Counter-Hegemony in Transboundary River Basins

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The problem: Scholars using the hydro-hegemony framework argue that the most powerful nations within transboundary river basins have the ability to exploit power asymmetries to elicit favorable outcomes. Yet, a focus on the most powerful nations and their capacity to sway the dynamics of transboundary governance and treaty negotiations may overlook the power that “non-hegemons” have to manipulate basin dynamics, through geographic and collective advantages. I argue that countries in transboundary river basins that are clearly not “hydro-hegemons” are still able to achieve objectives, and that hegemonic dynamics have also changed due to specific external forces, such as transnational funding.

My approach: I begin this paper with a review of how power is manifested in international water interactions. Cascão and Zeitoun (2010) identified four forms and fields of power: geographical power (upstream advantages), material power (economic power, military might, technological prowess and international political and financial support), bargaining power (who controls the rules of the game and sets agendas) and ideational power (the capacity of the riparian to impose and legitimize certain ideas and narratives).

What shall a non-hegemon do if it has none of these forms and fields of power? This perspective of hydro-hegemony implies that non-hegemons may not have options in water management decision-making that affects the hegemonic riparian. Yet there is evidence that non-hegemons may employ counter-hegemonic strategies that can change the outcome towards more equitable configurations, as evidenced by Cascão (2008).

I discuss four case studies - the La Plata, the Mekong, the Tigris-Euphrates, and the Nile basins - that demonstrate where counter-hydro-hegemony has allowed for non-hydro-hegemons to change basin power dynamics, and the influence of power pooling, issue-linkage and external funders in these achievements. In the La Plata, Brazil and Paraguay signed an agreement to construct the Itaipu Dam that can be considered largely favorable to Brazil, yet Paraguay forced the power generated on its side of the dam to be at a frequency different than Brazil’s national grid, despite intense pressure from Brazil and offers from Brazil to pay for its conversion. China’s ostensible “hegemony” in the Mekong is curtailed by its wishes for good relations with its neighbors and wishes to develop ports in Yunnan Province to exchange goods with Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Thailand. Syria was able to secure water in return for being involved with Turkey’s internal struggles with its Kurdish population. Finally, with outside funding support and the formation of new negotiating alliances, upstream riparians have been able to assert themselves in the Nile Basin.
Nearly every international basin has some form of counter-hydro-hegemony. Even cases where hydro-hegemony has been cited to be most prominent, non-hegemons can still find avenues to achieve their necessary goals. Hydro-hegemony has its limitations in the arenas of international relations and negotiation. The fact that these borders between riparians are often just imaginary lines means that these countries are often inextricably bound together by this shared transboundary resources through their respective populations and shared economic interest.