation through the Malabo Declaration, signed in Equatorial Guinea, and later in 2015, they held further negotiations that resulted in the Khartoum Agreement, or otherwise commonly known as the Declaration of Principles (DoP) of 2015 in Sudan (Middle East Eye, 2020). Under the DoP, Ethiopia was mandated to take utmost measures that would not negatively affect the downstream states. Thus, continuous negotiations and reviews were encouraged (Hagos, 2015). But around 2019, a major issue arose when Ethiopia announced that it would begin to fill up the GERD dam with or without an agreement/consent from others. This prompted Egypt to issue a warning against any attempts to commence the filling of the dam before a final deal could be agreed upon. Because of this development, Egypt sought the interpretation and enforcement of Article 10 of the DoP, which stipulates that if the three countries could not find a solution to their dispute, they could request third parties to mediate. This led Egypt to seek the mediatory involvement of the US.

When the US came on board to mediate, several rounds of peace talks from 2019 to 2020 were held but also ended without any concrete agreement, thus allowing tensions to continue simmering. Intervention talks by the AU from 2020 to 2021, chaired by South Africa (as AU Chair in 2020) and by the DR Congo (as AU Chair in 2021), also did not yield much. These talks (mediated separately by the US and the AU) collapsed mainly because of neutrality concerns. On the one hand, Egypt and Sudan saw South Africa and DR Congo as seemingly leaning towards Ethiopia's

interests. On the other hand, Ethiopia felt pressured to give away its right to use the Nile waters, and hence, saw the US involvement in mediation as an attempt to advance Egypt's interests at the expense of the Ethiopian state (Institute for Security Studies, 2021).

In 2021, Egypt proposed a quartet mediation by the UN, the US, the European Union (EU), and the AU, but this proposal was rejected by Ethiopia. While Ethiopia was not necessarily opposed to 'foreign' mediatory efforts, it nevertheless preferred that the role of outsiders be limited to observer status with no direct involvement in the talks (UNSC Report, September 15, 2021).

From a political perspective, it can be inferred that the challenge in resolving the GERD disputes seems to have been compounded by the persistent politicization of the matter beyond the AU sphere. For instance, Egypt and Sudan seem to prefer outside intervention over the GERD talks instead of local mechanisms and seem to rely much on the 1929 and 1959 colonial treaties. It can be argued that the absence of an international legal document that can bind the three main contenders has created a challenge in the resolution process (Helal & Bekhit, 2023). Also, while Egypt and Sudan favor the idea of having a binding legal document, Ethiopia prefers the resolution of those disputes through negotiations, especially using the AU route. Ethiopia also argues that it has a sovereign claim of *natural rights* over the Blue Nile, whose source begins on its soil (Dahir, 2020).

Ganesh Pangare, the Asia-Pacific Regional Director of the International Water Association, describes transboundary water governance and hydro diplomacy as a mechanism for states to balance national sovereignty interests with regional cooperation. Before the emergence of the concept of hydro diplomacy, the main avenues for achieving cooperation largely depended on multilateral treaties and

coalitions (International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2012). The most prominent of such at the international level was the 1997 United Nations (UN) Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. This convention sets out norms governing basin-specific agreements, particularly equitable utilization of shared water courses, and an obligation to avoid significant harm to other riparian states' interests (McCaffrey & Sinjela, 1998, pp.97-98). Because the enforcement mechanisms are not strong, the concept of hydro diplomacy becomes a relevant avenue. What underlies the prevailing conception of hydro diplomacy is the acceptance of cooperation as a necessary good for the diplomatic management of transboundary waterways (International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2012).

Regarding the legal relevance of the 1929 and 1959 colonial treaties that Egypt and Sudan often refer to, Lumumba (2007, p. 19) argues that the enforcement of those two treaties may not be guaranteed. For instance, Article 34 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties of 1969 states in part that:

... a treaty does not create either rights or obligations for a third state without its consent, and this principle does not provide any exceptions in the case of obligations, although certain obligations contained in a treaty may bind third states independently as rules of international customary law (United Nations, 1969).

Although the talks over the GERD have remained largely without a breakthrough, there have been some notable achievements in those dialogues. For instance, the negotiations resulted in the formation of the IPoE in 2012 and the DoP in 2015, as part of ongoing negotiations. The remaining issues relate to drought mitigation, the safety of the dam, and whether the overall agreements should be

legally binding or not. Because of these unresolved issues, the involvement of the AU as a continental and local institution remains an important requirement in the resolution process (Kasimbazi & Bamwine, 2021).

To successfully resolve this problem, stakeholders need to see Africa's position in the current world order through an IR theoretical lens that centers on homegrown initiatives as solutions to local problems. This will allow them to see the intersections of the local and global more broadly, thereby developing a unique approach to the study of Africa as a place in the global village and at the same time, as a place of the global village (Abrahamsen, 2000). It can be argued that by now, Africans should have been more cautious on how the *international* is articulated in African settings and appreciate that the understanding of development must necessarily be a construction that focuses on addressing local issues with local knowledge systems, rather than a focus on the *international* for solutions. In other words, the successes of the international community are themselves products of successes at the local and regional levels. Thus, rather than rely on so-called universally valid procedures, the continent should instead seek avenues that respond to Africa's unique needs and challenges (ibid).

Drawing on African local approaches to conflict resolution can foster an understanding of regional interests beyond narrow national pursuits. As such, mediation efforts focused on comradeship, solidarity, and coexistence would provide equitable dividends to all stakeholders. Social solidarity asserts that Africans are historically linked (Kasimbazi & Bamwine, 2021). Additionally, the African philosophical concept of *Ubuntu*, on peace-making, argues for a win-win solution in dispute resolution where the assumed *losers* are accorded face-saving avenues due to a shared destiny. Ubuntu contends that unity of purpose, cooperation, and a sense

of belonging promote a better platform for managing disputes than liberal prejudiced approaches, which prefer to publicize and shame certain stakeholders. Shaming other parties renders the negotiations futile because the shamed parties no longer have a sense of belonging (Ntshangase, 2025).

Paul-Simon Handy, the East African Regional Director at the Institute for Strategic Studies, argues that the AU's main leverage lies in its diplomatic legitimacy. In this context, diplomatic efforts could formulate the concept of shared interests instead of the domination of one by the other. For instance, the AU can effectively tackle conflicts by formulating punitive and accountability measures that could compel stakeholders to choose the path of peaceful negotiations. Also, institutions such as the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights can be strengthened to make their decisions binding. For sustainable peace, the GERD conflict requires endogenous mechanisms of peacebuilding. Normative changes in national and foreign policy direction towards conflict resolution are needed, especially given the changing international order towards regional integration (Institute for Security Studies, 2025; Newslive SA, May 23, 2025).

However, the AU currently faces the challenge of the absence of strong leadership committed to upholding the ideals of the African Renaissance agenda. The AU – save for its name – is an entity that seems no longer fit for purpose. In its current configuration, where the institution is marred by ineptitude and indifference, it would be naïve for African citizens to take such an organization seriously. Most African leaders who are supposed to be key in shaping the AU policies are themselves spent forces who have gone way past their *sell-by date*, and whose only interest in clinging on to power is for self-aggrandizement rather than genuine service to the population.

Thabo Mbeki, the former President of South Africa, also laments the aloofness of the AU when he argues that ‘we have an AU commission that does not even know what its duties, rights, and obligations are, until someone reminds them with a ten-page letter detailing their duties’ (Newslive SA, May 23, 2025). There is an urgent need for a mindset change because, while today, many Africans are educated with various skills, they do not have the value system that previous leaders had; leaders such as Julius Nyerere, Thomas Sankara, and Patrice Lumumba. Mbeki’s main argument is that the future of Africa cannot continue to be decided by outsiders; instead, it must be shaped by the efforts and decisions of the Africans themselves. Africa needs more Nyereres. Also, Mbeki emphasizes the crucial need for inclusive governance where the agency to marshal the African Renaissance agenda is focused on a bottom-up approach (which includes voices of the youth) rather than the current top-down approach (Newslive SA, May 23, 2025).

Despite the current gloomy picture about the AU, there seems to be a glimpse of hope for stronger leadership emerging outside of the AU circus, which are gradually arising from the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) made up of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The AES leaders have not just removed the puppet regimes; they are rewriting Africa’s political order by embarking upon tangible local developmental programs that correspond to local needs. The gradual and incremental economic growth within the AES has exposed colonial and imperial fallacies that insinuate that Africa needs grand foreign IR theories and superfluous economic programs to grow (Simuziya, 2025).

The picture below shows the Nile River basin covering eleven countries.

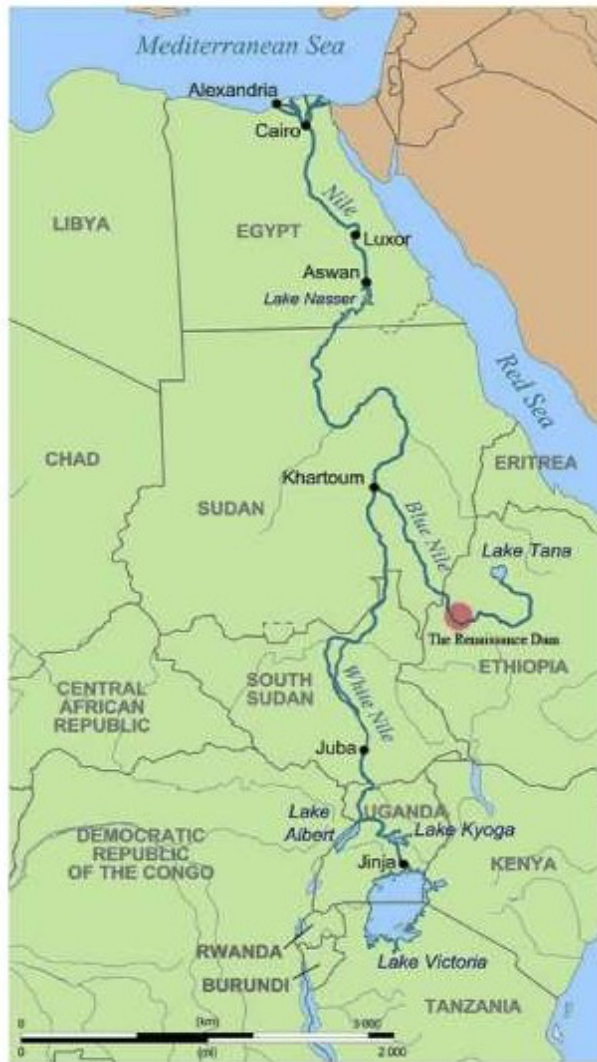


Figure 1. The spread of the Nile River in eleven countries with two main tributaries (The Blue Nile emanating from Lake Tana in Ethiopia, and the White Nile, originating from Lake Victoria in Uganda).

Source: Modern Ghana (Lawrence Freeman), 2021.

The picture below shows an elevated aerial view of the GERD project in Ethiopia.



Figure 2. Aerial view of the multimillion-dollar GERD project.

Source: Horn Review, 2021.

In discussing the themes of this study, the paper uses an IR realist theoretical conception of foreign policy as a framework of understanding conflict, national interests, and state behavior in an international system. Data supporting the study's inferences were gathered through document analysis and online descriptive analyses of the themes covering human security and the geopolitics of the Greater Horn of Africa region.

Theoretical conceptions of foreign policy informed by Realist IR perspectives & why African states should tailor their foreign policies based on homegrown African conceptions

Political science and IR Scholars are unanimous about the necessity of a foreign policy for each state since no state would function in isolation, both economically and politically. The term *foreign policy* has been defined in various ways by scholars; however, it is certain that foreign policy is about a state's behavior towards other states in the context of political, economic, and social gains (Neack, 2008). Rosenau (1966) defined foreign policy as a set of goals, means, strategies, tactical structures, and processes of attaining state objectives in IR.

Gove (1981) opined that foreign policy is the underlying basic direction of a sovereign state in its interaction with states, typically manifested in aspects of peace, war, neutrality, alliances, trade, or combinations of these approaches.

Padelford et al. (1976) argued that the state's foreign policy is the totality of its dealings with the external environment. It is the overall result of the process by which a state translates its broadly conceived goals and interests into specific courses of action to achieve its objectives and interests. Broadly interpreted, foreign policy aims to attain its conceived goals while prioritizing national interests. Foreign policy is determined by several elements, which can be classified as objective and subjective. The objective factors determine the general framework within which the foreign policy is to operate. The subjective factors determine the specific response to a given situation.

Foreign policy is mainly anchored within the IR realist paradigm, for realism is based on the state-centric belief that the state is the primary material power and security actor in international affairs. In political science, the understanding of *power*

should not necessarily be confused with *authority*. Power is the capacity of a state to dominate and influence the course of political action in IR, while authority is seen within the context of legitimacy. As such, power contains a more expansive political thread as it can be used illegitimately (Mearsheimer, 2003).

The classical realist scholarship of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Weber, Carr, and Morgenthau sees the world as an empirical constellation rather than as a normative frame, and that the causes of war and conflict emanate from imperfect human nature (Morgenthau, 1956, p.4). While classical realism emphasizes human nature as the focal point of political analysis, a strand within that realm, the neorealist school, locates causation in the anarchical international system (Brown & Ainley, 2005, p. 92). Thus, neorealists such as Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2003) marginally depart from the orthodox explanations that classical realists provide on politics. Influenced by the behaviourist revolution, neorealists have endeavored to construct a more scientific approach towards the study of state behavior in IR rather than confining the explanations of state behavior to subjective assessments of IR (Jackson & Sorensen, 2007, p. 75).

For neorealists, conflicts among states occur mainly due to the anarchical international system. Also, neorealists assert that the state is a rational actor that pursues national interests within the realm of its power capabilities as it competes with other states in an anarchical international system. Because states rely on selfhelp, their foreign policy behavior is determined by global systemic pressures rather than ideological aspects and domestic persuasions (Fareed, 1992). The relative amount of power resources that states possess will shape the magnitude and ambition of their foreign policy. As their relative power increases, states will seek more influence beyond their borders, and as the power decreases, their actions and goals

will be scaled down accordingly. Realists of all strands assume that relations between states are motivated by the pursuit of power, and as such, realist approaches remain the core of the entire subject of international relations, even if they do not provide a full-scale understanding of the intrigues of IR (Buzan, 1996, p. 47).

A state is considered hegemonic if it can assume a regional leadership position utilizing its power rather than solely relying on intimidation or its authority. The degree of hegemony obtained depends on a dominant state's capacity to expend its power by exploiting its existing material and non-material capabilities. The current hydro hegemony dispute over the GERD between Ethiopia and Egypt is a case in point: while Egypt has been attempting to preserve its long-time hydro hegemonic position in the Nile basin, another riparian state (Ethiopia) has been challenging that hegemonic position (Zeitoun et al., 2017). Both Ethiopia and Egypt are political *giants*. On the one hand, Egypt is long known as a land of great civilizations, as evidenced by its monuments such as the majestic Pyramids of Giza, the Great Sphinx, and other similar cultural artefacts. Egypt is also one of the pioneer countries in the fields of medicine, astronomy, and mathematics. Today, Egypt stands as one of the key international tourist hot spots on the African continent (Chen, 2022).

On the other hand, Ethiopia's pedigree is also rooted in its great historical achievements that surpass an average African state. For instance, Ethiopia is one of the centres of ancient civilizations, as evidenced by ingenious architectural works such as the legendary medieval Orthodox church of St. George at Lalibela and the Aksum Obelisk, a 1,700-year-old slender architectural monument which some African historians suggest represents *immortality*. Also of historical significance is that Ethiopia did not fall into the Western colonialism trap, as most African states did. Furthermore, Ethiopia today hosts the AU headquarters and boasts of having the

biggest and most reliable airline transport and air link hub in Africa. These feats demonstrate that the Ethiopian state is a force to be reckoned with (Jalu & Simuziya, 2025).

Regarding the politics of hydro hegemony over the GERD, hegemony can either positively or negatively affect the weaker riparian states in a basin. For instance, employing its governing capacity, a hydro hegemon can provide stability, order, and greater assurance of water flow. However, in the Eastern Nile basin, the hydro hegemon (i.e., Egypt) had been suppressing upstream infrastructural development while improving its hydraulic infrastructure development using resource capture and reclamation. As a result, another riparian state (Ethiopia) started to challenge Egypt's hydro hegemony to bring a more equitable power regime in the Nile basin (Ali, 2023, p.301).

States' foreign policies change periodically, mainly to address the unfolding economic and political challenges. Hermann (1990, pp.3-4) identifies four graduated levels of such foreign policy change: (1) Adjustment changes – i.e., changes in the level and scope of receivers (2) Program changes, i.e., qualitative changes in the methods and means, (3) Problem/goal changes, i.e., where the initial problem or goal is replaced or forfeited, (4) International orientation changes, i.e., the redirection of a country's entire orientation toward global affairs, and a simultaneous shift in international roles/activities. The escalation of the US involvement in the Vietnamese War (1955 – 1975), followed by its extrication, provides an example that illustrates all four levels of graduate change discussed above.

Hermann (1990) also outlines other agents of major foreign policy change, such as (a) leader-driven, (b) bureaucratic advocacy, (c) domestic restructuring, and (d) external shock. Empirical studies show that even minor changes in leadership

often result in a foreign policy change. Leadership changes bring to the decision-making process new actors with a different set of beliefs, goals, ideas, and preferences. Even when there is continuity in basic approaches, the incoming political leaders can bring with them new ways of behavioural interactions with other states (Moon, 1985). Further, for mere political expediency, the incoming administrations can use policy changes to differentiate themselves from their predecessors in a bid to show that they are fulfilling the campaign social contracts with the population. Furthermore, foreign policy can also change midstream when a unique phenomenon occurs, such as how 9/11 reordered the US foreign policy (Macdonald, 2018).

However, critics of realist-centred foreign policies, such as neoliberals and constructivists, assert that the idea of the theory of an *anarchical world* as the source of problems is overstated: neoliberal scholars such as Robert Keohane, Joseph Nye, and John Ikenberry argue that international institutions can modify state behavior in IR. Institutions such as the UN, the EU, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) can progressively sway a state's policies (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Thus, for neoliberals, the realist grim view of interstate behavior due to anarchy underestimates the extent to which interdependence and cooperation exist among modern states and undervalues the human desire for peace. It is also argued that the notion of *anarchy* as realists frame it contains an arbitrary dialogue of state rivalry and conflict. Consequently, the strident concept of a realist discourse ultimately comes across as a self-fulfilling prophecy (ibid).

Others who criticize the foreign policies embedded in realist IR approaches are constructivist theorists such as Alexander Wendt, Nicholas Onuf, and Michael

Barnett, who argue that the anarchical makeup of the world is socially constructed by human beings acting on specific agendas to advance their (national) interests. While the interstate system may not have the guiding authority to enforce international law, anarchy, in the main, is ‘what states make of it’ (Wendt, 1992). Constructivists argue that the cynical theorizing of people within the realist paradigms needs to be discarded and replaced with a fresh communitarian theory of state cooperation in IR.

Voices from the Global South also argue that foreign policies anchored in Western IR realist strands have taken a hegemonic and domineering status in which Western theories and ideas are privileged while trashing aside all other knowledge systems from the Global South. As such, it can be argued that IR theories as they stand today are neither universal nor remarkably novel, as they have left out potential voices of reason that could provide alternative IR viewpoints that reflect the values and aspirations of Global South populations (Acharya & Buzan, 2017). The novelty of Global South knowledge systems lies in their local uniqueness and homegrown architecture. While some local experiences and knowledge systems remain orthodox, they are, nevertheless, viable vessels in resolving local challenges (including conflict resolution) in a sustainable way (Beckmann, 2024, pp. 1-2). Some African states appear to be in perpetual conflict with fellow African states because there is a mismatch between the cultural realities rooted in local frameworks of conflict management (which are often ignored) and the Western foreign policy ideologies rooted in IR realist approaches, which some African states prefer to rely upon. In other words, the disproportionate influence of the Anglo-American realist strands, i.e., the one-size-fits-all approach to foreign policy agendas, coupled with the Machiavellian objectives of winning at any cost, makes the attainment of peace a tall

order. As Beckmann (2024, p. 14) has observed, the realist-centred foreign policies should be exercised with utmost caution because ‘while it is a dangerous thing to be a Machiavelli, it is a disastrous thing to be a Machiavelli without *virtue*.’

For instance, powerful Western states often seem to view every problem in IR as requiring a military solution. Such self-serving and capitalist-driven dispositions are exactly the reason why most regions/countries that entertain Western involvement in their local affairs seem to be in perpetual conflict. In this context, the example of the US misadventure in Iraq in 2003 could not be more convincing.

Aside from the Iraq war being illegal (i.e., it was not sanctioned by the UN Security Council), the conduct of the US and British forces in torturing and abusing war prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Basra detention centres in Iraq was appalling. Many human rights advocates around the world wondered whether the Geneva Conventions of 1949 on the laws of war mean anything at all to the US and British governments. Such breaches by the US and Britain are not just about brushing aside international law; they are a methodical way of knocking down the rule of law, bit by bit, thus systematically dismantling the cornerstone of justice. What is even more incomprehensible is that those grotesque abuses of human rights were performed by countries that are members of the UN Security Council, and who frequently preach human rights and good governance to African countries (Simuziya, 2023a).

For instance, the US has used its foreign policy mantra of demanding ‘good governance’ practices to suspend Ethiopia from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) beneficiary countries, accusing it of not respecting human rights. AGOA is a US trade initiative meant to steer growth within the Sub-Saharan African states, but on condition that those African states adhere to good governance practices (Congressional Research Service, 2025). The contradiction of demanding human

rights adherence from others could not be starker: for you cannot preach water and drink wine.

Another prime example of US realist-based foreign policy disasters can be illustrated by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces intervention in Libya in 2011, where they toppled the Gaddafi regime and the eventual leadership void resulted in the de facto creation of a Libyan *failed state*, which has today become a haven for criminality. Under Gaddafi, Libya was arguably the most prosperous country in Africa, but today, the Libyan economy is in shambles, and the country has become a breeding ground for extremists, racketeers, money launderers, and human traffickers who continue to cause mayhem in the Sahel region. To date, Africa is still counting the cost arising from the fall of the Gaddafi regime due to the NATO intervention (Chengu, 2018; Simuziya, 2023a).

However, the critique of Western IR theories, especially realist-centred foreign policies, is not to suggest that everything about those theories is wrong. Indeed, the theories contain some valuable frames that are relevant to Global South polities, which Africans can benefit from; after all, knowledge has no geographical boundaries. But, in the main, the IR theories in their current configuration represent a kind of false universalism of the social and political world. These Western foreign policies have not just affected politics but have also affected other areas, such as academia, especially in publishing (Beckmann, 2024).

For instance, publishing and funding opportunities are mainly a preserve of Western scholars, where most publishing houses perform stringent gate-keeping practices or ideological biases that privilege and incentivize the writings of prototypical research that aligns with Western ideas and preferences. These gate-keeping agendas include high publication costs in so-called *higher-tier journals*,

which have resulted in many African researchers looking for alternative journals that are more flexible and more accommodating of critical views, especially about Western neocolonial practices. Often, critical writings or journal manuscripts that expose Western imperial practices and hypocrisy in Africa are branded as being ‘not scholarly’, or ‘not rooted in literature’, or ‘the methodology is not sufficient’, or ‘the topic is outside the scope of the aims of the journal’. These gate-keeping tactics are code words that silently say, *do not dare write about Western neocolonial practices*. Ironically, the so-called ‘rules of academic writing’ are determined by the West: that is, the West is both the judge and prosecutor in a case that requires global consensus, and this is supposed to be called democracy; the false democracy of imposing Western ideas on others. Habibie & Hultgren (2022) acknowledge that although forms of gate-keeping (such as peer-review in journals) are there to ensure that scientific work is properly filtered, they do carry connotations of Western neoliberal hegemonic dispositions.

Taken from this perspective, it can be argued that through various redlining and discriminatory practices, non-Western researchers, especially Africans, have effectively been relegated to the role of a practitioner who applies European ideas to local problems. In this way, the African researcher has essentially become a *native accomplice*, who has now become part of the problem rather than being part of the solution to Africa’s challenges (Simuziyya, 2025). Many within the IR spheres acknowledge that the core IR theories reflect a Western understanding of global politics, which deliberately casts aside African ideas and agency. The IR theories and foreign policy agendas are motivated mainly by the development of Western hegemony, as can be attested by the problematization of the concept of an *anarchical*



world (Acharya & Buzan, 2017). Beckmann summarizes these Western hegemonic and realist-centred foreign policy propositions by arguing that:

... obsession with great-power politics distorts analytical boundaries when considering the validity of theoretical assumptions. This is confirmed by Kenneth Waltz's admission that his 'balance of power theory' is predicated only on great-power states. This is because it would be 'as ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica as it would be to construct an economic theory of oligopolistic competition based on minor firms in a sector of an economy'. By the same token, Denmark, a country from the global North, *doesn't matter* due to its diminutive military and economic capabilities (Beckmann, 2024, pp. 4-5).

To be sure, IR theories, especially realism and its associated Western foreign policies, are steeped in entrenched whiteness, racism, bigotry, a white superiority complex, and blatant disregard for any African ideas and solutions. Desch (2008) asserted that non-inclusive practices and policies contradict the values of democracy, liberty, free choice, and respect for human dignity. Chinonye Chukwu, a US Black writer, put this argument more succinctly by saying, 'we live in a world and work in organizations that are so resolutely committed to upholding whiteness and perpetuating unabashed discriminatory practices towards people of colour' (The Standard, January 25, 2023).

In this context, IR theories are insufficient to explain the realities, aspirations, and experiences of the Global South populations. For this reason, Africans must be alert to Western powers' contradictory moralist discourses, especially on ideas

purporting to promote democracy and human rights, when in fact, behind the veil, there are ulterior motives aimed at perpetual control of the minds and destinies of Global South populations. Thus, Africans are implored to utilize homegrown ideas anchored on a postcolonial frame, which can ignite political consciousness among locals. While realism delves into tensions around power politics and national interests, postcolonial theory focuses on emancipatory pathways to international politics. As Tytar & Kostenko (2025) have argued, the utility of a postcolonial theory lies in its unwavering resolve to deconstruct imperial narratives that continue to subjugate the cultures of subaltern populations. This can be achieved, in part, through a thorough analysis of literary and artistic discourses.

Analysing the ontology of the GERD & the potential dividends for the Greater Horn of Africa region

The Nile basin is considered one of the most complex and unique river basins due to its massiveness and varying climate, hydrology, topography, and demography. This variation poses many challenges to managing the basin's transboundary water resources. Crucially, there is growing pressure from the ever-growing population, with increased poverty levels and climate change shocks resulting in shrinking water levels. This pressure also comes from the construction of dams and several irrigational agricultural development plans within the basin (Batisha, 2013).

The Nile, the longest river in the World, is approximately 6,650 km long and has a basin of 3.2 million square km shared among eleven countries (Ethiopia, Burundi, DR Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda). It is estimated that over 300 million live in the basins and rely on the Nile waters for their livelihood (International Rivers, January 24, 2014).

The USD 4 billion GERD project is built on the Blue Nile about 32 km east of the border of Sudan. The GERD is the largest hydropower project in Africa and is designed to generate an estimated 6,000 megawatts of hydroelectricity (Degefu & Goshu, 2021). The dam is 145 meters high and 1,708 meters long, with a reservoir that can hold more than 70 billion cubic meters of water. Upon completion, the dam will flood an area of 1,680 square km (International Rivers, January 24, 2014).

The picture below shows the area where the dam will flood.

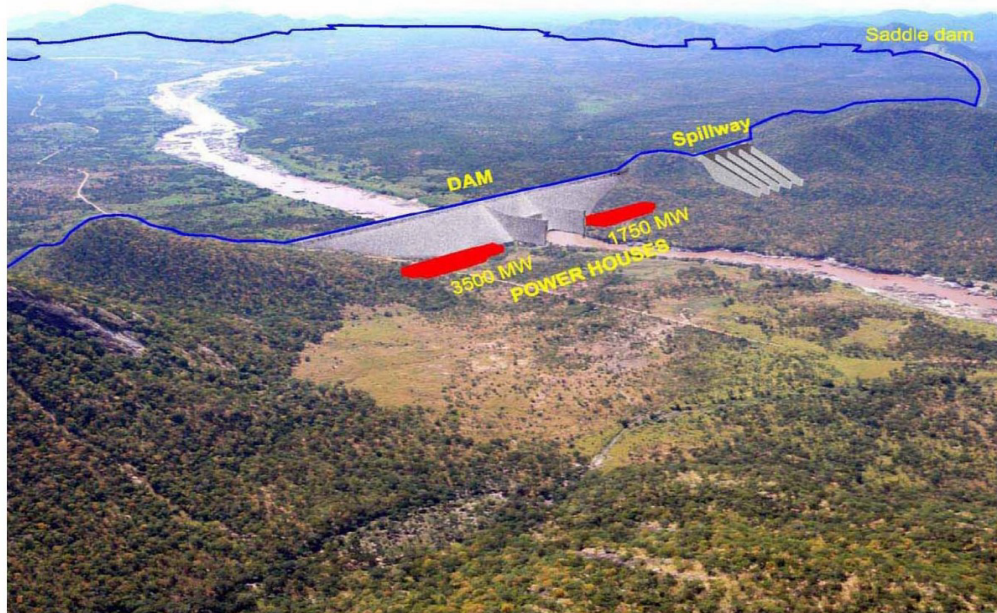


Figure 3. Rendering of the GERD. Source: International Rivers, 2014.

The Blue Nile (Eastern Nile basin) has about 85% of the flow of the Nile that originates from Ethiopia, whereas the White Nile (Eastern Equatorial Nile) has the remaining 15% flow. Thus, the Blue Nile contributes immensely to the sustainability of the downstream Aswan High Dam, the most vital dam in Egypt, which is located at Egypt's strategic southern gateway city of Aswan (Mulat & Moges, 2014).

Below is a map showing the locations of the Aswan High Dam in Egypt and the GERD in Ethiopia.



Figure 4. Location of the Aswan High Dam and the GERD.

Source: No More Pencils (David Bennett), 2019.

Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world with a Gross National Income per capita (GNI) of around USD 1,130, compared, for instance, to Egypt, whose GNI per capita is around USD 3,900, and South Africa, whose GNI per capita is around USD 6,750 (Statista, 2023). Currently, more than 60% of Ethiopia’s population has no access to an electricity supply and only depend on fuel wood for heating and other household uses. These statistics underscore the importance of the

GERD project as an avenue that will improve energy supply and boost industrialization (Thomson, 2006).

The energy sector is one of the least developed in Africa, especially in the Sub-Saharan region. The Africa Progress Report of 2015 indicates that Sub-Saharan Africa has a huge electricity deficit, where the grid has a power generation capacity of only 90 gigawatts (GW), and nearly half of it is in South Africa. Often, statistical figures tend to mask the real picture of Africa's energy poverty: the reality on the ground is that out of three people on the continent, two have no access to an electricity supply (Africa Progress Report, 2015). The World Bank report of 2022 suggests, for instance, that the average electricity consumption in Sub-Saharan Africa is only 383 kilowatt-hours (kWh) per capita per year. The same report suggests that in 2022, Ethiopia's consumption was a paltry 92 kWh per capita per year, compared, for instance, to South Africa, which consumed 3,358 kWh per capita per year (World Bank Group, 2025).

The World map below shows that Ethiopia is among the least developed countries in the World regarding electricity supply.

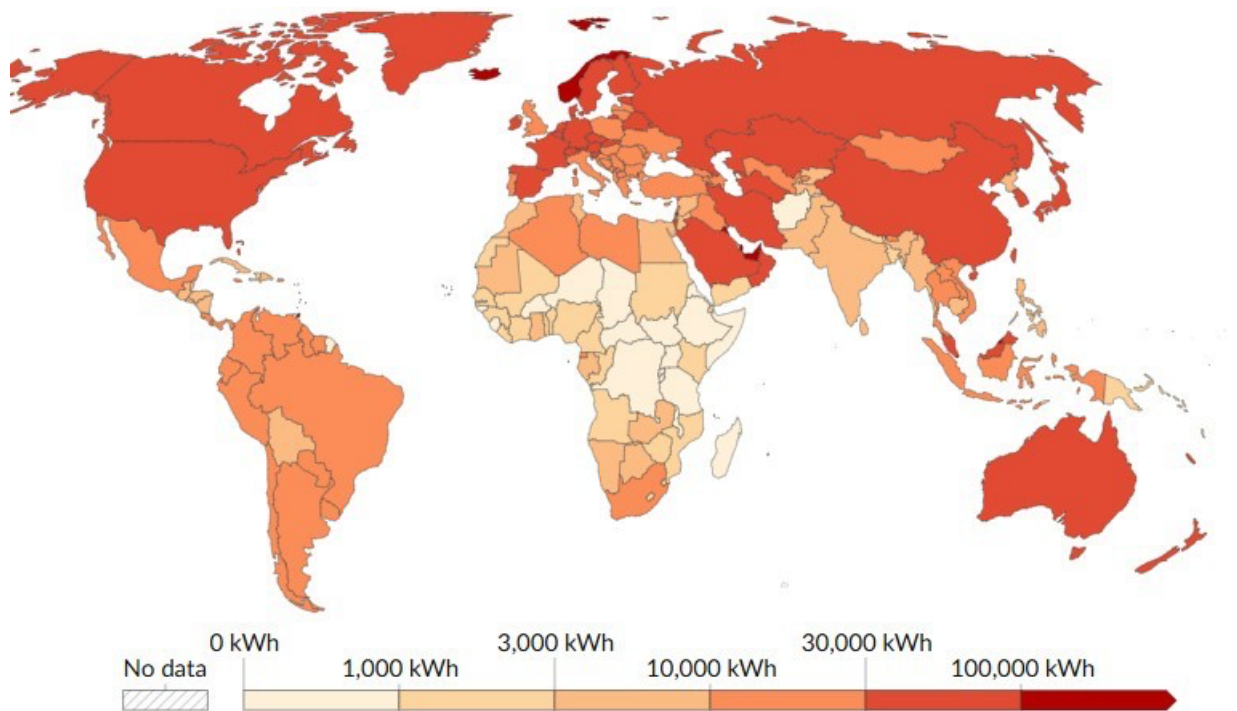


Figure 5. Electricity supply comparison per region, measured in kilowatthours per person.

Source: U.S Energy Information Administration, 2023.

Because of the disputes surrounding the GERD project, foreign investors were not keen to invest in the GERD project, fearing the potential risk of conflict in the region. This was because Egypt and Sudan had argued that the water that flows through more than one country is an international resource. As such, the resource must be governed by all parties concerned. International financial institutions, including the World Bank, declined to fund the project because they preferred that clearance must first be granted by the downstream states. But such clearance was not granted (Abteu & Dessu, pp. 161-162).

Egypt's main concern was that the filling of the dam would take many years, and hence, Egypt would not achieve the expected annual baseline capacity of 55.5 billion cubic meters of the Nile waters. Egypt also argued that although it has its dam (the Aswan High Dam) which enables it to conserve the Nile waters, its status as a downstream country means that it matters less how efficiently the Aswan High Dam is managed if water reaching it from the Blue Nile is not enough (Suter, 2016).

Ethiopia rejects Egypt's asserted rights to 55.5 billion cubic meters of the Nile waters per year, since this supposed right originates from the 1959 bilateral agreement between Egypt and Sudan, an agreement which Ethiopia was not party to, and not to mention that it is an agreement endorsed by colonial Britain (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2020).

Thus, due to external loan funding challenges, Ethiopia had to take a proactive and decisive step to commence the dam construction using its resources, generated mainly through government bonds (Fagerland, 2022). For Ethiopia, the GERD represents a crucial moment in its development history, acting as both a counterhegemonic power play as well to improve the energy deficiencies of the country. Ethiopia accuses Egypt of colonialism over the Nile water controls, especially the fact that Egypt pressured foreign funders not to support the GERD project, which led to Ethiopia raising its funds through national bonds. Thus, Ethiopia regards the GERD as a symbol of both Ethiopia's historical and contemporary resistance against outside interferences in its domestic affairs (Fagerland, 2022).

Since the 1950s, Ethiopia has rejected the 1929 and 1959 colonial treaties that Egypt and Sudan made with the backing of imperial Britain over the Nile water rights. Ethiopia contends that it has a sovereign right to develop water resources

within its borders. Further, many African countries (including those in the Nile basin), upon gaining independence from their colonizers, started to declare that they would not be bound by colonial treaties made by their former colonial masters under what is known as the *Nyerere Doctrine*. This doctrine, a brainchild of the former President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, asserts that independent African states should not be bound by colonial agreements they made with their colonial masters. The doctrine further asserts that any such agreement needs to be renegotiated due to the new country's status as a sovereign independent state. This is the basis upon which Ethiopia argues its point when Egypt and Sudan insist on the 1929 and 1959 treaties (Yacob, 2007; Makonnen, 1984).

Ethiopia has persistently argued that the GERD would also benefit the downstream countries, for instance, by removing up to more than 80% of silt and sedimentation in the water, and that the GERD would also regulate the steady flow of water throughout the year and avoid unexpected flooding in downstream states (Belachew, 2013). Despite these potential benefits, GERD remains the centre of contention among Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan. Ethiopia is adamant that the dam will not have any significant effect on Egypt's share of the Nile waters even during the initial stages of filling of the dam reservoir. Ethiopia continues to assert that the realization of the GERD will significantly uplift Ethiopia's economy; hence, the dam is a matter of life and death.

From an economic analytical lens, capital projects such as the GERD have a higher economic multiplier effect, hence have the capacity to alleviate poverty, which in turn would contribute to peacebuilding and state-building efforts. Development that has a trickle-down effect is itself a form of liberation, freedom, and peace. In this connection, the GERD electrification project can play a dual role

in boosting growth as well as creating an environment for peace in the Horn region at large (Amartya, 2001). It can be argued that development and poverty are two sides to the same coin, whereby both sides challenge each other. In comparative terms, between Africa and the West, the manifestation of poverty in the West and several other associated constraints encourage development as a solution. This is achieved, for instance, through technological innovations and infrastructural development. But in Africa, poverty - ironically - does not propel development, but instead hinders it. One area that has been identified as the core hindrance to Africa's growth is the lack of infrastructural development (Oyeshola, 2007, p. 553).

The GERD project, therefore, being an infrastructural project, is an economic imperative with the potential to increase Ethiopia's investment portfolio. Additionally, such developmental projects can galvanize the population around a unity of purpose, where every citizen sees themselves as beneficiaries of those ventures. From an economic standpoint, citizens in economically viable policies (i.e., beneficiaries of economic development) are less likely to engage in ethnic or nationalist rivalry politics. This is because their economic empowerment status works as an incentive for them to avoid engaging in rival activities that might only work to the detriment of their economic stability (Yacob, 2007; Oyeshola, 2007).

Because of the potential economic stakes that will accrue from the GERD project, engaging constructively with neighbouring states, especially Sudan and Egypt, could offer greater prospects for sustainable economic development through the spirit of give-and-take. Lack of political tolerance in the Horn region could work at cross purposes with the GERD project's wider vision of spreading growth dividends beyond the Ethiopian state. In other words, the absence of genuine

cooperation among the three main contenders could pose considerable odds on the long-term sustainability of regional security (Kasimbazi & Bamwine, 2021).

The fundamental aspect to note is that the Ethiopian government has presented the GERD as an ‘African project’ that would benefit all stakeholders. Within Ethiopia nowadays, the nationalistic pride trumps all alternative narratives, as exemplified by the hashtag #ItsMyDam that went viral on social media in solidarity with the GERD project. The hashtag, ‘It's My Dam’, has generated a tremendous sense of local ownership and inspired citizens across the board in support of the project. In a country deeply divided along political and ethnic lines, the GERD is the only factor that all Ethiopians seem to agree on. However, the successes of the Ethiopian government’s advocacy of the GERD project are not without their limits: the government cannot afford to make too many concessions over the GERD, otherwise it risks losing political legitimacy and popular support at home (The Amhara Media, March 31, 2024).

US foreign policy on the Greater Horn of Africa (especially with Ethiopia & Egypt)

The war on terror occasioned by 9/11 has been at the centre of US foreign policy and alliances in the world, especially by strengthening ties with countries perceived to be ‘more useful’ in the fight against terrorism. However, the US policy focus on counterterrorism has brought about an overlap between defence and development.

This overlap emanates from the hypothesis that resource-poor countries with ineffectual governance are more dangerous as potential havens for terrorist organizations than they are as breeding grounds for terrorism themselves. The

presence of the Al-Shabaab militant group in Somalia, the ethnic rivalries in Ethiopia, the army factions' skirmishes in Sudan, and the presence of pockets of Al-Qaeda operatives in Chad, internal extremist groups in Egypt are all worrisome to the US. Informed by a post 9/11 chronology of linking poorly governed states with terrorism, the US has taken a keen interest in the volatile Horn region as a likely haven and breeding ground for terror activities (Simuziya, 2023a). But currently, countering the influence of China in the Horn region seems to be the US's priority. It seems the US has come to perceive the rise of China and Russia, and not terrorism, as the biggest threat it is facing in the Horn region and beyond. This policy shift has been outlined in the 2018 US National Defence Strategy (Mehari, 2018, p.2).

Thus, countering the influence of its strategic rivals, especially China, reminiscent of the Cold War period rivalry, has led to increased US interest in the Horn of Africa. The rapidly growing economies of countries such as Malaysia, Japan, and China strategically compete with the US for the Horn of Africa region's energy and other natural resources. China poses a formidable challenge to US interests in the Horn region, particularly due to the intercontinental infrastructure development project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The mammoth scope of the BRI is such that it will potentially raise global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and contribute to improved trade deals. Importantly, the BRI will provide developing nations with the much-needed infrastructural development to accelerate local growth (Shah, 2023).

The picture below shows the intercontinental stretch of the BRI project, which aims to build a network of railroads and shipping lanes that will span over 100 countries, mainly across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.

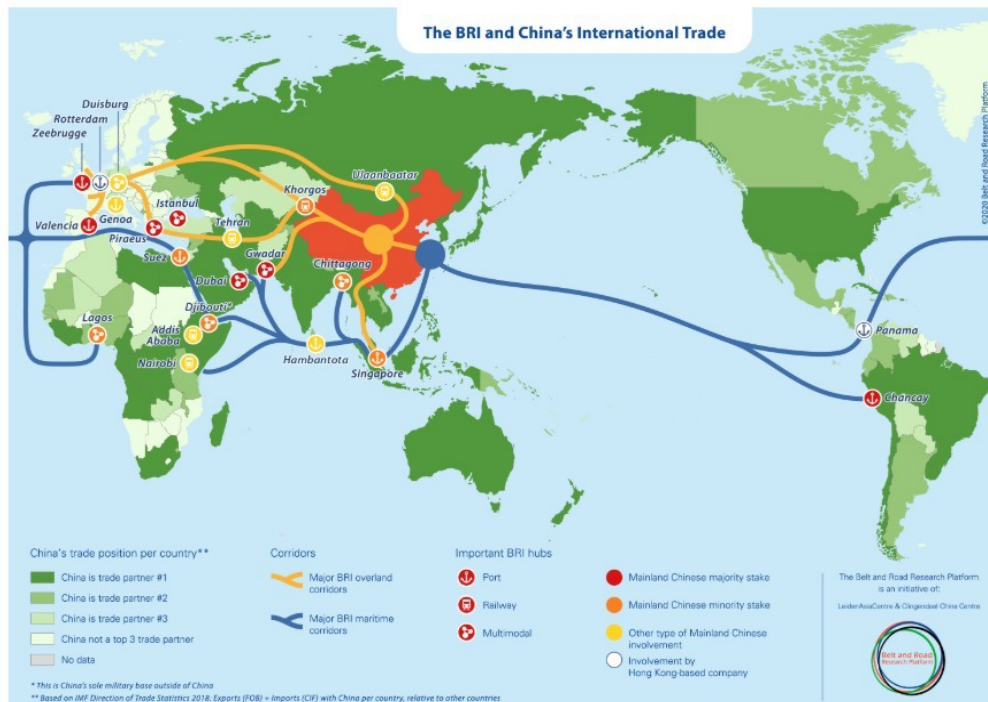


Figure 6. The BRI project.

Source: Clingendael, 2021.

Political leaders in the Horn region prefer to deal with China compared to the US because China’s Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) programs exclude conditionalities such as ‘good governance’ and human rights, commonly associated with the US and the EU investment programs, which local leaders view as imperialistic and neocolonialism. Instead of forcing business agendas overseas, China promotes a state-led development design that focuses on mutual long-term benefits and non-interference in the local politics of partner states (Station, 2024). Thus, China’s investment approach offers partner states *equal opportunity* and a stake in the development agenda. For instance, in 2017, China built its first naval

base in Djibouti, which the US believes will have a significant impact on its interests in the Horn region (Sperber, 2019, p.2).

This Chinese global growth mission towards a diversified world might explain why, in October 2018, the US unveiled a USD 60 billion investment fund that seeks to invest in low and middle-income countries, including Africa, for infrastructural projects. The fund is viewed as a soft power move to counter China's trillion-dollar BRI project. While the USD 60 billion is a substantial amount, the pledge is far surpassed by China, which, in the same year of 2018, pledged the same amount as the US, but all of it meant for Africa alone (Adegoke, 2018).

The shift in US priorities in the Horn of Africa shows that the US government has realized the need to put more effort into the economic front in the Horn region. While the US is aware that it cannot match the scale of Chinese investment and trade in Africa, it is still looking for plausible ways of curbing Chinese influence in the region. For instance, there is Western propaganda and scaremongering tactics that depict China as a new *colonizer* of Africa bent on trapping the continent through debt traps (Mehari, 2018; Simuziya, 2023b, p. 393). Further, the Africa-US relations have not been solid due to offensive and demeaning language, or general lack of respect by the US towards Africa, insinuating that Africa *does not matter*. For instance, President Trump is reported to have referenced African states as *shithole countries* and spoke of the continent as an arena where his colleagues go merely to see if they can be wealthy (BBC News, August 1, 2019).

The two pictures below show a comparison between China and the US trade with Africa between 2002 and 2018, indicating a sharp decline in the US trade ventures with Africa.

China-Africa trade (2002-2018)

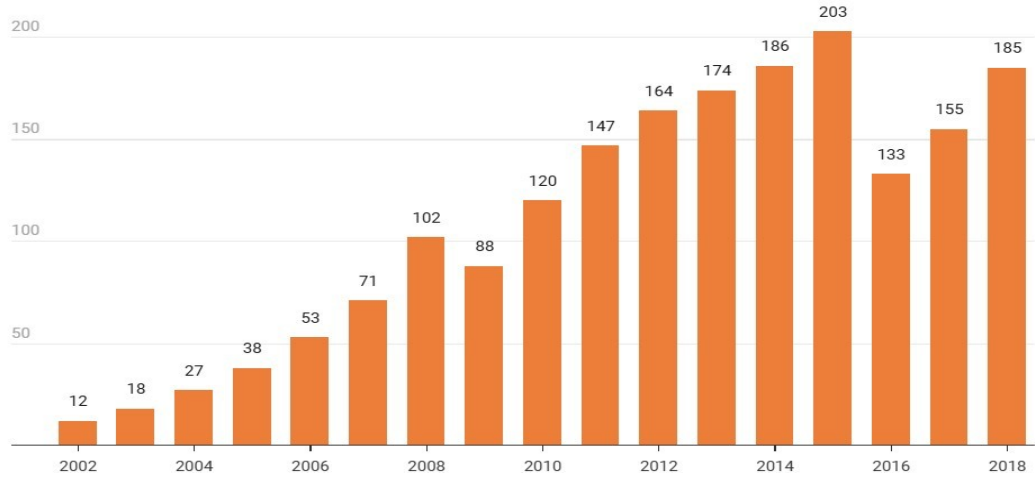


Figure 7. China-African trade.

Source: Africa Check, 2020.

US-Africa trade (2002-2018)

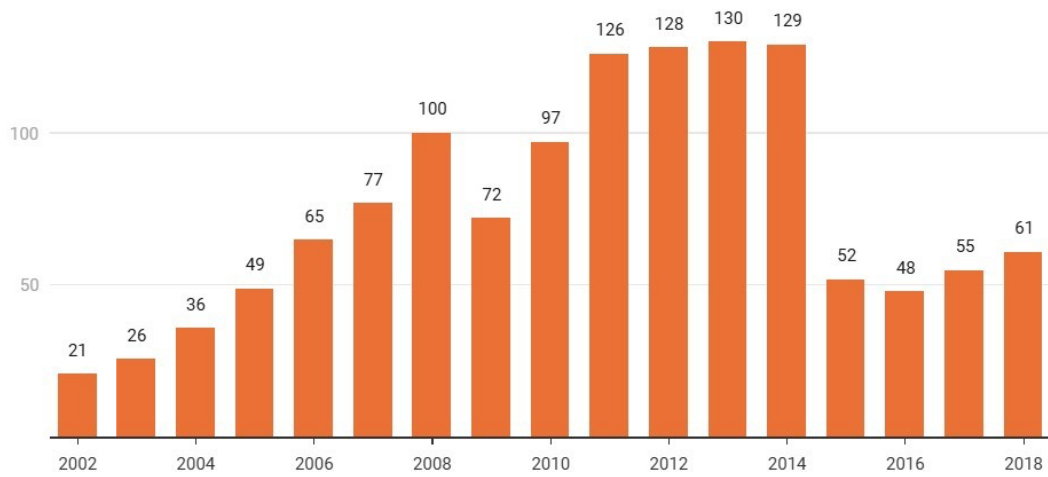


Figure 8. US-Africa trade.

Source: Africa Check, 2020.

U.S Relations with Ethiopia: Analysing the Significance of Ethiopia to the U.S

The relationship between Ethiopia and the US is one of the oldest ties that Ethiopia has established in its diplomatic history. This relationship chronologically holds the fifth place following the relations of four European nations with Ethiopia, namely, Italy, France, Britain, and the USSR, respectively. Nonetheless, Ethio-US relations are the most fundamental and crucial diplomatic contacts that have been playing a central role in the IR of Ethiopia (Taye, 2010).

Diplomatic relations between the US and Ethiopia focus on advancing regional peace and security, strengthening democratic institutions, expanding human rights, and spurring broad-based economic growth. Also, the US is the largest bilateral contributor to humanitarian aid to Ethiopia (US Department of State, 2020). In 2024, the US-Ethiopia total goods trade was USD1.5 billion (with the US goods exports at USD 1.0 billion, and goods imports at USD 465.8 million) and recorded a trade surplus of USD 551.9 million (Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR), 2025). Further, the AGOA program is an area where Ethiopia has also benefited: for instance, Ethiopia's textile exports to the US grew from around 11% in 2014 to a staggering 68% in 2020 due to AGOA (Luke, 2023). However, under the AGOA program, the key eligibility criteria are measured and reviewed annually based on adherence to good governance practices. Eligible states are provided with duty-free access to the US market (Simuziya, 2023b).

Also, the Ethiopian government's policy change of being willing to privatize state-owned enterprises, in sectors such as transport, agricultural processing, energy, and telecommunications, means that there are growing opportunities for US trade and investments (Telecom Review, October 4, 2024). Ethiopia is important to the US

because of its strategic location in the Horn, along with its historical pedigree of political leadership and influence within the region and beyond. Ethiopia's influence can also be seen through its population size of around 135 million, which is nearly half of the total population within the area covered by the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The IGAD is a group that promotes joint growth initiatives and consists of eight countries of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda (Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), 1996).

Further, Ethiopia has been an important partner of the US in defending regional stability through counterterrorism efforts, especially to fend off advances by Al-Shabaab militants. Notably, Ethiopia is also one of the largest contributors of peacekeepers for the UN and AU missions in Somalia and South Sudan, where Ethiopia has contributed at least 3,500 forces (to Somalia) and 1,500 (to South Sudan) (US Department of State, 2023). In addition to those US ties, Ethiopia also maintains cordial relations with Israel based on their Jewish religious and historical connections.

However, despite the US-Ethiopian collaborations mentioned above, their relations have also been lukewarm in certain instances. For example, the US has accused Ethiopia of human rights violations against its citizens, such as stifling freedom of expression and arbitrary arrests and detentions of journalists and human rights advocates. Ethiopia's credentials faced considerable odds in IR when the regime was accused of rampant human rights abuses during the Tigray War (2020 - 2022). It is also alleged that hate speech by government operatives targeted certain ethnic groups, which itself is a counterproductive approach as it could potentially increase ethnic turmoil and increase state fragility (Jalu & Simuziya, 2025). Because

of such a poor record on good governance practices, the US has suspended Ethiopia from the list of AGOA beneficiaries (Congressional Research Service, 2025).

U.S Relations with Egypt: Analysing the Significance of Egypt to the U.S

The US and Egypt share a strong partnership based on mutual interests in the Middle East security and peace processes, whereby promoting a stable and prosperous Egypt is in the US's interest. The US strategic partnership with Egypt has played a central role in countering extremism and terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The US also has a keen interest in helping Egypt defeat the threat of the Islamic State militants of Syria and Iraq (i.e., ISIL and ISIS) and to protect Egypt's Sinai Peninsula while ensuring minimal civilian casualties (Sharp, 2019). Also, American firms are active in most sectors of the Egyptian economy, including oil and gas exploration, financial services, manufacturing, construction, telecommunications, and information technology (US Department of State, 2019).

At home, Egypt endeavours to present itself as a moderate state advocating for religious tolerance, educational reforms, and the empowerment of women. Egypt's political leadership in the MENA can also be seen by the fact that it hosts the 22member Arab League. It also hosts the Al-Azhar University, one of the oldest universities in the world, having been established around 970 AD in the historic city of Cairo. The university is also credited for being a leading educational institution, especially for Islamic law and Arabic literature (Don & Hussin, 2024, pp. 13701371).

Further, because it has a huge population of around 118 million (the majority of whom are Muslims), Egypt has a symbolic importance to the Muslim world as

one of the leading sources of Islamic scholarship. This status can potentially influence public support among moderate populations of the Middle East. Broadly, the US views the stability of Egypt as key to the stability of the wider MENA, and as such, it is in the US's interest to see that Egypt's armed forces are capable of combating terrorism. Because of this strategic partnership and the high stakes involved, the US has largely refrained from publicly criticizing Egypt over its poor record on human rights, which the international human rights bodies have exposed (Sharp, 2019).

Human rights violations continue to raise alarm in Egypt, where the state is accused by human rights groups of systematically stifling critical voices. Egypt is also notoriously known for arbitrary and prolonged detentions of suspects, some of which are performed under the guise of fighting terrorism. Because of this, critics accuse the US of double standards on democratic governance, whereby it supports an authoritarian and otherwise *military* regime in Egypt but denounces autocracy elsewhere within Africa (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

For the US, the historical watershed in its relations with Egypt can be traced back to the Camp David Accords in 1978, which were facilitated by the US, in which Egypt, as the first Arab state, recognized the state of Israel. The Accords established a framework that resulted in the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty (Kuruvilla, 2022). As the peace broker between Israel and Egypt, the US has traditionally provided foreign aid to both countries to ensure a regional balance of power and sustain security cooperation with both.

Among the major US aspirations in the Middle East is ensuring the security of Israel, and in the assessment of the US, there is no country as crucial to the security of Israelis as Egypt. This has made Egypt one of the largest recipients of US overseas

military aid (Eriksson, 2012). It is estimated that since the Camp David Accords in 1979, the US has provided Egypt with an estimated USD 2 billion per annum, most of which is in military grants. Through such support, Egypt has got the most advanced military power in the Nile basin, giving it greater political and economic leverage in the wider region (Wang, 2011).

It is estimated that at least 10% of petroleum-related international trade goes through Egypt's Suez Canal, which cuts down on thousands of miles of ships' journeys from Asia to Europe and North America. Thousands of barrels of petroleum go either through the Suez Canal or the oil pipelines across Egypt, destined for the European and American markets. The US also has an interest in helping Egypt secure the Suez Canal and maintain overall maritime security in the Red Sea (Cole, 2013; Sharp, 2019). The Egyptian military provides a security umbrella to much of the Arab world, including the countries of the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula along the Red Sea. The Middle East produces at least 30% of the world's oil, and although the US gets only around 12% petroleum imports from that region, the global energy markets remain highly interconnected, and US security depends on inexpensive Middle Eastern petroleum. Thus, if Egypt becomes unstable, such instability can significantly affect American access to fuel and energy sources in the Middle East (US Energy Information Administration, 2024).

Moreover, the US might also be aiming to counter the perceived growing threat of Iran over the US's broader foreign policy agenda in the MENA and the Horn region by favoring Egypt in the Nile waters dispute because a stronger Egypt also provides the much-needed buffer against Iran. Similarly, it can be argued that Egypt's strategy of putting the Nile River dispute on the Middle East agenda to the point of appearing to raise it as relevant to the Israel-Palestine peace process can be

interpreted as a symbolic attempt to generate more support for its position on the Nile question (Zerihun, 2020).

Discussion and conclusion

Scholars have viewed the scarcity of water as a source of conflict in IR, and that those disputes increase with the rise in the population size, urbanization, an increase in irrigation facilities, hydroelectric developments, and industrial and environmental degradation (Reuveney & Maxwell, 2001). However, despite these challenges, water itself has the potential to bring neighbouring parties together for mutually beneficial results (Gehrig & Rogers, 2009).

Access to water is a question of life or death, which easily brings out emotionally charged discourses for three main reasons: (1) water is a fundamental resource, indispensable to all forms of life, (2) unlike other resources such as oil, there is no direct substitute for water, (3) fresh water is becoming scarce, and even if it may be renewable, supplies are not infinite, and its availability is gradually decreasing mainly due to industrial activities (Ashton, 2000).

This study finds that overall, GERD presents several economic development opportunities not only for Ethiopia but also for the Greater Horn region in terms of alleviating energy poverty and improving the overall economic prospects of millions of people; after all, electrification has a higher economic multiplier effect on all economic sectors (Degefu & Goshu, 2021).

Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world, with a GDP per capita of USD 1,130, and faces multidimensional poverty (Statista, 2023). Ethiopia also has an energy deficit, whereby over 60% of its people do not have access to an electricity supply. In the contemporary world, electricity is the major determinant for growth,

yet currently, Ethiopia has such a huge deficit. Given that Ethiopia has rich water resources to produce hydro power, this has the potential to boost industrialization, and as such, embarking upon the construction of the GERD project is a noble cause. Because energy will boost local growth, such growth will inevitably promote business links with neighbors, and hydropower could also be exported (Degefu & Goshu, 2021).

Also of significance is the fact that the GERD will help the downstream states, especially Sudan, to operate as a buffer in controlling massive floods in the years of heavy rainfall. As such, far from being seen as a vanity project, the GERD is a major economic gain and a symbolic political triumph that demonstrates Ethiopia's resolve to improve the lives of millions of marginalized people. Further, the GERD is also a symbol of Ethiopia's resistance against foreign interference in its internal affairs. As the biggest hydroelectricity project in Africa, the GERD has increased Ethiopia's political and economic bargaining power internationally. Already, Ethiopia is the seat of the AU and prides itself in having the biggest airline transport hub in Africa, and not to mention that Ethiopia is now a member of the BRICS group. These dynamics make Ethiopia a powerful political actor in the politics of the Greater Horn region, and beyond (EFE News Agency, January 1, 2024).

The basic factors that have caused rivalry in the GERD dispute include the degree of water scarcity, the extent to which water supply is shared, the relative power of individual basin states, and the ease of access to alternative fresh waters.

But the greatest concern and fear that Egypt had raised in 2019 regarding the possibility of reduced water flow during the period of the GERD dam filling has now been allayed as Ethiopia completed the dam filling in 2024 without any negative effects for the downstream states. Fekahmed Negash, a hydraulic specialist and

former Director of Transboundary Rivers Affairs at the Ethiopian Ministry of Water, asserts that the successful completion of the dam filling has thrown an egg on Egypt's face. He argues that:

...the time has now come when the GERD would 'serve as a diplomat and negotiator in its own right.' Egypt lost all its cards regarding the incessant negative publicity it had against the project. The dam has now been realized. The negative impact that Egypt said the dam would cause to the downstream countries has been exposed for what it is: a wrong hypothesis. This is why Egypt is now shifting its strategy (The Reporter, May 24, 2025).

On the question of mediation efforts, it is argued that US direct involvement in the Nile dispute, where it seemed to side with Egypt, was ill-advised because such a position negatively affects the US's overall foreign policy mission in the Greater Horn, a region troubled by intractable conflicts, terrorism, and state failure. The US's mixing of its roles from observer/mediator to seemingly being perceived as a *decision maker* breaks the neutrality principle required from a third party.

Thus, on the Nile question, the US now seems to be in a Catch-22, whereby favoring Egypt may lead to losing Ethiopia's strategic support in the US's fight against terrorism. For the US foreign policies to succeed in the Greater Horn region, the US needs both Ethiopia and Egypt on its side.

The US needs Ethiopia because, since 9/11, the US's partnership with Ethiopia has been essential in the fight against terrorism and state fragility, especially limiting the incursions of Al-Shabaab militants in Somalia (US Department of State, 2023). It is this strategic alliance that the US risks undermining by appearing to favor Egypt. Further, while Ethiopia is an ally to the US, it is also a strong partner of China and

Russia; after all, Ethiopia is now a member of BRICS. The BRICS group accounts for at least 40% of the world's population and more than 20% of the world's GDP (EFE News Agency, January 1, 2024). Ethiopia also has promising links with Gulf states in commerce and trade partnerships. Also, the Ethiopian government seems to be contemplating joining the Arab League mainly for economic diplomacy. Simply put, Ethiopia is well-connected with other powerful global players and thus is not beholden to the US (Horn Review, February 3, 2025).

On the other hand, the US needs Egypt to counter extremism and terrorism in the MENA, especially the threat posed by ISIL/ISIS. Most importantly, Egypt is useful to the US in its efforts to provide a balancing act in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furthermore, a powerful and stable Egypt is in the US's interest as Egypt provides a vital sea oil corridor for Western supplies through the Suez Canal (Sharp, 2019).

Whatever the net result might be on the US foreign policies towards Egypt and Ethiopia, the US position on the GERD question reflects an unstable order overseen by an unpredictable superpower whose moral authority in IR is gradually slipping through its fingers. It also shows the US government's lack of coherent policy and strategy in Africa, thus making its foreign policy competency questionable. The US's contradictory policies and demands of 'good governance' practices in Africa have also been exposed for what they are: a sham for political expediency. For instance, the US provides annual aid and military support to Egypt, an authoritarian *military* regime, while on the other hand, it puts pressure on Ethiopia for its poor record on human rights, which led to Ethiopia being suspended from the AGOA beneficiary states (Congressional Research Service, 2025).

Given that international human rights bodies such as Human Rights Watch (2024) have exposed flagrant abuses of rights, both in Egypt and Ethiopia, why does the US seem to keep a blind eye on Egypt? In Africa, the US is seen by many, with misgivings, as a marauding superpower seeking to destabilize the developing nations of Africa. The memories of the destruction of Libya due to the US and NATO intervention in 2011 serve as an *everyday* reminder to most Africans that the US cannot be trusted with its intentions on the continent. The Libyan situation underscores the growing suspicion among many Africans that foreign powers benefit when Africans remain divided and unstable. American programs in Africa, such as the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), are widely *discredited* and resented across the continent, and that is why, to date, the US has failed to secure an AFRICOM headquarters on African soil; instead, the headquarters remains in Germany. To be sure, AFRICOM is widely seen as a wolf in sheep's clothing. Many on the continent see the US in a literal sense of an *arsonist* masquerading as a firefighter (Simuziya, 2023b).

Thus, the incoherent and cherry-picking policies of the US in Africa, especially on democracy and good governance issues, coupled with the general weakening of its trade investments on the continent, have aided China in undertaking an aggressive investment 'window of opportunity' to penetrate Africa. China's extensive FDI portfolio, which far surpasses the US in Africa, together with the BRI project, poses a considerable threat to the US hegemony, as those investments have the potential to spur infrastructural development in Africa, which many locals so badly need for their domestic growth (ibid).

To resolve the Nile disputes and achieve long-term peace, stakeholders must look inwards for solutions rather than looking to outsiders for mediation. Peace

imposed from outside rarely produces tangible results. Essentially, local problems require endogenous resolutions for sustainable peace. The AU peace framework provides institutional designs (including through regional organizations) that can implement modes of mediation, conflict prevention, peace-making, and peacebuilding. Thus, the AU's involvement in the GERD issue is critical to ensure African ownership and leadership in promoting peace and human security (Kasimbazi & Bamwine, 2021).

Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan have been holding the Nile talks for over a decade to reach an agreement on the implications of the GERD and have recorded some successes, which include the creation of the International Panel of Experts (IPoE) in 2012, and the formation of the Declaration of Principles (DoP) in 2015. These frameworks are important for ongoing and future negotiations and demonstrate that it is possible to achieve peace using local and homegrown solutions. The remaining matters mainly revolve around drought mitigation and the safety of the GERD.

Thus, for Egypt and Sudan to seem to prefer outside mediation, including a preference to rely on colonial treaties of 1929 and 1959, is a misdirected step. Not only does that position work at cross purposes with the *Nyerere Doctrine*, but it also has a legal weakness. For instance, a deeper examination of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties of 1969 seems to pour cold water on those colonial Nile treaties. Specifically, Article 34 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties of 1969 insinuates that a third state may not be legally bound by a treaty where it was not a signatory or where it was not consulted over the treaty's formation (United Nations, 1969).

Thus, the full involvement of the AU could provide an opportunity for the continental peace architectural framework to take effect, especially using regional

bodies (or elders such as Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, John Kufuor of Ghana, and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria), and other good offices, including from the African corporate world. The AU's current challenge, however, seems to lie in its weak, if not poor, leadership. The continued reliance on foreign mediators (such as the US in the GERD dispute) instead of the AU taking full charge of the case seems to indicate that Africa has not learnt much from its past mistakes of allowing foreign intrusion in otherwise clearly domestic matters.

From the colonial days, right up to 2011 when NATO forces invaded Libya, it has been noted that outsiders (especially from the West) rarely have genuine intentions to resolve local African problems; instead, they use such 'mediatory opportunities' as avenues to push their capitalist foreign policy and neocolonial liberal agendas on the continent. It is also paradoxical that countries that suffered the brutality of colonialism and foreign interference, such as Egypt and Sudan, could still, today, prefer to seek foreign or otherwise *colonial mediation* efforts in local matters.

In the current GERD dispute, the US-mediated talks flopped because the US seemed to have sided with Egypt for political gains that favor its national interests. The US foreign policy contradictions in Africa are in the public domain and therefore easy for anyone to see. The AU's current Achilles' heel lies in its lack of stewardship of the likes of Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, Thomas Sankara, John Magufuli, and Levy Mwanawasa, among others. Today, the AU's mediocrity can easily be seen through the many puppet leaders who seem more inclined to adopt Western agendas willy-nilly at the expense of the local people's needs, initiatives, and preferences. The current AU is essentially a shell of its former self that has surrendered its agency to Western entities to tell them what to do, when to do what they must do, and how

to do what they need to do, and who must be involved in what is to be done. While there are many heads of state in Africa, there are only a few statesmen.

This decay of agency has now created a political leadership gap that has enabled Western interference in African local politics under the pretext that Africans cannot find solutions to their conflicts unless foreigners are involved. This perpetual narrative and erosion of confidence in local mechanisms is a disgrace to the African population and might explain (faintly though) why Egypt and Sudan still prefer to engage foreign Western mediators rather than use the AU route (Simuziya, 2025).

However, there seems to be hope that has been rejuvenated by the leadership emerging from the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, whose leaders have jointly declared that mediocrity and puppet leadership will no longer be the *modus operandi* in Africa.

Kwesi Aning, a professor in security and political studies at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre in Ghana, asserts that the AES leaders, especially Captain Ibrahim Traore of Burkina Faso, the *modern-day Thomas Sankara*, have masterfully built the persona of pan-Africanist leaders resolved to free their countries from Western neocolonialism. The AES has embarked upon unprecedented developmental local programs, which are gradually bearing fruit in ventures such as agriculture, mining, education, health, and vocational training. These feats have been achieved because the AES leaders are practical and hands-on. Because of their relentless commitment to local development, they have debunked neocolonial myths that suggest that a country needs grand IR theories or ideologies to grow (Channel One TV, May 20, 2025).

The AES's anti-colonial populism has influenced many in Africa, especially the youth. Notably, the new government of Senegal, with Bassirou D. Faye as

President and Ousmane Sonko as Prime Minister, won the country's polls under the banner of identical anti-imperialist and decolonial frames (Spheres of Influence, April 26, 2025).

Africa can learn lessons from the fact that when Europeans have problems, they do not call Africans to mediate in their issues, so why do Africans not learn from that? Also, Africans can learn lessons from the wilful exclusion of African ideas and unique experiences in mainstream IR theories. It can be inferred that this exclusion of African voices effectively means that Africa continues to adopt and rely on foreign theories that are not aligned with local realities. This is a wake-up call to Africans to begin to utilize homegrown ideas and theories when framing their foreign policies (Desch, 2008).

Thus, in devising their foreign policies, Africans should anchor their theories and ideas on a postcolonial frame, rather than on IR theories per se. This is because the blanket reliance on *Western* IR theories to solve African problems often results in a disconnect with African experiences and realities. Consequently, African technicians and policymakers have become obsessed with the application of foreign, and otherwise utopian, methods to solve local problems. In this way, the African technician/expert, who ordinarily should be focusing on solving African problems, has now become a Western surrogate who implements unviable foreign programs that are *dead on arrival*, as they are not aligned with local needs, local realities, and visions.

As such, postcolonial theory is useful in this equation because it can galvanize political consciousness among locals. While realist IR theories inform much of Western foreign policies on issues of conflict, power, hegemony, and state relations, a postcolonial theory focuses on routes of liberation philosophy that provide

platforms for emancipation as an approach that assures sustainable development and coexistence in IR (Beckmann, 2024). Also, through a postcolonial theory, Africa can pride itself in propagating its dual mission in the world: that Africa is both a place in the global village, as well as a place of the global village. This dual role means that Africa is both a student (i.e., can learn from others) as well as a teacher (i.e., others can learn from African unique experiences) in the cultural, social, economic, and political dimensions of the globalized world.

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