

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Changing Arms Control Norms in International Society*

By Kenki ADACHI, London: Routledge, 2021

Keith KRAUSE\*

Professor Kenki Adachi has written an accessible, but at the same time sophisticated and original, account of the way in which arms control norms develop and are spread in international society. His argument spans examples of weapons controls from poison and the crossbow, to norms of chivalry and Bushido, to contemporary attempts to ban anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions, and he draws upon different civilizational and ethical traditions to underscore that the roots of weapons restraint are not only Western or Eurocentric, but also can resonate (or not) in other times and places.

The overarching aim of the book is two-fold: to re-situate the study of norms within a larger examination of the constitution of international society, and to elaborate upon (and challenge somewhat) the “norm life cycle” model popularized by Kathryn Sikkink that has largely influenced the way in which norms are thought of and studied in International Relations. Professor Adachi does this through six systematically linked chapters that examine the relationship between norms research and international society scholarship (chapter one), the emergence and development of norms on weapons use, first within domestic societies, and later in the “inter-state society” (chapters two and three), and their subsequently attempted universalization through various attempts to regulate weapons (chapter four). Chapters five and six (the conclusion) examine some of the competing contemporary pressures that are affecting the process of norm evolution with regard to weapons, in particular the role of non-state actors and the diminished autonomy of state actors.

Certainly the former aim is extremely laudable. It is doubtlessly true that most studies of norms are largely micro-level, focused on the particular issues (not only weapons control, but also specific norms of human rights such as banning torture, or apartheid, or less positively, norms that perpetuate forms of subordination and oppression of women or other social groups). These innumerable studies seldom (with some exception) situate their analysis against the broader backdrop of the constitutive norms of international society, in its “English school” sense. Similarly, they seldom reflect on the heritage or

---

\* Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland.

Email: keith.krause@graduateinstitute.ch

Published online: March 22, 2022.

horizon of meaning that informs and in some cases supports micro-level norms, especially of restraint in relations between states and societies.

Professor Adachi's book addresses this issue by drawing on works such as Norbert Elias' *The Civilizing Process* (and equivalents in Japanese historical sociology) to show the way in which courtly norms of restraint and chivalry were designed also to reinforce the power and legitimacy of rulers and established orders, and to eliminate violence and force from everyday social interactions. The attempts (not always successful) to impose regulative norms such as against the use of poison as a weapon, or crossbows (which challenged knightly superiority) or firearms (which challenged the position of the Japanese warrior class) is better understood against this social context. Parenthetically, he notes that firearms were at one point more widely distributed in Japan than in Europe, a claim that makes their near-total ban even more surprising.

The "international society" dimension emerges when these efforts to regulate weapons were externalized to govern relations between states, and became "important in terms of exploring the genesis of the law of armed conflict" more broadly. Here Professor Adachi traces (in chapter two) the evolution of attempts to civilize war and armed conflict, from the earliest organized efforts in the 18th and 19th centuries to the advent of international humanitarian law and the law of armed conflict. One of his most interesting points, made almost in passing and drawing upon Japanese scholarship, is that the constitutive norm of sovereign equality that underpins contemporary international society was not at all accepted in, for example, 18th century relations between China and Russia, which were framed (on the Chinese side) as a tributary relation, and not one between sovereign equals. Traces of this approach to multilateralism in Chinese worldviews can be found today. Also paradoxically, as he notes, the process of "civilizing war" made it in some ways more acceptable.

With respect to his second aim – challenging the "norm life cycle" model – the book deploys several very useful "flow diagrams" that serve as an analytical framework to chart, first in general and then in specific terms, the diverse influences on normative evolution. These include not just different actors (at different times), but also different aspects of norm evolution, including not only its emergence, but also contestation, disappearance, clarification, or acceptance and stabilization. At various points in the process, a new norm can be made to "disappear" if met with widespread non-compliance (based on diminished credibility or shifting power relations, for example), and there is nothing teleological about the march forward of progressive norms (as is implied in Sikkink's "justice cascade"). These diagrams are used effectively to trace the (successful) stabilization of the norm banning chemical weapons from the injunctions against poison weapons to the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention, which was mainly an affair of states, to the more complex reality of the campaign to ban anti-personnel land mines, which included a range of forces and actors from transnational civil society, this time pushing towards a ban. But the implications of what he labels the "new medieval society" (echoing Hedley Bull) is that the push-and-pull factors are no longer just confined to states, and that therefore the scope of their autonomy is more limited.

This more nuanced and perhaps realistic or pessimistic view of norm evolution is a healthy corrective to the enthusiasm of those who unreflectively saw the Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention of 1997), or the Convention on Cluster Munitions (2008), or even the efforts towards the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (signed in 2017, entered into force in 2021) as a steady and cumulative process. Thus Professor Adachi underlines what he calls the "viscosity" and stagnation of the evolution of norms concerning nuclear weapons (proliferation and use), and the challenges this regime faces. He is also pessimistic about future progress on arms control and indeed on restraint in warfare, given the fragmentation of international society, the multiplication of actors (including non-state armed actors as well as "civil society"), the impact of such developments as targeted killings and extraordinary rendition

and torture, and the overall impact of these processes on the cohesion needed for arms control norms to emerge, evolve and be stabilized.

Professor Adachi's book overall achieves its two aims, both re-situating norms against weapons use against a broader historical and sociological backdrop, and adding nuance to some of the accounts of arms control norm diffusion. The main strength of his work is to highlight that all efforts at so-called "humanitarian disarmament," cannot be understood outside of the broader horizon of meaning established by the civilizing process of Norbert Elias, or more pointedly the "standard of civilization" argument of Gerrit Gong. The style is accessible, and the volume could usefully be aimed at undergraduate or graduate level audiences who wish to gain an overview of existing debates and perspectives in the realm of arms control. Similarly, it is relevant beyond those who are concerned simply with arms control norms, including for scholars working on other norm-related issues (including, for example, norms around the promotion of transitional justice, post-conflict peacebuilding, multilateral security arrangements, and so forth). It is thus a useful supplement to the more fine-grained analysis of particular arms control measures and regimes, as well as to the literature on norms in world politics.