

Women, Peace and Security governance in the Asia–Pacific: a multi-scalar field of discourse and practice

STÉPHANIE MARTEL, JENNIFER MUSTAPHA AND SARAH E.
SHARMA*

UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, which formally launched the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2020. This benchmark year served as an opportunity to take stock. It also created new momentum for an increasingly global diffusion of the agenda, encouraging a variety of state and non-state actors to hasten development of their own localized initiatives under the WPS umbrella. Despite its flaws, the UN's WPS framework continues to inform undertakings by state and non-state actors on questions of gender and security. As Kirby and Shepherd suggest, WPS has developed into a global but pluralist field of practice with porous boundaries.¹ It involves multiple actors and processes, and is characterized by areas of tension that emerge from the dynamic interaction of competing understandings of what the agenda is and where it ought to be going in different regional contexts.

This article explores and analyses the emerging field of discourse and practice that is currently shaping up around WPS governance in the Asia–Pacific region. Our analysis identifies key themes discernible in the WPS national action plans (NAPs) that have already been adopted by selected states in the Asia–Pacific. We situate these NAPs within the larger context of recent and continuing attempts at framing a wider regional vision of what WPS means, and offer insights into the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in this increasingly salient domain of regional security governance. Of particular interest is how the WPS agenda is interpreted and implemented differently by key actors, highlighting the existence of definitional and conceptual ambiguity within regional approaches to WPS.

The article is structured as follows. The next section provides some background context on WPS work in the region. It takes stock of the current status of the global WPS agenda, and discusses challenges and opportunities highlighted by WPS scholarship. It also explains our country case selection. In the following section

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¹ Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd, 'Women, Peace, and Security: mapping the (re)-production of a policy ecosystem', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6: 3, 2021, pp. 1–25.

we first present our key findings on the NAPs of these countries, and then situate them in the context of emerging and ongoing regional WPS initiatives. We then conclude with several key observations and policy considerations regarding the future of security governance in the Asia–Pacific. Here, we point to an emerging field of WPS discourse and practice in the region that carries the potential for both convergence and contestation as actors work to assert and reconcile diverse—and sometimes contradictory—views on WPS governance. Ultimately, our analysis articulates and theorizes the present state of a complex regional policy terrain that has so far been underexamined, and in doing so provides a much-needed starting point for further research down several avenues.

The WPS agenda at 20: contextualizing regional responses

International Relations (IR) scholars—and feminist IR scholars in particular—have been building an extensive literature on the WPS agenda since the adoption of UNSCR 1325 in 2000. This literature engages with the work done by state actors, regional organizations and transnational activists who have worked to ‘mainstream’ gender considerations in institutional agendas since the early twentieth century.² Several considerations highlighted by this literature help to contextualize our analysis of the WPS agenda in the Asia–Pacific.

First, scholars have underscored the role of many non-state advocacy actors that were instrumental in placing WPS on the UNSC’s agenda.³ They also note the difficulties attached to transforming radical emancipatory feminist ideals into mainstream international policy.⁴ Despite scepticism in both institutional and grassroots spaces around the agenda’s implementation,⁵ there is general agreement that gender itself is a legitimate aspect of peace and security at the UN. Further, siloed approaches to WPS that are disconnected from humanitarian and development goals remain problematic.⁶ These tensions, dynamics and points of agreement are all observable within the Asia–Pacific as well, as we outline in the following section.

Second, scholars have analysed the intersections of networks and scales of engagement in the development and implementation of NAPs, including along postcolonial lines of contention,⁷ which remain stark across regions. Here, western

² Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Reintroducing women, peace and security’, *International Affairs* 92: 2, 2016, pp. 249–54; Laura J. Shepherd and Jacqui True, ‘The Women, Peace and Security agenda and Australian leadership in the world: from rhetoric to commitment?’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68: 3, 2014, pp. 257–84; Emma Palmer and Sarah Williams, ‘A “shift in attitude”? Institutional change and sexual and gender-based crimes at the extraordinary chambers in the courts of Cambodia’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19: 1, 2017, pp. 22–38; Sam Cook, ‘The “woman-in-conflict” at the UN Security Council: a subject of practice’, *International Affairs* 92: 2, 2016, pp. 353–72.

³ Carol Cohn, Helen Kinsella and Sheri Lynn Gibbins, ‘Women, Peace and Security Resolution 1325’, *International Journal of Feminist Politics* 6: 1, 2004, pp. 130–40; Keina Yoshida and Lina M. Cespedes-Baez, ‘The nature of Women, Peace and Security: a Colombian perspective’, *International Affairs* 97: 1, 2021, pp. 17–34.

⁴ Cook, ‘The “woman-in-conflict” at the UN Security Council’; Laura J. Shepherd, ‘WPS and adopted Security Council resolutions’, in Sara E. Davies and Jacqui True, eds, *The Oxford handbook of women, peace and security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 98–109.

⁵ Palmer and Williams, ‘A “shift in attitude”?’; Cook, ‘The “woman-in-conflict” at the UN Security Council’.

⁶ Jacqui True and Sarah Hewitt, ‘What works in relief and recovery’, in Davies and True, eds, *The Oxford handbook of women, peace and security*, pp. 178–92.

⁷ Rebecca Tiessen, ‘Gender essentialism in Canadian foreign aid commitments to women, peace and security’,

countries of the global North tend to present gendered inequality and violence as existing *outside* their borders, usually in countries of the global South.⁸ This can result in problematic (liberal) moralizing in multilateral diplomacy, and interventions into conflict situations by the same countries, unlikely to be self-reflexive about their own values and practices that contribute to gendered violence and global inequality.⁹ Conversely, when developing NAPs of their own, many global South countries tend to hold a lens up to gender dynamics *within* their borders.¹⁰

Third, and related to the previous considerations, our analysis of WPS governance in the Asia–Pacific intersects further with two ongoing debates regarding the WPS agenda writ large: whether the promotion of gender equality and protection of women using a state-led military-based approach can ever be successful; and the degree to which the WPS agenda is complicit in persistent structures of patriarchy and western imperialism.¹¹ On the former debate, there are already well-articulated concerns that the WPS agenda reinscribes tropes and assumptions about women’s requirement for protection and the ‘natural’ emergence of more peaceful outcomes from their participation in peace and security.¹² Such persistent patriarchal biases mean that when women and girls fail to meet these ideal-types, they are less protected, dismissed as exceptions and/or cast as deviant.¹³ These narratives also act as a convenient pretext to avoid addressing systemic barriers to gender equality, or the ways that men must also take responsibility for change in organizational and institutional cultures. Such tendencies, common across the WPS agenda, are also visible in many of the NAPs discussed in this article.

On the latter debate, there are concerns about how WPS perspectives prioritize gender over and above other social categories that inform women’s experiences, even as colonial histories continue to reverberate into present global WPS work and regional security discourses more generally.¹⁴ Here, tensions arise out of the pervasive structural inequalities that exist between and within states and societies as a result of histories of western imperialism.¹⁵ An important question, therefore, is whether the predominantly Eurocentric WPS scholarship and work merely

International Journal 70: 1, 2015, pp. 84–100; Shepherd and True, ‘The Women, Peace and Security agenda and Australian leadership’; Columba Achilleos-Sarll, ‘Seeing the Women, Peace and Security agenda: visual (re-) production of WPS in UK government national action plans’, *International Affairs* 96: 6, 2020, pp. 1643–63.

⁸ Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Making war safe for women? National action plans and the militarisation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda’, *International Political Science Review* 37: 3, 2016, pp. 324–35.

⁹ Tiessen, ‘Gender essentialism in Canadian foreign aid commitments’.

¹⁰ Tiessen, ‘Gender essentialism in Canadian foreign aid commitments’.

¹¹ Shepherd, ‘Making war safe for women?’; Nicola Pratt, ‘Reconceptualizing gender, reinscribing racial–sexual boundaries in international security: the case of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on “Women, Peace and security”’, *International Studies Quarterly* 57: 4, 2013, pp. 772–83.

¹² Cohn et al., ‘Women, Peace and Security Resolution 1325’.

¹³ Isabelle Côté and Limingcui Emma Huang, ‘Where are the daughters? Examining the effects of gendered migration on the dynamics of “sons of the soil” conflict’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 43: 10, 2018, pp. 837–53; Laura J. Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, ‘Reduced to bad sex: narratives of violent women from the Bible to the war on terror’, *International Relations* 22: 1, 2008, pp. 5–23.

¹⁴ Stéphanie Martel, ‘From ambiguity to contestation: discourse(s) of non-traditional security in the ASEAN community’, *Pacific Review* 30: 4, 2017, pp. 549–65; Stéphanie Martel, *Enacting the security community: ASEAN’s never-ending story* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, forthcoming 2022); Jennifer Mustapha, *Writing southeast Asian security: regional security and the war on terror after 9/11* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

¹⁵ Chantal de Jonge Oudraat, ‘The WPS agenda and strategy for the twenty-first century’, in Davies and True, eds, *The Oxford handbook of women, peace and security*, pp. 840–49.

re-inscribe the systems that perpetuate complex and intersectional inequalities along lines of gender, race, geography, income and sexuality.¹⁶

The extent to which these tendencies are reproduced in regional, national and/or local contexts, and in the particular frames and practices of local actors of security governance beyond the West, remains underexplored. This is especially important to consider when examining the localization of the WPS agenda in the Asia–Pacific,¹⁷ a large geographic grouping with a mix of predominantly postcolonial states alongside a few powerful states whose interests reflect the existing global hegemony of Anglo-American liberal internationalist approaches to peace and security.¹⁸ A feminist postcolonial reading can further offer intersectional perspectives that highlight the point that women’s vulnerabilities do not arise solely from traditional forms of war. Rather, such vulnerabilities are also rooted in longstanding gendered relations of power that are re-inscribed by conflict situations and postcolonial structures; that are reproduced in scholarship; and that fail to enable ‘security’ frameworks that would improve the day-to-day situation of women in a variety of insecure circumstances.¹⁹

This broader empirical and analytical context informs how we discuss localized manifestations of the WPS agenda in the Asia–Pacific. Existing WPS research showcases complex networks and multi-scalar fields of practice that intersect in a number of ways.²⁰ By ‘multi-scalar’, we refer to the complexity of governance practices that necessarily involve both convergences and contestations as they occur across a range of different actors at the multilateral, state, substate and non-state levels; and across a range of different ‘tracks’, from official foreign relations and diplomacy to intersecting networks of policy communities, epistemic communities, field practitioners and community stakeholders. Yet despite the broad reach and substantial size of the analytical literature on the complexities of WPS work and fields of practice more generally, a specific focus on the Asia–Pacific region remains nascent.²¹ Also, examinations of the framing of the WPS agenda on a regional scale remain rare,²² and underscore a ‘failure to engage’ that does not reflect the current momentum.²³ Addressing these openings in the literature is an important part of what this article does, and aligns with our general view that

¹⁶ Maria Martin de Almagro, ‘Producing participants: gender, race, class and Women, Peace and Security’, *Global Society* 32: 4, 2018, pp. 395–414; De Jonge Oudraat, ‘The WPS agenda and strategy for the twenty-first century’.

¹⁷ Nicole George and Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Women, peace and security: exploring implementation and integration of UNSCR 1325’, *International Political Science Review* 37: 3, 2016, pp. 297–306 at p. 299.

¹⁸ The inclusion of ‘western’ or ‘global North’ states in the broad geographical grouping of the ‘Asia–Pacific’ is just one of many interesting dissonances that characterize such an expansively defined region.

¹⁹ Maria Tanyag, ‘Resilience, female altruism, and bodily autonomy: disaster-induced displacement in post-Haiyan Philippines’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43: 3, 2018, pp. 563–85.

²⁰ Kirby and Shepherd, ‘Women, Peace and Security’.

²¹ Katrina Lee-Koo and Barbara K. Trojanowska, ‘Does the United Nations’ Women, Peace and Security agenda speak with, for or to women in the Asia Pacific? The development of national action plans in the Asia Pacific’, *Critical Studies on Security* 5: 3, 2017, pp. 287–301; Shepherd, ‘WPS and adopted Security Council resolutions’.

²² Shepherd and True, ‘The Women, Peace and Security agenda and Australian leadership in the world’.

²³ Mathew Davies, ‘Women and development, not gender and politics: explaining ASEAN’s failure to engage with the Women, Peace and Security agenda’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38: 1, 2016, pp. 106–27; see also Sara E. Davies, Kimberly Nackers and Sarah Teitt, ‘Women, Peace and Security as an ASEAN priority’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68: 3, 2014, pp. 333–55.

it is ‘not only desirable, but necessary, to situate ... security perspectives within particular empirical contexts—historical, geographic and discursive’.²⁴

Methodologically and analytically, and for all the reasons mentioned above, our analysis is not focused on *all* of the states taking part in the regional governance of WPS in the Asia–Pacific. Further, the Asia–Pacific states typically associated with ‘the West’ (the United States, Canada and Australia, among others), all have NAPs that already form the bulk of case-studies in WPS scholarship.²⁵ Hence, the countries on which our analysis focuses are the Philippines, Indonesia, South Korea, Japan, Timor-Leste and Bangladesh. These six countries were selected because they have articulated WPS NAPs, and because they are firmly anchored in the Asia–Pacific subregions of east, south-east and south Asia. They are also all members of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the most inclusive security grouping in the Asia–Pacific, and therefore take part in discussions on the development of regional approaches to WPS. The selected countries also happen to be classified as ‘Asia and Pacific’ states with NAPs by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which is the main international monitoring body for the development of WPS NAPs.

After making our case selections, we used tools of post-structuralist discourse analysis and Atlas.ti²⁶ coding to examine the textual mechanisms of expressing foundational assumptions and themes of meaning in the NAPs, and in key WPS statements made by multilateral regional institutions.²⁷ We identified four overarching themes pertaining to the WPS agenda as it is being developed in the region. We further complemented this analysis with participant observation in regional dialogues where WPS is discussed through various ‘tracks’, which also involved informal discussions with WPS practitioners.

Findings and analysis: the WPS agenda in the Asia–Pacific

Only a fraction of states in the Asia–Pacific have adopted WPS NAPs in accordance with the UN WPS resolutions, and there is general agreement that the region is lagging behind in efforts to do so, including in comparison to other areas in the global South. Yet signs of a new regional momentum on WPS are

²⁴ Mustapha, *Writing southeast Asian security*, p. 156.

²⁵ Taxonomies that seek to capture differences between industrialized liberal democracies that are part of the Anglo-American–European ‘global North’ and those of the developing, newly developed, postcolonial ‘global South’ are necessarily fraught. We use this dichotomy because it is one that is commonly used by regional actors themselves, especially in practices of othering that target so-called ‘western’ states as external actors not properly part of ‘the region’, despite participating in regional groupings and other initiatives.

²⁶ Atlas.ti is a software workbench tool to help with qualitative analysis of large bodies of textual, graphical, audio and video data. Its tools aid in scanning and synthesizing data points in a variety of documents and texts through coding and visualization, according to the specific needs of the researcher: <https://atlasti.com/product/what-is-atlas-ti/>.

²⁷ For more on post-structuralist discourse analysis as a methodology, see, among others, Roxanne Lynn Doty, ‘Foreign policy as social construction: a post-positivist analysis of US counterinsurgency policy in the Philippines’, *International Studies Quarterly* 37: 3, 1993, pp. 297–320; Lene Hansen, *Security as practice: discourse analysis and the Bosnian war* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); Charlotte Epstein, *The power of words in International Relations: birth of an anti-whaling discourse* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Stéphanie Martel, ‘The polysemy of security community-building: toward a “people-centered” Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)?’, *International Studies Quarterly* 64: 3, 2020, pp. 588–99.

undeniable, although they have not yet garnered much scholarly attention. Our analysis enters the conversation by articulating different trains of thought that are emerging in the region about the WPS agenda. We find that examinations of contested meanings are still nascent in the WPS literature itself, and almost absent altogether in relation to the Asia–Pacific.²⁸ When we consider that the WPS agenda is mainly top-down and state-led, and that much of the pre-existing gender-based feminist work that occurs is often bottom-up and led by civil society, we get a sense of the complex terrain on which the multi-scalar dynamics of the WPS realm are occurring.

WPS national action plans: emerging themes

The ARF is the largest security dialogue grouping in the Asia–Pacific and accordingly we focus on its membership to observe regional trends in work on the WPS agenda. Of the 27 members of the ARF, only ten have officially adopted national action plans: the Philippines (2010), Canada (2010), the United States (2011), Australia (2012), Indonesia (2014), South Korea (2014), New Zealand (2015), Japan (2015), Timor-Leste (2016) and Bangladesh (2019). For the reasons explained above, we focused our analysis on the NAPs of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Timor-Leste.²⁹ This section compares these countries' approaches to WPS along four overarching themes identified through our discourse analysis: (1) how the WPS agenda is nationally defined as addressing *gendered forms of insecurity*; (2) the *self–other dynamics* expressed in how NAPs assert and reproduce national identities; (3) the ways in which *women's roles and agency* in WPS are defined; and (4) which stakeholders are considered relevant in WPS, and the degree to which *consultations with stakeholders* (particularly women's groups and civil society organizations) take place at various stages of the NAP process, from elaboration to implementation.

²⁸ Shepherd and True, 'The Women, Peace and Security agenda and Australian leadership in the world'.

²⁹ Full references to the NAPs quoted in this section: Coordinating Minister of People's Welfare of the Republic of Indonesia, *The national action plans for the protection and empowerment of women and children during social conflicts of 2014–2019*, 3 June 2014, <http://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/NAP-indonesia.pdf>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh, *National action plan on Women, Peace and Security*, 2019, [https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Bangladesh%20NAP%20\(2019-2022\).pdf](https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Bangladesh%20NAP%20(2019-2022).pdf); Government of Japan, *National action plan on women, peace and security*, 2015, <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Japan-National-Action-Plan.pdf>; Government of Japan, *National action plan on women, peace and security, second edition (2019–2022)*, 2019, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000521395.pdf>; Government of the Philippines, *The Philippine national action plan on UNSCRs 1325 & 1820: 2010–2016*, 2010, https://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/NationalActionPlans/philippines_nap.pdf; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the Republic of Korea, *The national action plan of the Republic of Korea for the implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security*, 2014, <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Republic-of-Korea-NAP.pdf>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the Republic of Korea, *The second national action plan of the Republic of Korea for the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security*, 2018, [https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/2ndNationalActionPlan_ROK%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/2ndNationalActionPlan_ROK%20(1).pdf); Ministry of Interior, Government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, *National action plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security (2016–2020)* (2016), <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NAP-WPS-Engls-FINAL-12-July-2017-timor.pdf>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 19 Nov. 2021.)

Gendered forms of insecurity

NAPs typically presuppose that ‘gendered insecurity’ refers to the insecurity of ‘women and girls’, which is in line with the assumptions built into the phrasing of the UN’s ‘*Women, Peace and Security Agenda*’ (emphasis added). As such, mention of ‘gender’ in this context tends to essentialize women as subjects of security, as opposed to referring to an expansive understanding of what it means to have a gendered analytical lens. Accordingly, the NAPs we examined foreground the impacts of conflict on women and girls. The specific forms of gendered violence emphasized vary, in terms of issue-area or the extent to which the NAPs see insecurities becoming manifest in public or private spaces. Nevertheless, they tend to eschew the term ‘human security’ and instead converge on connecting gender to more amorphous concepts such as ‘non-traditional’ or ‘inclusive’ security, which already exist in the regional security lexicon.

These discursive manoeuvres create space for WPS work while catering to well-documented postcolonial sensibilities around the perceived western overtones of a ‘human security’ agenda and all its associated negative connotations in regional multilateral settings.³⁰ Admittedly, the conceptual thorniness of ‘human security’—and its attendant proximity to difficult questions in the discourses around peacekeeping and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)—varies from region to region, but there is a lot of resistance in the Asia–Pacific to any kind of mechanism that would infringe upon state sovereignty. As such, the regional NAPs we examine show a cautious treatment of gendered insecurity within this context, and they do so in varying ways.

Of the six selected countries, Indonesia is the one whose NAP is most strongly focused on conflict situations. Yet its conception of ‘conflict’ is quite broad, with an emphasis on ‘social conflict’, defined as ‘enmity and physical violence between two or more community groups that [result] in insecurity and social disintegration [that] disrupt national stability and ... development’. As such, theirs is an expansive definition. The NAPs from the Philippines, Bangladesh and South Korea also foreground conflict but show a broader understanding of gendered insecurity. The Philippines’ NAP, for example, discusses how gendered insecurities can arise from displacement, disruption of livelihoods, malnutrition, poverty, sexual violence, trafficking, prostitution and gun culture. South Korea, through an emphasis on ‘comfort women’ and North Korean refugees, also incorporates wide-ranging conceptions of the insecurities that arise from conflict situations, including trafficking, sexual exploitation and other forms of violence. Bangladesh’s NAP, in turn, includes references to the gendered dimensions of climate change and disaster relief as well as violent extremism.

³⁰ David Capie, ‘The United States and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) in east Asia: connecting coercive and non-coercive uses of military power’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38: 3, 2015, pp. 309–31; See Seng Tan, *The responsibility to provide in southeast Asia: towards an ethical explanation* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019); Martel, ‘From ambiguity to contestation’; Martel, *Enacting the security community*; Aarie Glas and Marion Laurence, ‘The evolution of norms in practice: non-interference in the UN and ASEAN’, unpublished working paper, n.d.

Timor-Leste is an interesting outlier in this regard. This is because Timor-Leste's NAP does not present conflict solely as a *cause* of gendered violence, but instead frames it as a *symptom* arising from gendered insecurities that take place in both public and private spheres. For example, domestic violence is understood to be enabled by traditional gender roles and cultural conceptions of family honour. This reversal of the causal arrow echoes research that shows misogynistic attitudes and gender-based violence to be strongly correlated with violent extremism and inter-communal conflict.³¹ Timor-Leste's NAP is also more evidence-based than most, citing national data on domestic violence and women's representation in politics as informing WPS-related policies. It is also unique among those examined in explicitly outlining some of the challenges inherent in implementing the WPS agenda.

Another noteworthy finding is whether and how NAPs link the military to gendered insecurities. In this respect, the Philippines, South Korea, Bangladesh and Timor-Leste specifically recognize how militaries can perpetuate gendered violence. South Korea's and Bangladesh's NAPs include strong language sanctioning sexual offenders in the military. For Timor-Leste, the military dimension of insecurity is acknowledged mostly in reference to the Indonesian military's role in the 1999 East Timor crisis. By contrast, Japan only obliquely acknowledges the possibility of its Self-Defence Forces perpetrating sexual violence, with limited references to peacekeepers requiring education on sexual violence.

Finally, the NAPs vary in their apparent recognition of intersectionality in gendered insecurity. For example, Indonesia's and Japan's NAPs tend to conflate women with girls in a problematic subject framing which feminist scholars describe as 'womenandchildren'. In so doing, these NAPs tend to treat women and girls as a homogeneous group, with emphasis on victimhood over agency. In Japan's case, we find brief recognitions that 'women and girls are not all the same' and therefore may experience discrimination based on 'various attributes'—such as being LGBT, internally displaced, disabled, single mothers, elderly, etc. Beyond these brief references, however, there is no further mention of any specific implementation objective.

By contrast, the South Korean, Philippine, Bangladeshi and East Timorese NAPs are more intersectional. The Philippines' NAP makes multiple references to how marginalized women, especially Moro and Indigenous women, experience insecurity in particular ways, while Bangladesh's devotes attention to migrant and refugee women and the particular gendered insecurities experienced by populations of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Timor-Leste's NAP distinguishes between the experiences of women depending on their degree of agency and the roles they play in peace and security. Finally, South Korea's NAPs³² give details of the unique situations of victims of sexual violence and refugees.

³¹ Melissa Frances Johnston, Muhammad Iqbal and Jacqui True, 'The lure of (violent) extremism: gender constructs in online recruitment and messaging in Indonesia', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, publ. online May 2020, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2020.1759267.

³² Of note here is that as of 2021 South Korea is one of three countries (along with Japan and the Philippines) that have issued revised versions of their original WPS national action plans. Because of this we sometimes refer to the NAPs of these countries in the plural when we want to reference observations that span successive versions of their NAPs.

Self–other dynamics

Another comparative dimension we explored is the extent to which, and how, NAPs (re)produce self and/or other dynamics in their approaches to the WPS agenda. Such dynamics are complex and challenging to capture succinctly, which is why entire subfields of IR and foreign policy analysis are devoted to questions around how state actors construct their identities and position themselves in a variety of settings. For our purposes, we regard NAPs as public-facing documents within the context of multilateral and regional relations, operating as highly performative artefacts that carry representations of the national self as provider of security. In this vein, states draw from their own histories to position themselves as WPS champions. For instance, Timor-Leste's NAP relies heavily on the country's position as a young post-conflict nation, making numerous references to its struggle for independence. Similar references are present in Bangladesh's NAP. South Korea's NAPs focus on the country's unique position as the 'only divided nation in the world under an armistice agreement'. They draw on the inter-Korean experience as the main motivation for a focus on the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers as a contribution to global peace and security.

The Philippines' NAP highlights the Bangsamoro armed struggle and the communist-led insurgency as sources of gendered insecurity, which helps to personify aspects of national identity in terms of resilience and heroism. Its NAP also makes a point of highlighting domestic initiatives that address gender-based violence and support the participation of women in peace and development. It makes reference to women's contributions to national economic well-being, echoing narratives that revere the 'new heroism' of female overseas workers who provide remittances to their communities while enduring personal sacrifice. These gendered narratives reproduce problematic nationalist assumptions about the resilience of Filipino women in ways that 'erase all the gendered sacrifices, including physical and emotional stress, [associated with] intensified care obligations',³³ ultimately shifting attention away from government failures.

Japan, in turn, uses its WPS work to project aspirational 'middle power' status. Japan positions itself as a major donor, global peacekeeping country and regional force for peace, making reference to national resilience in the face of large-scale disasters such as the 2011 tsunami. Japan also makes reference to its constitution's upholding of gender equality. Overall, its NAPs seek distance from the country's imperial history and express a clear desire to be recognized as a significant contributor to international society. Similarly, despite being a relative latecomer in developing its NAP, Bangladesh uses its plan to convey a distinct national identity as an early leader in WPS issues. Bangladesh's longstanding contributions to UN peacekeeping efforts, and its history of promoting female troop participation, undergird its national self-projection as a WPS forerunner. Bangladesh also uses other historical narratives as context for its WPS work. In particular, the 1971

³³ Yvonne Su and Maria Tanyag, 'Myths about disaster survivors stall the global response to climate change', *The Conversation*, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/myths-about-disaster-survivors-stall-the-global-response-to-climate-change-121548>.

war of liberation is presented as an origin point for domestically focused WPS policies, with attention to the rehabilitation of female victims of sexually violent war crimes.

Indonesia's 2014 NAP is the least detailed when it comes to projecting national leadership in WPS issues or national identity grounded in these efforts; nor does it present any particular narrative of national self-conception rooted in gender equality. However, there are strong indications that this could change with a second-generation NAP. Indeed, Indonesia has recently seized the role of regional and global champion of WPS, spearheading the WPS agenda in various ASEAN settings. In August 2020, while holding the presidency of the UNSC, Indonesia also supported a unanimous endorsement of Resolution 2538, which promotes the role of women in peacekeeping. So it will be interesting to see whether this WPS leadership is reflected in its updated NAP, and how influential Indonesia will be in shaping regional visions of WPS.

Some of the NAPs also position 'others' as sources of insecurity, which could exacerbate existing tensions in the region. This 'othering' often takes the form of naming or gesturing towards other state actors and/or state institutions deemed to be responsible for gendered forms of insecurity, and is especially salient on issues where post-conflict reconciliation remains limited or absent. However, there is variation in terms of how overtly this occurs. For example, Bangladesh makes only veiled references to Myanmar in relation to the Rohingya, and to Pakistan in relation to liberation struggles, and remains careful not to name either explicitly. By contrast, Timor-Leste's NAP specifically calls for reparations from the Indonesian military, whose actions after the 1999 referendum led to large-scale violence. As already mentioned, this conflict continues to serve as the primary context for Timor-Leste's NAP, which continually emphasizes how Timorese women—as victims, peace workers and liberation fighters—were made insecure by the Indonesian military's actions during the crisis. The prominence of othering manoeuvres in Timor-Leste's NAP is noteworthy, distinguishing its rationale for embracing WPS as a more outward-looking agenda compared to other countries in the region.

Perhaps not surprisingly, South Korea is among the most direct when it comes to othering practices in its NAPs. Seoul's unresolved conflict with Pyongyang features prominently in positioning the contributions of South Korean women to peace and security, which are said to be rooted in inter-Korean relations. And when it comes to insecurities experienced by South Korean women, the Japanese Imperial Army's violence against 'comfort women' is emphasized. This persistent source of tension with Japan also informs South Korea's focus on trafficking, sexual exploitation and strong calls to punish sex offenders—all of which feature less prominently in other regional NAPs.

Finally, some of the NAPs are also interesting for what they *omit* in terms of self/other framing. For example, Indonesia's makes no mention of ongoing violence in West Papua; nor does it allude to its own role in the Timor-Leste

conflict.³⁴ Conversely, there is a surprising absence of acknowledgement for the many contributions of women to the Aceh peace process, despite this ‘success story’ being commonly raised by Indonesian representatives in multilateral WPS settings.³⁵ And of course, for Japan the topic of ‘comfort women’ is predictably absent from its NAP, though this issue continues to be central to Japan–South Korea relations and a key point of contention that could reverberate into regional discussions on WPS. In a related point, it is also notable that despite a long history of gendered insecurities and gender-based violence experienced around US military bases in the region,³⁶ there is no mention of the continuing and long-term repercussions of the US military presence in the NAPs of the Philippines or South Korea.

Women’s roles and agency

WPS NAPs are obviously concerned with gendered insecurities faced by women and girls. But questions around women as victims of violence are distinct from expectations around their agency and participation. Hence, another interesting theme is if—and how—women’s agency is acknowledged or discussed, and the extent to which women are thought to have a role in peace and security. In this respect, Timor-Leste’s and Bangladesh’s NAPs recognize women’s agency the most among the countries we examined. A key aspect of both is an emphasis on women’s active participation in independence liberation movements. This includes acknowledging women as combatants, their contributions during both war and peacebuilding, and their status as veterans deserving of compensation and support. Bangladesh’s NAP formally defines wartime rape survivors as ‘freedom fighters’ eligible for compensation and reparations. It also acknowledges that women sometimes exercise agency as perpetrators of insecurity, such as in violent extremism.

Like those of Timor-Leste and Bangladesh, the Philippines’ NAP also discusses ways in which women exercise agency in peace and security, and expands its definition of ‘women’s empowerment’ beyond the typical neo-liberal preoccupation with economic participation. In so doing, it incorporates questions of women’s agency throughout discussions on peacebuilding, peacekeeping, conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. The Philippines also recognizes the expertise of women with lived experience of insecurity and includes them at the WPS table to discuss mediation and negotiation in security policy and peace processes. The NAPs of Timor-Leste, Bangladesh and the Philippines all conceive of women’s participation qualitatively, beyond simply counting heads.

By contrast, Japan’s NAP acknowledges women’s agency and participation in peace and security only in broad terms. References to women’s agency in conflict

³⁴ Lee-Koo and Trojanowska, ‘Does the United Nations’ Women, Peace and Security agenda speak with, for or to women in the Asia Pacific?’

³⁵ Participant observation at the 2021 Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) study groups on WPS and the 2021 ARF EEP meetings, among others, allowed us to observe several examples of this.

³⁶ Mustapha, *Writing southeast Asian security*; Lee-Koo and Trojanowska, ‘Does the United Nations’ Women, Peace and Security agenda speak with, for or to women in the Asia Pacific?’

mediation, negotiation and resolution evince only essentializing assumptions around gender-specific attributes. In general, Japan's tendency here is to take an 'add women and stir' approach, without consideration for the need to reform prevailing societal expectations of gender. Women and girls are often conflated in discussions of victimhood, and any agency ascribed to them is fleeting or only realized through the state's benevolence. Japan's second-generation NAP does make some space for the participation of women in peacekeeping, but still delimits the contributions of women by continuing to relegate their participation mostly to purposes of representation.

Indonesia's NAP depicts women mostly as victims, with a tendency to portray their agency in ways that reflect patriarchal assumptions.³⁷ This occurs through an emphasis on supporting women in their 'natural functions' and reproductive roles, and encouraging their participation in gendered economic activities such as hairdressing. This is an example of the neo-liberal disposition to 'empower' women mainly in positions traditionally associated with them, on the basis of the view that this is the primary way to facilitate their transformation from victims into agents of peace. The 'women and children' conflation is broadly deployed, with references to women's agency as undifferentiated from that of children. References to the rights of 'unborn' girl children also create tension with WPS objectives of advancing the reproductive autonomy of women.

Taking an approach similar to that of Japan's, Indonesia's NAP has a paternalistic tendency to focus on training in ways that position women as needing state guidance to realize their agency, erasing the extensive contributions made by an already well-established community of peacebuilders. Admittedly, however, Indonesia's NAP does recognize that women's agency can be enhanced through capacity-building efforts that support women's participation as mediators and negotiators in peace processes. As noted above, there is evidence of a possible change of approach in the second-generation NAP that might better recognize the contribution of women peacekeepers. Further, the Surabaya attacks of 2018 served as a reminder that women's agency can also be implicated in violence.³⁸ Such considerations specifically informed the country's gender-sensitive approach to the development of a national strategy on Countering Violent Extremism, adopted in 2021.³⁹

³⁷ Nuri W. Veronika, Irine H. Gayatri and Jacqui True, 'What Indonesia's stint on the UN Security Council means for peace-building in the Indo-Pacific region', *Lens*, 3 Sept. 2020, <https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2020/09/03/1381203/what-indonesias-stint-on-the-un-security-council-means-for-peacebuilding-in-the-indo-pacific-region>.

³⁸ In 2018, three separate families undertook a series of targeted suicide terror attacks against Christian churches in Surabaya. The three families were connected by their affiliation with an Indonesian jihadi organization, Jamaah Ansharut Daulah, and their attacks were understood to have been inspired by ISIS. Notably, the Surabaya attackers included the active involvement of the wives and mothers of these families, along with their adolescent children—some of whom were daughters. Though the agency of the minors is less straightforward as the girls were all very young, the involvement of the women in these attacks clearly challenges gendered stereotypes around perpetrators of terrorism and violence. See Rueben Ananthan Santhana Dass, 'The use of family networks in suicide terrorism: a case study of the 2018 Surabaya attacks', *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 16: 2, 2021, pp. 173–91.

³⁹ Irine Hiraswari Gayatri, 'Indonesia's NAP CVE as an instrument of non-traditional security approach in Indo-Pacific', *Australian Outlook*, 11 Feb. 2021, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/indonesias-nap-cve-as-an-instrument-of-a-gendered-non-traditional-security-approach-in-indo-pacific/>.

Consultations with relevant stakeholders

Finally, we compared the six countries' NAPs in terms of whether they involved non-governmental stakeholders in their development; which stakeholders were deemed to be relevant; and in which phase of NAP development these stakeholders were consulted. As a clear exemplar in many respects, Timor-Leste reported its stakeholder consultations in detail, including specific mention of which inputs were made by whom, and how they were incorporated. Their NAP chronicles how key civil society agents were directly involved at every step and were actively considered as agents of collaboration and implementation.⁴⁰ Timor-Leste's NAP is also the most detailed when it comes to methodology, providing accounts of various stages and instances of stakeholder consultation. In addition, it explicitly mentions that civil society organizations (CSOs) will be expected to play an active and continuous role in advocacy work and WPS monitoring.

Stakeholder consultation processes in the Philippines and Bangladesh are also among the most extensive. In both cases, CSOs have played a leading consultative role from the outset. According to Lee-Koo and Trojanowska,

CSOs drove six regional cluster consultations ... across the Philippines, three in Luzon, two in Mindanao and one in ... the ... Visayas in 2008 and 2009. Two national validation workshops (inclusive of women's groups) followed and led to the NAP launch in 2010.⁴¹

The Philippines' first NAP highlights the 'integral' nature of CSOs' contributions to gender mainstreaming in peace and security. It lists the various CSOs consulted, which include a mix of peace-oriented institutions and organizations and women's rights organizations. It also makes reference to specific processes of consultation designed to ensure representative CSO input, occurring at different stages of the plan's development. Interestingly, despite NAPs being a mostly top-down endeavour, both the Philippines and Bangladesh relied on grassroots and civil society stakeholders to identify root causes of gender-based insecurity and develop strategies for WPS implementation. In the case of Bangladesh, emphasis is placed on the contributions of religious leaders and women's groups in conflict prevention. Consultations with civil society stakeholders are also institutionalized via the creation of a consultative platform of CSOs, which is also meant to support monitoring and review.

Japan's NAP, on the other hand, is an example of a top-down approach that makes only limited room for CSO stakeholder consultation. The Japanese government formulated a draft NAP *before* soliciting input from CSOs (for example, some Tokyo-based NGOs, and women's organizations in Okinawa) in a number of consultation rounds that took place between 2013 and 2015.⁴² The 2015

⁴⁰ The NAP lists the following not-for-profit and/or non-governmental organizations lobbying for gender equality and/or engaged in post-conflict reconstruction work: ACBIT (Associacon Chega Ba Ita), APSC-TL (Asia Pacific Support Collective Timor-Leste), Rede Feto, Ba Futuru, Belun, CEPAD (Centre of Studies for Peace and Development), Fokupers and JCMP (Judicial System Monitoring Program).

⁴¹ Lee-Koo and Trojanowska, 'Does the United Nations' Women, Peace and Security agenda speak with, for or to women in the Asia Pacific?', p. 295.

⁴² Jody M. Prescott, Eiko Iwata and Becca H. Pincus, 'Gender, law and policy: Japan's national action plan on

NAP makes a few broad references to civil society consultations and the role of NGOs as ‘indispensable partners’ in the protection and respect of women’s rights, but provides no detail on the practical aspects of the consultations; what the stakeholder inputs were; or which inputs—if any—were incorporated. Indeed, this NAP does not go much further on the role of non-state stakeholders than an acknowledgement that civil society recommendations were ‘adopted ... as much as possible’ in the revised version of the plan.⁴³ Instead, the ‘main agents’ of implementation identified in the plan are exclusively government actors,⁴⁴ while civil society’s inputs are limited to an evaluating committee in charge of producing a report,⁴⁵ the conclusions of which are meant to be incorporated into the NAP as part of a periodic revision process.

In South Korea, the CSO stakeholder consultations undertaken by the government were even more limited.⁴⁶ The consultations that did occur took the unusual form of a public–private consultative body that consisted of government officials and area experts. The resulting framework is bereft of proposals for concrete action on specific issues that CSOs would have flagged, but instead advances a ‘whole of government’ and ‘whole of society’ transformation that calls for reforms to school curriculums and mobilization of mass media in order to alter societal perspectives on issues of gender equality. In a sense then, the South Korean approach takes an excessively expansive view of how to incorporate stakeholder consultations, to the point of subsuming and diluting CSO contributions within generic gestures of ‘raising awareness’. This overly broad approach to WPS has been criticized by South Korean women’s organizations for adopting only ‘a small part of the various recommendations submitted’ during the NAP development stage.⁴⁷

Indonesia’s NAP is also characterized by a top-down and government-centred approach to WPS, but here the situation of stakeholders in the plan is less straightforward in its apparent absence. For one thing, despite its top-down and government-centred nature, Indonesia’s NAP is nevertheless heavily decentralized in its approach to implementation. Further, while the participation of civil society in the drafting process is not explicitly mentioned in the NAP itself, extensive consultations did in fact occur between the government and CSOs.⁴⁸ While recognizing the existence of consultative gaps, Indonesia’s NAP is ultimately a ‘by-product of collective efforts’ of a broad variety of stakeholders, and an attempt to reconcile diverse perspectives in a way that reflects an ‘inclusive approach’.⁴⁹ As such, Indonesia’s NAP is a good example of how formal policy documents can belie the active

Women, Peace and Security’, *Asian-Pacific Law and Policy Journal* 17: 1, 2016, pp. 1–45.

⁴³ Government of Japan, *National action plan on women, peace and security*.

⁴⁴ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Japan’s international development agency hold predominant roles.

⁴⁵ Japan’s NAP conflates issue area experts and NGOs under the category of ‘civil society’.

⁴⁶ Lee-Koo and Trojanowska, ‘Does the United Nations’ Women, Peace and Security agenda speak with, for or to women in the Asia Pacific?’, p. 296.

⁴⁷ Lee-Koo and Trojanowska, ‘Does the United Nations’ Women, Peace and Security agenda speak with, for or to women in the Asia Pacific?’, p. 296.

⁴⁸ Lee-Koo and Trojanowska, ‘Does the United Nations’ Women, Peace and Security agenda speak with, for or to women in the Asia Pacific?’.

⁴⁹ As described by Indonesian WPS expert Irine Gayatri.

participation of various stakeholders and downplay the existence of ‘differing interpretations, resistances and subversions’ that often remain unresolved.⁵⁰

Overall, a key central point that emerges from our comparative analysis of these six countries’ NAPs is the existence of both convergences in thinking and also multiple interpretations of conceptual themes that reflect a diversity of approaches to WPS in the Asia–Pacific. This brings us to the complicated question of what is happening at the regional scale of WPS governance. In what follows, we offer some preliminary observations on attempts to articulate shared visions of the WPS agenda in various regional forums. It is useful to consider how regional WPS work connects to NAPs (or does not); how this is an emerging field where meanings are still in the process of being articulated; and how differences are being navigated in these circumstances.

The WPS agenda on a regional scale: multiple meanings

As we have explained, WPS issues are a relatively recent addition to the security agendas of states and multilateral institutions in the Asia–Pacific, but signs of a nascent regional momentum on WPS issues are observable. This section reviews recent regional-scale and multilateral WPS developments that have taken place in the Asia–Pacific, particularly in the context of ASEAN as the hub of regional security governance. More attention needs to be afforded to how—or even whether—regional organizations and groupings are managing to reconcile varying and sometimes conflicting national-level approaches to WPS. ASEAN and ASEAN-related governance on these issues offers a prime terrain on which to unpack such dynamics. Further, while significant limitations persist in the ways that WPS work is undertaken, the agency of state and non-state actors in taking ownership of the WPS agenda is also an interesting focus of enquiry.

The regionalization of WPS: a brief survey of ASEAN’s contributions

Prior to 2015, WPS issues were effectively absent from ASEAN’s official security agenda. Mechanisms to promote women’s rights and declarations on gendered issues such as sexual violence and human trafficking were always positioned outside the scope of *security* cooperation. ASEAN’s attentions to WPS, along with the deliberate linking of gender to security, began taking shape in the context of the formal launching of the ASEAN community, and the extension of a ‘people-centred’ approach to political–security cooperation.⁵¹ In March 2015, the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR) convened a multilateral workshop on ‘Strengthening women’s participation in peace processes and conflict resolution’. This workshop resulted in recommendations that would later be picked up by ASEAN and serve as the basis for its first concrete contributions to the regional promotion of WPS.

⁵⁰ Soumita Basu, ‘The global South writes 1325 (too)’, *International Political Science Review* 37: 3, 2016, pp. 362–74 at p. 363.

⁵¹ See also Martel, ‘The polysemy of security community-building’.

Like many other regional organizations, ASEAN saw the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 as an opportunity to integrate WPS into its activities officially. This move mirrored parallel developments at the national level, which included the development of NAPs. Understanding that there are areas of both convergence and discord between the various national-level perspectives sheds light on the multi-scalar complexities that emerge in efforts to develop regional-scale WPS-related initiatives.

In 2017, ASEAN issued a joint statement as its first step in initiating a formal regionalization of the WPS agenda.⁵² This was a short, two-page document delineating a broad understanding of how the WPS agenda fits in with existing initiatives, and setting out general principles that should guide the implementation of a regional WPS agenda. However, it contains no specific action items, and one could be forgiven for reading the statement as largely symbolic.

Accordingly, this 2017 statement was followed by the adoption of WPS statements by key ASEAN-related forums: the ARF in 2019 and the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2020. The 2019 ARF statement further contributes to a gradual positioning of WPS as an emerging security priority for regional actors. The statement also includes more specific goals with the aim of developing a regional framework, for example calling for data-driven gender-based research and sharing regional best practices on WPS issues. It pushes for the infusion of a gender perspective in all international security efforts pertaining to armed conflict, and underscores the work of women as agents of conflict prevention and peacebuilding.⁵³ Interestingly, it specifically encourages member states to develop NAPs, further highlighting the emergence of a complex regional landscape of multi-scalar WPS governance.

For its part, the EAS statement is similar in scope and format but addresses broader societal forms of gendered violence and makes a commitment to the promotion of women in a variety of peace-supporting roles. It also encourages consultations with community stakeholders to promote implementation of the agenda in ways that highlight women's perspectives and experiences. Unlike the ARF's, the EAS statement makes clear that any national-level implementation of WPS should happen on a voluntary basis and be flexible to the needs of member states. This can be read as caution against expectations that NAPs are obligatory, but is also an indicator of debates currently unfolding over the development of a regional framework.⁵⁴

Beyond statements, ASEAN and its related forums have developed more concrete initiatives to support the WPS agenda. For example, the ASEAN Women Peace Registry was convened in 2018 as a regional listing of women's WPS expertise. Then, in 2020, ASEAN launched a network of women peace negotiators and mediators, and organized a number of important dialogues on WPS. Further, in

⁵² ASEAN, *Joint statement on promoting women, peace and security in ASEAN* (Manila, 13 Nov. 2017).

⁵³ ARF, *Joint statement on promoting the Women, Peace and Security agenda at the ARF* (Bangkok, 2 Aug. 2019).

⁵⁴ EAS, *EAS leaders' statement on Women, Peace and Security*, 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100115541.pdf>.

2021 ASEAN published an extensive expert-driven report on WPS conducted with support from USAID and the UN. This report highlights four major findings. First, there are signs of WPS localization in ASEAN member states, with a need to ‘scale up’ via a regional action plan. Second, while the emergence of regional WPS networks is promising, there remain significant gaps in the promotion of gender equality in the security sector across member states. Third, despite repeated nods towards ‘non-traditional security’ concerns, many forms of gender-based violence remain unaddressed. Fourth, WPS is increasingly recognized as a cross-sectoral regional issue, taken up in all three pillars of the ASEAN Community. These findings serve as a strong foundation for further institutionalized regionalization of the WPS agenda.⁵⁵

An emerging key issue of concern in regional discussions around WPS is the divergent perspectives across member states and other stakeholders regarding the ‘next step’ of developing a *regional* WPS framework or action plan. Identifying common goals in the different NAPs and regional instruments, and then converting them into actionable items, will inevitably depend on the extent to which ASEAN can mediate competing perspectives in productive ways.⁵⁶ On this last point, an interesting question emerges in respect of the regionalization of the WPS agenda: namely, whether or not the development of NAPs is itself a necessary step towards developing a regional-level action plan on WPS. While the WPS agenda creates an expectation of concentric circles of action-oriented implementation, moving outward from the local to the global, the case of the Asia–Pacific region raises questions about this assumption. And in fact, there are indications that resistance to developing formal NAPs does not necessarily mean resistance to the idea of regional WPS action plans or to the idea of WPS work in general.⁵⁷ While it is too soon to draw any conclusions, these are questions we flag as marking interesting areas for future research.

A related and noteworthy point is that the current regional momentum around WPS extends beyond official ‘track 1’ initiatives. Expert communities in the region have also taken an interest in WPS issues, as exemplified by initiatives like the ongoing study group on WPS under the rubric of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia–Pacific in 2021. WPS issues were also raised by several delegates at the 14th ARF’s Expert and Eminent Persons Group (EEP) meeting in July 2021, marking a significant departure from previous meetings.⁵⁸ In addition, despite not being framed as ‘WPS’ *per se*, gender-based violence and gendered insecurity have long been issues under discussion among regional CSOs and networks. There are also signs of civil society seizing this momentum, exemplified by calls for regional actors to pick up the pace on WPS in the recommendations made by Solidarity for Asian Peoples’ Advocacies on the ASEAN Vision

⁵⁵ ASEAN Secretariat, USAID and UN Women, *ASEAN regional study on Women, Peace and Security*, 2021, <https://asean.org/book/asean-regional-study-on-women-peace-and-security/>.

⁵⁶ Participant observation at the 2021 ARF workshop on WPS.

⁵⁷ Participant observation at the 2021 CSCAP study groups on WPS involved seeing discussions to this effect.

⁵⁸ Participant observation at the 2021 ARF EEP.

2025.⁵⁹ These non-governmental regional initiatives are important and deserve more attention in future research.

Conclusions

Our examination of the status of the WPS agenda in the Asia–Pacific makes several things apparent. First, it is clear that Asia–Pacific actors and institutions are, to varying degrees, making attempts to catch up with the global trend of regionalizing the WPS agenda. This is occurring in conjunction with localized expressions of the agenda, which we have examined in our analysis of regional NAPs. We also see evidence of an emerging and increasingly diverse multi-scalar community of practice coalescing around the WPS agenda on various ‘tracks’ of regional diplomacy. Despite being mostly elite-driven, these initiatives nevertheless offer a variety of ways for women and feminist activists—including those with lived experiences of gendered insecurity—to be part of the regionalization of the agenda at all stages of decision-making, implementation and monitoring.⁶⁰

On the other hand, important limitations will continue to hamper the promise of the WPS agenda in the Asia–Pacific. Many of these are not specific to this region but are pervasive aspects of WPS that have been well documented. These include a lack of consideration for intersectionality; an unproblematic reliance on neo-liberal practices that do not account for the role of capitalist modes of production as sources of gendered insecurity; a failure to recognize statist and militarized security practices as a root cause of gendered insecurity; a tendency to assume that agents of ‘civil society’ are necessarily representing women’s lived experiences; and the reproduction of gendered assumptions that women are inherently good at peacemaking owing to certain ‘natural’ attributes and roles. This last limitation additionally places the burden of WPS solely on the shoulders of women while simultaneously ignoring their participation in perpetuating patriarchal structures and gendered violence. An obvious ongoing concern here is that, despite its emancipatory goals, the WPS agenda itself may be ill suited to effectively mitigating gendered violence in the region.

Further, the WPS agenda is interpreted differently by key actors. At both national and regional levels, various actors hold different and sometimes incompatible views on WPS issues. States disagree on fundamental elements of the agenda, such as the need for a formal regional approach. Some question the need for NAPs at all, and do not view them as a requirement for working towards the objectives of the WPS agenda, either nationally or regionally. These sorts of tensions create challenges for regional actors who may not be able to reconcile competing understandings of WPS to work towards any meaningful implementation of its goals. Ultimately, our findings suggest that the emerging field of WPS

⁵⁹ Solidarity for Asian Peoples’ Advocacies, ‘Civil society submission for an ASEAN community post-2015 vision and agenda (2016–2025)’, 2021, <https://www.forum-asia.org/uploads/wp/2015/09/Civil-Society-Submission-ASEAN-Community-Post-2015.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Lee-Koo and Trojanowska, ‘Does the United Nations’ Women, Peace and Security agenda speak with, for or to women in the Asia–Pacific?’.

discourse and practice in the Asia–Pacific carries the potential for both convergence and contestation, which has implications for regional security relations that warrant continued attention.

A key factor at play in the region, which will continue to shape WPS-related discussions, is the continued reverberation of anti-colonial sentiment and ‘a deeply held suspicion of global or perceived Western agendas’ on the part of many regional actors.⁶¹ While regional institutions have spelled out broad principles, continued differences in approach at various scales are likely to become more apparent as additional NAPs are developed; as some states continue to resist the call to develop NAPs altogether;⁶² and as security tensions in other areas intensify between major players in the region—most notably between China and the United States. In other words, the mere presence of western/liberal states who have branded themselves ‘champions of WPS’ in regional institutions might complicate further regionalization, with effects that may reverberate outwards into other areas of regional security relations in the Asia–Pacific. More attention needs to be paid to these complex dynamics of diffusion and localization that shape the postcolonial encounters between the broader western-led WPS agenda and subregional considerations around gender and security.

Overall, there is cause for both cautious optimism and ongoing concern: optimism that the region is working towards the goal of addressing gendered insecurities, and concern that ongoing fissures in these areas of work will have a negative impact on broader regional security relations. Divergences clearly remain in how regional actors make sense of the WPS agenda and how that agenda is being implemented, if at all. There is still a long way to go before the general principles that animate the WPS agenda in the region can be translated into actionable—let alone budgeted—items with clear indicators of progress. Our analysis points to the emergence of a multi-scalar space of WPS governance in the Asia–Pacific, which is still very much in its formative stages. Our analysis also indicates that this space is characterized by significant challenges that could easily hamper the development of effective regional initiatives towards the achievement of WPS goals. And in fact, our findings highlight the continued existence of fundamental cleavages between key regional actors and ‘western’ states, whose efforts to promote the WPS agenda remain tainted by a longstanding wariness that countries like the United States, Australia and Canada harbour a neo-colonial agenda that is ultimately designed to maintain regional hegemony under the guise of liberal international frameworks and norms.

Finally, this study also raises obvious questions for future research about how WPS work takes shape outside spaces dominated by state actors. We are reminded that this region is home to well-established communities of practice composed of women activists, community leaders and organizers, peacemakers, issue experts and negotiators that have long played crucial roles in working to address gendered

⁶¹ Lee-Koo and Trojanowska, ‘Does the United Nations’ Women, Peace and Security agenda speak with, for or to women in the Asia–Pacific?’. Fortunately, active participants in the emerging WPS community of practice are not waiting for governments and multilateral institutions to get their act together to make progress.

⁶² Basu, ‘The global South writes 1325 (too)’.

insecurities. These communities of practice remain important sites of activism, advocacy and service work, whether or not they are contributing specifically to the development of national and regional framings of WPS. It is also worth remembering that ASEAN and its various bodies typically operate in a highly aspirational fashion, through statements that are meant to set members on long-term paths but that rarely offer guarantees of practical outcomes. Limiting our attention to official WPS-based regional activity, such as formal NAPs developed under the auspices of organizations like ASEAN, means that we also limit opportunities for understanding the full array of gendered insecurities experienced in the region and of efforts towards governance in these areas. All of these factors combined open up interesting avenues for research with the potential to generate important insights into the prospects for WPS agenda implementation in the Asia–Pacific—and, more broadly, the significance of taking seriously the localized and historical discursive contexts in which WPS governance takes place.