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# CLAIMING (BACK) THE LAND: THE GEOPOLITICS OF EGYPTIAN AND SOUTH AFRICAN LAND AND WATER GRABS<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

While land deals are on the rise on all continents, the majority in both its number and hectarage takes place in Africa. Given the (neo)colonial resonance and local enclosure effects of the sometimes brutal business deals, it is unsurprising that the debate on foreign direct investment is particularly resonant where Africa is concerned, from academia to the popular press. The debate however is partial and dominated by the discussion of the pros and cons of its developmental merits, the fate of local land users driven or enticed off the land, and of the economic and the environmental costs.

Snapped up for, in places, as little as fifty cents per hectare, African land is not necessarily brought into immediate food, forestry and mining production, and when it is, staples and biofuels dominate rather than export crops (*The Economist*, 2009). Speculative hoarding, with a view to bringing the land into production when grain and other staples commodities markets are at their most profitable or selling the cheaply acquired land off again at enormous profit at a propitious future moment. Given the millions of hectares now acquired, these circumstances could easily lead to a future glut in the global land and commodities market.

If production or speculation is not necessarily the most significant, nor the only, driver for the new scramble for African land, what is? The present contribution will see land grab, along with the virtual energy and virtual water that come with the land, as a phase in an ongoing geopolitical game for influence. Moreover, the present article considers the circumstances and options of two regionally hegemonic powers, Egypt and South Africa, claiming land and virtual water - or claiming it back.

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<sup>1</sup> Slightly adapted version of an eponymous article in M. Keulertz, S. Sojamao, J.A. Allan and J. Warner (Eds). *Handbook of land and water grab in Africa*. Routledge. 2012. Reprinted with the kind permission of Routledge.

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The explosion of land deals reverses a centuries-long trend for states to rely on the world market for a strategic element of their food security. Importing food, and as a result, importing 'virtual water' was an escape for water-scarce economies, preventing the depletion of their resources, but also creating dependency on exporters of virtual water. Direct investment not only provides access to resources, but also to *geopolitical control*. After identifying the meaning of geopolitical thought and the 'grab bag' of geopolitical schools of thought, different strands geopolitics pertinent to African resource grab, are added as an additional layer of the geopolitics of state building.

Since the term 'land grab', as global food giant Nestlé admitted (quoted in *The Economist* 2009), is almost tantamount to virtual water grab, we then introduce and elaborate on the geopolitical turn in Hoekstra's conception of the 'geopolitics of (virtual) water'. Hoekstra's (2011) and Hoekstra and Chapagain's (2008)'s observations identify security dependencies between virtual-water exporters and importers, but have so far refrained from deepening the understanding of the geopolitics they refer to.

To illustrate the role of semi-peripheral geopolitics in Africa, the two cases of Egyptian and South African land and water geopolitics will be presented to illustrate the importance of geopolitical security concerns legitimising claims on land – and, in both cases, on claiming it back. In each case, land and water deals have largely gone under the radar of activist NGOs and scholars. But in both cases, as we shall see, the topic has its particular sensitivities.

## 2. Strands in the geopolitics debate: a grab bag of theories

The discipline of geopolitics is, as Mamadouh (1998) has termed it, one flag with many meanings. Geopolitics re-establishes the importance of variables often neglected in International Relations (Crikemans 2008). A geopolitician does not start evaluating the security of a nation from a vacuum, but makes a geospatial analysis of the home nation's place and competitive advantages and disadvantageous, threats and opportunities in a wider international environment.

Next to 'geopolitics', the core concept of this tradition is 'geostrategy'. It is concerned with the strategic value of geographical factors (resources, access to the sea, etc.). While Luttwak (1990) has claimed geopolitics has been overtaken by geo-economics after the Cold War ended, others have pronounced the arrival of a 'new geopolitics'. Roberts *et al* (2003) for example posited a liberal geopolitics, with the free market as panacea, integration in globalisation.

Klare (2003) for example claims the 'old geopolitics' died out as acceptable discourse after Hitler's abuse of the *Lebensraum* doctrine. Yet, he argues, geopolitical drivers for control of resources remained, which explained why the US supported apartheid. He posits the competition for the 'new heartland' of the Eurasian continent, 'encompassing the Persian Gulf area, which possesses two-thirds of the world's oil, the Caspian Sea basin, which has a large chunk of what's left, and the surrounding countries of Central Asia'. Still others claim that Africa is at the heart of the 'new International relations' (*African Geopolitics* Issue 38. African-geopolitics.com). Lester Brown, a neo-

Malthusian eco-pessimist, presents a resource-centered view of the ‘new geopolitics’. Brown (2009) perceives food as the hidden driver for current global geopolitics, and asserts that the competition for water is actually taking place in the world grain market.

The neo-Marxian world-systems tradition, with Immanuel Wallerstein as its exponent since the 1970s, sees land grab as neo-colonial competition between imperialist powers extracting resources for their reproduction. This school roughly identifies four stages: Imperialism (15<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, primitive accumulation), Capitalist Colonialism (19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century). Developmentalism (Cold War era), and globalisation (post-Cold War), of which many see the current ‘land grab’ as Primitive Accumulation 2.0. World-systems approaches help us understand global relations as economic exploitation, whether of people or resources. World-systems analysts identify a hierarchically ordered (and multi-level) global core, semi-periphery and periphery groupings. The system’s economic core extracts resources from the periphery, often aided by a venal ‘*comprador* bourgeoisie’ in the periphery, selling out natural resources to foreign investors for private gain. The possible overtaking of the US as a world hegemonic state by China would not change the logic of this exploitation (although see Agnew 2010).

However since the beginning of this century, it is not as clear to identify as it used to who belongs to which of the three categories. While the US has remained hegemonic, the West has been experiencing an overall decline vis-à-vis Asia and the BRICS economies. The European Union continued to integrate, but could not get its foreign-policy act together lacking a unified strategy. The resurgence of periphery (Mayo and Yeros 2005) has also brought a very different power balance in the scramble for African resources.

While the *dependencia* approach has largely been superseded by International Political Economy, the view that Southern elites largely follow the interest of ‘core’ ideas and interests has remained influential. This extends to green ideas on space and nature conservation, drawing on political ecology, the study of “ecological distribution conflicts” (Guha and Martínez-Allier, 1997: 31). Thus, ‘the Centre-Periphery division does not only involve the monetary exchange of goods, it also involves physical exchange in which Southern regions provide materials and energy so that the North can maintain and develop its socioeconomic metabolism.’ (Martinez-Allier, 2006). This ‘green world systems’ approach sees the international agricultural trade system as abstracting water resources as raw materials from “peripheral” countries to “core” countries (*ibid.*),

The virtual-water perspective discussed here presents globalization via a water-resources security lens: ‘what’s important from a geopolitical point of view: Europe’s water security strongly depends on external water resources (Hoekstra, 2011): The external resource dependence of virtual water ‘importers’ would seem to allow virtual water ‘exporters’ potentially to impose their political objectives on the ‘importer’.

This contribution is informed by an International Political Economy approach, but with lashings of neorealism and critical geopolitics. The Marxist concept of ‘surplus’ and ‘excess’, found in world-systems theory, is not presented as a reality in this article, but as a *legitimising* discourse for seizing resources. In that sense we borrow from the tradition of critical geography, ownership of land and water is usually the consequence

of taking (seizing) land by force, then legitimising the claim, while squatting is taking it back (Wallerstein 2012), Grounds for grabbing land by the state as 'eminent domain' are war, natural disaster or *terra nullius*, that is, the land appears to belong to no one as a result of insubstantial claim to title. Labelling land and labour as underdeveloped, uncivilised, un(der)cultivated, underpopulated and unowned is common practice: for five centuries securitising moves (invoking security needs to justify intervention have legitimised enclosure. Even Gulf States now refer to Africa's 'underpopulation' as an imperative for their investment (Geisler 2012).

Problematic about both geopolitics and political geography are their provenance as essentially Western, Anglo-saxon disciplines that tend to ignore the periphery. The state-centredness of the European state model has become the norm, which makes the neoclassical approach less suitable for Africa, where the state is often weak, dysfunctional, or absent. As a legacy of colonialism, boundaries are irrational, environmental stress prevails and access to wealth and power is ethnically differentiated (Griggs 1996). Africa has a surfeit of failed or failing states including Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan, which would make a Realist, state-centred approach seem inappropriate. From a critical geopolitics perspective, it may be doubted that the state is the key actor on the geopolitical scene. A better approach might involve focusing on global capitalist elites instead. They straddle the public and private sectors. We feel a degree of state-centricity in the approach however is defensible given that the investors involved in continental land grab are often parastatals and recipients use investment to strengthen their position.

Most analyses being conducted on the big investors from the Western world or Asia, including the Gulf. We however are especially interested in the African geopolitics of the semi-periphery of the world system. The core cannot reach the periphery without the services rendered by the industrialising semi-periphery. The semi-periphery can be a sub-imperialist itself, but also tends to be a source of systemic innovation (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1997). Wallerstein (1997) included Egypt and South Africa, on which we focus in this chapter, among the 35 states of the semiperiphery. It is shown that a new arrangement for mutual virtual-water dependency is taking shape.

### 3. The domestic layer

In this analytical undertaking we go beyond the state-centric perspective dominating the virtual-water literature and opt for a two-level analysis, as also proposed by Vieira (2011). There are empirical reasons to see *land and virtual-water grab as a multi-level and multi-sided game*. We need to add a second level, the domestic level, which influences and is influenced by the interstate level. While large-scale foreign land acquisitions grab the headlines, smaller but more numerous domestic land grabs by states and by companies facilitated by the state actually predominate.

While geopolitical analysis tends to be concerned with interstate relations, Cowen and Smith (2009) show that geopolitics 'was never only about the state's

external relations, but rather (...) involved a more encompassing “geopolitical social” that both crosses and crafts the distinction between inside and outside national state borders’. As in Africa, the dominance of the state sector over its population and sovereignty over its territorial boundaries are not assured, states continue to be involved in a domestic hegemonic strategy of state formation at the same time as they seek external stability in its foreign relations. There are therefore not only external, international actors, but also regional and domestic actors at play: land-hungry urban real-estate developers have their eye on the countryside. We should therefore not just focus on the international chessboard but also on the national arena. Their concerns are not always coordinated with the state (although they often are).

Mosley (2012) argues private direct investment is a way for states to secure revenue from peripheral areas. It is also a stage in the ongoing process of state formation. As Mosley notes, the centralised enclosure of land, in frontier or border areas, is a way for states to reach into the backwoods, tie them to the state and develop a tax base. In the Horn of Africa, efforts to escape central rule is a key conflict dynamic. ‘Rents generated from enclaves let governments by-pass their populations, and militate against the construction of tax or social contracts; a key source of state accountability’ (Carmody and Owusu 2007). This process highlights the active role of states, however weakly developed, in courting foreign direct investment.

At the same time, the potential for riots, or even civil war sparked by farmers driven off the land can have geopolitical impact. Some directly attribute the civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Sudan to foreign land acquisitions. Perhaps more precisely, as David Deng has it, the investment complicated an already fractious, conflict-prone context (cited in Zweynert 2012). These activities investment also imply a role for the investor in the state formation process. Consider for example, the yet-incompletely formed “new” South Africa. Its agricultural land investment in the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter, DRC), is being driven by the confluence of an invitation from the DRC mainly to white South African farmers under the auspices of AgriSA (see South African case study below) and their very focussed goal to seek opportunities beyond South Africa’s borders.

While much literature suggests land grabbing is a form of neo-colonialism, investee states are not passive victims, but active marketeers who may eye sources as a way to strengthen the state’s domestic position. Much land investment responds to an open invitation from recipient countries, enabled by liberal local investment legislation, and legitimised as strengthening recipient economies, as it gives access to power networks and capital without need to address the very challenging tasks and avoid some risks. These challenges include, firstly, unpredictable experiments with developing a tax base and accountability, and, secondly, the risk of contracting the ‘Dutch disease’ – spending the windfall proceeds from natural wealth unproductively (see the discussion on *rentier* states in Luciani/Beblawi 1989) or the resource curse - failure to benefit from natural wealth - coupled with a ‘governance curse’ (Sparks 2011).

#### 4. Virtual water grab

The discussions related to land deals are followed on their heels by the discussion over water access (Woodhouse and Ganho, 2011). Land production will take place in places where water is available. Adding to such an argument is the concept of virtual water which brings our attention to how much water is necessary to produce food and, consequently, how much water a country can save through food imports (Allan, 2011). The virtual water concept allows us to understand water through virtual flows. The idea also adds to the understanding that production choices and strategies have a direct impact over water availability in different parts of the world. When we discuss a land deal, therefore, we cannot avoid relating the discussion to the allocation of water resources and the consequences of such allocative choices on the sustainable availability of water resources. Food exporter and importer countries are also trading virtual water and consequently importer countries depend on the water resource endowments of exporters.

The virtual-water perspective presents globalization in a water-resources focus: 'what's important from a geopolitical point of view: Europe's water security strongly depends on external water resources' (Hoekstra 2011). The external resource dependence of water importers would seem to allow exporters to impose their political objectives on the importer.

In the neoclassical outlook, as Aldaya *et al* (2010) suggest, countries should follow the highest economical return to water in their sourcing choice of water-intensive products, which would reinforce even more the dependency of European countries on food community imports (Chapagain and Hoekstra, 2008). Food-commodity exporters would potentially define the rules and assume positions of control and power in the evolving geopolitical structures. Yet it is food-commodity importers in the global North who still control the global trade and economy as well as the international institutions they dominate which shape global politics. Biro (2007) emphasises the dependency of dry Southern countries on virtual water imports from the temperate North (US and Europe). Power clearly is not related to who has the resources but rather to who has the power to secure access to them.

The idea that virtual water is a geopolitical resource was first publicly mooted in a well-attended session, Water and Geopolitics, during the 2003 World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan. At the time, the call was explicitly tied to a trade-promotion agenda believed to lead to the ecological benefits of market-induced water efficiencies ('green liberalism'). Five years later, Hoekstra and Chapagain (2008, p. 135) noted with apparent disappointment that 'the idea that freshwater is a geopolitical resource of global importance... does not get across to many people.'

These scholars had clearly become more aware of the dark side of the global political economy of global virtual water trade (Allan 2011: 80). In their perspective, water is a geopolitical resource influencing the strategies of countries in order to guarantee access to water resources (Hoekstra and Chapagain 2008). Such a concept introduces a new type of water dependency: virtual-water import dependency in which



water-scarce nations are dependent on food and embedded water supply from other countries.

By that time, the global setting had changed dramatically as a consequence of global food price rises. Whole speculative investor funds discovered the food markets as a relatively secure alternative to the plummeting housing market, states and Transnational Companies (TNCs) decided to circumvent to foibles of the global agricultural market and invest directly in productive land and resources, predominantly in Africa.

It is instructive to observe examples of a positive relation between countries practicing land grabbing and those dependent on virtual-water import such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Libya, Jordan and Kuwait (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick, 2009; Hoekstra and Chapagain, 2008). The African land deals made by China and India, even though they are not virtual-water dependent countries today, can also be counted as such for the future - given an expected increase in food consumption, and the expected (although by no means certain) persistence of high world food-price levels, they can be considered part of this category.

Hoekstra and Chapagain's observations seem to reflect this changed reality. For Hoekstra, virtual-water supplying countries could assume geopolitical power positions since other countries would depend on them to guarantee their food and water security. Through land deals, though, virtual-water-dependent countries are attempting to assume positions of control since they have access to land and water without the need to depend on food exporter nations via international food trade. Water, then, is an important geopolitical resource, but we cannot assume that countries holding large amounts of land and water will necessarily be in a position of power on the international geopolitical scene.

Such dynamics are also taking place in the context of energy strategies and in new alternative sources such as biodiesel. Countries heavily dependent on oil such as the US, UK and China are also investing in land grab practices to guarantee access to those resources. In this context, water and virtual water are important aspects of the new energy strategies in which water is crucial to energy production. In this complex suit of dependencies, abundance of land and water in a country's territory does not assure power on the global geopolitics. On the other hand, these arrangements do show how the political economy plays a very significant role. The flows of virtual water will continue through global food commodity trade, and could increase once biofuels assume a larger importance as an energy source; however what will change are the mechanisms promoting such flow. Trade will continue to be a strong component but production resulting from land grabbing agreements will also play a role. In this case, power relationships in between economies exporting and importing food commodities and biofuels will not be the only ones in place. TNCs, investor and bilateral land agreements will also play an important role.

Virtual-water importing countries besides having access to food by trade and via land grabbing do not need to deal with the social and environmental externalities of natural resource degradation and water and labour exploitation in their own territory.



From this perspective importing countries can invest in different economic activities. For example they can protect their local water and decrease the pressure over the natural environment. Once more, countries that focus on food production and are food and virtual water exporters bear the negative outcomes of such production.

The traditional global hegemony in the northern hemisphere have upped the ante in response to the 2008 food price hike. The US and EU are faced with the (expected) end of the cheap food era, aging populations, plus a scramble for energy and rare earths. In the geopolitical contest for Africa, they now compete with very water-scarce, capital-rich Gulf states, South Korea, Japan and the BRICS economies. There is a marked difference in the strategies pursued by the investors from different types of economy. On the one hand West European countries, Japan and the USA, considered one of the main importers of water through food trade, invest in land grabbing through private sector agreements, which focus on biofuels production. In this case, Hoekstra's understanding of how trade could save water is in place, however, when attention turns to energy, his focus turns to profit and energy security. On the other hand, Middle East countries, poor in water resources and highly dependent on food from abroad, are the main oil producers in the world. They focus their strategy on government to government agreements to produce food staples and decrease their dependence on trade and low international food prices.

Water-scarce Gulf-state governments inward investment in land and water in Africa and elsewhere to guarantee their food supply. They tend to focus their production on the most water intensive agricultural products; wheat, corn and livestock (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009; Hoekstra and Chapagain, 2007). Private businesses headquartered in the UK, Germany, Sweden, USA and Japan are mostly investing in biofuel production to decrease dependency on oil. The only country that finds itself in both types of investment is China, investing in both food production and biofuel to secure its supplies of food and energy (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009) although it should be noted that Africa is not China's biggest target for investment.

One would expect most of the grabs to take place in those African countries where water scarcity is not an issue. Sudan and Ethiopia however are countries with low levels of water availability while receiving large international investments for staple production (von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009; Chapagain, 2008). It would appear that countries involved in inward investment in land and water thus are mainly externalizing their water scarcity problem.

But what of the 'middle powers' in Africa, the semi-periphery, those that both send and receive major investments? To explore this issue, two cases are described below.

## 5. Land and (virtual-)water deals in two semi-peripheral states

The following examples may serve to briefly illustrate the geopolitical position of two states with geopolitical interest in land and water: Egypt and South Africa.

### 5.1 The case of Toshka: pipe dream on the Nile

Fear of losing access to water explains Egypt's obsession with control of the Nile: Egypt depends on the Nile like a diver on oxygen (Schiffler, 1997) and has always upheld its rights to water, granted by the British and enforced in a treaty with Ethiopia in 1906 and water deals with Sudan in 1929 and 1959. Egypt is an example of semi-periphery in land terms, a downstreamer with few alternatives in water terms and a net importer in food terms. Like South Africa, Egypt both receives and makes land deals.

The undisputed leader of the Arab world in the 1950s after Nasser's revolution and nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956, Egypt has lost its pre-eminent position to Saudi Arabian oil wealth, yet continues to command a dominant position on the river Nile, to be considered a cornerstone of NATO security policy and a top recipient of American aid. Its land redistribution of the 1950s procured the state a political base among smallholders (*fellahin*) if it did not lead to a major overhaul in tenure (Bush 2004).

To make up for its dependency, Egypt has always relied on virtual water imports, banking on American aid until the early 21st century and cheap world food until 2007-8. Now that the age of 'cheap food' seems over, Egypt's dependency on virtual water became painfully clear when Russia shored up exports in 2010 due to large-scale fires while food prices such as that of wheat doubled. The impact is felt all the more in recipients as American food donations and sales at below-market prices as they have tended, and even sought to, shift dietary preferences in recipient countries towards wheat (Gonzalez 2004).

Egypt's dependency on external water is 97% (Hoekstra 2008), and on virtual water 23.55% (El-Sadek 2010). While for Hoekstra and Chapagain, economic logic would dictate that the water cost in maintain Egypt self-sufficient on water is unsustainable once much more water is needed to produce food in Egypt than in other countries, Egypt has sought to maintain its food security and independence through domestic staple production and even expanding it, at the cost of struggles with upper Nile countries (Hoekstra and Chapagain 2008). Ethiopia as an upstream state has historically threatened to take Egypt's resources, and in turn Egypt has threatened war should Ethiopia develop its resources autonomously (Kendie, 1999). This has led to a game of 'chicken' on the river Nile, what with Ethiopia creating thousands of micro dams under Egypt's radar (Waterbury and Whittington, 1997). Even today Egypt keeps upholding the right to interdict 'arresting' Nilotic water by upstream riparians, and thus develop water resources in ways that could subtract from Egypt's inflow.

While Egypt is already exceeding the quota agreed under the 1959 Nile agreement, it is set to claim more under a new Nile agreement, as the New Valley land development project in the Western desert gets under way.

It was noted above that inward investment in land and water is legitimised by geopolitical security arguments, whether of threat or of opportunity. The activity is commonly associated with the idea that there is a need to develop underutilised

space. While in the 1970s President Sadat saw the desert as open space to be exploited, enabling 'candid land grab', Mubarak saw it as a threat, needing to be controlled (Wahdan 2011). These two drivers alternate in the history of Egypt's internal colonisation of its desert, the Toshka (or New Valley) project, the first stage of a \$70 billion scheme in the desert which is hailed as a 'new civilisation on the Nile'.

The cost of this so-called Toshka Project, a three-stage plan could run up to USD90 billion. The Toshka agricultural land development project for a 'new civilisation on the Nile' coincided with empty state coffers, revealing the need to attract foreign investment. The United Arab Emirates' Sheikh Zayed furnished start-up money for the project's main canal, which was subsequently called after him. Foreign land investors however were thin on the ground; big swathes of land were only snapped up by Saudi's Kingdom Agricultural Development Company, with a view to producing vegetables for exportation to Europe (Fahmy 1997). The investor is a Saudi prince Talal, known to be the wealthiest in the region, representing a cash-flush but water-poor country, saw an opportunity to snap up huge swathes of fertile land (100,000 acres plus a reported 128,000-acre buffer zone granted under the counter to protect the land, Salem 2010) at a bargain price. It was an open-ended deal: no need to invest, no state controls.

While nominally pandering to the rural electorate, promising plots to students and farmers, in fact the emphasis of the Egyptian state's attention shifted to the urban population of Cairo. Centrally imported food was sold at heavily subsidised cost or given away where food stamps, enabled by American food aid. IMF-imposed reforms took away these subsidies, causing wild price explosions, leading to food riots in the late 1970s. The gradual abandonment of the countryside and liberalisation of the land law in the 1990s deprived many farmers of their economic security, forcing elevated rents on poor families and threatening to return land to owners who lost it in the 1950s. This displacement led to under-reported rural violence and urbanisation.

Moreover, like so many other seemingly 'up-for-grabs' areas, the area to be developed is not empty. Nubian activists and human rights activists have disputed the deal, dismissed it as both land and water theft and refused to be resettled in Toshka. Non-governmental activists claim 13,000 Nubian families were expelled from Toshka to free up the land for investment (Elyan 2011). A lawsuit was filed on their behalf aimed to annul the Saudi Prince's land deal in October 2010, but a post-revolutionary meeting between the new government and Nubian protesters in April 2011 proved the new Egyptian leadership unwilling to overturn Mubarak's government's resettlement plans.

While in part justified as enhancing food self-sufficiency and organic export, there is also a population management angle here. Egypt's population boom and skyrocketing rate of urbanisation has been invoked as a security imperative to greening the desert, with foreign (Gulf-state) capital. The desert, as a 'new frontier', would import millions of Egyptian into an area currently mainly inhabited by Nubians, where Islamists have a strong political basis and which has been the scene of terrorist attacks. Moreover, the settlement establishes prior water claims on the Nile, as it requires 5

million cubic metres of Nilotic water even in dry years, almost a tenth of the total Egyptian requirement.

From a geopolitical perspective, it may not be incidental that the land project is bordering on the Hala'ib Triangle, an area where Egyptian army already made an incursion into in 1994 as part of a long Egyptian-Sudan dispute over territorial claims. The project moreover provides employment and potential income for the military sector which is increasingly turning civil, as agricultural entrepreneurs and construction developers. While opposition press and Members of Parliament asked critical questions, nothing really happened until the revolution of 2011 when the new, post-revolutionary Egyptian government claimed the Saudi Prince had irresponsibly left land idle, whereupon the investor countered that the Egyptian government had neglected to provide irrigation water (Eddin 2011). The investor eventually accepted the truncation of his land take (selling back 50,000 of the original 100,000 acres at the buying price) and redistribution of the remainder among young farmers and college graduates.

It may not be without meaning that a Saudi investor is thus snubbed. Since the age of Nasser, Egypt has presented itself as a leader of the Arab world, but since the oil boom of the 1970s has faced Saudi Arabia move alongside as a contender for Arab leadership. Not wanting to lose its geopolitical base in Egypt, the Saudi investor gave in. As Woertz (2013) contends, Saudi investment is not so much inspired by high food prices, but by the fear of export restrictions.

Egypt itself has meanwhile faced a counterhegemonic change of scene in the Nile arena by upstream *Alleingang* (see Matthews *et al.* 2013). Egypt has long been able to maintain its claim on Nile leadership, issuing threats to those who might consider upstream water diversion, but also facilitating and part-funding Nile co-operation in various initiatives, most recently the Nile Basin Initiative, which in 2006 almost led to a new integrated Nile agreement. The negotiations smartly widened the frame from a zero-sum water game to water-for-energy swaps.

Egypt's hegemonic position on the river Nile however no longer goes unquestioned now that Nilotic upstreamers, emboldened by heavy foreign investment, have decided to draw up their own Nile agreement, without Egypt. In this turn of events emotions can run high: Egyptian leaders implicitly declared the upstream move a *casus belli* when Mohammed Allam, Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation, reportedly told the Egyptian Parliament that Egypt "reserves the right to take whatever course it sees suitable to safeguard its share." (AFP 2010). The issue returned in June 2013.

The Ethiopian Millennium (Renaissance) Dam, first mooted in the 1860s and now seriously under way, feeds Egyptian fears of upstream land grabs which may impact the quantity directly and indirectly on the quantity and quality (return flows) of Nile water flowing into Egypt. There may however be a great deal of political posturing to this sabre-rattling, feeding the revival of persistent water-war sensationalism in the press.

As an alternative to domestic development and upstream strife, however, Egypt itself has started to buy land and water resources in Sudan and Ethiopia to produce

food for Egyptians (Keulertz, 2013). Despite the cereal export ban Ethiopia imposed in 2007, top political figures from both Egypt and Saudi Arabia reportedly (based on WikiLeaks documents) managed to export from those lands while at home, due to the increase of food prices, the import of staple foods did not guarantee cheap food for local consumption.

Egypt's two-level geopolitical chessboard may look something like this:

- *Internal state building.* People management, Arabizing the Nubian South, building new 'civilisation' with Saudi and Emirates investment;
- *External sphere of influence:* carrots and sticks on the Nile, smaller investment in Sudanese and Ethiopian land.

## 5.2 Land and water geopolitics of South Africa

At the opposite end of the continent we find a country that likes to label itself as 'the new South Africa', to emphasise a clean break with a troubled past. South Africa's post-apartheid status has actually given the country a distinct advantage, which it uses throughout the Continent as a means to expand its economic and political influence and ensure its security. The 2010 World Cup football games moreover propelled South Africa to the global stage. Not since the 1994 election of the former President Mandela, had an event evoked so much continental solidarity and Pan-Africanism. The event demonstrated that South Africa was not only capable of meeting the challenge of putting on an event as well as its World Cup predecessors—Germany and the US—both 'core' states in the world system, with global presence, but could do so successfully.

According to Hugon (2008), South Africa has relations with as many as 43 African countries and controls the economies of countries in southern Africa. South African FDI for Lesotho and Malawi is 86% and 80%, respectively (accumulated over 1994-2003). In 2005, South Africa represented 25% of the entire African continent's GDP and 65% of the sales of the five hundred largest African companies, half of the railway network, 40% of highway network, and 50% of energy consumption in sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, South Africa is a military power, which not only purchases weapons, but is a top arms seller.

The 'South-Africanisation' of Africa has not gone unnoticed by other African states; especially those concerned with what some have called South African 'financial colonialism' (Goldstein 2003). Goldstein calls attention to the political dimension of the increased role of foreign investment by South Africa, which sparked political controversies in Zambia and Tanzania, where it has found expression in political opposition to not only South Africa, but also the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Among these countries, Zambia has the more strategic natural resources, e.g. copper, which is the principal attraction for South Africa. Besides copper mining, South Africa has flexed its FDI muscle in both Zambia and Tanzania with hotels, telecom, and supermarket chains.

The conspicuous surge in African land deals with India and China however has allowed South Africa's land and water expansion on the continent without the attention of NGOs and other observers focussed on land and related (real and virtual) water grabs. In semi-arid South Africa, water (and energy) is central to the economy and, reports indicate South Africa's limited water resources may have a direct impact upon its future. Gauteng province, South Africa's industrial and mining base, has the highest population density, economic power, education level - and water demand.

South Africa is a 'pivotal' riparian in 'pivotal basins' (Turton and Earle 2005). The Orange, Limpopo, and Incomati Rivers, all critical to South Africa, are either near or are facing closure. If it were just about the water, South Africa's ambitious desalination programme, part of the 2004 National Water Resource Strategy [NWRS], may well go a long way to safeguarding its future water security. South Africa, however, has used its capacity and hegemonic position to project its power beyond its borders and has a long history of doing so. Apartheid-era South Africa applied its knowledge, funds and hegemonic position to obtain water beyond its borders, entering into transboundary water agreements, capturing and controlling water resources beyond its political boundaries. The country continues to exercise economic, political, and advisory influence on other states with a view to future access to water for irrigation and hydropower.

The Cahora Bassa Dam complex in Mozambique exports electricity generated from the hydropower plants at the dam to South Africa. The Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP), which exports Lesotho's water to South Africa. But water is also important to the energy security of a country, and where almost three quarters of energy needs are supplied from coal production, and where the energy sector receives preferential allocation of water resources. South Africa's direct 1998 intervention in Lesotho may not have directly been driven by a water imperative (Turton *et al.* 2004), but certainly helped to secure the co-operation of a stable and friendly neighbour willing to continue the water deal. Two other, not yet fully realized investments involve importing water from the Zambezi and Congo Rivers.

A recent investment in the Democratic Republic of Congo may further illustrate the water-power nexus. In November 2011, the South African and DR Congo governments signed an agreement to develop the Grand Inga III Dam. That agreement secures South Africa the lead in building a 39,000Mw hydro power plant on the Congo River, which would dwarf that of China's Three Gorges Dam. Its dam wall would exceed that of Lesotho's Katse, currently the highest dam wall on the continent (Showers 2012). With reliable electricity, the Congolese could stop cutting forest to meet their energy needs and export electrical power to South Africa and neighbouring states. A possible stumbling block to its construction however is the project's USD80 billion (!) price tag. The Congo River, second only to the Amazon by flow, is unique among the world's great rivers due to its rapids and waterfalls so close to its mouth. Among its most pronounced geomorphic features is the Inga Falls. Overall South Africa will benefit significantly from involvement in the Inga project. With SA-Eskom in control, the water-scarce continental economic hegemon gains access to hydropower



and, importantly, land irrigation controls for agricultural production. Apart from Eskom South African companies interested in DRC include Sasol (a private international energy and chemicals company initially formed in South Africa in the 1950s) and PetroSA (South Africa's national oil company).

In expanding its footprint in the DRC, South Africa prospers geopolitically, and builds greater opportunities to enhance its political and economic influence both singularly and regionally in multiple arenas, particularly those of water and energy. South Africa has contributed peacekeeping troops, millions of rand (South Africa's currency, ZAR) and years of diplomacy to trying to bring stability to the eastern DRC. This involvement was based not only on a felt moral duty to share South Africa's peace dividend with Africa—President Zuma and others have stated that it was in South Africa's economic interest to stabilise the Great Lakes region (*Mail and Guardian* 2011).

South Africa's regional and continental dominance contributing to its successful ability to 'grab' land and water is rooted in the past. The *apartheid* era has conditioned the current realignment of power, framed the political discourse and created the conditions and space for land (and water grabs) regionally and domestically. From the 1950s to the 1980s the South African government forcibly relocated between three and five million black and other non-white South Africans (Du Plessis 2004). The 1994 Restitution of Land Rights Act was framed to oversee restitution of land 'taken' under the apartheid regime. At that time, the ANC determined to redistribute as much as 30% of white-owned agricultural land would be subject to expropriation by the state as a means to redress a historical wrong and restore land to its previous owners. The ability of previous owners to provide evidence for land restitution can be challenging, though, especially given the weak tenure rights system and challenges associated with establishing traditional or customary use, a problem not unlike that faced by those challenging 'land grabs' by external investor public and private investors throughout the continent.

The deadline for filing claims was 31 December 1998. Between 20 and 25% would involve rural lands (Du Plessis 2004). While it was emphasised that no land would be taken by force, violence did occur, small farmers in particular were harmed, many attacked, some killed, and all forced to leave their farms (IRIN 2003). Only later would farmers appeal the land invasions and obtain some compensation. All transactions were to be concluded by 2015 (Hall *et al.* 2003).

Driven both by sticks (concerns about government taking their land) and carrots (an acute sense of commercial opportunity), several South African farmers have taken their commercial farming farther afield. Albeit on a smaller scale than non-African investors, South African farmers have created a history of land acquisition in Zambia, Mozambique, and Tanzania that has been going on for decades (Cotula *et al.*, 2009). AgriSA, the South Africa agro-investment agency has many white commercial South African farmers who face insecurity, potential losses due to land redistribution reform policies, as well as deregulation of subsidies and marketing boards making their livelihoods within South Africa less secure. They have been involved in talks on



investment with 22 countries. The most significant concluded deal negotiated by AgriSA is with the Republic of Congo (Hall 2011), which itself imports 95% of its food requirements. The agreement between the Congo government and AgriSA gives South African commercial farmers an initial 200,000 ha of former state farms, the associated farmland and places another 10 million hectares of arable land under the control of AgriSA farmer members (Hall, 2011).

‘Domestic land grabbing’ in South Africa however takes multiple forms. Grabbing ‘white’ land is legitimised in the name of justice remedying the past actions of the apartheid state, meanwhile remains an explosive and sensitive issue, whether for white farmers or black radical (largely unemployed) youth being corralled by the African National Congress’s Youth League. But ‘black’ land was also seized for the greater good of the 2010 soccer World Cup—a game repressed under apartheid in light of its popularity with the black population, but in the ‘new South Africa’ a soft-power spearhead of its prominent status in the global arena. In Johannesburg for example, the ‘games’ created the political space and governmental financial support to evict poor residents and relocate others (an estimated 17,000 or more) legitimated by the imperative of ‘urban renewal’ in newly ‘zoned’ sports-precincts (Bénit-Gbaffou 2009). Attempts to demolish a 99 year old market in Durban (from which over 10,000 informal traders operated) however were met with organized protest (Cottle 2010). A judgement rendered by the courts prevented a successful internal land grab.

South Africa’s geopolitical project, then, consists of two levels:

- *Internal state building*. Internal economic divergence, potential losses due to land redistribution reform policies failing anti-poverty programme, racial violence, nationalisation as ‘grabbing’ (but also ‘squatting’).
- *External sphere of influence*: pan-Africanism, Independence from the West, conflict resolution, access to resource, ‘soccer diplomacy’.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

The article has sought to deepen the understanding of geopolitical strategies in Africa of semi-peripheral states in the world system, especially on (virtual) water. In so doing, it has progressed Arjen Hoekstra’s ideas on the geopolitics of water.

Hoekstra has posited that virtual-water strategies create dependencies, but failed to elaborate. More’s the pity in light of the post-2008 intensification of state-centred moves to increase geopolitical security. States are rarely *only* importers or exporters of virtual water, so that dependencies are rarely one-way. Moreover, states can be both investors and investees in land deals. On both ends of the African continent, Egypt and South Africa come to mind.

From the virtual water geopolitics perspective, the dependency of South Africa as well as Egypt on virtual water imports can be considered low, even though both states are facing conditions of water scarcity (Hoekstra and Chapagain, 2008). While neoclassical economists would predict a heavier reliance on external trade in order to

guarantee their water and food security and deal with pressing population issues, both countries are using the water security argument to maintain their power positions in their region and control access to water in multiple ways.

The two states are set in predominantly dry areas, which means water is easily 'securitised' as a national security issue in both states. While contending investors are outside the continent, Egypt and South Africa are part of it, and have direct geo-hydraulic interests that extend well beyond their respective political boundaries. As semi-peripheral players in the world system, they have the power to resist external hunger for their resources, although they do not necessarily refuse. They are moreover states with their own ethnic and economic power differences, between geographically concentrated communities (Arab North vs. Nubian South of Egypt, the white-dominated province of Gauteng vs. the rest of South Africa), and a heavy 'shadow of the past' impinging on present-day politics and investments (Sebastian 2008). Water strategies may therefore also address overpopulation and socio-economic rifts and tensions.

Governments all over the developing world, but especially in the Middle East and North Africa, where the Arab riots also toppled Mubarak, seized on the 2008 food price peak to tighten the reins on trade and emphasis the primacy of food security. Indeed, food riots in over 30 countries temporarily put food on the security agenda internationally (though see Burger et al 2010 on the non-securitisation of food).

South African actors seek security and influence through deals with neighbours and investments in hydropower and land further afield, which give access to virtual water and energy. Both semi-peripheral countries are thus exercising their economic and political power to secure access to food and water security through land deals with other countries while, at the same time, inviting foreign direct investment, Egypt on its territory, South Africa in its banking sector. Post-revolutionary Egypt has felt strong enough to rebuff a Saudi investor, while post-Apartheid South Africa feels justified in rescinding earlier land takes.

Both countries have used a mix of carrots and sticks in seeking sufficient control of upstream neighbours. Egypt's and South Africa's upstream neighbours, Ethiopia or Lesotho, control their downstream neighbours' access to water, but geographic advantage has not ensured upstreamers political leverage over other countries without political power. Instead, the upstreamers have accepted land and water deals (Lesotho Highlands Project, Egyptian land investment in Ethiopia) that are potentially disempowering to the (virtual) water-exporting countries.

Land and water take then - and their return - are not merely monetary transactions but need to be legitimised, and may moreover serve geopolitical, hegemonic goals which likewise need to find acceptance to be durable. In that sense we have looked at both the 'hard' (material) and 'soft power' aspects of resource claims. Hegemons often present themselves as exceptional, imbued with a mission for their region (Prys, 2008), As hydro-hegemonic contenders (Zeitoun and Warner, 2006) Egypt and South Africa have a particular need to legitimise their actions to domestic and external audiences.

They have proved successful in this endeavour, with the help of side payments and, at times, open or veiled threats, in 'socialising' secondary powers in their region to accept their discourse (Ikenberry, 1990). In that sense we have looked at both the 'hard' (material) and 'soft power' aspects of resource claims.

Egypt, blessed with a 5,000 year hydraulic civilisation and, for a time, a prominent place in the developing world after nationalising the Suez Canal in defiance of England, France and Israel, continues to claim its leadership of the Nile basin. Hard pressed for food security, post-revolutionary Egypt appears to have regenerated its plan to colonise the desert, presented as a New Civilisation on the Nile. Yet it also uses considerable muscle to keep domestic and foreign opposition at bay, while as an investee, it has recently given the richest man in the region, a Saudi Arabian prince, a wrap on the knuckles.

The Saudi 'land grab' in Egypt has largely been neglected by international NGOs (if not international water experts) as it seemed 'non-incendiary' except for a relatively small group of Nubians – the issue is 'undersecuritised' (Buzan and Waever 2003) giving the Egyptian state leeway to go ahead with the Toshka project relatively unnoticed. However while Egypt's reliance on virtual water and the limits to Egypt's water wealth have become less of a taboo, the hydrological and economic folly of Toshka is far less open to debate.

South Africa meanwhile busily invests (and mediates) under a pan-africanist discourse. The 'soccer diplomacy' of the World Cup confirmed South Africa's status as the front guard of African resurgence and righting historic wrongs at home. South Africa's land dealings however illustrate the complexity of its history relevant to strong state roles in land acquisition to meet a political agenda. The country has to grapple with its own sensitive domestic land issues. While Egypt's Toshka project may be considered 'undersecuritised', in South Africa land grab is 'oversecuritised' (Buzan and Waever, 2003) by all commentators exactly because of the aforementioned 'shadow of the past': the resonance of history makes anything any current South African action sensitive, interpreted as it is in light of past actions. The 'elephant in the room' is an explosive agenda issue, whether for white farmers and black radical youth – not to mention outside analysts.

The thorniness of the topic requires a careful contextual consideration of notions simplified by activist 'land grab' discourse. Geopolitical rationality, this article has contended, is part and parcel of this context.

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# CLAIMING (BACK) THE LAND: THE GEOPOLITICS OF EGYPTIAN AND SOUTH AFRICAN LAND AND WATER GRABS

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**Abstract:** Snapped up for, in places, as little as fifty cents per hectare, African land is not necessarily brought into immediate food, forestry and mining production, and when it is, staples and biofuels dominate rather than export crops. Speculative hoarding, with a view to bringing the land into production when grain and other staples commodities markets are at their most profitable or selling the cheaply acquired land off again at enormous profit at a propitious future moment. The present contribution will see land grab, along with the virtual energy and virtual water that come with the land, as a phase in an ongoing geopolitical game for influence. Moreover, the present article considers the circumstances and options of two regionally hegemonic powers, Egypt and South Africa, claiming land and virtual water - or claiming it back.

**Key words:** Water grabbing. Land grabbing. Virtual water. South Africa. Egypt.

**Resumo:** Atualmente, no continente africano, grandes porções de terra são negociadas a preços que chegam a até 50 centavos de dólar por hectare. Seu caráter especulativo indica que tais áreas entrarão em produção no momento que o preços dos alimentos estiverem altos ou serão vendidas quando valorizadas. Neste contexto, este artigo têm por objetivo contribuir no entendimento de como a atual apropriação de territórios, juntamente com sua energia e água virtual, representam uma fase do jogo geopolítico contemporâneo. Para isso, este artigo analisa as circunstâncias e opções de dois países Africanos regionalmente hegemônicos, Egito e África do Sul, e suas estratégias em reivindicar e manter o acesso às suas terras e água virtual frente à tensões com outros países e investidores. Os dois casos ilustram como a importância das preocupações em relação a segurança geopolítica destes países legitimam as suas reivindicações territoriais.

**Palavras chave:** Apropriação da terra. Apropriação da água. Água virtual. Egito. África do Sul.

**Resumen:** Tierras por todo el continente Africano están siendo apoderadas por tan poco como 50 centavos de dólar por hectárea. Sin embargo, éstas no se utilizan necesariamente para producción alimentaria, forestal, o minera, y cuando es el caso, dominan los biocombustibles y

alimentos de primera necesidad, dejando de lado la exportación de cultivos. Por otra parte, dichos terrenos también se acaparan especulando con futuros auges de precios de los commodities o aumentos del precio de la tierra. El presente artículo considera la apropiación de la tierra, junto con los conceptos de agua virtual y energía virtual, como una nueva etapa en el juego geopolítico de lucha por la influencia. Además este trabajo abarca las circunstancias y opciones de dos potencias hegemónicas regionales, Egipto y Sudáfrica, los cuales reclaman el agua y tierra virtual que les fueron arrebatadas.

***Palabras clave:*** apropiación de agua, apropiación de tierra, agua virtual, Sudáfrica, Egipto

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