1.22 Water, Civilisation and Power: The Conundrum of Regional Integration in the Nile Basin.

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As international concerns over water scarcity, rising food prices and the multiplier impact of climate change mount, a new politics is emerging around the water-food-energy nexus. Shifts in the global economic system are reordering the hydropolitical economies of several African states and, arguably, no region is more dynamic in this respect than the Nile Basin. Water security sits at the very heart of the political debate in – and the political future of – East Africa. Several ecological, political, demographic and economic trends related to water are converging to give shape to these new realities. Both the number of extreme droughts and flash floods is rising and population doubles every 30 years: an additional 150 million mouths will have to be fed in a region already notorious for largescale malnutrition and erratic water management policies. Food insecurity is linked to the wider economic malaise in East Africa’s cities and the upsurge in political discontent (cf. the Arab Spring), including the failure of Hosni Mubarak’s regime to respond effectively to rising food prices and youth unemployment in Egypt. Water is not just key to food production through agriculture, it is also increasingly linked to regional energy security. Less than one third of people of East Africans are connected to the electrical grid, a major impediment to welfare of individuals and to macro-economic development. At the same time, the region has historically underused its water resources for irrigation and power generation. Sudan, Ethiopia and Uganda have launched dam programmes to increase energy supply, but also to revamp irrigated agriculture. Climate change is increasing the stakes of these ambitious schemes, with critics alleging that they waste money and water.

Two important political discourses surrounding these developments compete both in the policy and the academic realm. On the one hand, neo-Malthusian voices are gaining ground: in no region is population growth and degradation of habitats occurring as fast as in the Horn of Africa; this puts unprecedented
pressures on water resources and thus pessimists predict that the frequency and intensity of conflicts (“water wars”) will rise, particularly as regional climate change worsens. The risks of instability only increase the stakes as states race to capture critical resources through a zero-sum conceptualisation of water security. The global economy is undergoing seismic changes, with power shifting to new rising powers—China, India and Brazil of course, but in the Nile Basin states like Turkey, Qatar, Malaysia and Israel are also playing an increasingly important role. As investment, production and consumption in these centres reshapes commodity prices and commercial networks, this increases global anxiety about securing key resource areas of the future. Simultaneously, this power shift also generates a new optimism—East Africa is no longer merely seen as a victim of Malthusian collapse but also as an opportunity for new patterns of international economic integration, including water security. In the past decade, the BRICs and other actors have concluded agreements with African governments worth tens of billions of dollars in the water-food-energy nexus, spearheaded by a wave of dam-building and investment in capital-intensive agriculture. The likes of Juba, Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi are eager partners. China is constructing dozens of dams across the continent while Brazil is expanding agricultural investments along the Nile and South Korean, Zimbabwean and Australian entrepreneurs move to South Sudan to bring hundreds of thousands of acres of land into cultivation. Indian agro-business is transforming Uganda and Western Ethiopia while the military-Islamist regime in Khartoum has staked its political future in the post-oil era on the success of the most far reaching (hydro-)infrastructure programme in Sudanese history. These multibillion dollar trends dwarf conventional trade and are reshaping Africa more dramatically than traditional oil investments. This paper explores the new politics emerging out of this convergence of complex developments surrounding water, food and energy security and what this means for local communities, national elites and international partners. We first discuss a number of conceptual lenses through which to approach water security and the politics of African energy development—useful perspectives that enable a deeper understanding of the
changing narratives and material interests that are impacting on the region from within and from without.

Subsequently, I develop the case study of Ethiopia’s Dam Programme, which is unparalleled in political-economic ambition in the Nile Basin. Through reconfigured alliances with partners in the West, the Persian Gulf and East Asia, the Dam Programme aims to catapult the country from an aid dependent, impoverished state to a regional hegemon that ties East Africa to it through hydropower flows and increased irrigated production. Finally, I offer some conclusions on the wider lessons that can be drawn for water security debates from the politicisation of the water-food-energy nexus in East Africa.