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Review of Beyond and Between the Cold War blocs

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Review of “Beyond and Between the Cold War blocs,” Special Issue of The International History Review 37:5 (December 2015), in H-Diplo Article Review Forum, no. 614 (May 2016)

By **Wen-Qing Ngoei**, Northwestern University

In their introduction to this special issue of *The International History Review*, Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl, Sandra Bott, Jussi Hanhimaki and Marco Wyss state that this collection of papers examines “what independent pathways” existed for peripheral states, independence movements, or regional alliances “within the Cold War system that were not directly subjected to the East-West confrontation” (902).^[55] And there is, in principle, much to recommend this endeavor. As the introduction rightly points out, there is abundant evidence of middle and smaller powers as well as non-state actors who pursued their objectives through “an extensive array of strategies” that “did not easily fit into binary” Cold-War dynamics (901). Though the big powers exerted preponderant influence upon world affairs, the history of the global Cold War remains incomplete without acknowledging the agency of those who operated “in the Cold War, but not of it,” those who escaped the gravity of the superpowers’ agenda to achieve their own goals.^[56]

Thus, this collection of papers aspires to “take off the Cold War lens” and go beyond simply showcasing those historical actors of the Third World who resisted the United States, the Soviet Union, and China, or influenced the dimensions of the global conflict.^[57] Indeed, several of these papers delve into the rivalries and alliances within the Third World, comparing the agendas and actions of Non-Aligned and neutral states (be they European, Asian, or African) that departed from the Cold-War rivalry; others shed light on under-studied multinational networks such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Commonwealth that at times intersected with the Cold War but at others secured what the introduction describes as the “leeway” to chart their own paths (902).^[58]

To render visible the “independent pathways” that historical actors eked out within the Cold War and, most importantly, show that these “pathways” were not of the Cold War, most of these papers hold the “independent pathways” up against East-West dynamics, using the ostensible contrast to make their case. This approach seems conceptually sound but there are perils in the execution. In several papers, the Cold-War conflict looms so large and irresistible, that what limited or short-lived ‘leeway’ the smaller powers achieve seems to pale in its significance.^[59]

Indeed, as Sue Onslow concludes her insightful essay on the Commonwealth as a “global sub-system” with sufficient (and underappreciated) heft to maintain a “determined stance of non-involvement in Cold War issues,” she cautions that the Commonwealth’s “influence and activities should not be over-stated.”^[60] To be sure, her paper argues that the Commonwealth has an admirable record of successful diplomatic efforts not directly subject to the Cold War, including its support for negotiations to end the Nigerian civil war as well as transition Bangladesh and Mozambique to independence. But Onslow concedes that in the face of “‘hard power’ calculations of the Cold War,” the Commonwealth’s “report card [was] much less impressive” (1076). When President Ronald Reagan authorized the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983, for example, an intervention intertwined with the escalating U.S.-Soviet rivalry, Onslow reveals that the Commonwealth Secretary-General’s “intense behind-the-scenes diplomacy” failed to forestall the American military intervention and could do little more than encourage Commonwealth members “not to endorse it” after the fact. The Commonwealth, Onslow argues, could only “exploit its filigree of formal and informal networks” with effectiveness when the superpowers were not directly invested in incorporating a particular theater of conflict into their rivalry (1076). Put another way, the Commonwealth’s “partial independence” appears to have bloomed neither of, nor within, the Cold War.

Likewise, when Schaufelbuehl, Wyss and Bott compare the under-studied recognition policies undertaken by the European neutrals Switzerland, Austria, and Sweden, it is the tremendous gravity of the American Cold War agenda and U.S. political and economic power that (unfortunately) makes the deepest impression.^[61] Again, this arises from using a contrast to reveal the ‘leeway’ that these European neutrals possessed to recognize North Korea or North Vietnam. The authors first remind us that the “cold war was a global conflict, in which all participants were confronted with either/or choices,” that even the neutrals and Non-Aligned countries “could not shy away from choosing sides” (1014). The paper goes on to demonstrate why, “in the wake of the escalation of the cold war in the Third World,” the neutrals did not and, in their own geopolitical calculations, could not recognize either Pyongyang or Hanoi. Switzerland, Austria and Sweden’s freedom to be genuinely neutral in their recognition policy was hamstrung by their “massive financial and commercial interests at play with West Germany” (1029), which was a function of the economic component of the U.S. Cold War containment strategy toward West Germany and Europe. As the authors point out, the European neutrals would not even “re-evaluate their recognition policy” toward the divided Asian states until East-West rapprochement occurred in the early 1970s (1029). Even then, the European neutrals only felt emboldened to dilute their Western-orientation and forge relations with Pyongyang and Hanoi after the U.S. State Department

indicated, and in the case of Sweden explicitly telegraphed, that it did not “attach too much importance” to the issue (1028). If “independent pathways” such as this only emerged when the United States chose not to train its Cold-War lens upon the issue, then was this ‘leeway’—conceptually and practically—truly within the Cold War?

To be fair, Schaufelbuehl *et al.* in their introduction have taken utmost care in defining the spirit of their project. And by definition, sporadic gaps in the United States’ Cold-War fixations, lapses in Soviet and Chinese attention, or the perceived lack of strategic import to the big powers, certainly ensured that some local and regional questions during the Cold War were “not directly subject to the East-West confrontation” (902). Robert B. Rakove’s compelling study of Non-Aligned mediation (he notes that he uses the term “non-aligned... expansively”) makes the most of this definition to showcase the agency of middle and smaller powers of the Third World (993).^[62] His paper underscores how Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru imbued Non-Alignment with a “peace-making mission” as a direct retort to the “on-going fragmentation of the post-war world into blocs” of the Cold War (994). Mali and Ethiopia’s successful mediation of a “short but bitter border war” between Morocco and Algeria in October 1963 certainly resembles an “independent pathway” after the style that Schaufelbuehl *et al.* have established. Paying close attention to the agency of post-colonial actors, Rakove succeeds in demonstrating their “energy, morality, and creativity” in striving to make peace while the “industrial North” and its communist rivals waged their destructive Cold War (1009).

But again, can one take for granted that all events—like the Morocco-Algeria dispute—from the end of World War II until 1991 fell within the Cold-War conflict? After all, Rakove shows that the Kennedy administration “possessed neither experience nor insight” into the Morocco-Algeria standoff of October 1963 that Mali and Ethiopia so ably resolved. And in words that signaled the absence of American strategic investment in the standoff, similar to the State Department telegram to Sweden mentioned above, National Security Council official Robert Komer “mused” that the Morocco-Algeria conflict remained “a pretty obscure situation.” Indeed, the U.S. leadership seemed content to exclude this troublesome “oasis” from their Cold War concerns. Mali and Ethiopia’s diplomatic efforts, what Rakove calls the “high water-mark” of non-aligned mediation, therefore unfolded outside of the Cold War context (997).

On the flipside, when Mali and Egypt attempted to mediate the Vietnam War, a conflict decidedly embedded within the East-West confrontation, the two Non-Aligned nations predictably encountered overwhelming resistance from Beijing, Washington, and even Hanoi (1008). The stark difference between the minor triumphs and major failures of Non-Aligned mediation, like the

Commonwealth's diplomatic initiatives being frequently a 'victim' of 'hard power' Cold-War calculations, and the European neutrals' sustained inability to diplomatically recognize Hanoi and Pyongyang, underscores a crucial problem for the study of "independent pathways" as conceived by Schaufelbeuhl *et al.* (1076). It seems that the middle-to-smaller powers found only fleeting and narrow "leeway" to accomplish whatever aims they harbored that were "within but not of the Cold War." Worse, when the Cold War powers were determined, they usually ran roughshod over these "independent pathways." Ultimately, this gives the troubling impression that the middle and smaller powers' exercised all but a diminished and doomed agency within the Cold War. Of course, the primary goal of this study is to add to—and not supplant—what scholars have already shown of how peripheral actors effectively resisted and influenced the superpowers so as to "block, moderate, expand, or intensify" the global Cold War (902). And alongside the considerable ability of the middle and smaller powers to "utilize pressure stemming from Cold War relations," this study of the "independent pathways" enriches our understanding of the myriad ways that less central or powerful states managed for a time to slip the surly bonds of the Cold-War logic.