

Critical Dialogue

Contesting Sovereignty: Power and Practice in Africa and Southeast Asia. By Joel Ng. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 300p. \$99.99 cloth.
doi:10.1017/S1537592723001044

— Swati Srivastava , Purdue University
srivas70@purdue.edu

Scholarly treatments of regional integration and sovereignty have largely focused on the European experience, even before Brexit. As such, Joel Ng's recent monograph, *Contesting Sovereignty: Power and Practice in Africa and Southeast Asia*, is a welcome addition. Ng skillfully examines sovereignty contests in the evolution of the African Union (AU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), two pillars of regional integration in the Global South. Borrowing the concept of "norm circles" from sociology, Ng theorizes how politically diverse regional organizations where material inequalities are relatively constrained manage norm contestation related to integration. Ng argues that norm contests are determined by diplomatic competence, operationalized as 1) controlling the initiative; 2) mastering other shared norms; and 3) converting opportunities for influence (*metis*) (p. 15). The research design selects six proposals in the AU and ASEAN contexts that met with success, failure, and qualified success in their respective norm contestation. The book relies on archival materials, secondary histories, and some interviews to trace the fate of these proposals.

Contesting Sovereignty is nestled within three theoretical literatures in International Relations. First, it directly aims to advance theories of norm contestation by invoking the concept of norm circles to move beyond (what Ng terms) singular logics such as the "norm cascade." Second, it is part of the emergent "practice turn" in diplomatic studies and promotes the idea of power as competent performances ("power in practice" framework). Third, it tangentially connects to theories of state sovereignty, especially those concerning supranational integration. Empirically, the book also links to comparative regional integration as well as organizational studies (particularly coalition dynamics).

The book is at its strongest in revealing various diplomatic alternatives at pivotal moments of organizational change. The AU's origin story in the early 2000s out of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) has been told

before, but Ng dives deeper into the proposals that could have set the African continent on an entirely different trajectory. In particular, the notion of a new "United States of Africa," proposed by Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 1999 and built on a Pan-Africanist vision from the early twentieth century, imagined a political union with "one government, one leader, a single army, one currency, one central bank and one parliament" (p. 83). Gaddafi's proposal stunned the other states, particularly South Africa and Nigeria, and Ng follows their confluence into opposing norm circles as well as their competence in defeating the United States of Africa idea without fully alienating Gaddafi. In the Southeast Asian context, Ng leverages interviews to relay the little-known events behind the formation of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). Indonesia's ability to work around spoilers like Myanmar is well communicated along with the emergence of the new right to development in the eventual ASEAN Human Rights Declaration.

The research design, writing style, and organizational structure are all done well. Selecting failures as well as successes of norm contestation is important for theoretical leverage. Ng is also effective at weaving the theoretical framework throughout the six empirical chapters. Each chapter concludes with a table summarizing the three competencies—control of initiative, shared norms usage, and *metis*—observed in the proposing and opposing norm circles. While comparative insights across the two regional organizations are largely muted in the empirical presentation, the conclusion of the book briefly overviews some commonalities and differences. Just like the book's structure, Ng's writing is clear and direct. Each paragraph serves a purpose in propelling the narrative. Ng also provides enough context to understand the background of the diplomats and relevant players. Overall, the book is eminently readable and will be suitable for advanced undergraduate and graduate courses.

There are two areas where the book invites some critical reflection. First, even though the title and central argument concern sovereignty, Ng rarely defines the term or examines the different meanings of sovereignty empirically. In the opening pages, references to sovereignty allude to its "traditional sense," a "restrictive notion of sovereignty," "sovereignty-limiting norms," "political notions of sovereignty such as non-interference,"

sovereignty as “states’ agency,” “a quality of ‘sovereignty,’” and sovereignty “understood as freedom to act” (pp. 1–6). Stephen Krasner famously introduced four types of sovereignty (international legal, Westphalian, domestic, and interdependence) that differ on internal/external control as well as legitimation. My book, also featured in this critical dialogue, catalogues over twenty definitions in IR theory that focus on different aspects related to “supreme authority.” The lack of conceptual clarity (or discussion of the impossibility of such clarity) are important because the empirics are structured around different contestations of sovereignty norms. However, in the numerous mentions of proposing or opposing norm circles defending sovereignty claims, Ng only includes two explicit mentions of sovereignty by a state leader (p. 86, p. 216). For example, when discussing how South Africa and Nigeria dealt with Gaddafi’s United States of Africa proposal, the book does not use the archival material to reveal particular sovereignty concerns, instead choosing only to emphasize that such opposition existed (pp. 89–90, 92–93, 95). Thus, while Ng remarks that “African states could be united in such negotiations without ceding sovereignty” (p. 97), we have little insight on *how* the leaders thought about the meaning of sovereignty and what *kind* of sovereignty contests were at play with Gaddafi’s proposal.

The story recurs in the successful Conference on Security, Stability, Development, and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA), which introduced ideas of collective responsibility. CSSDCA is interesting because it features within-case variation: the proposal by Nigerian leader Olusegun Obasanjo in 1991 was initially rejected before a version was later adopted in 1999. Here, Ng calls attention to the OAU Charter’s principle of non-interference as the sovereignty norm at stake in 1991 (p. 112). However, while mentioning that states like Libya and Sudan were vocally opposed (p. 116), Ng does not present those objections in charter terms or otherwise. In the historical background, Ng refers to the “OAU’s first open debate about the nature of sovereignty” (p. 119), but the selected passage does not invoke sovereignty directly or indirectly. Crucially, the one aspect that changed between the 1991 and 1999 proposals was that CSSDCA’s challenge to sovereignty was “less directly stated” (p. 127). This is an important aspect of what I call “Idealized Sovereignty,” where state leaders maintain the convenient fiction of indivisible supreme authority even when they proceed to divide and delegate sovereign functions. Elsewhere, in the ASEAN chapters, Ng sometimes uses language of “national interests” to substitute for sovereignty (pp. 179, 188), but this is also not substantiated by diplomatic discourse. There is sometimes a sense that the meaning of sovereignty norms in regional organizations is ambiguous outside of practice (p. 183), but this point could be more clearly stated, especially given its affinity with international practice theory. The practices

themselves still rarely highlight the variety of contests over meanings of sovereignty.

Second, the book’s unique contribution to norm contestation derives from promoting a theoretical argument that foregrounds “utility” beyond a foundationalist approach that conceives of norms as moral (p. 23). For Ng, the foundationalist view misses that norm following also occurs for instrumental reasons (p. 26). Instead, Ng adopts the idea of utility, which means that “norms that are more beneficial or serve a greater utility than their counterparts are likely to spread and embed themselves” (p. 28). Even though this framing largely overlooks work on the instrumentalization of norms (e.g., see Ian Hurd, *How to Do Things with International Law*, 2017), the more acute concern is disregarding the feedback loop between power and utility and divorcing the creation of “greater utility” from normative force. While Ng touches upon this briefly in a footnote (p. 43), the issue is surely deserving of greater engagement, especially if the utility model claims to not treat preferences as exogenous (p. 44).

Ng also positions his contribution to norm contestation by opposing realist and constructivist foils (p. 36). International Relations scholars have (gradually) moved past arguments that exclusively present realism as material power and constructivism as ideas or norms. Indeed, the variety of social construction projects in IR over the past two decades would be totally compatible with Ng’s embrace of “power in practice” and the strategic use of norms. While Ng situates his work well within practice theory, there are missed opportunities to include IR theorists who have recently worked to reconceptualize norms (e.g., Michelle Jurkovich, “What Isn’t a Norm?”, *International Studies Review* 22[3], 2020), especially from a processual view (see Simon Frankel Pratt, “From Norms to Normative Configurations,” *International Theory* 12 [1], 2020), and study the practices of procedural rules (see Mark Raymond, *Social Practices of Rule-Making in World Politics*, 2019). These works are similarly advancing practice theory and norm contestation beyond singular logics, but without reifying the material/ideational divide.

These conceptual issues notwithstanding, *Contesting Sovereignty* is an important book that sheds light on multiple histories of wrestling with sovereignty in regional integration outside the Global North. It deserves to be read widely and have its argument engaged, through dialogues like this.

Response to Swati Srivastava’s Review of *Contesting Sovereignty: Power and Practice in Africa and Southeast Asia*

doi:10.1017/S1537592723001093

— Joel Ng 

I take on board many of Swati Srivastava’s suggestions of what the book neglected to do. However she has two main