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Non-Western engagement in peace processes and the rise of 'hedging' by elites in conflict-affected states

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Abstract   *Analysing the peace processes of Nepal and Myanmar, this article argues that the changing landscape of peacebuilding support to conflict-affected states(CAS) marked by multiple international actors is increasing the bargaining leverage of elites in CAS to shape post-conflict institutions in their favour. It highlights that multiple and competing forms of international engagement allow elites in CAS not only to 'co-opt' international support as widely discussed in peace studies but also undertake multiple strategies categorised cumulatively as 'hedging'- to harness distinct benefits from varied international actors, exploit the differences between multiple international institutional prescripts, and offset dependency on one by aligning with another. These strategies enhance the agency of elites to resist Western pressures to adapt liberal reforms and instead shape post-conflict institutional* outcomes *in their favour. Such resistance fosters 'illiberal' institutions where elites renege on critical pledges of the peace process on inclusion and security sector reform to protect their interests.*

Introduction

Existing scholarship in peace studies has increasingly highlighted that peace-building projects fail to engender liberal institutions and norms as elites in CAS 'co-opt' international engagement, by resisting, exploiting and manipulating international engagement in their favour (Barma 2017; Mac Ginty 2011; Simangan 2018). The use of strategies like 'co-option' enhance the agency of elites to bargain with and instrumentalise the resources brought about by liberal peacebuilders instead enables 'compromised' *outcomes*, which reify elite control and dilute liberal aspirations being the order of the day (Barnett, Fang and Zürcher 2014). A voluminous body of work in peace studies highlights how such 'compromised' outcomes take the form of 'hybrid' peace institutions-which embody both liberal and illiberal features, rather than solely liberal ones (Barma 2017). This sense of agency of elites in CAS, to consciously adopt a *strategy* of 'co-opting' international peacebuilders, and shape institutional *outcomes* in the form of illiberal, or hybrid post-conflict institutions has, however,

largely only been examined in relation to liberal peacebuilding projects sponsored by Western states.

This appraisal agency of CAS, in their ability to use certain strategies to engender institutional outcomes that suit their interests, which so far has been confined to the discursive toolbox of 'co-option' needs revisiting in light of the changing 'global marketplace' of political transitions (Carothers and Samet-Marram 2015). In this new 'marketplace' the dominance of 'liberal peacebuilding' as the predominant mode of international engagement is being challenged by increased engagement of multiple non-Western states in CAS (Carothers and Samet-Marram 2015; Lewis 2017). This crowding of the global peacebuilding landscape, with several non-Western actors, including a variety of regional hegemons, as well as emerging states like India and China, increasingly deploying varied means from diplomacy, development aid, military force, and political cash to influence political transitions implicates the leverage that CAS have in two-distinct ways. First, the expanding matrix of international actors bringing diverse and competing sets of norms and incentives enables CAS to move away from the 'carrots and sticks of liberal interventionism' and enabling a greater bargaining position for CAS (Pospisil 2017). Such bargaining strength of CAS invariably impacts the leverage Western states have in promoting liberal agendas. Second, it is well-noted that these non-Western actors differ from liberal peacebuilders, in terms of norms and practices (Peter and Rice 2022). Such non-subscription of non-Western emerging powers to the norms underpinning liberal peacebuilding, such as inclusive state institutions, reconciliation, democratisation, and human rights (Sánchez-Cacicedo 2014) not only invariably benefits the local elites in CAS, but also fractures the global consensus of international support-which elites in CAS can manipulate. In short, the multiplicity of international actors and differences between them changes the nature of the 'agency' of elites in CAS- in the *strategies* available to them as they interact with international intervenors as well as their ability to shape institutional *outcomes*- by enhancing their leverage to choose between different international partners, select institutional agendas that suit them and eliciting concessions from competing international actors to their advantage. The use of such *strategies* to bargain better and affect institutional *outcomes* is noted in the scholarship on 'development assistance' where African states balanced out competing aid providers- China and Western states- to shape international assistance in their favour (Mohan and Lampert 2013). This article attempts to address this gap by examining how elites in CAS navigate this changing landscape of peacebuilding marked by competing forms of international engagement and examine conditions under which they can enhance their bargaining power or leverage in such context. In particular, the focus is on how the agency of elites of CAS changes in terms of the strategies available to them to bargain better with international actors and how such strategies affect institutional outcomes within this shifting global landscape of peacebuilding.

Drawing on the empirical investigation of peace processes in Nepal and Myanmar, which have received the simultaneous engagement of India and China, respectively, their regional neighbours, and liberal peacebuilders–a motley of multilateral and bilateral aid organisations, think tanks, non-governmental organisations funded largely by Western states to aid CAS. Within the

study of peace processes, the case studies discuss the trajectory of two of their core agendas, namely, inclusion and security sector reform (SSR). The article discusses these strategies and highlights that the dominant framework of 'co-option' to account for strategies used by elites to enhance their agency is inadequate in accounting for CAS, which witness plural and competing forms of international engagement. In these contexts, not only are elites able to 'co-opt' international engagement but are also able to undertake three other 'hedging' strategies, which include- harnessing distinct benefits from varied international actors, expanding their choice on selecting institutional prescripts by exploiting the differences between plural sources, and offsetting dependency on one by aligning with another. Secondly, such strategies and the increased agency of political elites to resist international prescriptions engenders illiberal institutional *outcomes* to the peace process, as elites row back on liberal pledges of inclusion, and reform of the security sector, enshrined in peace agreements in both Nepal and Myanmar.

In proposing these arguments, this article makes two contributions to peace studies. First, it evidences that the changing context of peacebuilding with increased non-Western engagement in international conflict resolution is changing agentic opportunities for CAS, as they can enhance their bargaining using 'hedging' strategies. The core conceptual contribution of this article is outlining three hedging strategies based on empirical evidence, identifying hedging-enabling structural factors, as well as distinguishing it from the 'co-option'- the dominant framework in peace studies. Secondly, this article also outlines how expanded strategies available to CAS through hedging can impact the outcomes of peace processes by making post-conflict institutions more 'illiberal'. While similar to Barnett, Fang and Zurcher's argument of 'compromised' outcomes which reify elite control and dilute liberal aspirations being the order of the day (Barnett, Fang, and Zürcher 2014). However, while their work looked at the interaction between liberal peacebuilders and domestic elites alone, this article extends the analysis by situating the argument in a context of plural forms of international support.

The article is informed by fieldwork in Nepal and Myanmar between 2017 and 2018, with a total of 56 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in the peace process in Nepal and Myanmar. These included insiders to the process, including politicians, civil society representatives, mediators, as well as outsiders, including scholars, journalists, think tank leaders, as well as representatives of bilateral and multilateral agencies funding peacebuilding projects. Nepal and Myanmar were selected as cases given the diverse and competing forms of international engagement they received, and how such engagement shaped peace outcomes, rather than to compare their respective processes. Further, the article acknowledges the fragmentation and cleavages between competing elite groups- political, economic, or social. However, the 'agency' of elites in increasing their bargaining leverage vis-à-vis international actors through distinct strategies is highlighted in the article as a form that is available to all groups of elites, who often share strategies on using international engagement to preserve their dominance, despite all their other differences, as demonstrated in case of Nepal and Myanmar.

Borrowing from Aoi, De Coning, and Thakur, peacebuilding is defined in this article as- international interventions undertaken in support of a peace

process largely by Western states, designed both to meet the short-term objectives of supporting ceasefire agreements to end physical violence but also as a long-term process addressing the root causes of any conflict through projects like Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR), SSR, transitional justice (Aoi, De Coning, and Thakur 2007). This definition, while it might appear static, in light of the shift of peacebuilding to statebuilding projects and discourses, reflects the realities in Nepal and Myanmar, which like many peace processes in Asia, have not required a statebuilding mandate (Keethaponcalan 2020). Rather as confirmed by their peace agreements, as well as mandates of key peacebuilders, the focus has been on promoting liberal goals of inclusion, SSR, and democratic governance (South 2014; Upreti and Sapkota 2017). While aware of the heterogeneity of actors, ranging from Western states, international organisations, as well as multilateral forums in liberal peacebuilding, this article is analytically concerned with the shared consensus of these actors on the promotion of liberal norms of democracy, human rights, and market economics (Mac Ginty 2011), which stands in contrast with Chinese and Indian engagement who do not share these normative premises.

The remainder of this article discusses the changing landscape of peacebuilding marked by increased non-Western engagement in CAS; situates the concept of 'hedging' within the broader discussion on the agency of domestic elites in CAS; and demonstrates how hedging strategies have been adopted by elites in Nepal and Myanmar, in reference to the debate on inclusion, and SSR. The last section will explore how the expanded agency of elites through 'hedging' has brought an 'illiberal' turn in with regard to commitments on inclusion, and SSR in the peace process, before proceeding to the conclusion.

Changing landscape of international engagement in conflict-affected states

There is a rare consensus that the dominance and effectiveness of liberal peacebuilding projects are being challenged by increased engagement of non-Western states in shaping peace and conflict transitions. The extant scholarship classifies this engagement of disparate groups of non-Western states as 'non-liberal', 'illiberal', or 'authoritarian' to disaggregate them from Western states (Höglund and Orjuela 2012; Lewis 2017). The rigid categorisation of West-supported 'liberal peace' and 'illiberal engagement' of the non-Western states might appear fallacious in light of the illiberal and interventionist forms peacebuilding has adopted in contexts like Afghanistan. However, fundamental differences with liberal peacebuilding projects sponsored by Western states, ensure that engagement of non-Western emerging states are introducing competing alternative norms and incentives that can affect the agentic opportunities for elites in CAS to either draw upon or exploit.

First, despite the illiberal consequences, international assistance for peacebuilding is marked by a declaratory commitment to liberal norms, such as democracy, inclusion, and human rights (Joshi, Lee, and Mac Ginty 2014). For example, peacebuilders have promoted the idea of 'inclusion'- where all major social groups and their interests are taken on board- often by intervening in domestic peace negotiations (Castillejo 2014). Such liberal commitments are neither stated nor aimed for by non-Western states like India and China in

their engagement who do not adhere to the 'international standard' as Western donors do (Uesugi 2021).

Relatedly, while ambivalent to peacebuilding as a policy framework, India, and China, have introduced alternative norms, that compete with the interventionist vision of liberal peace, centred on ideas of 'sovereignty'-a norm prioritised in their foreign policies. China has promoted development and stability as pathways for peace, rather than ideas of inclusion and equality championed by liberal peacebuilders. Peacebuilding contradicts China's position on state sovereignty and non-intervention (Lei 2011). Similarly, India's stance on peacebuilding emphasises national ownership, a light footprint approach from external parties, and building national capacities- which stand at odds with the very modality employed by liberal peacebuilders (Singh 2017). Such sovereignty-centred perspectives have led India and China to curtail the legal scope of related concepts, such as Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and Humanitarian Intervention, through their activism at the UN (Kozyrev 2016; Kurtz 2014). Such misalignment between liberal peacebuilding and regional hegemons like India and China, also leaves gaps, which domestic political elites in CAS can manipulate. In Sri Lanka, elites played off different international actors against each other, by drawing on 'funding and support from India and China to stave off Western international pressure during the final phase of the war' (Cheng, Goodhand, and Meehan 2018).

Lastly, while non-Western states do not have a 'peacebuilding' policy (Call and de Coning 2017), their engagement in the form of diplomatic engagement, aid, trade, and investment, often operating outside the confines of peace processes, is impacting political transitions in CAS. The competing moral and material incentives brought by regional states, on the one hand, weaken the power of liberal peace agents to either incentivise or secure the compliance of CAS, and on the other, expand the range of resources available for elites in CAS to mobilise and manipulate. Such differences impact 'agentic opportunities' available for elites in CAS, as laid out in Table 1. Furthermore, these differences with liberal peacebuilders, ironically, are also a point of convergence for India and China, despite their differences in their domestic political system, economic levels, and their competition and conflict with each other (Cunliffe and Kenkel 2016).

Peace processes in Nepal and Myanmar provide windows to look at the contours of Indian and Chinese engagement on the ground and their differences with liberal peacebuilders. As regional hegemons, India and China's engagement has been undergird by immediate stakes in security, investments in the wider political economy, and strategic pursuit of influencing political developments in the region (Breslin 2013; Padukone 2014). However, the global rise of India and China has accentuated their ability to engage in the region, both in terms of intensity and scale (Chaturvedy and Malone 2012; Lintner 2016b). Nepal's peace process (2005–2015) not only focused on ending its decade-long civil war by forging a peace agreement with the rebel group, the Maoists, but undertook an ambitious project of 'state restructuring' (Jeffery 2017). In taking this leap, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the Interim Constitution of 2007 committed to the *'inclusion'* of marginalised groups through different pathways, including affirmative action, federalism, transition from a Hindu state to a secular state, a commitment to human

Table 1. Differences between the strategies of co-option and hedging, and the structural factors that enable hedging.

Co-option	Hedging	Enabling factors amid the changing landscape of peacebuilding
Allows elites to receive moral and material benefits from liberal peacebuilders	Allows elites to *receive benefits from both* liberal peacebuilders and other regional states	Competing moral and material incentives brought by regional states enable elites to harness distinct benefits from liberal peacebuilders, and regional hegemons.
Empowers elites to exploit inefficiencies of liberal peace by appropriating liberal norms and institutions for their benefit	Empower elites to *choose* institutional prescriptions that suit them by exploiting the differences between various modes of international engagement	The presence of alternative norms, centred on development, stability, promoted by regional states allow for elites to selectively pick and choose norms and practices that suit their interests.
Enables elites to reach out to liberal peacebuilders when it suits their interests	Enables elites to reach out to one set of international actors to *offset or balance the other*	The ambivalence of regional states to the liberal norms, such as inclusion and SSR, and the reduced compliance power of liberal peacebuilder in the face of competing incentives allows elites in CAS to balance and offset one set of actors when another's norms and practices impact their power and interests.

rights, as well as SSR to promote notions of civilian supremacy. In the peace process, India facilitated the 12-point agreement between the Maoists, and the democratic opposition which in turn catalysed the CPA. Despite its central role, there were salient differences between India and the Western countries. India did not prioritise or engage on issues of human rights or SSR (Rawski and Sharma 2012). In contrast, peacebuilders advocated for embedding liberal norms such as human rights and SSR into the peace agreements and the Constitution, as well as supported instituting bodies like the Local Peace Committees, Truth and Reconciliation Commission to operationalise these agendas (Selim 2018). Further, the US, along with other European states, vouched for an increased role for the UN and other NGOs, while India was not comfortable with a UN presence in South Asia (Muni 2012). This led to a tense relationship between the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN)- the most visible peacebuilding organisation, with a mandate to oversee the verification of Maoist combatants, and their integration into the Nepal Army- and India.

Similar differences were evident in Myanmar, where despite the 2021 coup and the resulting uncertainty, some semblance of the peace process has continued. The peace process, between 2011-2020, sought to address multiple rebellions waged by Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO) representing minority ethnic groups, on grounds of exclusion by the Bamar majority, along with partial democratization (interrupted by the coup) (South 2014). The peace process, anchored on the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), promised not only a ceasefire but also dialogue on long-term political demands of the EAOs, such as federalism with greater autonomy for ethnic areas; 'security reintegration' where the military would be composed of all ethnic nationalities; and finally an amendment of the 2007 Constitution, which had privileged the military through a seven-staged peace process (Bell et al. 2017). In the peace process, while liberal peacebuilders posited exclusion of ethnic groups, constricted democratic space, and absence of the rule of law as the root cause of the conflict (European Commission 2016), China articulated the absence of development and economic deprivation as the driving factor (Adhikari 2021). Furthermore, while the peacebuilders supported discussions on SSR to promote civilian supremacy and dilute the military's hold on power, China's defence cooperation strengthened the military (Nakanishi 2013). Likewise, when many Western countries sought an international UN-led inquiry into the Myanmar government's violations of human rights, China shielded Myanmar from international attention through vetoes in the Security Council, and instead attributed 'poverty' to be the source of turmoil (Haitao 2017).

Situating 'hedging' as a pathway for greater leverage within extant discussion on 'agency'

The agency of CAS who use distinct strategies to negotiate greater leverage from international intervenors has been astutely studied in concepts of 'spoilers' (Stedman 1997), the role of elites in eliciting 'compromised peace-building' (Barnett, Fang, and Zürcher 2014), and a raft of scholarship in critical peace studies. Notably, the 'local' turn in peace with its focus on 'agency of the local and everyday' pitched concepts such as 'hybridity' to decentre away from the dominant focus on 'international' actors and agendas, and examine the role of local actors, institutions and perceptions both in the making of peace, but also their role in the reproduction of oppression, contestation, and violence (Nadarajah and Rampton 2015). However, these discussions have situated 'agency' solely with regards to Western-championed liberal peace projects. Building on insights from bargaining theory, scholars like Barnett and Zurcher outline how such agency has been determined by strategic interaction between two key actors, namely, liberal peacebuilders and elites in CAS, with differing interests- the former seeking to promote liberal inclusive institutions that devolve power, while the latter seek institutions that perpetuate their hold on power (Barnett and Zürcher 2008). They further argue that while such strategic interaction sees elites in CAS use multiple strategies, including the ability of local actors to either comply, resist, subvert, disengage, or exploit liberal peace which is well documented in peace studies, 'co-option' is the most prevalent form of agency (Barnett, Fang, and Zürcher 2014).

These discussions on co-option recognise that peacebuilding brings a range of moral and material resources to post-conflict states: knowledge, economic assistance, legitimacy, recognition, and the building of key domestic institutions, all of which elites try to control, in order to subsequently consolidate their hold on power (Franks and Richmond 2008). Co-option is discussed both as a *direct* appropriation of the legitimacy accorded, or of the monetary resources invested but also *indirect*, through the capture of state institutions that seek to deliver on rule of law, electoral assistance, transitional justice, and reform of the security sector projects (Barma 2017). These institutions, supported by peacebuilders, are co-opted because they seek to devolve power away from the elites and promote accountability, thus undermining elite authority, disrupting patterns of clientelism, and their access to the state's resources (Barnett, Fang, and Zürcher 2014). Drawing from the varied contexts from Kosovo to Cambodia, scholars have discussed many aspects of co-option: elites paying lip service to liberal norms in internationally sponsored peace agreements while suppressing these norms in practice; committing to peace deals that are rarely enforced; establishing peace institutions but rendering them incapable of functioning; and adherence to commitments initially but reneging them, or diluting them later (Miklian, Lidén, and Kolås 2011). In that sense, by co-opting institutions supported by peacebuilders to make them more inclusive and representative, elites in CAS co-opt both international peacebuilders and domestically marginalised groups. Co-option, thus, is discussed as a core *strategy* used by the elites in CAS to shape post-conflict institutional *outcomes* in ways that continue to support their dominance in the political settlement. Elites also do not always reject the push for such inclusive institutions by liberal peacebuilders, as they want the legitimacy accorded by liberal peacebuilders and the material resources to support cash-strapped economies- making co-option a viable option (Chesterman 2004).

Critical peace studies also detail how such a use of 'co-option' as a strategy has impacted the *outcomes* of peace processes. In particular, the focus has been on 'local agency' being able to breed 'hybrid' peace structures and institutions- which embody both liberal and illiberal features (Barma 2017; Barnett, Fang, and Zürcher 2014; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). For instance, the hybrid justice system in Cambodia has a liberal mandate to promote justice to victims of the Khmer Rouge, but is illiberally awash with excessive political interference, and a constricted legal mandate (Simangan 2018). The type of hybrid institutions engendered, whether they veer towards the liberal spectrum or the illiberal one, depends on the power of liberal peacebuilders to incentives or coerce CAS, but also the agency of CAS to resist and ignore international actors, or to propose alternative forms of peace (Mac Ginty 2011).

If the context of the changing landscape of peacebuilding, with multiple international actors with varied normative priorities and practices, are to be accounted for, the framework of 'co-option' proves inadequate. If bargaining models like the one by Barnett and Zurcher are to be invoked in this context of multiple international actors, strategic interaction in CAS is not only between liberal peacebuilders and elites in CAS but also features non-Western regional actors. They also feature varying preferences or interests where non-Western actors are guided more by geopolitical considerations and are ambivalent to liberal institutional agendas promoted by liberal peacebuilders. This

context with a multiplicity of actors, and differences in their preferences in contrast with liberal facilitates enable three other strategies that elites in CAS can deploy- cumulatively conceptualised as 'hedging'- which are discussed in the case studies of Nepal and Myanmar. These strategies also distinguish hedging from co-option as presented in Table 1.

While 'hedging' as a strategy is new in the application in peace studies, it has been mooted in International Relations to describe the behaviour of states seeking to guarantee their long-term interests by placing their policy bets on multiple, and possibly contradictory, international alignment options, designed to offset risks (Fiori and Passeri 2015). Extant scholarship uses 'hedging' is used in at least four ways: (i) a mixed strategy in which a state engages global power while adopting alternative security measures as a form of insurance; (ii) a security strategy adopted by states navigating triangular relations with China and the United States; (iii) an ambiguous alignment strategy vis-à-vis one or more major powers; and (iv) flexible strategy adopted by states to address specific strategic and economic vulnerabilities (Ciorciari and Haacke 2019). In essence, hedging is about enhancing 'agency' through rational decision-making for greater leverage (Jackson 2014) or even a 'context-specific tactical manoeuvring' in the context of changing domestic as well as international contexts (Jones and Jenne 2022).

This conceptual premise of the availability and use of competing sources of international engagement makes 'hedging' a relevant concept to study the agency of CAS like Nepal and Myanmar, as discussed below. Building on insights from the scholarship in International Relations, hedging, in this article hedging refers cumulatively to three strategies: harnessing distinct benefits from varied international actors, exploiting the differences between plural sources by selectively choosing international institutional prescripts, and offsetting dependency on one by aligning with another. Empirical examples in the section below highlight how such strategies manifested in the strategic interactions between liberal peacebuilders (namely the UN in Nepal and multiple Western donors in Myanmar), regional international actors (India in Nepal and China in Myanmar), and elites in CAS (represented broadly by traditional political parties and the Army dominated by CHHE elites in Nepal, and the military in Myanmar).

Harnessing distinct benefits

Despite their competing nature, elites in Nepal and Myanmar have sought out liberal peacebuilders and regional powers simultaneously, as both these forms of international engagement bring distinct benefits (Adhikari 2022). Nepali elites benefitted through India's high-level diplomacy, including being an implicit guarantor of the peace process, which was critical as India was seen as the sole external actor able to restrain both the Maoists and the democratic opposition.[1] Power constituencies like the Nepal Army also continued to benefit through defence cooperation from India. Further, as a part of the SSR, notably in terms of cantoning of former Maoist combatants, until they were

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[1] Interviews in Kathmandu, Nepal, 2017, Kathmandu.

verified by UNMIN, India provided 'hardware' to the process: tents for the cantonments; containers for the storage of Maoist weapons, and the deployment of former Nepali soldiers from the Indian Gorkha regiments who supervised the process of cantoning the Maoist combatants (Sharma 2019).

By the same token, peacebuilders not only brought material dividends but also international legitimacy to the overall process.[2] Financial aid to support deliverables of the peace process annually accounted for 5–6% of Nepal's gross national income, with the Nepal Peace Trust Fund alone contributing 208.6 million US dollars between 2007 and 2014 (DANIDA 2013; Reliefweb 2015). The UNMIN and other peacebuilding organisations have also been involved as 'neutral' third parties, supporting components of the peace process, such as managing the process of disarming and demobilising Maoist combatants, thus legitimising the peace process, and protecting the elites from pressures from different marginalised groups.[3] Peacebuilders were key in bringing a normative push for inclusion, in line with the Nepali peace process's stated commitment to correct the historic state-sanctioned exclusion- fostered by Nepali-speaking high caste groups from the hilly region, known as the Caste Hill Hindu Elite (CHHE), who make up 31.25% of the population (Lawoti 2016). This has included supporting excluded groups through technical, capacity-building, and financial assistance. Such support was aimed at groups like the Dalits, designated as untouchables according to Hindu norms; the Janajatis, or indigenous nationalities, facing religious and linguistic inequalities; and the Madhesis who have kinship and cross-border ties with people in Northern Indian states, and have been excluded based on race, region, language, and citizenship (Lawoti 2016). Given the benefits, Nepali elites prioritised diversifying their international engagement, by reaching out to multiple international actors and promoting 'treatment in isolation'- where they interacted separately with Indian representatives, and independent of interaction with Western peacebuilders.[4]

Similarly, in Myanmar, peacebuilders also brought technical assistance: helping Myanmar design the architecture and stages of the peace process; monitoring the conduct of elections; supporting critical institutions of the peace process, including the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee, and Myanmar Peace Centre; and capacity building of key stakeholders (Adhikari 2022). Additionally, it also allowed the quasi-civilian government to respond to calls by civil society groups who called for an increased engagement of Western states in the process (Kumbun 2019). The peace process, upturned decades of sanctions, and catalysed aid, investments, and diplomacy from Western states who flocked in to support the peace process (Goh and Steinberg 2016). However, Myanmar also continued to benefit through Chinese mediation in the peace process, with China being the only party able to persuade Northern EAOs to join the process.[5] It also continued to benefit through investments, grants, as well as defence cooperation from China through the peace process.

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[2] Interview with peace negotiator, 6 August 2017, Kathmandu.
[3] Interview with peace negotiator II, 8 August 2017, Kathmandu.
[4] Interview with former minister, 4 September, 2017.
[5] Interview with Senior Mediator, November, 2018, Yangon.

Expanded choice by exploiting the differences between modes of international engagement

Unlike co-option, in CAS with multiple and competing sources of international engagement, elites also have the 'choice' to decide who to partner with and which institutional prescriptions to embed and reject, actively exploiting the difference between the two. Or as Raja Mohan, outlining Nepal's expanded agency asserted, 'When you have a single vendor, it is the sellers' market, but when you have multiple vendors' it is the buyers' market' (Mohan 2020). The ambivalence of India and China to key agendas of the peace process in Nepal and Myanmar, like inclusion, human rights, and SSR further allows 'the buyers'- the elites in Nepal and Myanmar- to choose institutional prescription from multiple vendors in the crowded marketplace of the peacebuilding arena.

In Nepal, such expanded choice has been noted to impact the agenda of SSR and inclusion. Here, liberal peacebuilders provided much impetus to the idea of 'inclusion' through research; supporting civil society groups to implement projects for the political empowerment of marginalised groups; technical assistance in the constitution-writing process to embed the principle of inclusion; provision of expertise; and organising study trips to understand issues like federalism in other contexts.[6] Contrasting liberal peacebuilders, while India championed the inclusion guarantees of Madhesis, given concerns about cross-border instability, it remained agnostic to the larger debate on inclusion beyond the concerns of Madhesis. Exploiting the difference between Indian ambivalence towards federalism beyond Madhesi concerns, and that of liberal peacebuilders, Nepali elites selectively picked a federal model, with seven provinces, whose administrative boundaries were gerrymandered in such a way, that apart from Madhesis, who dominate in Province 2, all the other provinces continue to retain CHHE dominance; thus leaving aspirations for identity-based federalism unfulfilled (Jha 2017). Further, the commitment to affirmative action, which reserved seats proportional to the population in the civil service and state organs, which was central to inclusion-related demands, has been diluted by adding in the dominant group CHHE as one of the 'reserved categories'. Cumulatively, while all these provisions signal a liberal leap with regard to addressing exclusion, it continues to buoy the CHHE dominance.

More so, on the question of secularism, liberal peacebuilders supported non-Hindu Janajati civil society organisations like the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, who championed secularism. Contrasting this, members of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), given their Hindutva ideology pressurised Nepali leaders to abandon secularism and move back to adopting 'Hinduism' as the state religion (Muni 2015). Nepali political leaders were reported as having met Indian representatives and the 'international Western community' quite separately, often making contradicting pledges.[7] Nepali elites assured India's ruling party, the BJP, that their concerns, about the mention of secularism in the Constitution, would be addressed (Muni 2015; Sharma 2019). Contrarily, they also convinced the liberal peacebuilding

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[6] Interviews in Nepal, 2017, 2018.
[7] Ibid.

community that Nepal would commit to a broad-based inclusion by pledging to secularism (Muni 2015). In the end, in combining competing international policy prescriptions, and the bottom-up campaigns for secularism, the 2015 Constitution adopted a hybrid outlook on secularism. While the 2015 Constitution, written as a part of the commitment of the peace process declared Nepal a secular state, defined secularism as the protection of religion being practised 'since ancient times' and bans religious conversion (Letizia 2012). Given Nepal's history of being the world's only Hindu state, this version of secularism facilitated the protection of Hinduism and its traditions.

Notably, SSR in Nepal was seen to encompass two central agendas: the management of arms and armaments, and a broader version of civilian control of the Nepal Army. UNMIN sought to reinforce the Nepal Army to respect its commitment to 'democratise', as well as to 'integrate a certain number of Maoist rebels into the Nepal Army', as per its commitment to the CPA (Martin 2012). India, contradictory, was of the view that integration of former Maoist combatants would dilute the Nepal Army's professional credentials, and agendas like 'democratisation', or right-sizing of the Army, would compromise its institutional integrity (Jha 2014). Thus, India continued to strengthen the Nepal Army through multiple forms of defence cooperation, including selling arms at concessional rates, offering training, and joint exercises (Ghimire 2018). Such varying models firstly diluted international pressure to get the Nepal Army to reform. The presence of India also allowed Nepali elites to exploit the differences and choose between agendas heralding a medley of reforms that suited the Nepal Army. Here, in a bid to satisfy the UN and gain some international legitimacy, political elites, and the Nepal Army, responded to UNMIN's call with a modest integration of 1422 Maoist combatants into the Nepal Army. Similarly, such elites also adopted the Indian stance of leaving the Nepal Army fundamentally untouched by the 'democratising the Army' agenda. Further, the availability of Indian support, not only made institutions like the Nepal Army less dependent on civilian institutions but also reduced any reliance on peacebuilders, decreasing the latter's leverage on the security forces (Bogati and Strasheim 2019).

Similarly, in Myanmar, the idea of inclusion, and federalism that gives more power to ethnic regions as a pathway to inclusion was core to the peace process, as well as a central part of the support liberal peacebuilders provided. Peacebuilders have invested in the issue of federalism, with technical assistance to civil society groups, comparative research, policy discussions, study visits, and capacity building of ethnic communities to increase the knowledge base on the issue.[8] However, China has been ambivalent about the issue of inclusion, apart from promoting the inclusion of all EAOs in the dialogue process (Liang 2017). But while ethnic communities having more power and rights to control their land and resources is central to the debate on federalism, Chinese investments have undercut this agenda. Chinese investments have bypassed engagement with ethnic communities and EAOs governance channels and often forged bilateral contracts with the central government, often with companies close to the military (Abb and Adhikari 2021). These not only challenge the authority of EAOs but also fail to engage local ethnic

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[8] Interview with a think-tank representative, November 2018, Yangon.

communities, dampening the momentum by ethnic communities for equitable resource sharing under a federal model (Abb and Adhikari 2021). Exploiting the difference between the two models, the NCA championed by Myanmar elites-both the democratic government that came to power in 2015, and the quasi-civilian government between 2011–2015- commits to democracy, federalism, and the rights of ethnic communities. Contrarily, in practice, political elites have escalated trade and investment deals with different Chinese actors, which only marginally involve and benefit ethnic people, leading to fears that by the time discussions on federalism in the peace process are firmed up, EAOs are likely to have lost their rights to own and manage natural resources in their territories.[9] Not surprisingly, the wording of the provision for federalism agreed upon by the peace process until 2020, while committing to equitable sharing of management rights between the Centre and the states, does not firm up patterns of this allocation (State Counsellor Office, Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2017).

Such patterns, where elites have exploited China's ambivalence towards liberal institution-building, are also noted on the issue of SSR. Peacebuilders invested in training and support for furthering the SSR agenda, and promoting the norm of civilian supremacy, while China's continued defence cooperation through arms sales and training has strengthened the military, stifling any prospects of reform (SIPRI n.d.). In addition, China's dual policy of supporting both the military-led government at the centre, and different armed groups like the EAOs in the Myanmar-China borderlands, has led to an arms race, offering no incentives for the EAOs to relinquish their arms, or for the Tatmadaw to acquiesce (Haacke 2011). Such differences have allowed increased choice in availing distinct benefits from varied international actors and determining the scope and extent of reform. Accordingly, the military continued to court liberal peacebuilders, engaged in projects on police reform, promoting the rule of law, access to justice, civilian oversight of the military, and human rights amongst others. The military referenced the terminology of SSR/DDR.[10] For instance, at the 2016 Union Peace Conference, the Senior Military General indicated, 'We will have to practise DDR and SSR in line with the expectation of the international community' (Jolliffe 2017). However, the military has also continued to court China and cut military deals with Chinese agencies which strengthen the military's hold on the economy.[11] Further, buoyed by China's moral and material assistance, the military has been loath to any action that could weaken its political role, given the fear of losing its special prerogatives, as evidenced by the suppression of Constitutional amendments, initiated by the National League for Democracy in 2019 (Myint 2020).

Offset or balance one form of international engagement for another

The differences in the norms and forms of engagement between India and China allow elites in Nepal and Myanmar to offset or balance one set of international actors by aligning with the other. In Nepal, the option of reaching out

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[9] Interview with think-tank representative, 15 November 2018, Yangon.
[10] Interview with SSR expert, July 2017, Yangon.
[11] Multiple Interviews, 2017, 2018, Yangon.

to peacebuilders also helped offset or act as a counterweight to Nepal's challenge of balancing India's historic ways of intrusive engagement.[12] In the peace process, India was not comfortable with a UN presence in its regional backyard, thus, lobbied for a reduced role of the UN with Nepali elites (Muni 2012). However, despite India's hesitance, Nepali elites acknowledged the need to have Western engagement in the process. Such elites cautioned that India would have to take the role itself if it was not willing to let the UN manage the peace process- something they knew India was not prepared to do.[13] Yet in another instance, when India wanted to supervise their cantonment, the Maoists and the Prime Minister of the interim government formed in 2007 believed that it would be better to involve UNMIN, to ensure that India would not control the process (Sharma 2019). Here, the legacy of Indian political intrusion, and the fear of Indian dominance in the peace process, which could delegitimise the role of Nepali political actors, is thought to have played its part.[14] Further, once the Constitution was promulgated in 2015, when India did not wholeheartedly support it, on grounds of the continued exclusion of Madhesis and the leap towards secularism, Nepali elites promoted a narrative highlighting the acceptance of the Constitution by other countries such as China, US, EU amongst others, to offset India's stance (Sharma 2019).

Conversely, Nepali elites across the political spectrum sought to balance international pressures put forth by UNMIN by reaching out to India. When UNMIN became unbearably intrusive, reminding the Nepal Army of the CPA's commitment to its democratisation (Martin 2012), the Nepal Army, and the non-Maoist political parties, turned to India. India, given its absolute support of the Nepal Army, not only helped it evade the democratisation agenda, but also rather successfully lobbied for UNMIN's departure before it completed its central task of integrating former combatants into the Nepal Army (Jha 2014). In fact, this even contributed to UNMIN's departure from Nepal. The presence of China, another neighbouring rising power that can be invoked by elites to balance against peacebuilders' pressures, further adds an advantage to Nepali elites. Confirming this balancing strategy, in the context of the Nepali government's decision to terminate UNMIN's mandate in Nepal, a former Prime Minister confided: 'There were divisions about UNMIN's exit both domestically and internationally, including in my own political party. To force us to rethink our decision about UNMIN's exit, on behalf of the UN Secretary-General, ambassadors representing the five permanent members of the UN Security Council came to meet me. One of the ambassadors even threatened that if violence resumes after UNMIN's exit, I could be tried at the International Criminal Court. However, in the interaction with these five ambassadors, I noted that the British, French and American ambassadors were forthcoming in their persuasion to continue UNMIN's role, but the Russian and the Chinese ambassadors were largely quiet. The silence of regional powers like China was reassuring for us. We realised that there will be

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[12] Multiple Interviews, 2017, 2018, Kathmandu.
[13] Interview, similar sentiments in Munit (2012).
[14] Interview with political commentator, 4 August 2017, Kathmandu.

regional allies in case of Western backlash and decided to go ahead with UNMIN's exit'.[15]

Multiple and competing forms of international engagement have also allowed for offsetting deep-seated dependencies for both the National League for Democracy (NLD) headed by Aung Saan Suu Kyi and Thein Sein's government throughout the decade of the peace process. In 2011, a core reason for Thein Sein to embark on a peace process was attributed to redeeming from excessive dependency on China for diplomatic and economic support built through decades of Western sanction (Lintner 2016a). The peace process not only became a springboard for the loosening of sanctions but also greater Western engagement, which radically altered Myanmar's strategic options, especially its asymmetry with China (Sun 2017). This policy option was reversed after 2015 in the aftermath of the Rohingya refugee crisis. As the peacebuilders called for an interventional investigation on human rights violations, Myanmar limited its engagement with the West and sought China's support. China's diplomatic support at the UN was key to truncating the international mandate on the Rakhine crisis, which has relieved Myanmar elites, both the Tatmadaw and the NLD-led government, in the process (Myint-U 2020).

The 'illiberal' turn in peace process

The three distinct hedging strategies that have emboldened elite agency in CAS, as discussed above, have impacted the *outcomes* of the peace process, particularly the shape of post-conflict institutions. Such institutions have witnessed an 'illiberal' turn in agendas such as inclusion and SSR. This rise of illiberal turn confirms Barnett, Fang and Zurcher's hypothesis about 'compromised' outcomes in peace processes being the most prevalent in practice. These illiberal outcomes, that compromise on liberal pledges on inclusion and SSR by the elites themselves, could be seen as a 'context-dependent' illiberal form of 'hybrid' peace, discussed in much of the peace studies scholarship (Smith et al. 2020). However, the difference in contexts which witness plural and competing forms of international engagement is that liberal commitments have formally been embedded in peace agreements to engage with liberal peacebuilders, which elites benefit from as it also balances out regional powers, but in practice these liberal pledges have been routinely reneged upon or diluted as the process progressed.

Conceptually, hedging strategies birth illiberal peace outcomes in *two* ways. *First*, it includes an additional form of strategy, along with co-option, for elites to negotiate the terms, timing, and scope of completing forms of international engagement to engage with international actors in their favour. Hedging allows domestic actors to extract the benefits of international support, while not adhering to institutional prescripts proposed by these international players. This is more for institutional prescripts like inclusion, and SSR, promoted by liberal peacebuilders, which either seek to decentralise power from the most powerful groups and devolve it towards other marginalised groups or make

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[15] Interview, 12 December 2018, Kathmandu.

them more accountable and thus, are detrimental to elite interests. While considerations of international legitimacy, associated development assistance, as well as domestic signalling that bottom-up civil society demands for inclusion and accountability have been taken on board to coerce elites in CAS to engage with peacebuilding norms, they are wary of accepting and practising them in totality (Chesterman 2004). For instance, when the interests of some of the most powerful institutions like the Nepal Army, or groups like the CHHE were challenged in Nepal, these elites used hedging strategies to take back control. So, after nine years of persistent negotiations on the issue, the Constitution of 2015, a key part of the peace process, regressed on multiple aspects of the CPA. Institutional commitments to affirmative action were diluted by the addition of the already over-represented CHHE to the list of 'communities' entitled to reservation (Rai 2018). Likewise, discussion on federalism based on 'genuine autonomy', which was reversed by the assignation of politically motivated and manipulated boundaries, with the power to preserve CHHE dominance.[16] An immediate impact of the illiberal turn on inclusion was evident in the first elections after the peace process. The provincial election results from 2017 evidence that apart from Province 2, with its Madheshi majority of 72%, none of the other marginalised groups have electoral representation proportional to their population, with the most vulnerable groups, like Dalits, having made only marginal gains (Paswan 2018). In yet another instance, the promise of a bold version of SSR was reduced to a basic skeletal form of DDR emerged, with just over 1400 ex-combatants integrated into the Nepal Army, while minor combatants were left without compensation or rehabilitation packages. The commitment to the 'democratisation of the Nepal Army', stand forgotten (Sharma 2017). In 2009, the government formed a 'Committee for the Recommendation for the Formulation of the Plan for the Democratisation of the Army and Improvement of the Security Apparatus', convened by the defence minister. This committee is said to have submitted a detailed plan on democratisation but, since the report has not been made public, there has been no national conversation on the same (Sharma 2017).

Added option to hedge has meant that elites in Myanmar, including the NLD since 2015, while championing the NCA, which commits to federalism, secularism, and semblances of SSR, as well as liberty, equality, and justice institutionally, has rarely practised any. In fact, even the NLD's commitment to federalism in practice has been questioned. The NLD appointed its own party members, as Chief Ministers in the Rakhine and Shan Assemblies in 2016, despite ethnic parties winning the majority of seats. The NLD also named a bridge in Mon state after Aung San, who is a Bamar, against the wishes of local people who wanted it to be named after a person of Mon ethnicity (Myint 2017). The peace process has not only continued the dominance of the Bamar Buddhist majority, of whom the Myanmar military is a key embodiment domestically, as well as internationally, as the peace process legitimised the military through Western engagement.

Second, hedging away from the regional hegemons has limited impact on the wider agendas of the peace process, given their ambivalence to these agendas. However, hedging away from peacebuilders has a direct and profound

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[16] Interview with Constitutional lawyer, 12 August 2017, Kathmandu.

impact on the fate of peacebuilding agendas. Peacebuilders, despite the selectivity and limits of their commitments, as widely discussed in peace studies, in Nepal and Myanmar, to varying degrees championed norms such as human rights, and inclusion, to be embedded within peace agreements, supported institutions to operationalise these commitments, as well as created a bottom-up demand through civil society engagement to lobby for these issues. This misalignment between regional powers and liberal peacebuilders not only inhibits concerted international pressure to elicit reform in CAS but also further weakens the power of liberal peacebuilders to get elites to make reforms and comply with pledges in the peace agreements.

Conclusion

This article discussed the impact of the changing structure of international support to CAS, marked by the simultaneous engagement of Western-championed liberal peace projects and that of regional powers, on the agency of domestic political elites, and for peace structures. It has outlined how elites leverage the difference in norms, forms, and incentives between regional powers and liberal peacebuilders not only by co-opting international engagement but by undertaking hedging strategies. The article also teased out three hedging strategies based on empirical analyses of peace processes in Nepal and Myanmar, in particular the discussion on inclusion and SSR. Through these agendas, the article confirms that the changing landscape of international support - with plural and competing norms and forms of engagement- is not only profoundly changing the agency of CAS by making more *strategies* available in their interaction with international actors, but also affecting the *outcomes* of the peace process, notably the institutions and agendas of their peace process. The impact of the increased agency of CAS in fostering illiberal turn in critical agendas of the peace process- as elites compromise on liberal commitments of the peace process and continue to reify elite control of the state- also confirms the dominant prognosis in peace studies of 'compromised peace outcomes' being the most prevalent in practice.

   The conclusions from this article complement and builds on two core debates in peace studies. Firstly, it applies the long-held assertion by constructivists in International Relations on the mutually constitutive nature of agency and structure, and the dynamism of this interrelationship to core inferences of critical peace studies (Wendt 1987). However, in looking at the structural shifts in the nature of international support, it invites critical peace scholars to recognise the increasing role of non-Western states in CAS (Lewis 2017). Secondly, this article adds two distinct contributions to the existing understanding of 'local agency' in critical peace studies. On one level, while peace studies tend to be occupied with co-option as a form of agency, this article also proposes recognising 'hedging' strategies as a core approach in countries that receive plural and competing forms of international engagement. On another level, this article, while it supports the central thesis about illiberal and compromised outcomes being most dominant, it argues that such illiberal outcomes are facilitated not only by an interaction between local and international actors as discussed in peace studies but also by the interaction between multiple international actors, with diverse motivations and strategies.

Building on insights from Nepal and Myanmar, the article can also help draw four inferences on structural conditions which increases the bargaining leverage of elites in CAS, which has a wider resonance. First, the multiplicity of states engaged in CAS, and the differences in the norms and practices of their engagement can open avenues for greater leverage. Here, not only is the difference between liberal peacebuilding and non-Western states pertinent, but equally important is the fact that there is no one 'non-Western' template for peacebuilding, which further widens the rage of choice for CAS. This is exemplified by cases like Nepal, where the elites not only navigated between the UN and India, but also between India and China. Second, the 'geo-strategy' and 'geography' of peace becomes significant variables (Selby 2013). Neighbourhoods or peripheries of regional hegemons see their entrenched engagement in the political process, which directly and indirectly influences the core agendas of the peace process. Elites in CAS in such regional neighbourhoods are able to exploit the security and strategic concerns of regional states to carve greater autonomy for themselves. Third, the global context of a fundamental powershift marked by the decline of the West and the rise of various non-Western states also weakens the incentives and coercive power of liberal peacebuilders to push through liberal reforms in CAS. Lastly, the shift from peacebuilding towards agendas of statebuilding, grounded on securitised notions of stability and strong states, not only brings greater complementarities between non-Western powers and liberal peacebuilders, but creates a normative context that benefits the elites, and enables them to move away from liberal norms. These inferences are important not only to fill critical academic gaps but also to influence policy responses as international engagement in CAS to build sustainable peace has continued to be aglobal priority.

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