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Research Article

Forgotten Conflicts: Producing Knowledge and Ignorance in Security Studies

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Abstract

Security studies privileges the study of civil wars in some contexts over others. The field's leading journals mostly publish studies of armed conflicts in Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Armed conflicts in Asia receive comparatively little attention, despite their prevalence and protracted nature. Against the background of our own empirical archive—the decades-old but largely ignored civil war in Myanmar—we ask why some conflicts draw more scholarly interest than others and why this uneven attention matters. In doing so, we argue that the empirical selectivity bias in the study of civil war and armed conflict reflects (1) institutional entanglements between the field of security studies and Western foreign policy; and (2) sociological factors that shape the formation of scholarly subjectivities and pertain to methodological challenges. This uneven empirical landscape shapes our conceptual understanding of civil wars. In fact, prominent debates within leading security studies journals surrounding the nature of civil war and armed conflict are inseparable from the empirical contexts in which they emerged. Leveling such an uneven empirical landscape thus generates opportunities for discussing conflict, insecurity, and violence in a different light. In shedding light on this issue, we urge closer attention to questions of place, time, and power in the scholarly production of knowledge and ignorance.

Résumé

Les études de sécurité privilégient l'étude des guerres civiles dans certains contextes par rapport à d'autres. Les principales revues traitant ce domaine publient principalement des études portant sur les conflits armés d'Afrique, d'Europe de l'Est et du Moyen-Orient. Peu d'attention est comparativement accordée aux conflits armés d'Asie malgré leur prévalence et leur nature prolongée. Dans le contexte de notre propre archive empirique—la guerre civile de Birmanie longue de plusieurs décennies mais en grande partie ignorée -, nous nous demandons pourquoi certains conflits attirent davantage d'intérêt de recherche que d'autres et pourquoi cette attention inégale a de l'importance. Ce faisant, nous soutenons que le biais de sélectivité empirique dans l'étude des guerres civiles et des conflits armés reflète a) les enchevêtrements institutionnels entre le domaine des études de sécurité et la politique étrangère occidentale, et b) les facteurs sociologiques qui façonnent la formation des subjectivités de recherche et se rapportent aux défis méthodologiques. Ce paysage empirique façonne notre compréhension conceptuelle des guerres civiles. En réalité, les débats dominants des principales revues d'études de sécurité autour de la nature des guerres civiles et des conflits armés sont inséparables des contextes empiriques dans lesquels ils sont apparus. Le fait d'égaliser un tel paysage empirique inégal génère donc des opportunités de discuter des conflits, de l'insécurité et de la violence sous un jour différent. En apportant un éclairage sur ce problème, nous recommandons

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vivement d'accorder une plus grande attention aux questions de lieu, de temps et de pouvoir dans la production de connaissances et d'ignorance des recherches.

Resumen

Los estudios de seguridad favorecen el estudio de las guerras civiles en algunos contextos sobre otros. Las principales revistas del campo publican, en su mayoría, estudios de conflictos armados en África, Europa del Este y Medio Oriente. En comparación, los conflictos armados en Asia reciben poca atención, a pesar de su prevalencia y naturaleza extendida. Ante el contexto de nuestro propio archivo empírico (la guerra civil en Birmania, de décadas de antigüedad pero ampliamente ignorada), preguntamos por qué algunos conflictos atraen un mayor interés académico que otros y por qué esta atención desigual es importante. De esta manera, sostenemos que el sesgo de la selectividad empírica en el estudio de las guerras civiles y los conflictos armados refleja lo siguiente: a) conflictos institucionales entre el campo de los estudios de seguridad y la política exterior occidental; y b) factores sociológicos que influencian la formación de subjetividades académicas y pertenecen a desafíos metodológicos. Este panorama empírico desigual determina nuestro entendimiento conceptual de las guerras civiles. De hecho, los debates prominentes en las revistas principales de los estudios de seguridad en torno a la naturaleza de las guerras civiles y los conflictos armados son inseparables de los contextos empíricos de los cuales surgieron. Por consiguiente, nivelar un panorama empírico tan desigual genera oportunidades para analizar el conflicto, la inseguridad y la violencia con una perspectiva diferente. Al aclarar este problema, urgimos una mayor atención a las cuestiones sobre el lugar, el momento y el poder en la producción académica del conocimiento y la ignorancia.

Keywords: sociology of knowledge, armed conflict, civil war, epistemology, security studies, Myanmar,
Mots clés: sociologie des connaissances, conflit armé, guerres civiles, épistémologie, études de sécurité, Asie,
Palabras clave: sociología del conocimiento, conflicto armado, guerras civiles, epistemología, estudios de seguridad, Asia

Introduction

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is home to the longest ongoing civil war in the world. Ever since the country's independence in 1948, Myanmar has been troubled by a multitude of conflicts involving a dazzling array of armed actors. Yet, Myanmar has rarely been featured in disciplinary scholarship on civil war and armed conflict.[1] Like other long-standing armed conflicts in Asia such as in Southern Thailand or Northeast India, country specialists have produced a wealth of knowledge on the region's violent politics. And Asia remains largely off the radar in mainstream debates on civil war and armed conflict within the field of security studies and its subfield of peace and conflict studies.[2]

Civil wars and armed conflicts have become a particularly prominent field of research in security studies since the end of the Cold War (Newman and DeRouen 2014). Scholars of conflict and security, while neglecting certain conflicts, have also long visited and revisited particular civil wars and their aftermaths. The most influential discussions are of wars in the former Yugoslavia, select conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as Sierra Leone or Rwanda, and conflicts in the Middle East, including Israel/Palestine or more recently the civil war in Syria. This selectivity bias in security studies is also observable within regions. The brutal civil war in Syria has attracted significant media and scholarly attention, for instance, but the equally brutal war in Yemen is commonly ignored.

Selectivity bias in news reporting on conflict is a well-known phenomenon that can mostly be explained with

1 This is indeed something that has baffled researchers in the field of Myanmar studies. Independent analyst David Mathieson, for instance, called it the "'Burma Gap' in conflict studies" (Mathieson 2018).

2 (International) Security studies is an expansive field that looks at a wide range of phenomena from interstate war to big data. In this study, we are concerned with security studies scholarship that investigates organized political violence at the substate level, including civil wars, armed conflicts, and ethnic violence.

the perceived newsworthiness of commercialized media production (Livingston 1996; Jakobsen 2000; Hawkins 2011). Much less scrutinized is the scholarly production of knowledge about civil wars and armed conflicts through investigating the empirical silences of leading academic journals in the field.[3] Gaining a better understanding of how we produce knowledge *and ignorance* about particular conflicts is of major importance for scrutinizing what we think we know about the nature of conflict, violence, and war in general. In other words, our conceptual understanding of social phenomena cannot be divorced from the empirical contexts in which it emerges.

In fact, some of the most prominent conceptual debates in the study of civil wars, including those concerning notions of new wars, state failure, or warlordism, have been developed from particular empirical contexts and might not travel to others (if indeed they are applicable in their empirical contexts of origin).[4] This development is highly problematic in a field that is dominated by positivist political science, particularly in the United States, and its claim to produce generalizable findings and universal truths. However, even when acknowledging context specificity, thinking outside of the parameters set by the conceptual apparatus derived from a distorted selection of cases is difficult, and often leads to the reproduction of received wisdom rather than innovation in the study of armed conflict and civil war. Against the background of our own empirical archive—the ignored civil war in Myanmar—we ask the following three questions:

- Why do some civil wars and armed conflicts garner more scholarly attention in leading security studies journals than others?
- How does the uneven empirical landscape of knowledge shape our conceptual understanding of conflict, war, and violence?
- How can a focus on the empirical silences (e.g., Myanmar's civil war) help us to rethink extant paradigms in the field of security studies?

Before addressing these questions, the first part of our paper will illustrate the pattern of selectivity bias in leading security studies journals through a systematic review of articles published on civil wars, armed conflicts, and ethnic conflicts. In doing so, we do not claim to have captured security studies scholarship in its entirety. Indeed, we do not attempt a review of all security studies journals or a review of articles in area-specific journals. Instead, we deliberately focus on leading disciplinary journals in security studies because of their centrality in shaping disciplinary debates (Russett and Arnold 2010). As leading journals in the field with their higher impact factors, research findings from these journals provide prominent cues of how the mainstream security studies scholarship understands the field. The second section suggests some explanations for the observed selectivity bias evident in these prime outlets for the study of armed conflict and civil war. We discuss the institutions within which security studies operates, with a particular focus on the field's intimate entanglement with Western security interests.[5] We also focus on the formation of security studies scholars in their particular social context as well as the methodological challenges involved in researching particular civil wars and armed conflicts. The third section explores how the focus on specific conflicts over others has shaped conceptual paradigms pertaining to the nature of war, the state, and the rebel. Finally, we turn to specialist literature in Myanmar studies (Burma studies) to offer some suggestions on how a close reading of empirical silences can help to further our understanding of conflict, violence, and (in)security.

By focusing on the sociology of knowledge production in security scholarship, we urge closer attention to issues of place, time, and power when studying the phenomena of civil war and armed conflict. In doing so, our article centers on the ways in which

3 This issue is similar to how feminist and postcolonial security scholarship has highlighted gendered and Western-centric silences in security studies more widely (see, for instance, Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Bilgin 2010; Parpart 2020).

4 Also doubtful is how analytically useful concepts such as "failed states" are to analyzing conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, the empirical context from which this discourse emerged (Wai 2012; Henderson 2015).

5 The "West" is of course not a coherent political actor with coherent foreign policy interests, even less so under the Trump presidency. That said, the Trump presidency obviously had no impact on the scholarship under investigation in this article (journal articles published between 1990 and 2018). We, therefore, use the West and Western foreign policy in line with postcolonial scholarship on security studies to denote the mostly Anglophone sphere defined by Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, a shorthand for the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, 331). Whether "Western" foreign policy will further fragment in the future and what impact that might have on security studies remain to be seen.

empirical archives[6] and theory building relate to one another. Our intervention thus contributes to the increasingly vibrant debate on bias in international relations (IR) more widely (Wallerstein 1997; Bilgin 2010; Barkawi, Tarak, and Brighton 2011; Vitalis 2015; Bliesemann de Guevara and Kostić 2017; Colgan 2019; Kamola 2019). Specifically, we contribute to arguments that highlight the oft-Eurocentric repertoire of empirical archives in IR and how this limitation inhibits the quest for global theory building and a more global discipline itself (Kang 2003; Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Kang and Lin 2019).

Selectivity Bias in Leading Security Studies Journals

Some parts of the world witness higher rates of internal armed conflicts than others. A quick glance at conflict datasets illustrates this point. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP, v19.1), for instance, shows that the regions that have witnessed the most internal armed conflicts in the world since the end of the Cold War are Africa (359), the Middle East (117), Eastern Europe (104), Southeast Asia (98), South Asia (82), and the Americas (71).[7]

This empirical distribution of conflict, however, is not reflected in scholarly interest, as expressed in leading security studies journals. Indeed, a mismatch remains between the prevalence of regional distribution of civil wars and attention by the disciplinary study of civil wars. In particular, conflicts in Southeast Asia and South Asia are rarely the object of inquiry. To illustrate this mismatch, we have undertaken an article count of leading security studies journals, as identified by Russett and Arnold for the time period between 1990 and 2010 (Russett and Arnold 2010). The list of journals can be seen in the online appendix. By focusing on English-language journals with high impact factors, we do not claim to represent the wealth of global scholarship produced on civil wars and armed conflicts. Nor do we want to imply that knowledge in the identified journals is more legitimate than knowledge produced in others. On the contrary, by focusing on bias formation within the identified set of journals, we join other critical arguments on bias in academic publishing in security studies (e.g., Colgan 2019; Goh 2019; Kang and Lin 2019).

Indeed, we consciously focus on the identified journals' power in shaping the disciplinary debate on civil war and armed conflict within the field of security studies and its subfield of conflict and peace studies. Our study thus focuses on leading security studies journals of different epistemological traditions such as *International Security* and *Security Dialogue* but excludes area-specific outlets such as *Asian Security* or *African Security Review*. In doing so, we aim to determine which empirical contexts inform the most prominent mainstream discourses in the disciplinary study of civil war and armed conflict.

We searched these journals for articles that featured the following three keywords: "civil war," "ethnic conflict," and "armed conflict." We retrieved all journal articles that included at least one of these three terms. We performed article searches for each journal in accordance with the following sequence. First, we collected all articles that returned when tagged with the keyword "civil war." Notably, this search method produced few results across most journals as most articles were not tagged with this specific keyword. Next, all articles with the keyword "civil war" in their abstracts were retrieved. Finally, articles with the keyword "civil war" anywhere in the text body were obtained. We repeated the entire process for the next two keywords "ethnic conflict" and "armed conflict." We counted a journal article retrieved

6 Our use of empirical archive (rather than empirical knowledge) is influenced by Foucaultian and postcolonial literature on knowledge production (e.g., Guha 1988; Foucault 1972). This focus highlights that neither conceptual nor empirical debates in security studies and beyond are an objective representation of the truth but rather reflect wider institutional ways of knowing about the world.

7 Measuring armed conflicts is a disputed terrain, one common question pertaining to the operationalization of the term in terms of measuring levels of violence (Sambanis 2004; Staniland 2017). For illustrating our main argument, the mismatch between the prevalence of regional distribution of civil wars and scholarly attention, we follow the UCDP definition of armed conflicts as a conflict between at least one government and non-state actor or between non-state actors, which "results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year" (Department of Peace and Conflict Research n.d.). We used UCDP data to record armed conflicts for the period of interest from 1990 to 2018. We only use conflicts recorded as "Internal armed conflict" and "Internationalized internal armed conflict" in the UCDP database, while excluding conflicts that were coded as "Extrasystemic" and "Interstate." We retrieved civil conflicts for each year and coded them, respectively, for this paper's categorized regions: Africa, Middle East, Americas, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. Years with multiple ongoing civil conflicts in a country were counted as a single entry for that country.

through one of the three keyword searches, and we only allowed one count per article. Only articles that examined intrastate conflicts were included, while articles that reviewed solely interstate conflicts and wars were excluded. Articles that analyzed both types of conflicts were included.

We performed the searches using the online search platforms provided by the respective journals. Except for select journals (such as *Foreign Affairs*), all journals used in this study are hosted under the broader publisher platforms of Taylor & Francis, Sage Publications, Cambridge Core, Wiley Online Library, Elsevier, and MIT Press Journals. While not identical, each respective publisher platform provides the functionality to search for the articles by dates and specific keywords tagged by each article. Searches for the keywords located in the articles' abstracts and bodies of texts could also be performed. Thereafter, each individual article was separately reviewed and coded according to the world region its research pertained to, if indeed it did. Almost half of all articles (711) pertained to more than one region, mostly because they were statistical large-*N* studies, reflecting the quantitative turn in security studies, including in some of its most prominent journals such as *International Security*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and *Journal of Peace Studies*. We divided the remaining, regionally focused articles (848) into eleven key regional categories: Middle East, Africa, Americas (both North and South Americas), Western Europe, Eastern Europe (including Russia and the former Soviet Union countries), South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Oceania.[8]

We show that security studies scholars have focused their research on armed conflicts in Africa (270 articles), Eastern Europe (156 articles), and the Middle East (164 articles), while Southeast Asia (42 articles) and South Asia (52 articles) attracted much less scholarly interest in high-ranking security studies journals. Moreover, and given our conflict count above, we can explore the empirical focal points and silences in the study of civil wars (at least insofar as highly influential disciplinary studies go).[9]

Figure 1 summarizes and illustrates these findings and in so doing (1) compares the number of articles about internal armed conflicts published in high-ranked security studies journals by region; (2) suggests that some world regions are underrepresented in the study of civil war and armed conflict; and (3) in particular shows that considerable scholarly interest has been devoted to the study of conflicts in Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. While these regions have been home to numerous conflicts since 1990, the figure also demonstrates that conflicts in Asia overall have attracted much less scholarly attention. With regard to Southeast Asia, we can witness a particularly stark discrepancy between conflict occurrence and scholarly attention. The region has witnessed a similar number of internal armed conflicts (98) as the Middle East (117) or Eastern Europe (104) since 1990. While 14 percent of leading security studies journal articles are written about such conflicts in the Middle East, with 18 percent of those published on similar such conflicts in Eastern Europe, only 5 percent of articles in leading security studies journals (forty-two articles in total) pertain to conflicts in Southeast Asia. Conversely, the occurrence of internal armed conflicts in Western Europe has been negligible since 1990 (four conflicts or 0.5 percent of all conflict occurrence in the world as per UCDP). Disciplinary scholars in security studies have, however, devoted significantly more energy to researching conflicts in Western Europe (fifty-six articles or 7 percent of all counted articles).

When disaggregating the publications on conflicts in Southeast Asia, which according to the above has the highest percentage of neglected conflicts, the mismatch between conflict occurrence and scholarly interest continues. A considerable number of articles study the interlinked conflicts in Indonesia (eleven of forty-two articles) and Timor-Leste (six of forty-two articles). In comparison, in our counting only three articles were specifically focused on Myanmar, and only one on Thailand. These articles were mainly broad commentaries on the political environment and their implications, rather

8 Empirically, the disaggregation of Asia into various subregions is arbitrary, particularly because East and Southeast Asia are deeply connected, for instance, in a regional security order (Van Schendel 2002; Goh 2019). That said, we separate Southeast Asia from East Asia and Oceania because almost no reported conflicts are in East Asia and Oceania within the UCDP dataset, whereas Southeast Asia features a particularly strong discrepancy between abundant occurrence of armed conflicts and the limited amount of academic coverage within security studies.

9 To be sure, our conflict and article counts above are far from perfect. Our conflict count does not consider the intensity or protracted nature of conflicts and our article count might have missed articles that do not use any of our keywords. That said, our analysis suggests a general pattern in the mismatch between conflict occurrence and scholarly attention in the field of security studies that provides for an entry point into discussing neglected conflicts in the discipline.

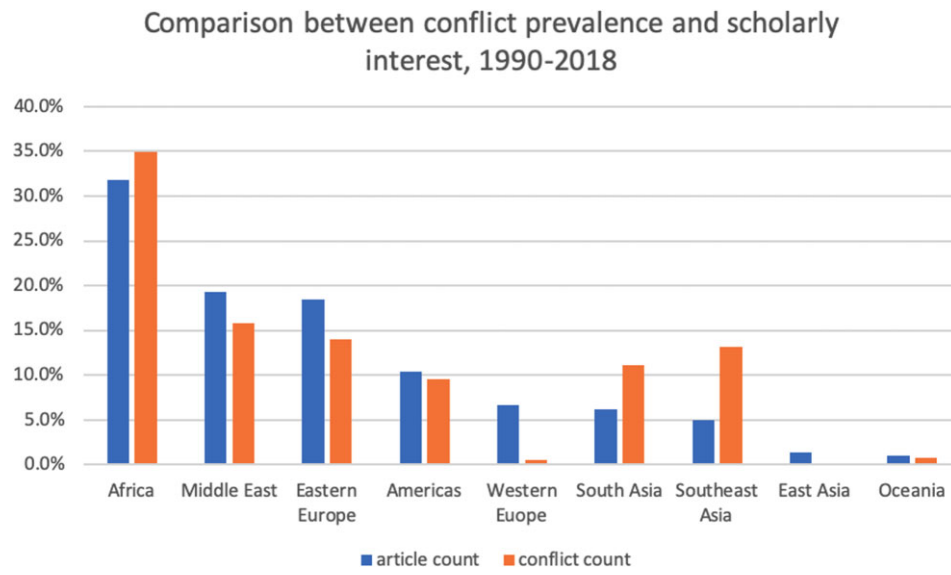

Figure 1. The mismatch between conflict occurrence and regional interests in security studies.

than evidence-based studies on conflict processes in these two countries. Given that Myanmar is the world's longest running and most fragmented civil war (featuring at least eighteen ethnic armed rebel movements and fifty-eight militias in 2015), and Thailand's deep south has seen some of the deadliest cycles of communal violence in the region, leading security studies journals' inattention to these and similarly neglected conflicts needs explaining (Storey 2008; Brenner 2019, 3).

The Sociology of Knowledge Production in Security Studies

While the selectivity bias in leading security studies journals is not self-explanatory, it might not come as a great surprise that some armed conflicts are literally ignored in public discourse more widely. News coverage of armed conflicts after all has been shown to exhibit stark selectivity biases. In fact, there is limited correlation between the severity of armed conflicts and their coverage in Western news media (Jakobsen 2000; Hawkins 2011). The relatively low-intensity conflict in Israel–Palestine, for instance, has become a permanent feature in major European and American news outlets. In contrast, the Second Congo War and its aftermath in the Great Lakes region of Sub-Saharan Africa most likely cost more than five and half million lives since 1998 (Prunier 2008; Hawkins 2016, 2). Nevertheless, these conflicts have remained virtually absent in Western news media (Hawkins 2016, 2). Similarly, the civil war in Syria has been in the media spotlight, while the equally brutal conflict in Yemen receives much less airtime. As Peter Jakobson put it, the "media ignores most conflict most of the time" (Jakobsen 2000, 131).

As per Virgil Hawkins, the perceived newsworthiness of armed conflicts in Western media is determined by a combination of several factors, including proximity to audience interest and identity (Hawkins 2011). In contrast to journalists operating in the 24-hour news cycles of commercialized media, scholars should base their case selection on academic considerations. The most important consideration is the potential of studying a given conflict for generating knowledge. Therefore, underreported and less researched conflicts should naturally receive more academic attention than conflicts that feature more prominently in existing scholarship. Why then do the bulk of leading security studies publications tend to (re)visit the same places to study the same conflicts while ignoring conflicts elsewhere?

Since the 1990s, security studies has engaged in extensive self-reflection on its objects and subjects of study. In fact, most contemporary textbooks in the field trace the field's contested nature to different perspectives in the scholarship (Krause and Williams 2002; Collins 2016). In the *Evolution of International Security Studies*, Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, for instance, chart the development of the field through a macro-sociological lens (Buzan and Hansen 2009). Following Foucault's notion of the archaeology of knowledge, they understand IR and its subfield of security studies not as "objective

representations of reality, but rather particular ways of looking at, and generating knowledge about, the world" (Buzan and Hansen 2009, 60). Their genealogy consequently highlights how the study of security has been shaped by an interplay of great power politics, technological advances, historical events, prevailing academic paradigms, and organizational dynamics in the wake of institutionalizing the discipline (Buzan and Hansen 2009, 41). Their work has received much praise and sparked further critical discussion. Thomas Biersteker and Ole Waever, in particular, have criticized the privileging of macro-level factors in Buzan and Hansen's analysis and convincingly argued for more attention to the contexts of individual scholars in explaining wider trends in security studies (Biersteker 2010; Waever 2010).

Building on this debate, we approach the sociology of knowledge in the study of civil war and armed conflict with both macro- and micro-dimensions in mind. As per Karl Mannheim, we see those dimensions related to both (1) the ways in which the working of ideologies in a given social context accentuates, distorts, and neglects certain "truths" over others and (2) how "the social position of the knower" shapes the production of knowledge in socially conditioned ways (Shils 1974; Mannheim 2013). We thus explore how security studies has come to produce and reproduce its own selectivity bias in the empirical study of civil war and armed conflict because of its academic institutions, which operate in close proximity to the Western policy world, and the formation of scholarly subjectivities, which pertain to the methodological challenges in the study of civil war and armed conflict.

The Institutions of Security Studies

The study of civil war and armed conflict stands in close proximity to the foreign policy agendas of Western states because contemporary security studies draws its lineage from strategic studies, which emerged first and foremost as a problem-solving policy science in the service of Western hegemonic powers at the end of the Second World War (Barkawi and Laffey 2006). Strategic studies has since sought close engagement with governments and their militaries to find solutions to questions surrounding war and peace, most prominently in the United States (Barkawi and Laffey 2006). This engagement has given rise to an institutional assemblage between academic research at universities and oft-partisan security think tanks, including revolving doors, knowledge exchange, and extensive funding infrastructure (Buzan and Hansen 2009, 61–64).

IR scholars have indeed voiced concern of a widening gap between their research and foreign policy makers, particularly in the United States (Walt 2005; Nye 2008). In response, they increased efforts to foster closer collaboration, for example, forming the Bridging the Gap Project, with its aim to "promote scholarly contributions to public debate and decision making on global challenges and U.S. foreign policy."[10] The US foreign policy establishment generally maintains wide engagement with international security scholars through different scholar–diplomat programs as well as fellowships for scholars such as at the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations (Nye 2008, 601). Thus, scholars commonly wear double hats as scholars and policy advisers, not least to receive government funding for their research (Stepputat 2012). Importantly, many IR scholars do not see this as a problem. On the contrary, according to a 2011 survey most IR scholars in the United States (92 percent) believed that "there should be a large number of links" between policy and academia (TRIP survey cited as in Hundley, Kenzer, and Peterson 2015, 290). Only a small minority (8 percent) believed that "there should be a higher wall of separation" (TRIP survey cited as in Hundley, Kenzer, and Peterson 2015, 290).

Due to these close ties, the bulk of Western security studies scholarship has traditionally been concerned with the insecurities of the West rather than the non-West, even when studying non-Western contexts (Ayoob 2002; Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Bilgin 2010). Instead of viewing the historical absence of non-Western insecurities merely as a discipline blind spot, Pinar Bilgin convincingly argues that these silences are a constitutive practice of the discipline itself (Bilgin 2010). The boom in research on civil wars in so-called failed states of the Global South after the end of the Cold War is itself a case in point. Rather than solely reflecting a shift in the nature of security threats, this research agenda is indicative of changing interests of Western security establishments. The political process behind this shift in security policy was poignantly captured by Edward Newman's analysis on burgeoning post–Cold War research on "failed states":

> The popularity of the failed state concept and its impact upon policy circles reflects the interests and influence of certain types of political agendas and analysts … As long as governments and security establishments are sensitive to the alleged threats of failed states and are willing to fund research into this area, scholars and analysts will emphasize – and indeed play up – the dangers of failed states. (Newman 2009, 437–38)

10 For the mission statement of Bridging the Gap, see https://bridgingthegapproject.org/about/.

Post–Cold War research on civil wars in the Global South has become particularly close to Western foreign aid agendas as part of the wider merging of development and security concerns in the West. Since then, Western development agencies have taken the leading role in post-conflict peacebuilding and reconstruction activities in war-torn countries of the Global South (Stepputat 2012). This situation shaped the empirical and conceptual concerns of security studies as expressed by the field's leading journal publications.

Empirically, the study of civil war and armed conflict has come to focus on the contexts of Western interventions. The civil wars in Sierra Leone or Bosnia and their aftermaths—both sites of major Western peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts—have, for instance, become major geographical hubs of knowledge production in the field of security studies. In contrast, the conflicts in Chechnya or Northeast India—both places without Western intervention—have largely been ignored by scholars of armed conflict and civil war. In Southeast Asia, a world region that is generally underrepresented in the disciplinary study of civil wars, Indonesia and Timor-Leste stand out as cases of interest to security studies, or at least security scholars in neighboring Australia. Five out of six articles on Timor-Leste were published in the *Australian Journal of International Affairs* during the period of our article count. Given the Australian-led UN intervention in Timor-Leste, unsurprisingly these articles focus on issues of peacebuilding. In comparison, armed conflicts without Western intervention in Southeast Asia, such as in Southern Thailand or Myanmar, have not drawn any noteworthy interest from security studies scholars.

Moreover, studying cases of conflict with Western interventions led to a strong focus on the practices of Western interventions themselves (more so in European than American scholarship). In fact, many studies referring to civil wars are post–civil war studies, in which Western-led international interventions rather than the dynamics of armed conflict itself are the main object of interest. Debates on humanitarian and peacebuilding interventions in contexts of civil wars have become a major subfield of security studies. In fact, Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Roland Kostić point to the field of "conflict and intervention studies" (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kostić 2017, 1).

To be sure, a large part of this scholarship is vocal in its critique of Western interventions. Critical peacebuilding scholars, for instance, position themselves in opposition to Western, top-down institution building and social engineering programs. Instead, critical peacebuilding scholars advocate for incorporating "customary" and "indigenous" solutions to build peace in a hybrid way between "local" and "international" forces (Richmond 2010; Mac Ginty 2010). As postcolonial critiques demonstrate convincingly though, much of this literature misunderstands and romanticizes the "local" by neglecting its co-constitution with "international" forces through long imperial histories (Sabaratnam 2013; Nadarajah and Rampton 2015). Indeed, not least because this scholarship privileges the study of intervention over the study of the intervened or, in fact, the understanding of armed conflict and civil wars outside the frame of Western interventions.

Indeed, as Sabaratnam points out, most critical peacebuilding literature exhibits not only a rather limited understanding of but also little concern for the societies in which interventions occur. Sabaratnam notes that this "habit of exclusion ... does seem to uphold the overall sensibility that nothing worth engaging with is going on outside the interventions themselves" (Sabaratnam 2013, 271). Instead, Western peacebuilding critiques often remain mired to a Eurocentric framework, essentially foreclosing the space for struggle and resistance outside a notion of peaceful emancipation (Nadarajah and Rampton 2015). In line with related parts in critical security scholarship such as human security, agents of change outside the West often remain to be "conceived as the bearers of Western ideas" (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, 350).

This convergence of Western foreign policy agendas and the study of civil wars has affected the conceptual tool kit in security studies in two ways. First, the preoccupation of security scholars with conflicts in which the West has a stake has led to their neglect of conflicts where Western interests are less affected. The result is a rather narrow set of in-depth case studies that are often made to speak to the phenomena of civil war and armed conflict more generally. Second, civil wars are often studied through the lens of Western objectives and concerns, dragging the conversation away from studying civil wars to an often rather self-referential debate about Western policy.

In addition to these close ties between scholarship and foreign policy, the selectivity bias in the study of civil wars is produced and reproduced by the formation of scholarly subjectivities, which are intimately linked with questions of positionality and methodology.

The Formation of Security Scholars

Security scholars are social beings, who are socialized, educated, and trained in particular social contexts. To understand the how security studies scholars approach their object of study, we must appreciate their embeddedness within the academic and policy institutions. And we must

remain attentive to their formation as people and scholars and how those formative experiences shaped their positionality to capture the viewpoint from which they observe and deliberate about the world. This understanding also includes their identities, not least with regard to gender, race, and ethnicity, as well as the place and time of their socialization, training, and scholarship (Biersteker 2010; Waever 2010). As per Mannheim, we need to shift from the ideology of institutions within which knowledge production takes place to the wider social positionality of the knowledge producer.

In the West, the socialization of security scholarship is produced in institutions that privilege some regions over others. The study of Asia inhabits an almost paradoxical place in IR. On the one hand, IR scholars generally recognize the strategic importance of Asia, in particular eastern Asia, where the rise of China is often perceived as an immediate threat that needs to be managed in the West (Hundley, Kenzer, and Peterson 2015). On the other hand, remarkably little scholarship on Asia is published in top IR journals, and even when it is, scholars often interpret Asia through a Eurocentric lens (Kang 2003). Between 1980 and 2011, only 12 percent of all articles in leading journals in the field were concerned with Asia (Hundley, Kenzer, and Peterson 2015, 294). Unsurprisingly, then, students of international security learn relatively little about Asia. In fact, the study of Asian security is mostly relegated to area experts in specialist courses. When general security studies textbooks and core courses draw upon Asian examples, they are often selected, viewed, and analyzed through the prism of non-Asian cases that informed theory building in the first place (Kang and Lin 2019).

Examining the reading lists from core seminars in forty-two US graduate schools, Kang and Lin found that 29 percent of assigned texts generalized about the working of international politics from the basis of European cases: none were solely based on empirical material from Asia (Kang and Lin 2019, 393–94). Textbook discussions of international security in Asia thus often read like another Concert of Europe, with different pieces on the chessboard (Goh 2019, 406). This relative paucity of knowledge about Asia among Western IR scholars not only entails a shortage of theory building based on Asian histories and experiences (Haggard and Kang 2020) but also makes it more difficult to publish on Asian politics in IR journals. Authors of Asian security articles in mainstream IR journals are often expected to provide significantly more background information for their general readership than authors on European or American security. So, their articles must be more descriptive, leaving less room for theory building, which makes it more difficult to be accepted for publication in leading disciplinary journals. This situation, in turn, perpetuates the absence of Asia in mainstream IR training (Hundley, Kenzer, and Peterson 2015; Kang and Lin 2019).

Similarly, Asian examples have largely been absent from informing theory building in the study of internal armed conflicts, as our article count of leading security studies journals suggests. That said, not only Asian cases are neglected. As discussed, there are also stark discrepancies within regions. In the study of armed conflicts, African cases are drawn upon more so than cases in Asia. Here as well though, certain cases in Africa have dominated the debate in security studies: Rwanda, Somalia, or Sierra Leone are widely debated, the Democratic Republic of the Congo or the Central African Republic much less so. Apparently, media selectivity shapes public discourse and is thus linked to the social positionality of knowledge producers.

While conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa have generally been underreported in Western media, some conflicts such as the genocide in Rwanda and the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia have received substantial coverage. Coverage has been dominated, however, by sensationalized portrayals of child soldiering, cannibalism, and warlordism (see, for instance, *The Vice Guide to Liberia* news documentary). Fictionalized accounts in Hollywood movies such as *Blood Diamond*, the *Lord of War*, or the *Constant Gardener* co-produced portrayal of contemporary civil wars in Africa as rather apolitical, senseless acts of violence that are primarily fueled by primordial ethnic hatred and the economic profiteering of local elites (Mafe 2011; Sakota-Kokot 2014). As we elaborate further below, these reductionist explanations were mirrored in some of the binary intellectual constructs surrounding new and old wars as well as greed and grievances in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Collier and Hoeffler 1998; Kaldor 2012).

This is not to say that academics come to develop certain kinds of analytics because of their film preferences, but rather to point out the wider discursive environment within which knowledge (and ignorance) is being produced. As academics teaching in the field of security studies at Western institutions will know, the imaginary of armed conflicts for most students since the 2000s has strongly been shaped by images of the Middle East. And today's students (thus, tomorrow's scholars) naturally then want to write their dissertations about sectarianism and terrorism in the Middle East, in the same way as students focused on questions of ethnic conflict in Southeast Europe in the 1990s or debated the resource curse in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 2000s. As US

strategic interests shift away from the Middle East to counter China's influence in Asia, we might perhaps see more academic research and teaching start to focus on the Asia region in the years to come.

In addition, security studies scholars' vantage point is shaped by methodological questions related to fieldwork. To be sure, fieldwork or any kind of contextual inquiry has become less relevant for a significant part of disciplinary studies on civil war and armed conflict since the 2000s. In part, this occurred because the field of civil war studies in particular has become increasingly dominated by the neo-positivist paradigm in the social science, an approach that is "distinguished by its partiality to rational choice theory (RCT), naturalization of research objects, limiting studied objects as a function of their statistical measurability, and an epistemic closure that translates into a refusal to regard other paradigms as scientific" (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2018, 3). Contextual knowledge about the very places of armed conflicts, let alone fieldwork, is actively discouraged within this paradigm (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2018, 2–11). Nonetheless, scholars of civil wars who remain interested in context and rely on the collection of fieldwork data have to navigate methodological challenges that also shape which conflicts are selected as case studies.

Regarding field research, the researcher's concerns over access, safety, ethics, and convenience make it easier to work in some conflict-affected environments than others (Wood 2006; Mazurana, Jacobsen, and Gale 2013). Concerns over safety and intense risk management procedures at universities thus privilege fieldwork in post-war contexts rather than places of active armed conflict. Often university-preferred areas are also the site of a Western intervention, such as peacebuilding operations. Access is often significantly distorted. In addition to the urban bias, research infrastructure arguably faces the same "bunkerization" as international intervention efforts, which distances researchers from the societies they study.[11] Further, academics navigating the contexts of international intervention inevitably face a "fieldwork industry" in which access to the field and to informants and data is commodified (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kostić 2017, 10). Fieldwork practicalities that reproduce the selectivity bias toward contexts of Western intervention are buttressed by institutional entanglements between security studies and the Western foreign policy community.

However, even studies concerned with civil wars beyond Western interventions often study civil wars retrospectively by, for instance, interviewing former combatants (e.g., Weinstein 2006; Cohen 2013; Oppenheim et al. 2015). Places of ongoing protracted conflict in particular have often been "virtually dropped off the 'research map'" (Goodhand 2000, 8). If research is conducted on active conflicts, concerns over access, safety, ethics, and convenience often lead field researchers to conduct fieldwork in places close to the conflict rather than the conflict itself. As research in remote rebel-controlled areas is more challenging than research in relatively safe and easy to access government-controlled capitals of war-torn countries, scholars have long relied on urban elites as their main source of information. As per Stathis Kalyvas, this situation has led to a strong "urban bias" in which "most accounts of civil-war violence are produced by urban intellectuals who rely on a set of explicitly or implicitly 'urban' information and assumptions, even though most civil conflicts are rural wars, fought primarily in rural areas by predominantly peasant armies" (Kalyvas 2004, 161). Scholars thus commonly underestimate the popular support that many rebels command among rural communities reflected in oft-found narratives that portray rebel groups as mainly criminal and predatory forces, for instance, in the prominent "new wars" or "greedy rebel" paradigms (Collier and Hoeffler 1998; Kaldor 2012).[12]

Similarly, methodological challenges surrounding access and convenience of fieldwork in conflict areas shape which civil wars and armed conflicts are focused on in the first place. First, some conflict-affected places are easier to access than others. Ease of access is determined by a multitude of factors, not least by governments' access restrictions. While traveling to conflict-affected places in Sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East often comes with significant risks regarding the safety of researchers and researched, it is relatively easy to enter the actual conflict zones, for instance, by taking a flight to Juba or Mosul. In contrast, access to the often-remote battlefields of South and Southeast Asia is heavily restricted by state militaries. In fact, most conflict-affected regions of Myanmar or Northeast India are literally fenced off from international observers, including academics, journalists, and humanitarians alike.

The ease with which researchers can navigate their field sites is also shaped by factors such as language skills. It is no coincidence that English-speaking coun-

11 On the bunkerization of aid workers, see Fisher (2017) and Weigand and Andersson (2019).

12 The more multifaceted authority relations between rebel groups and civilians are something that has only recently been foregrounded in the study of civil war, particularly in the so-called rebel governance literature (e.g., Mampilly 2012; Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015).

tries in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as Uganda, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, have become the preferred destinations for conducting fieldwork on armed conflict, by far outranking their Francophone neighbors, let alone countries in Southeast Asia. Western scholars in security studies are often particularly ill-placed in studying conflict and insecurities in large parts of the non-Western-language-speaking Global South. Political science and IR training no longer incentivizes the learning of languages. On the contrary, a heavy emphasis on acquiring quantitative research skills leaves little time for PhD students and early career scholars to invest in linguistic skills. Learning about conflicts in linguistically challenging environments means scholars must turn to area specialists (which we shall turn later in this article).

These differences in accessibility and convenience among field sites also shape attention to conflicts within countries. Myanmar has received little attention in leading security studies journals. Nevertheless, even Myanmar and Southeast Asia specialists have paid significantly more attention to some of the country's multiple ethnic armed conflicts than to others. For many years, the scarce scholarship on Myanmar's civil war produced by area specialists has been dominated by studies of conflicts in the country's eastern borderlands with Thailand (e.g., Thawnghmung 2008; Horstmann 2011; McConnachie 2012; Gravers 2015). Comparable conflicts in the country's northern border areas with China and India have received much less attention because of the restricted access to conflicts in the country's north. Large parts of these areas such as Myanmar, China, and India remain off-limits to researchers, journalists, and humanitarians because governments place heavy restrictions on traveling and working for foreigners in their borderlands. Traveling on the Thai side of the border with Myanmar is comparatively easy and more convenient. In fact, a research infrastructure has emerged on the Thai border, which surrounds a nexus comprising humanitarians, journalists, activists, and researchers that has long operated on the Thai border to Myanmar. Similarly, the plight of the Rohingya on Myanmar's border with Bangladesh has attracted some attention from researchers due to the scale of ethnic cleansing and atrocities in Rakhine State, which supersedes other conflict zones in Myanmar. Arguably though, research on the Rohingya was also facilitated by the relative ease of access to refugee camps in Bangladesh (at least initially), located next to the holiday resort of Cox Bazaar with its five-star hotels.

To be clear, we are not arguing that some victims of Myanmar's protracted ethnic conflict, or indeed more easily accessible places elsewhere in the world, receive too much scholarly attention from security studies scholars or area specialists: People who are suffering, wherever they are, can never receive too much attention. However, there is often too little attention. The formation of scholarly subjects and access and convenience of field research combine with the aforementioned security studies institutions in shaping such patterns of scholarly attention or inattention. Rather than presenting an exhaustive elaboration of all possible factors, which is impossible within the limits of a journal article, we hope that our discussion can stimulate reflection on how we chose to study certain conflicts over others.

Rethinking Paradigms through Empirical Silences

Security studies, like other fields of academic knowledge, is governed by paradigms: "conceptual worlds that allow us to think differently about the same research problems" (Malešević 2008, 99). Paradigms provide common understandings of problems and solutions to phenomena such as war, violence, conflict, and security.[13] In this last section, we show how scholars translate their imaginaries of civil wars in certain places and times into universal paradigms of civil war more generally and the problems that arise because of it. We then mobilize specialist knowledge from Myanmar studies to show how greater attention to empirical silences can help generate new knowledge.

The notion that something is qualitatively new about organized violence after the end of the Cold War has become one of the most important research paradigms in the study of civil wars (Malešević 2008; Kaldor 2012). Often forgotten is that the study emerged in a certain place and time: Bosnia–Herzegovina of the 1990s. In the introduction to the third edition of her book *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, Mary Kaldor reflects on how she developed the New Wars thesis from this one "paradigm case":

> I use the example of the war in Bosnia–Herzegovina to illustrate the main feature of the new wars, mainly because it is the war with which I was most familiar when I originally wrote this book. The war in

13 This notion of paradigm is based on Thomas Kuhn's discussion of paradigms in the hard sciences as "universally recognized scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions for a community of researchers" (Kuhn 2012). Robert Wade demonstrated how useful this notion is also for social sciences, particularly fields close to international policy (Wade 1996).

> Bosnia–Herzegovina shares many of the characteristics of wars in other places. But in one sense it is exceptional; it became the focus of global and European attention during the 1990s. More resources – governmental and non-governmental – have been concentrated there than in any other new war up until the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the one hand, this means that, as a case study, it has atypical features. On the other hand, it also means that it became the paradigm case from which different lessons were drawn in the post-Cold War period, the example which has been used to argue out different general positions, and, at the same time, a laboratory in which experiments in the different ways of managing the new wars have taken place. (Kaldor 2012, 7)

Kaldor's reflections speak directly to our arguments on (1) why some conflicts figure more prominently in the study of civil war and armed conflict than others as well as (2) why this is relevant for our conceptual understanding of war, violence, and security. As she admits elsewhere in the book, there were many other contemporary wars, some of which featured more horrific levels of violence (Kaldor 2012, 32). Yet, it was the war in Bosnia–Herzegovina that "impinged on global consciousness more than any other war in the last decade of the twentieth century," which then turned it into "the archetypal example, the paradigm of the new post-Cold War type of warfare" (Kaldor 2012, 32). The conceptual ideas on civil war and proposed solutions developed in the case of Bosnia–Herzegovina have since been disconnected from this particular time and space, traveling freely to other places in the world.

Two of the most prominent paradigms that emerged in tandem with the New Wars thesis were that civil wars are precipitated by "state failure" and that civil wars are motivated and/or facilitated by economic opportunities aka "greed." To be sure, the "greedy rebel" and "failed state" paradigms have received substantial critiques in security studies, similarly to the New Wars thesis itself. This is precisely why we chose to illustrate our arguments with these debates. The debates (1) emerged from particular places and times, (2) are caricatures of complex empirical phenomena, and (3) have become primary building blocks of the conceptual apparatus in the study of civil war and armed conflict despite attracting elaborate and sustained criticism. Many scholars readily distance themselves from these paradigms. Nevertheless, they have become deeply engrained in the conceptual world of security studies.

The paradigms of the "failed state" and the "greedy rebel" emerged alongside the New Wars thesis during the post–Cold War reorientation from interstate conflicts to civil wars research among scholars of international security. They are linked to the same conflicts, which have governed the Western imaginary of war and violence since the 1990s. In addition to the Yugoslavian wars, as Kaldor explained above, those conflicts were the Rwanda genocide and the interconnected civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia. All three contexts combined the following elements: explicit ethnic dimensions, high levels of indiscriminate violence against civilians, and Western interventions or the failure of such. Moreover, they were seen as fueled by predatory civil war economies. Initially popular discourse, Western politicians and some security scholars forwarded culturalist arguments about the nature of civil wars in "failed states," whose collapse was said to be fueled by ancient tribal hatred rather than political goals and ideologies (Huntington 1993; Kaplan 1994; Kaldor 2012). Framing ethnic conflicts as spontaneous outbursts of irrational ancient hatred conveniently enabled Western foreign policymakers to justify inaction, for instance, in the face of genocide and ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Srebrenica, respectively (Bowen 1996).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, rationalist explanations rose to prominence in stressing the role of cold economic rationale and incentive structures as causes and facilitators of civil wars and state failure (for a good overview, see Blattman and Miguel 2010). This viewpoint, in contrast to cultural essentialism, was most prominently promulgated in Paul Collier's and Anke Hoeffler's original formulation of their "greed and grievance" thesis and its long-standing reiterations since (Collier and Hoeffler 1998). The new viewpoint also fit with instrumentalists, including Mary Kaldor, for whom predatory but rational elites use identity politics to manipulate the masses for their own ill gains (e.g., Bowen 1996; Kaldor 2012, 80–90). Yet again these discourses served the Western security establishment; however, this time they played into the hands of liberal interventionists and the then-emerging development–security nexus: if civil wars are based on rational, economic motivations, this argument goes, conflict-ridden failed states can also be "fixed" with technicist interventions that tweak the incentives of warring factions (e.g., Le Billon and Nicholls 2007; Wennmann 2009). Much of this rationalist literature is based on large-*N* econometric modeling rather than case study methodology.

Scholars have previously critiqued the political convenience of these explanations (Keen 2012), their methodological inadequacies, and how they are linked to wider epistemic structures (Bilgin and Morton 2002; Cramer 2002; Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011), their Eurocentric fallacies, including an ahistorical neglect of

colonial violence and its legacies (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Wai 2012; Henderson 2015), and the ways in which both paradigms further Western policy interests (Keen 2012; Wai 2012). Despite these criticisms, both paradigms—the "failed state" and the "greedy rebel"—remain deeply engrained in contemporary scholarship of civil wars. Discussions of hybrid governance and hybrid peacebuilding, which ostensibly critique the "failed state" paradigm, have yet to present genuine alternatives for understanding statehood and state formation in the postcolonial Global South. Rather, they reproduce liberal and neoliberal assumptions and prescriptions about the state, the local, and the role of violence in political contention (for good critiques, see Meagher 2012; Nadarajah and Rampton 2015). Similarly, scholars critique Collier's caricature of "the greedy rebel" by pointing to the overly broad-brush strokes with which aggregate studies simplify multifarious processes of political violence that have produced more fine-grained studies of armed groups. However, those critiques often reproduce the binary of greed and grievance at a lower spatial level of analysis, for example, by classifying rebels as either loot-seeking criminals or justice-seeking true believers (Weinstein 2006; Oppenheim et al. 2015).

Attending to neglected conflicts can be helpful for thinking about violence, conflict, and security outside of the constraints of self-maintaining paradigms because regional expertise is often disconnected from the conceptual apparatus of security studies.[14] From the gaze of security studies, the world's longest ongoing civil war, Myanmar's ethnic armed conflicts, for instance, might look like a paradigmatic case of an apolitical "new war" where "greedy rebels" profit together with the kleptocratic elites of a "failed state" from lootable resources and narcotics industries in lawless borderlands. In this narrative, fragile statehood leads to civil war and war economies that in turn contribute to state collapse. While Myanmar's civil war has remained conspicuously absent in disciplinary debates on civil war, the rare occasions in which leading security studies journals have tended to the Southeast Asian country paint a picture that fits neatly with these paradigms (Cornell 2005; Christensen, Nguyen, and Sexton 2019).

Myanmar specialists have also highlighted the intertwined nature of insecurity, conflict, and war economies in Myanmar's restive border areas, large parts of which are controlled by non-state armed groups (Meehan 2011; Woods 2011). In contrast to disciplinary security scholarship, however, Myanmar studies shows how the country's war economy is not necessarily corrosive of state power but has become "a central arena through which state power has been constructed and reproduced" (Meehan 2011, 376; see also Woods 2011; Jones 2014). Operating outside the "failed state" paradigm of security studies, scholars of Myanmar have indeed long investigated the country's civil war as a means of violent postcolonial state formation (Smith 1999; Callahan 2005). If at all, Myanmar does not seem to lack nation-statehood but encompasses too many competing nation-building projects that need be understood in relation to wider regional histories (Sadan 2013; Han 2019).

In a similar vein, Myanmar studies has largely been missing from the greed and grievance paradigm despite elaborate discussions of (1) the collusion of state and non-state elites in profiting from the country's extensive war economies (Woods 2011; Jones 2014; Brenner 2015) and (2) the political grievances of ethnic minority communities whose marginalization by an ethnocratic state has fueled a decades-long civil war (Smith 1999; Sadan 2013; Walton 2013). Instead of explaining rebel mobilization as a function of individual choices based on political grievances or economic opportunities, scholars of Myanmar's rebel movements have highlighted the importance of the historically grown social and political context within which rebellion emerged and persisted (Christensen and Sann Kyaw 2006; Thawnghmung 2008; Brenner 2019). In fact, Myanmar experts show how rebellion has often become "a way of life" in the country's borderlands, which produces its own social, political, and moral orders within which political violence needs to be analyzed (Smith 1999, 88). Myanmar scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, including IR, history, anthropology, and gender studies, have highlighted the importance of understanding how rebel movements are embedded in the lifeworld of local communities (Sadan 2013; Hedström 2017; Kiik 2017; Brenner 2019; Steinmüller 2019).

From this perspective, participation in rebellion is not so much the outcome of individual choices but linked to social relations, nationalist discourse, political culture, and everyday practices that shape the subjectivities of people as well as revolutionary projects themselves. These findings do not easily fit paradigms in the disciplinary study of civil war and armed conflict, but they do resonate with knowledge produced by area specialists on similarly neglected conflicts in the region, for instance, scholarship on the secessionist conflict in Southern Thailand or research on the Maoist Naxalite rebellion in India (McCargo 2015; Shah 2019). We thus

14 We are not arguing that area studies bears no epistemic baggage. As per Van Schendel, area studies produces its own ignorance, for instance, of places at the margins of traditional area containers (Van Schendel 2002).

hope that our brief excursion to Myanmar illustrates the potential for generating new ways of theorization in security studies by tending to the empirical silences in the field through area studies knowledge.

Conclusion

In analyzing civil war and armed conflict, this paper has shown how leading journals in the field of security studies privilege the study of some conflicts over others. Due to their prominent place within the field, this practice not only creates a skewed empirical landscape of knowledge and ignorance but also translates into our conceptual understanding of war, conflict, and violence. We explored the reasons for this selectivity bias as expressed in publications by leading security studies journals and argued that the empirical silences of the field can be particularly productive for thinking beyond the confines of existing paradigms. We do not claim that our findings indict the whole field of security studies. Indeed, many journals and policy papers outside the leading journals are not covered in our analysis. However, our article offers a critical lens into the sociology of security studies and IR because it hones into the field's mainstream analysis of war and conflict. By looking to the discipline's geographies of knowledge production, we urge closer attention to the interactions between empirical research and conceptual paradigms, particularly with regard to place, time, and power.

We argued that the selectivity bias in leading security studies journals is linked to the discipline's sociology of knowledge production. Importantly, security studies emerged and developed in intimate entanglement with security interests of the West, reflected in its funding and research infrastructure, encompassing a network of government agencies, think tanks, and university institutions. Rather than solely reflecting a shift in security threats, this entanglement is indicative of the changing agendas of Western security establishments that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, came to view "failed states" in the Global South as a main source of international disorder (Newman 2009, 437–38). However, leading security studies journals are interested only in some civil wars. Our analysis suggests that the disciplinary study of civil wars mainly focuses on places of interest to Western foreign policy, for instance, countries on the receiving end of Western interventions in the Western Balkans, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East. Conversely, security studies conspicuously neglects some of the most protracted armed conflicts, including those in Southeast Asia.

In addition to the institutional assemblage of security studies with Western security interests, academia itself perpetuates focal points and silences through the production of its own echo chambers. Training, publishing, and promotion requirements for scholars in security studies, like other fields, disincentivize genuine cross-disciplinary research. We argued that on an individual level, academic echo chambers are co-produced by socialization processes, including media portrayals, which shape the scholarly imaginary of war. Moreover, methodological challenges for fieldwork in civil wars further insulate the echo chambers in security studies. Researching civil wars comes with tangible fieldwork challenges in terms of access, safety, and research ethics. Unsurprisingly then, conflict researchers have visited and revisited some places rather than others. Most knowledge on civil wars as published in leading disciplinary journals, in fact, seems to be produced in urban, English-speaking contexts where Western interventions have created research infrastructures in the aftermath of war. Less accessible places have often dropped off the radar.

Selectivity bias not only has implications for empirical knowledge. Neglecting many armed conflicts also translates into distorted conceptualization of conflict, war, and violence more generally. The shortcoming of existing paradigms becomes particularly striking when consulting the empirical silences and margins in the scholarship on civil war and armed conflict. Freed from the conceptual blinders of disciplinary security scholarship, area specialists highlight the dynamics of state formation over state failure and identity over interests in analyzing the world's longest ongoing civil war in Myanmar. To productively disrupt and rethink established paradigms in the study of civil war and armed conflict, (re)starting the conversation between disciplinary security scholars and interdisciplinary area experts is indeed long overdue. Finally, we call for more attention to scholarship on security studies outside of the narrow set of leading journals in the field. Doing so can hopefully contribute to less Eurocentric theory building in security studies and IR, and indeed a more global discipline.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Journal of Global Security Studies* data archive.

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