Postcolonial perspectives on weapons control

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To cite this article: Ritu Mathur (2018) Postcolonial perspectives on weapons control, Asian Journal of Political Science, 26:3, 293-296, DOI: 10.1080/02185377.2018.1526694

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2018.1526694

Published online: 15 Oct 2018.
Several months ago, I received an invitation from the editorial board of the *Asian Journal of Political Science* to serve as a guest editor for a special issue of this journal. This unexpected invitation came as a pleasant surprise when I was mulling over the possibilities of postcolonial interventions to decolonize practices of arms control and disarmament. The efforts to decolonize cannot be undertaken alone but need a forum and multiple voices that can collectively represent the efforts of postcolonial scholars to engage with the problem of weapons. The scholars contributing to this special issue have long struggled individually to represent the subalterns struggle for equality and justice within the field of arms control and disarmament. It is now that they come together collectively with their myriad perspectives to interrogate contemporary practices of weapons control.

This undertaking is critical especially at a time when the field of International Relations is being critiqued for its Eurocentrism and there is a resurgence of populist civilizational discourses juxtaposing the West and the Rest. This appears as an opportune moment in history to accept the challenge of decolonizing practices of arms control and disarmament. It is not simply a cliché that the field of arms control and disarmament has long been defined and dominated by the West’s military superiority in arms. The struggle against this dominance has been launched by critical security studies scholars that question practices of Orientalism in warfare but refrain from probing more specifically into the problem of weapons. Postcolonial interventions are an exercise in responsibility as they engage with civilizational discourses of difference articulated in terms of race, technology, law and culture. A study of the performative power of these civilizational discourses of difference is critical to cultivate understandings of not only how differences reinforce hierarchies but also to generate reflexivity on the struggles for power, justice and emancipation waged continuously by the subaltern.

This Special Issue of the *Asian Journal of Political Science* is an effort to make more visible the engagement of postcolonial scholars with the problem of arms control and disarmament. It is an effort to resist a resurgent tide of dominant discourses seeking to constitute and reconstitute the field of arms control and disarmament representing the interests of the West to address problems of nuclear proliferation, counterproliferation and nuclear terrorism. While these efforts have their own niche in the field of security studies they cannot be guided by assumptions representing the West as the vanguard of maintaining order and stability in the international system. These dominant representations of the West as the guardian and custodian of the field of arms control and disarmament have often blighted and marginalized contributions of the Global South to weapons control. These efforts have been further stymied and marginalized as some actors from the Global South have striven to join the nuclear club and their practices have been typologized as co-optation or imitation of the behaviour of great powers in the international system.

It is under these circumstances that we invited scholars to not only acknowledge and build upon the postcolonial legacies of Bandung and the Non-Aligned movement but also further investigate and explore discourses on identity, power, hierarchy, marginalization and interventions in an effort to decolonize arms control and disarmament. We invited scholars to
specifically engage and reflect on the following questions: How do we as postcolonial scholars make interventions in the field of security studies? What are the postcolonial experiences in undertaking practices of arms control and disarmament? How have these experiences contributed to neocolonialism or decolonization of the field of weapons control?

My paper on Techno-Racial Dynamics of Denial and Difference in Weapons Control initiates this dialogue. It encourages scholars and policymakers to critically reflect on the intersecting ‘dynamics of difference’ and ‘dynamics of denial’ at play within the field of weapons control. The paper explores at length the persistent dynamic of difference between the Orient and the Occident that encourages proliferation of discourses on modernity and stereotyping the Other. It also questions spiralling dynamics of denial that vests its faith in practices of nuclearism and refuses to acknowledge the historical practices that contributed to the marginalization of the Global South. It insists that the rhetorical deployment of nuclear apartheid within the field of arms control and disarmament is no longer enough. It is imperative that attention be focused on practices of ‘techno-racism’ that are now more explicit, resurgent and circulating with their emphasis on racial reductionism and technological determinism in weapons control. This consideration is imperative as the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as victims of nuclear holocaust recedes and the techno-racial line regulated by managerial practices of arms control and disarmament is increasingly under duress. It questions whether only as sacrificial victims of techno-racial violence can the voices of subalterns make a claim and find resonance in the field of arms control?

Joining this conversation is Itty Abraham’s paper, Decolonizing Arms Control: The Afro-Asian Legal Consultative Committee and the Legality of Nuclear Testing 1960-64. This paper offers a revisionist view of the history of the Cold War. Abraham insists that it is no longer acceptable to view the complexities of decolonization as a ‘sideshow’ to the Cold War between the two superpower protagonists. On the contrary he is emphatic in his assertions that decolonization needs to be conceptualized as a moment in history during which the developing countries struggled for progressive change to constitute a pacific and post-imperial world order. To substantiate these claims, Abraham, demonstrates how the postcolonial states resorted to deploying international law as an interpretive tool that could help them to collectively participate, modify and incorporate their needs in the existing international order without exposing their material weakness. He focuses on the legal maneuvers deployed by the Asian African Legal Consultative Committee (AALCC) during the time frame when the Partial Test Ban Treaty was being negotiated. The 1964 Report of the AALCC documents how the Global South articulated two key principles to oppose nuclear testing. The first principle is the principle of abuse of rights and the second principle is one of absolute liability. These principles were articulated as the countries of the Global South debated the conditions under which nuclear testing could be considered a ‘nuclear wrong.’ These powerful interventions from the Global South could not be ignored as they served as forces of resistance and also as allies of the superpowers shaping the discourse on nuclear testing. It is important to acknowledge today how these interventions made by the diverse grouping of the AALCC helps to balance the dominant views on negotiating the PTBT and offers an insight into the decolonizing practices pursued by the postcolonial states during the Cold War era of arms control and disarmament.

This is then followed by Shampa Biswas and Chacko and Davis’s articles exploring the positionality of Iran and India respectively as representative postcolonial states negotiating a nuclear order dominated by the West. Shampa Biswas’s paper, Iran vs The International Community: A Postcolonial Analysis on the Iranian Nuclear Program undertakes a postcolonial analysis of the hypervisibility of Iran in the media coverage of the West from 2013-14. This was the time when a nuclear deal was being negotiated between Iran and the international community led by the US. In this article, Biswas raises some key questions: What made it
possible for the West led by the US to speak so expansively about it being representative of the international community? What made it possible for the US to hear the Iranians on their nuclear weapons programme? What are the possibilities and limitations of nurturing relationships of trust between Iran and the West? In addressing these concerns Biswas’s paper makes visible the Orientalist presuppositions and civilizational terms of difference deployed during these negotiations. She demonstrates how a series of Orientalist tropes carefully sowed the seeds of deep suspicion and fear in the West against an inscrutable Iran. She questions the trappings of dialogue that appears to take place among sovereign equals but in which Iran appears to be the supplicant striving to join the international community of civilized states. This paper evokes a deep sense of pathos as it engages with a contemporary civilizational narrative that obscures existing asymmetrical relationships of global power and hierarchy.

But Priya Chacko and Alexander E. Davis are not content with demonstrating how mainstream literature perpetuates Orientalist discourses. In their paper, *Resignifying ‘Responsibility’: Indian, exceptionalism and nuclear non-proliferation*, they insist on exploring the agency of India in challenging and perpetuating these discourses. In this endeavour they take recourse to Judith Butler’s conceptualization of ‘subversive resignification’ and deploy it to explore how India has successively resignified the idea of state responsibility especially when it comes to nuclear weapons. In a very interesting exercise, Chacko and Davis articulate how the concept of state responsibility gets bifurcated by two types of civilizational discourses. On the one hand discourses on standards of civilization emphasize state responsibility in terms of compliance but on the other hand discourses on civilizational exceptionalism emphasize state responsibility only in terms of state propensity for moral behaviour. This important distinction makes it feasible for a postcolonial state like India to emphasize and differentiate its own exceptional civilizational status that is then ironically acknowledged by the exceptional superpower, the US, to willingly negotiate the India-US Civil Nuclear Agreement (2005). Chacko and Davis further argue that while India’s subversive civilizational mantra might help it to climb the ladder of nuclear hierarchy it is achieved at the cost of a compromise with the dominant meanings associated with understanding of power, nuclear deterrence, and marginalized postcolonial considerations of ethics and morality. These compromises and subversive acts of resignification cannot be easily copied and reproduced but are very particular in terms of cultural inheritances, political histories and contemporary needs.

Similarly, Matthew Bolton’s paper, *The ‘Pacific’ Part of the ‘Asia-Pacific’: Oceanic Diplomacy in the 2017 Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*, is a call for an engaged analysis of Pacific peoples’ agency in addressing the problem of nuclear weapons. It is sensitive in its portrayal of racial and technological considerations and carefully introduces the concept of ‘resistance diplomacy.’ This paper emphasizes the humanitarian impact of nuclear testing in the Pacific and makes visible how political considerations of race and technology served as important criteria for nuclear testing in these trust territories. Bolton shares archival records of how imperial powers such as the US, UK and France exercised colonial control and did not hesitate to conduct nuclear tests. Bolton’s purpose is then to go further and demonstrate the struggle of the Oceanic people to organize themselves against ‘nuclear racism’, offer themselves as a more humane civilizational standard to be emulated, and insist that positive obligations be included in the final text of the TPNW. This paper provides critical insights into the particular role of Oceanic people and their colonial legacy in negotiating the recently concluded Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2017.

These five scholarly contributions to the Special Issue provide us with significant postcolonial insights in addressing the problem of arms control and disarmament. They articulate different intellectual and conceptual frameworks and engage with problems of positionality in arms control and disarmament. Both chronologically and thematically they cover the
period from 1945 to 2017 and address issues pertaining to use of nuclear weapons, nuclear testing and negotiations of arms control and disarmament agreements. In this undertaking they are acutely conscious of the need for more historical engagement focusing on the agency of actors from the Global South. They problematize discourses on technology, race, law, civilization and suggest how meanings associated with these concepts have been deployed and re-deployed to craft strategies of resistance and emancipation by the Global South.

These papers astutely acknowledge the asymmetrical relationships of power and recognize power as performativity. They encourage scholars to think about the intersecting dynamics of difference and dynamics of denial that are woven together by civilizational considerations of race and technology. These papers are not content to view subalterns as victims and suppliants but as thoughtful agents that are articulating discourses on rights, liability, morality and legal obligations that can help reconstitute contemporary practices of weapons control. Such reflexivity is imperative to constitute a post-imperial and pacific international society. These postcolonial efforts are only preliminary efforts to decolonize the practices of arms control and disarmament. This Special Issue of the *Asian Journal of Political Science* seeks to only re-ignite the dormant potential of postcolonial studies to give a new life and meaning to moribund practices of arms control and disarmament.

In such a challenging undertaking the invitation, support and coordination from the editorial board of the *Asian Journal of Political Science* is to be much appreciated. A special note of thanks to Runa Das for her support and to all the contributors for their enriching and provocative contributions without which this collective postcolonial effort at decolonizing practices of arms control and disarmament would not have been possible.

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