**‘Negotiated Co-existence’: Indian and Chinese engagement in the global governance of peacebuilding**

Abstract

A much-discussed theme in International Relations is how emerging powers will engage with the declining liberal world order, and its various governance regimes. This article examines the engagement of emergent powers with the regime of ‘peacebuilding’. Empirically, it examines the interaction between India and China, with liberal peacebuilding projects in the peace processes of Nepal and Myanmar respectively. Departing from the theory that emergent powers either displace, or converge with, the liberal world order, this article argues that emergent powers have a ‘negotiated co-existence’ with liberal peacebuilders. Despite competing motivations, this ‘co-existence’ of liberal peacebuilders and emergent powers, is negotiated, firstly, by the agency of conflict-affected states, who invoke plural forms of international engagement, to gain strategic advantage. Secondly, it is negotiated by limited interaction between the two, given the differences in their priorities, and modalities of engagement. The differences ensure that emergent powers operate in parallel, yet distinctly, from peacebuilders, rarely crossing each other’s path. This limited interaction prevents this co-existence from degenerating into instances of potential contestation but also inhibits cooperation. Yet, when emergent powers view their economic and strategic interests are threatened by norms and practices of liberal peacebuilding projects there are few instances of contestation.

# **Introduction**

A rare consensus in International Relations has settled that the US-led liberal world order is declining, and that this has coincided with the rise of various emergent powers (Duncombe and Dunne 2018). This global power shift has led to questions about how these emergent powers, who have risen in a world order not of their own making, will engage with the various global governance institutions rooted in the normative framework of the liberal world order (Kupchan 2012; Stephen 2012; Ikenberry, Parmar, and Stokes 2018). Scholars have examined these shifts in the multiple domains, including, economic governance, climate negotiations, participation in UN peacekeeping, human rights, humanitarian assistance, development aid among others (Hirono, Jiang, and Lanteigne 2019; Hopewell 2016; Hopgood 2015; Mawdsley 2010; Vihma 2011). From the extant scholarship, two inferences can be drawn. Firstly, there are contradicting views on the engagement of emergent powers in the global governance institutions i.e. the scholars either posit emergent powers to be status quoist and integrate within the liberal world order, or be revisionist and seek to reform or resist the liberal world order. The second conclusion is regarding the wide variation in their interaction with different issue-specific regimes, with some governance regimes, for example humanitarian interventions, likely to renegotiated by emergent powers than others (Duncombe and Dunne 2018).

This article investigates ‘peacebuilding’ as a specific site or regime of the liberal world order, to contribute to the broader debate on global power transition. It specifically looks at how two of the most discussed emergent powers, India, and China, have engaged with ‘peacebuilding’-the dominant form of international support to conflict-affected states largely championed by Western states and institutions they lead. Following Newman et. al. (2009) and Aoi et. al (2007), in this article, I define ‘peacebuilding’ as a range of internationally sponsored interventions to address both the causes and consequences of a conflict in post-conﬂict societies, which is focuses not just in managing instability but seeks to build peace based on liberal norms, including, democracy, market economy, human rights and the rule of law. Given its multifaceted approach, it also involving a complex network of actors, including states, donors, non-governmental organizations, humanitarian organizations and commercial entities (Newman, Paris, and Richmond 2009; Aoi, de Conig and Thakur 2007). This broad definition allows for a ‘holistic’ view of peacebuilding, which in practice, manifests as a ‘composite of all neoliberal problem-solving strategies’ applied in conflict-affected states (Heathershaw 2008). Above definition also mirrors the understanding of peacebuilding on the ground in Myanmar and Nepal. In these countries, a motley of entities, including bilateral donors like USAID, UKaid, regional and multilateral bodies like the EU, the UN, and multiple international NGOs, have funded and supported peacebuilding projects on the rule of law, Security Sector Reform (SSR), transitional justice, inclusion, and power sharing, building civil society capacity, human rights, and democracy promotion. Empirically, this article examines the Indian engagement with liberal peacebuilding projects in Nepal’s peace process and China’s in Myanmar. As countries bordering India and China, political transition in Nepal and Myanmar offers suitable cases where emergent powers have pertinent stakes and are processes which saw simultaneous engagement of emergent powers and liberal peacebuilding projects.

The article argues that, in their engagement with liberal peacebuilding projects in neighboring regions, emergent powers do not integrate into, or defy, the tenets of the liberal world order, as widely cited by scholars, rather maintain a ‘negotiated co-existence’ with liberal peacebuilding projects and actors. Here, the co-existence is negotiated not merely by the interaction of emergent powers and peacebuilders, but by agency of domestic political actors in conflict-affected states, who invoke plural forms of international engagement, to gain additional strategic advantage. Secondly, this interaction is sustained as a ‘co-existence’ because of limited interaction between the two sets of actors, given the differences in their priorities, modalities, and approach of engagement. The differences ensure that emergent powers operate in parallel, and separately, from peacebuilders, leaving minimal space for interaction, rarely crossing each other’s path. While this limited interaction prevents this co-existence from degenerating into potential contestations, it also inhibits active cooperation. Yet, this ‘co-existence’ could lead to active contestation in instances when emergent powers view their economic and strategic interests are threatened by norms and practices of liberal peacebuilding projects.

To contextualize these arguments, this article first outlines why peacebuilding serves as a pertinent site to study of how India and China interact with regimes of the liberal world order. This will be followed by an empirical examination of interaction between liberal peacebuilders and India in the case of Nepal, followed by examination of interaction between liberal peacebuilders and China in Myanmar. Building on the empirical evidence, the fifth section offers an analysis of the emergence of a ‘negotiated co-existence’, before moving to the conclusion.

Two key caveats issues need to be foregrounded. Firstly, this article synthesizes the commonalities of Indian and Chinese engagement, as seen by their practices on the ground. Such complementarities emanating out of their relatively strict adherence to sovereignty, and non-intervention is also evident in other liberal governance regimes, including peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention (Sullivan de Estrada and Foot 2019), climate change and global trade negotiation (Pant 2013). Despite such congruence, differences cannot be obscured, especially given their intense geo-political competition (Rao, 2021), diverse political systems, varying military and economic strengths, as well as the informal emerging coalition between India with Western states, as a counterbalance to China’s global ascendancy (Wohlforth 1999; Cunliffe and Kenkel 2016). The differences between Indian and Chinese approaches within broad contours of congruence is highlighted in different parts of this article. Secondly, a similar heterogeneity is evident in liberal peacebuilding (Zaum 2012). Multiple scholars have outlined the limits of pitting liberal peacebuilding as a coherent paradigm given the heterogeneity of actors, approaches, and definitions on liberal peace (Heathershaw 2008; Zaum 2012). The article acknowledges this debate on the heterogeneity of actors but uses the term peacebuilders or liberal peacebuilders due to two factors, which even scholars who outline the heterogeneity of actors, and paradigms agree on. First, liberal norms, even when actions are largely illiberal, are used to legitimate the actions of entities supporting liberal peace. And further, the prescriptions promoted in conflict-affected states by peacebuilders have been familiarly one of liberal institutions i.e. human rights, rule of law, democracy, and market liberalization (Mac Ginty 2011). Second, these scholars also concur on the centrality

 of Western states as core actors in the policy and practice of liberal peacebuilding (Zaum 2012). It is the liberal policy prescription, and centrality of western states that coheres this constellation of diverse actors as peacebuilders, and contrasts them with India and China, who do not explicitly share such a consensus on liberal prescriptions.

Methodologically, this article is primarily based on analysis of legal, political, and organizational documents, such as peace agreements, white papers, press statements, archives, reports, websites- depending on the availability in the four countries studied. This was substantiated by long-term field work for conducting elite interviews in Nepal and Myanmar between 2017-2018. I interviewed 35 key stakeholders in Myanmar, and 21 in Nepal. These included: bureaucrats, representatives of political parties, academics, journalists, civil society leaders, conflict mediators, negotiators, public intellectuals, and representatives from different International and local NGOs, and bilateral and multilateral sources who funded or implemented peacebuilding projects. In addition, I conducted 10 interviews with former diplomats, and scholars specializing on Nepal, in New Delhi, India in 2018, and 8 interviews at Sichuan University in China with academics with expertise in South and Southeast Asia, focused on Myanmar. The participants in India and China were selected based on their expertise on Indian and Chinese engagement in Nepal and Myanmar respectively, or that of conflict-affected states in the immediate region. In India and China, the questions were focused on themes, which included: broader global and regional foreign policy priorities; engagement in global peace and security-related issues; patterns of involvement in the peace process in Nepal and Myanmar; convergences and divergences in norms and modalities of engagement with that of liberal peacebuilders on the ground; and their impact on priority agendas of the peace process, including human rights, security sector reform, and inclusion. The interviews were semi-structured in all four countries, and except for one interview in Myanmar, and two in Nepal, all were conducted in English. While the level of access was different in each country, specifically between India and China, the data from the two countries were triangulated with inferences from interviews in Myanmar and Nepal, both before and after fieldwork in India and China, to account for the imbalance.

# **Emergent Powers in the Arena of Peacebuilding: Challenging the Liberal World Order?**

Scholars are divided in their assessment of the interaction of emergent powers with the institutional governance architecture of the liberal world order. Some see the liberal international order as integrative and flexible, which will creating incentives for emergent powers to integrate into the liberal world order (Ikenberry 2011). Others refute such optimism and argue that the fundamental differences in their understanding of concepts such as sovereignty, threats to international security, and statehood, inhibit any such integration (Hurrell 2006). Specifically focused on China, some argue that China has gradually been adapting to global liberal norms, given its increased membership of international organizations, its intra-party democracy, and its subscription to different international covenants (Johnston 2007; Zhang 2011). Others, citing China’s relations with such ‘rogue’ states as North Korea, its misuse of UN Security Council vetoes, its pattern of arms sale, as well as its record on human rights, have warned of a Chinese marginalization of liberal values (Halper 2010; Larson and Shevchenko 2010). However other scholars favor a middle path: a ‘cooperative’ partnership emerging between China and the US or a ‘co-existence’ between the US and China, where each would maintain their own distinct political and economic systems (Zeng and Breslin 2016; De Graaff and Van Apeldoorn 2018).

In comparison to China, India’s rise is much less discussed in scholarship. Scholars point to India following a middle path, where its quest for recognition from established major powers leads it to comply with elements of the liberal order, while a desire to maintain relations of solidarity with developing countries, compels it to champion the global distributive justice agenda, and call for changes to the liberal order (Narlikar 2013; Sullivan de Estrada 2015). Despite the variation between India and China in their engagement at the UN, and its leadership in many UN agencies, in the arena of peacebuilding both have shared premises and comparability. Not only does China hold the lowest number of executive leadership posts among the permanent members of the UN Security Council, apart from Russia, but China is also yet to lead an agency directly addressing international peace and security matters (Fung and Lam, 2021). While much ink has been spilled in discussing wider trends on India and China, and their engagement in the many regimes of the liberal world order, studies on how emergent powers have interacted with liberal peacebuilding projects, surprisingly have been limited (Lei 2011; Call and de Coning 2017; Kuo 2020). This article builds on to this burgeoning body of work, but also adds to the debate by looking at the emergent power engagement in the implementation and operationalization of peacebuilding, rather than solely focusing on the debates at bodies like the UN.

The peculiarities of peacebuilding as a concept and policy, and its inherent differences with norms and practices prioritized by emergent powers, renders itself important as a pertinent site of study. Firstly, peacebuilding is the most extensive and transformative type of peace operation, which is focused on wide-ranging activities, from brokering ceasefires among former combatants, election monitoring, protecting human rights, strengthening institutions to an elaborate post-conflict recovery capable of transforming the socio-political landscape of conflict-affected states (Barma 2017). Peacebuilding’s privileging of liberal values of democracy, rule of law, economic liberalization has not only earned it the prefix of ‘liberal’, but such ‘liberal peacebuilding’ has seen Western states and institutions dictate the process of knowledge production, the policies, as well as the practice (Kühn 2012; Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018; He 2019). This Western hegemony, in turn, has rendered India and China marginal. Thus, while, statements by Indian and Chinese representatives at the UN, reveal that their engagement on peacebuilding activities remains cautious and hesitant (Yinfan 2004; Zhenmin 2009; Mukerji 2014), a limited understanding exists on their interaction with peacebuilding projects on the ground.

Secondly, engaging on peacebuilding in conflict-affected states, as opposed to peacekeeping, is viewed as more contentious issue among emergent powers, since its mandate to build institutions based upon market economics and democracy necessitates infringing the sovereignty of conflict-affected states (Zaum 2003), a norm central to both Indian and Chinese foreign policies (Choedon 2017). Several factors, including a history of colonialism, the prioritisation of autonomy in their foreign policies, their identity as leaders of the post-colonial developing world, as well as concerns of their domestic conflicts being internationalised, has historically led India and China to champion the norm of sovereignty (Wang 1999; Ganguly and Pardesi 2009). Consequently India and China advocate for countries to have the right to choose their own system of governance and development, without international intrusion. It has also led to them overlooking the internal affairs of many rogue and repressive states (Information Office of the State Council, 1998; Narang and Staniland, 2012). Despite the recent shift into a more lenient understanding of sovereignty in Indian and Chinese foreign policy, statements by their representatives at the UN, as well as their practice on the ground, reveal that their engagement on peacebuilding activities remains cautious and hesitant (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN 2013a; Mukerji, 2014). Such caution is noted in the deliberation by the Indian representative at the UN, who, speaking on the relevance of the Peacebuilding Commission, cautioned, ‘This Peacebuilding Commission is, however, a relatively new body and it would be difficult for us to come to the conclusion that its utility stands proven’ (Mukerji, 2014).

Lastly, in different instances, India and China have constrained the mandate of liberal peacebuilding, and have competed with peacbuilders in conflict-affected states. Witness how India and China have sought to curtail, through their activism at the UN, the legal scope of such core peacebuilding tenets as Responsibility to Protect (R2P), and Humanitarian Intervention (Kurtz 2014; Kozyrev 2016). Further countries as Russia, India, and China, are not only impacting processes in conflict-affected states, but are often undercutting the influence of peacebuilders in these conflicts (Muni 2012; Goh and Steinberg 2016; Alden and Yixiao 2017; Lewis 2017).

The differences between the India and China, and liberal peacebuilders, take an added importance when the conflicts arise in countries bordering those of emergent powers. This is the case in Nepal and Myanmar, where India and China have been apprehensive about the presence of Western states, and liberal peacebuilders they support, and the application of such liberal policies as the Responsibility to Protect (Khilnani, Kumar, Mehta, Menon, Nilekani, Raghavan, et al. 2012; Fung 2020). Such liberal normative regimes are seen to undercut India and China’s role as regional hegemons, and as pre-eminent security guarantors in South Asia and Southeast Asia respectively, despite China not being situated in Southeast Asia, and having many powerful regional competitors (Breslin 2013; Padukone 2014). Thus, studying their engagement on conflict management at the regional level, where they have always enjoyed a commanding presence, can help make robust predictions, as to their engagement, when they emerge globally.

# **Nepal’s Trajectory of Peace: UN and India in the Nepali Peace Process**

In 2005, a 12-point agreement between the democratic political parties, grouped as the Seven Party Alliance (SPA), and the rebels, the Maoists, who had been fighting the state since 1996, catalyzed the peace process in Nepal. This agreement laid the framework for the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA). The CPA not only sought to end the conflict by mainstreaming the Maoists rebels, but undertook an ambitious project of ‘state restructuring’, comprising several elements (Jeffery, 2017). These included policies to address the historic, state-sanctioned, exclusion of a large number of marginalized groups through affirmative action, electoral reform, and a transition to secularism, commitment for human rights, by setting up such bodies as the high-level Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), as well as Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR): a mechanism that would deal with former Maoist ex-combatants; alongside a broader SSR-like process of a ‘democratization’ of the Nepal Army (Adhikari 2011; Bell, Badanjak, Forster, Jamar, Pospisil, and Wise 2017). The CPA segued into identity movements by such ethnic groups as the Madhesis, who live in the Southern plains across the Nepal-India border, and share deep cultural ties with people in Northern India (Jha,2017). Marginalized on grounds of race, region, language and citizenship, they and the Janajatis (indigenous ethnic groups) demanded federalism in order to address their religious and linguistic inequalities, discussions of which has been at the center of the peace process (Upreti and Sapkota 2017).

## ***Seeking International Support***

Nepal’s political transition, while largely, domestic-led, also saw India play a salient role.[[1]](#footnote-1) India was the primary guarantor of the process, facilitating the 12-point agreement between the Maoists and the SPA. India’s efforts were complemented efforts by Western states as well as the UN, who had been key development aid donors for decades, and during the conflict had sought to promote dialogue between the Maoist, political parties, and the monarch (von Einsiede and Salih 2017). India’s historic role of brokering of all major political developments in Nepal since the 1950s implied that it was able to solicit compliance from both the Maoists and the other democratic parties (Dabhade and Pant 2004; Thapliyal, 2006). However, both the SPA and the Maoist also actively looked beyond India to seek UN involvement in the process. Given the history of political intrusion and pervasive anti-India sentiments, political parties believed that Indian centrality in the peace process, without other international intermediaries like the UN, being involved would delegitimize the peace process, and their role in it (Sharma 2019).

India initially resisted Nepal’s proposal to have the UN involved. For since the UN Security Council failed to approve India’s claim to Kashmir, India has sought to limit UN engagement in the region (Muni 2012). A larger UN role further threatened India’s prominence as the regional hegemon in the process but also had the potential to undermine its multiple strategic concerns and motivations.

Despite India’s refusal, Nepal invited the UN to manage elements of the peace process. To circumvent Indian reluctance, political parties in Nepal firstly gave credible guarantees that Indian security concerns would be accommodated in scoping the role of the UN.[[2]](#footnote-2) Further, they also asserted that India would need to take on the role, if it was not comfortable with UN’s leadership, in the full knowledge that India would not be prepared to do so(Muni 2012). In trying to reconcile Indian concerns with Nepali demands for a UN mission, it was decided not to have a peacekeeping mission, with armed troops, but rather a political mission, with ‘qualified civilian personnel’: a very different model to that to which the UN was accustomed (Martin 2012). Nepal signed the Agreement on the Monitoring of Management of Arms and Armies with the UN, setting out the mandate of the United Nations Missions in Nepal (UNMIN) as the primary peacebuilder, to lead on three aspects of the peace process: managing the arms and former Maoist combatants; monitoring the cease-fire and the human rights situation; and supporting the conduct of elections(Martin 2012).

Nepali elites also actively appealed to peacebuilders for aid and technical assistance, and for them to lend legitimacy to the peace process. To this end, between 2006 and 2011, official development assistance from peacebuilders totaled nearly 4.4 billion USD, annually accounting for 5-6% of Nepal’s gross national income, and a quarter of the national budget (DANIDA 2013). Further, the legitimacy accorded by UN’s participation not only validated the process as ‘liberal’ and ‘transformative’, but also helped skirt the risk of international criticism on such issues as human rights and transitional justice (Selim 2018). Inviting the UN to participate, also addressed civil society demands. For, since 2005, civil society groups had lobbied for the sanctioning of a UN special rapporteur, to investigate allegations of war –time human rights violations (Rawski and Sharma 2012).

## ***India and the peacebuilders- a divergent trajectory***

In the initial period of the process, India and most Western community who supported peacebuilding projects, apart from the US,[[3]](#footnote-3) agreed on the need to mainstream the Maoists through a peace process. This led to India to play a pivotal role as an ‘implicit’ guarantor- bridging while critical national and international actors, including the US and the Nepal Army, who were not fully on-board about negotiating with the Maoists.[[4]](#footnote-4) By India’s own accounts, there was a lot of ‘convergence’ with countries like the US and UK in the initial period (Bhasin, 2005).[[5]](#footnote-5) However, after 2005, Indian engagement digressed substantially from that of liberal peacebuilders.

India ‘s engagement was aimed at begetting cross-border stability. Indian official representatives attributed their interest in the peace process as critical to its own security (Sharma 2019). To that end, India facilitated the 12-point agreement which terminated the war as well as invested a substantially in the security sector in Nepal, notably the Nepal Army despite formal claims of not believing in a ‘military solution to the conflict’(Pg. 1249, Bhasin, 2005). Through enhanced defense cooperation, weapons supply, and training, India provided the Nepal Army with a form of political patronage (Ghimire, 2018). In turn, peacebuilders, despite the limits of their support, focused on addressing issues of exclusion and human rights violations, which undergird the conflict. For instance, the UK Department for International Development, a prominent funder of peacebuilding projects explicitly recognised inequality and marginalization to be the root cause of the conflict in Nepal, and have subsequently supported projects, like the Janajati Empowerment Project, aimed at ensuring greater social, political and economic inclusion for the country’s indigenous groups (Adhikari 2017).

India’s engagement also was centred at macro-level or the political domain. As an interviewee in Nepal stated, ‘India is detached from the commitment of the CPA, including institutions, and priorities it commits to leaving peacebuilders to lead on the ‘day to day’ aspect of delivering on the peace process’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Such macro-level deliberations not only included the initial ceasefire agreement, but also engineering the rise and fall of political coalitions. The latter included supporting the formation of 20-party coalition against the Maoists in 2008, leading to the collapse of the Maoist government which was seen to be anti-Indian. India, however, refrained from other core deliverables of the peace process which were inked in the CPA, including Constitution writing, security sector reform, human rights, apart from the inclusion agenda. Indian representatives have continually maintained that aspects of the peace process like Constitution writing is a domestic preserve, to be determined by key parties without foreign intervention. Such views were corroborated by a former Indian diplomat, stating: ‘I was asked by the UN if India has any Constitutional experts to assist in the Constituent writing process in Nepal. We said No. Nepal already had five prior constitutions, so we believed Nepal had sufficient experience and experts to do the job.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

A notable exception was India’s championing of rights of Madhesis, and their demands for federalism, which appeared to mirror the liberal peacebuilders support for, and promotion of, inclusivity in the Nepali peace process. However India’s sole focus on Madhesis, and neglect of the concerns of other marginalized groups, such as Janajatis coupled with its tendency to divide the Madhesi movement when they did not serve India’s strategic concerns (Adhikari 2014)are evidence that Indian cross-border security concerns were its motivation, rather than the issue of inclusion. This political and yet parochial form of direct Indian engagement centred on macro-level political negotiations was delivered by its diplomatic corps or back-channel diplomacy through Indian political leaders or its intelligence unit, the Research and Analysis Wing (Sharma 2019).

In contrast, the a motley of peacebuilders, focused on a supporting the delivery of a wide-range of priorities, including: managing cantonments for former combatants, reintegration of combatants, rehabilitation of Internally Displaced Persons, election of the Constituent Assembly, strengthening of law and police administration, and the provision of broader support to the peace process (United Nations Nepal 2016). In addition, critical institutions as the Election Commission, and the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction, were financially and technically supported in mainstreaming inclusion and other critical agendas of the peace process. To deliver on these wide-ranging objectives, western actors instituted elaborate mechanisms, including The Nepal Peace Trust Fund (NPTF) and the United Nations Peace Fund for Nepal (UNPFN). The NPTF, established in 2007, was financed by eight Western donors,[[8]](#footnote-8) and supported multiple CPA-mandated commitments (International IDEA 2015). Similarly, the UNPFN was established to finance projects petitioned from UN organizations (United Nations Nepal 2016). Along with these, multiple high-profile projects including, the Nepal Transition to Peace, a track 1.5 dialogue process, enabled by national facilitators and the Centre for Constitutional Dialogue, instituted to build the capacity of the Constituent Assembly, were assisting the process.

India’s ‘value-free’ and stability centred engagement contrasted with the prioritization of varied norms by peacebuilders. India did not see such an issue as human rights, ‘as a topic worth discussing’ (Rawski and Sharma 2012). Radically different from this, peacebuilders prioritised a normative approach, which included persuading Nepali elites to insert normative commitments, on issues like transitional justice and SSR, in the CPA. They also encouraged a commitment to the formation of institutions, such as Local Peace Committees, in addition to the Commission on Disappearances, and the TRC about which there was little knowledge or support domestically (Selim 2018). This normative orientation was testified in the instance wherein the UN halted its financial and technical support for the transitional justice process in Nepal, given that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act did not comply with international legal standards (UN-OHCHR 2014). The normative push by peacebuilders was often critiqued for ignoring local needs and expertise to determine policies. For instance, a needs assessment of war victims’ groups in Nepal identified basic economic and social rights, including compensation, education, housing as their priority (International Center for Transitional Justice 2008). However, the transitional justice agenda, fiercely promoted by peacebuilders, focused on political rights, and overwhelmingly on the prosecution of perpetrators, which risked marginalizing such concerns as basic needs, and diverted resources to the judicial agenda (Robins 2012). Similarly, with the rise of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), with Hindutva as its ideological foundation, elements of the ruling BJP have also pressurised Nepali leaders to renounce secularism and revert to a ‘Hindu’ state (Muni, 2015)- an agenda ferociously promoted by the liberal peacebuilders and the janajatis in Nepal.

Indian engagement also actively sought to distinguish itself from that of peacebuilders. On the ground, India was not a part of the Nepal Peace Trust Fund, and even on broad donor forums Indian representatives attended meetings only when convened by the Nepali government, and its Ministry of Finance.[[9]](#footnote-9) In doing so, it sought to distinguish itself as a core stakeholder that was the most important entity, while seeing peacebuilders as external third parties. As a researcher based at think-tank in India confirmed, ‘India is a stakeholder and that all that was at stake for peacebuilders was a success story’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Similarly, depicting India’s idea of its centrality of the process, India’s Foreign Secretary, Jaishankar, while lobbying Nepali leaders to take the Madhesi agenda on board in the Constitution writing process in 2015, made it clear that: ‘India would not support the new Constitution…and support from the rest of the world would have no meaning’ (Sharma, 2019. Pg. 411).

## ***India contests the UN***

While differences in modalities and logics of Indian and peacebuilding engagement ensured that they operated distinctly with little interaction, there were instances of contestation, notably with UNMIN.

In Nepal, India had been indifferent to the burgeoning ‘peacebuilding industry’, but remained suspicious of UNMIN, which it feared would hijack the process.[[11]](#footnote-11) While India reluctantly agreed to a UN role in Nepal, Nepali elites requested for a constricted political mandate in the form of UNMIN, to assuage Indian concerns (Whitfield 2012). However, India’s differences with UNMIN on two counts, led to UNMIN’s premature departure from Nepal. Firstly, India’s misgivings about UNMIN escalated post 2007, after the rise of identity-based movements by Madhesis in the Tarai (the Southern plains bordering India) calling for greater guarantees of regional autonomy. With the unrest in the Southern plains, UNMIN was seen to be ‘angling for a political role in the Tarai, and even goading Madhesi groups to ask for international mediation’(Jha 2007), thus escalating India’s wariness of any international presence in the Nepal-India borderlands. In fact, India’s aversion to UN agencies, having an organizational presence in, the Southern borderlands, also meant that Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights’s term extension was agreed only after it agreed to close its office in the Tarai.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Secondly, India and UNMIN locked horns over the role of the Nepal Army. The UNMIN’s primary mandate originated from the Agreement on Monitoring of Arms and Armies requiring it to monitor the democratization of the Nepal Army, and the integration of rebel combatants into it. However, India sought to protect the Nepal Army, regarding it as a beacon of stability, as discussed above, and thus opposed the integration processes (Jha 2014). India not only sought to revoke UNMIN’s calls for the Nepal Army’s democratization, but such influential actors in India as a former Indian Army Chief argued that any integration of PLA ex-combatants into the Army would dilute its professional credentials, and compromise its institutional integrity (Jha 2014). Further, as relations between the Maoists and the Nepal Army deteriorated once the Maoists won the elections in 2008, India saw UNMIN as championing the Maoists, while trying to dilute the role of the Nepal Army. UNMIN’s lack of effectiveness in curbing Maoist violence as well as repeat extensions to the stated duration, thus raising the possibility of a mandate creep, further escalated the contestation. All this led India to lobby for UNMIN’s untimely exit from the peace process. It lobbied domestic political groups in Nepal, and the international community, including the US, and the UK, for its closure (International Crisis Group 2011). These instances of contestation also highlight that while not directly engaged, Indian engagement indirectly impacted agendas promoted by peacebuilders, including SSR.

# **Myanmar’s Pieces of ‘Peace’: China Meets Peacebuilders**

Myanmar’s peace process, which has been ongoing since 2012, has sought to end the many insurgencies launched by Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO), on grounds of exclusion at the hands of the Bamar majority (South 2014). Under the framework of Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), the process pledges a transition from a centralized, Bamar-dominated, state to a federal state, where ethnic groups would have a greater role in governing territories where they dominate as well as security reintegration, which would enable some form of SSR and DDR, through such policies as a restructuring of the armed forces to include all ethnic nationalities (Bell et al. 2017). By 2020, ten EAOs had signed the NCA, while groups that account for 80% of the country’s armed rebels, largely based in Northern Myanmar bordering China, including the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), and the United Wa State Army (UWSA), have abstained from the NCA (Lintner 2017). The government has thus employed a two-pronged approach: the first of which is persuading abstainers to sign the NCA and the second of which, is a move to a political dialogue phase, and to discuss such fundamental questions as federalism and SSR with those EAOs who have signed the NCA.

## ***Seeking International Support***

While domestically driven, China has been indispensable in the peace process.[[13]](#footnote-13) Since 2013, China has facilitated rounds of talks, between the EAOs like the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO). The government has been a formal witness in these talks as well as the NCA. In 2017, China arranged for EAOs based in Northern Myanmar to attend the 21st Century Panglong Conference, determined by the NCA as one of the crucial phases of the peace process (The Irrawaddy 2017). China is seen as the only actor able to bring EAOs in the Sino-Myanmar borderlands, including, KIO and UWSA (Vrieze 2017). These EAOs have shared cross-border historical and cultural ties and also have relied economically on the taxation of imported products, trans-border trade of raw materials, and on Chinese investment in mining, for sustenance (Smith 2007). Further, a history of Western sanctions, and the entrenchment of Chinese domination, in the wider political economy in Myanmar, has buttressed China’s centrality (Haacke 2002; United States Institute of Peace 2018). For having become an item on the UN Security Council agenda by the early 2000s, Myanmar had to rely on China for diplomatic support in global forums as well as for trade and investment, and defense sales and assistance.

This deep-seated dependency on China, and the pervasive anti-China sentiment at the local level (Zin 2012) has, however, compelled political elites in Myanmar to seek wider Western participation in the peace process despite China’s declension. The very start of the peace process was aimed at restoring relations with Western states, and resolving their concerns over democracy and human rights violations in Myanmar in a bid to address Myanmar’s growing dependence on China (Lintner 2016). Accordingly, in 2011, the Myanmar government sought to internationalize the process, and requested Norway to facilitate the emerging peace process (South 2014). This paved the way for peacebuilders, ranging from bilateral donors including USAID, UKaid, and AusAID, to multilateral institutions like the UN, the World Bank, and the EU, and a range of INGOs (Bächtold, Gasser, Palmiano, Alluri, and Stein 2014).

China’s apprehension to peacebuilder engagement was evident in multiple instances: proposing only the UN and China to be official witnesses of the NCA, when other countries like the US and the UK were proposed by EAOs (Chow and Easley 2015), advising Northern EAOs not to maintain links with ‘Western entities’, and cautioning it did not want to see ‘white faces’ in the border areas (Adhikari, 2021),and inciting EAOs, over which it has influence, to protest against the Myanmar government’s internationalizing of the peace process (Institute for Security and Development Policy 2015).

For Myanmar’s political establishment, apart from balancing China, peacebuilders not only conferred swift legitimacy to the political transition, but also eased the sanctions, in place since the 1990s. This became a springboard for aid, partnerships, high-level visits, bilateral trade and investment agreements, as well as debt relief (Gill, Goh, and Huang 2016). Peacebuilders also brought a range of critical technical assistance: helping Myanmar design the architecture and stages of the peace process, monitoring the conduct of elections, supporting institutions embedded in the NCA, such as the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee, setting up institutions like the Myanmar Peace Centre to coordinate all peace initiatives as well as helping with local initiatives to promote social cohesion.[[14]](#footnote-14) Additionally, it also allowed the quasi-civilian government to respond to the calls by prominent EAOs, like the KIO, for a greater international role and facilitation of the process (Shayi 2016).

## ***Varied Norms and Forms of International Engagement***

China’s engagement has converged with that of multiple other states funding peacebuilding projects in their joint support for the NCA regime. China, thus, has served as a formal witness to the signing of the NCA, in company with the UN, the EU, Thailand, China, India, and Japan (Institute for Security and Development Policy 2015). Beyond their coming together to support the NCA, there were differences in their understanding of the conflict, as well as modalities of engagement to address them.

Chinese engagement has centred on fostering cross-border stability. China has routinely cited instances of conflict spill over, where bombs used in the fighting in Myanmar landed on the Chinese side, causing casualties on a few occasions, in order to justify its interest and engagement in the conflict (Han 2017). Not surprisingly, China’s engagement centred on mediation and facilitation of the NCA, which would terminate violence. Its engagement is largely limited to conflict actors, focused on formal and informal engagement with EAOs in the North, and the Government at the Centre. While vested in NCA, China has been ambivalent to salient debates of the peace process, including, inclusion or security sector reform. Chinese engagement was also deployed by its diplomatic corp, with China’s Special Envoy for Asian Affairs Wang Yingfan (until 2013) and Sun Guoxiang since 2013 being the most visible faces in the conflict mediation efforts.

Peacebuilders in turn, engaged in a multi-faceted effort in support to different components of the NCA, deployed through a dense web of network of bilateral and multilateral donors, NGOs, think tanks, among others (Aung, 2016). Prominent peacebuilding consortiums have been instituted which have funded plethora of peacebuilding projects, including the Joint Peace Fund and the Peace Support Fund. Funded by Western governments, these funds have supported trainings and meetings in the peace process, the conduct of research on agendas like federalism and SSR, the promotion of the engagement of young people and women, and the monitoring of ceasefires (Joint Peace Fund n.d.; Paung Sie Facility n.d.). Further, pooled funds, like the UN’s Peacebuilding Fund, have helped to strengthen social services in ethnic areas, and sought to foster collaboration between state and non-state actors (United Nations 2014).

In positing development and strong state as the answer for addressing conflicts, China’s engagement in the peace process was also vested in developmental support. China has explicitly described its provision of infrastructure and developmental aid to Myanmar as a contribution to the peace process (Alexandra and Lanteigne 2017). Chinese sources have consistently argued that, with investment and trade potential generated by schemes like the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, a part of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this would provide opportunities for EAOs to partake in developmental activities, thus weaning them away from violence.[[15]](#footnote-15) Similarly, China’s continued arms sales, trainings, and joint exercises, have enabled the Tatmadaw to become a more professional force (Nakanishi 2013). In contrast, peacebuilders have recognized that the military has the resources, capacity and power to dominate the peace process, and thus have provided targeted support. It has been focused on capacity building for signatory EAOs, marginalized ethnic communities, and for women and civil society groups.[[16]](#footnote-16)

A notable contrast has been proclivity towards norms. The normative push of peacebuilders, has led them to advocate that the government should sign accords, such as the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention,[[17]](#footnote-17) as well as granting more human rights concessions to protect the rights of marginalized groups.[[18]](#footnote-18) Chinese engagement in turn is agnostic to normative prescriptions, and ‘China’s only concern has been to bring parties to the table and then let them do the talking’.[[19]](#footnote-19) An academic in China confirmed this stating that. ‘China does not prioritize ideological issues. For instance, North Korea calls itself ‘Socialist’, but even socialists in China criticize the North Korean style of socialism. However, in wider bilateral relations it is not socialism or democratic government that determines the scope of the relation’. [[20]](#footnote-20)

As further evidence of its ambivalence to the norms of democracy, China’s has engaged with the democratic government of the National League for Democracy which came to power in 2015, with equal enthusiasm as it did with the military junta ruling Myanmar until then.

China has sought to distinguish itself from other peacebuilders, as well as posited itself as a primary stakeholder. In discussing the uniqueness of Chinese engagement, the Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar, noted in an interview, ‘China’s financial aid would be very different from the aid offered by other states. There will be no strings attached for the aid-political or otherwise’ (Soe 2017). Similarly, pitting itself as a core stakeholder, another Chinese representative commented, ‘So the peace process is not just at the price for Myanmar people, but also at the price for Chinese people’ (Liang 2017). To demonstrate their stakes and difference, Chinese representatives rarely attend donor forums, and even when they are ‘reluctant engagers i.e., taking rather than giving information’.[[21]](#footnote-21)

## ***China Contests the Peacebuilders***

The arrival of peacebuilders in Myanmar had eroded China’s monopoly in the country, which was built over decades of Western sanctions. China has resisted the presence of peacebuilding projects, especially in Northern border areas, as well as in areas of large Chinese investments, such as Rakhine state (United States Institute of Peace 2018). The impact of such contestation from China is seen to be one of the determining factors for the low level of engagement of the US in the political transition in Myanmar (United States Institute of Peace 2018).

Yet another point of contestation has been the role of civil society organizations, which have used the space, which became available after the reforms of 2011 to raise their voices against Chinese investments. Since 2011, civil society groups in Myanmar have protested over large-scale projects, which have resulted in land grabs, violation of labor rights, environmental damage, and complaints about insufficient compensation (Mark and Zhang 2017). Such local protests have led the Thein Sein government to shelve large-scale Chinese-financed projects, like the Myitsone dam. China has viewed the response in Myanmar as influenced by Western-backed NGOs.[[22]](#footnote-22) Indeed Chinese academics have routinely attributed its rejection to Western states, and civil society groups funded by them in order to eliminate China’s economic advantage in South East Asia (Shihong 2014)

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# **Fostering a ‘Negotiated Co-existence’**

The interaction between India and China, with that of peacebuilders in the peace processes in Nepal and Myanmar negate the argument iterated by such scholars as Ikenberry, that emergent powers will integrate and adapt into liberal regimes given its flexible and integrative nature. Rather absence of normative foundations in their engagement, as well as their sense of exceptionalism as ‘core regional stakeholders’ highlight a departure from liberal peace. However, contrary to assertions that emergent powers will seek to revise the international order, China and India are not rejecting liberal peacebuilders directly or completely. Rather, avenues of contestation between the two demonstrate that unless liberal peacebuilders threaten their core interests, emergent powers have been largely indifferent and ambivalent to the agendas of peacebuilders. What this does highlight is what I have called ‘negotiated co-existence’, marked by: one, the agency of conflict-affected states who negotiate plural and competing forms of international engagement to enhance their autonomy, and two, differences in the modalities and approach of engagement, which sees peacebuilders and emergent powers operate distinctly within their own silos with limited avenues of interaction, and three, contestations arise but only when strategic and economic interests of emergent power are threatened by the norms and practices of peacebuilders.

## ***Agency of Conflict-affected States***

The competing motivations of liberal peacebuilders and emergent powers are clearly visible in Nepal and Myanmar. The stated rationale of peacebuilders includes addressing root causes of concerns, and stabilizing fragile states for transnational security (Duffield 2014). The very presence of liberal peacebuilders competes with the rationale for engagement of emergent powers, which is focused on providing regional leadership in crises (Destradi 2010), maintaining regional stability and influence (Lampton 2013; Gupta 2018), and keeping the region autonomous from any extra-regional presence (Mansingh 1984; Goldstein 2005). Despite India and China, seeking to curb any third-party engagement, a ‘co-existence’ of liberal peacebuilders and emergent powers is facilitated by domestic political elites in Nepal and Myanmar, who broker competing and plural forms of international engagement to harness distinct advantages.

In the strategic calculus, Indian and Chinese involvement in conflict-affected states in the region of influence are central, given the leverage they exert on conflict actors, their ability to provide a credible security guarantee as well as their indispensability, given the dependencies in the wider political economy. This agency is also rooted in history, where political elites in Nepal and Myanmar have persistently sought to arrest dependencies on India and China respectively by diversifying their foreign relations. Myanmar’s policies of ‘neutrality’ as well as Nepal’s policy of non-alignment highlight this time-tested quest for autonomy (Malik 1998; Rose 1973). Into this equation, peacebuilders bring three distinct advantages to the equation: international legitimacy to the process, financial and technical assistance to the peace process, and most importantly, they act as a counter-weight to balance the intrusive regional engagement of emergent powers. The understanding of this agency of conflict-affected states, however, has been accorded liminal space in the literature on global power transitions.

## ***Differences in Approach and Modality***

The five fundamental differences between the peacebuilders and emergent powers ensure that they engage in two distinct parallel tracks, fostering an active division of labor, whereby each contributes to different facets of the peace process. Operating within their own silos leaves these plural forms of engagement with limited avenues of interaction. Cumulatively, this has prevented this co-existence to degenerate into active contestation. However, this also inhibits engendering some form of cooperation. The net effect is that while they ‘co-exist’ in the space of the peace process, few collaborations are visible on the ground, and there is limited or no sharing information on critical issues.

First, both differ in the very purposes of their engagement. Liberal peacebuilders, at least in their explicit objectives, attempt to foster long-term peace rather than just limiting it to a short-term end of conflict, which is also a core to conceptualization of the peacebuilding regime (Boutros-Ghali 1992). To do so, liberal peacebuilders support ceasefires, powersharing agreements between conflict parties, strengthen civil society, and protect and promote minority rights, and even endorse a large-scale restructuring of the state (Zaum 2003). In contrast, emergent powers have focused on engendering ‘minimalistic version of peace’ or ‘stability’: critical to averting the spread of cross-border conflicts from Nepal and Myanmar.[[23]](#footnote-23) This is also evident in their conspicuous diplomatic support in negotiating ceasefires and preliminary agreements in their promotion of stability but are ambivalent to other salient agendas like powersharing and SSR that follows the signing of these agreements and are viewed as integral to long-term peace.

This stability-centric engagement, focused on brokering peace agreements to stop conflicts, ensures that India and China dominate the macro level political processes in these transitions. This contrasts with the liberal peacebuilders, who are invested in translating the peace agreement through ‘everyday deliverables’, such as supporting peace institutions, and institutional reform, among others. This contrast spurs a dichotomy between the formal ‘peace process’, where liberal peacebuilders dominate, and the wider ‘political process’, where India and China take precedence.[[24]](#footnote-24) This dichotomy leads to a two-level process, inhibiting any contact and tangible interaction between the two forms of international engagement.

Second, they differ on their understanding of how such peace or stability is engendered. Peacebuilders valorise a range of liberal values as vehicles of peace, evident in Nepal and Myanmar, and beyond. These include promotion of democracy and human rights, and the strengthening of civil society (Cooper, Turner, and Pugh 2011). The stability-centred lens of emergent powers, in contrast, leads them to view conflicts as manifestations of a weak state, leading to a breakdown of law and order. As such, they seek to remedy conflicts through strengthening state institutions like the Armies in Nepal and Myanmar; the provision of developmental benefits to pacify rebelling social forces, as verified by the BRI, and ceasefire agreements that end conflicts.

This understanding of pathways out of conflict is also evident internally in both India and China, despite radical differences in their internal governance systems. They have sought to stabilize domestic conflicts, through multiple, often contrasting instruments, including, negotiated settlements with rebel groups, the injection of developmental funding and goods, and the constitutional accommodation of minorities (Tamang, 2011). However they have also done so through military victory, suppression, control, and intimidation (Misra 2001; Kabzung 2015; Han 2016; Sinha 2017). India’s democratic credentials are in fact in doubt, given that it has prioritized counter-insurgency tactics, and autocracy to foster stability in conflict-torn North-eastern states as well as Kashmir (Baruah 2007).

Third, peacebuilders and the emergent powers vary on understandings of ownership for conflict management. India and China have sought to distinguish themselves as core stakeholders in the management of the conflicts around the neighborhood, while designating liberal peacebuilder as external third parties. This understanding of emergent powers as core stakeholders has meant that they have resisted coordinating with peacebuilders, as testified seen by their co-engagement with peacebuilders, and more symbolically their absence from these donor forums.

Beyond Nepal and Myanmar, statements by India and China at the UN consistently highlight national ownership. Witness their use of such phrases as: ‘local ownership’, ‘no substitute for engagement with host government’and for ‘post conflict states themselves bearing the burden of peace and security and devising strategies for post-conflict reconstruction’(Puri 2009; Naidu 2020). In contrast, the UN has championed local ownership as a core catalyst to successful peacebuilding (United Nations 2010), the very modality of peacebuilders, hardly allows for a local ownership (Mac Ginty 2008). These modalities include the prodigious import of experts and the authority they exercise, the imposition of normative mandates often obscuring the needs of the local context and adopting similar projects across countries with little or no contextualization.

Fourth, they differ on the relevance of norms. Despite claims of a ‘goal-free approach’, where the focus is on the process rather than liberal goals (De Coning 2018), liberal peacebuilding practices in Nepal and Myanmar demonstrate an innate normative bias, centred on sacralising such issues as human rights, rule of law, democracy, and inclusive governance. The normative push of peacebuilders has taken mutliple forms in Nepal and Myanmar: starting with the active ‘normativization’ of peace agreements (Bell 2017) with increased references to human rights, inclusion, and adoption of different international legal mechanisms.[[25]](#footnote-25) Contradictorily, emergent powers have shown ambivalence towards these norms as well various projects, such as SSR, transitional justice, or inclusion that propagate these norms.

Lastly, emergent powers radically differ from the peacebuilders on policies and institutionalization of their engagement. Peacebuilders have made systematic attempts to institutionalize their engagement at multiple levels: through a raft of policies, strategies and templates of what works (USAID 2005; AusAid 2011; OECD 2018) and various institutions including large multi-donor consortiums like the Nepal Peace Trust Fund, and the Joint Peace Fund, and the Peace Support Fund in Myanmar. Peacebuilder’s construct, and rely on, these institutionalized networks of donors, civil society groups, and the media.

Unlike the peacebuilders, emergent powers have no formally articulated peacebuilding policy (Call and de Coning 2017). Rejecting solution-based technocratic approaches to peacebuilding, interviews in India outlined how policy templates not only obscure local contextual specificities, but also inhibit the, of necessity, often tailored form of engagement required in a fast-changing post-conflict context.[[26]](#footnote-26) Reinforcing China’s stance, a Chinese academic remarked, China ‘does not have polished papers on peacebuilding. Rather we evaluate issues of peace and conflict in a case-by-case basis’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Peacebuilders use diverse channels to deliver their goals. These include bilateral donor, multilateral forums, and international and local non-government organizations. In contrast, India and China rely exclusively on their diplomatic corps, and other state institutions. On the ground, any policy framework is further hampered by the sheer pluralisation of foreign policy in India and China. The absolute number of cross-border ties and provincial players such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar that border with Nepal in India, or Yunnan that borders with Myanmar in China, as well as political parties like the BJPin India, and their ensuing multivariate interests, make a coherent policy campaign almost impossible (Daojiong and Breslin 2012; Sharma 2019). The absence of coherent policies to bind their engagement, and the resulting shifts it generates, makes any form of coordination with liberal peacebuilders difficult.

The modalities of engagement of emergent powers also expose their limitations. For instance, both Indian and Chinese engagement are elite-focused, and centred on macro-level political negotiations in the peace process. India and China do not have the institutions, or institutional partnerships on the ground, unlike liberal peacebuilders, who engage with a wide array of civil society partners. Such elite-level engagement not only leaves them open to exploitation by political elites in Nepal and Myanmar, who can ‘game’ a variety of international partners, but also leads to the critique that their engagement sustains elite control of the state, often at the expense of the needs of the local citizens (Adhikari, 2014; Chenyang & Char, 2016)).

Similarly, the pragmatism demonstrated by India and China, with sudden shifts in their engagement, also calls into question if they can be honest brokers in the peace process, exposing the constraints of their peacebuilding role. Such assessments are evident in headlines like ‘Myanmar Needs More Engagement From the West, Not China’(Kumbun, 2019a) and continued questions on whether China can be trusted to keep peace in Myanmar (Zaw 2019). In Nepal, despite India’s dominant role in brokering peace, a dominant narrative has been that it wanted a ‘controlled’ form of change, which it could dictate rather than negotiate peace (Sharma, 2019). Such shifts in policy are partly owed to the India and China’s inability in upholding a coherent foreign policy and reconciling competing interests of several domestic actors in the design and delivery of foreign policy, ranging from provincial players such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in India, or Yunnan in China, as well as political parties like the BJP. This highlights the domestic constraints in India and China which impact its international peacebuilding role.

Likewise, despite being able to impress with trade and investment opportunities, emergent powers. and their reputation of being ambivalent to issues of human rights, inclusion, and rule of law means that they are not trusted by political elites in Nepal and Myanmar to bestow international legtimacy. This leaves liberal peacebuilders as sole arbiters of liberal values, and international legitimacy. Relatedly, the fact that India and China are consumed with issues of cross-border stability in the immediate region, means it is rare that they are able to have the experience of[[28]](#footnote-28), or have the interest to, take the lead in the ‘peacebuilding’ regime.

## ***Avenues of Contestation***

In this ‘negotiated co-existence’, given the limited spaces of convergence, avenues of active contestation are nominal but emerge when emergent powers see peacebuilders as threats to their core economic and security interests. In such contestation, emergent powers have reigned over peacebuilders, and have even constrained the very scope and intensity of peacebuilding projects. Evidence from Nepal and Myanmar highlight how the presence of peacebuilders in the India-Nepal or Sino-Myanmar borderlands can be a sensitive issue that India and China contest. Similarly, threats to economic or business interests has been a critical issue in Myanmar, while India’s contesting of UNMIN centered on protecting the Nepal Army, who it saw as key to its own regional security. In such contestations, it is emergent powers who triumph in their regions: reduced US engagement owing to Chinese protestations, as well as the very scope and shape of the UNMIN testify this.

While ‘negotiated co-existence’ is conceptualised based on Indian and Chinese peacebuilding practices in the region, emergent power engagement in Africa also shares some of these features. Kuo’s articulation of the ‘Chinese peace’ paradigm discusses the centrality of stability, and infrastructure-led economic development in China’s engagement in peace and security related issues in Africa (Kuo 2020). An emphasis on social order, economic development, and indeed China’s aversion to ‘one-size fits all’ projects deployed by liberal peacebuilders in Africa has been noted by Alden and Large (2015). India’s engagement in fragile states outside the region is less discussed in the scholarship. This reflects India’s foreign policy practice, where its engagement is focused on its regional periphery (Sridharan, 2020). However, Mawdsley confirms how India has largely eschewed cooperating with Western states in the realm of development assistance, and has also shunned engagement with civil society organisations in Kenya (2010). Similarly, Taylor stresses how India’s approach has prioritised a ‘developmental’ approach, where it seeks to share lessons with Africa from its own development (Taylor, 2016).

# **Conclusion**

This article has offered a new argument to understand the interaction between emergent powers and liberal peacebuilding, a core regime of the liberal world order. Defined as ‘negotiated co-existence’, it outlines how emergent powers, in their engaging with projects of liberal peace in countries in their immediate neighborhood, neither accept or reject the tenets of the liberal world order, but rather have a limited interaction with it. In this co-existence, the two forms of international engagement in conflict-affected states operate in parallel, and in separate silos with limited arenas for convergence. This form of ‘negotiated co-existence’ is distinct from the ‘coexistence’ identified by De Graff and Van Apeldoorn, which sees the US as having to make some adjustments to integrate China (De Graaff and Van Apeldoorn 2018). In Myanmar, given its influence, China will need to adjust to sharing space with others, such as liberal peacebuilders. The article argues that when coexistence transcends to contestation in their regions of influence, it is emergent powers, and not liberal peacebuilders that dominate. So much so that this dominance is able not only to undercut the objectives and engagement of liberal peace projects but can also define and limit their very scope and intensity, as demonstrated by the case of the UNMIN in Nepal, or the reduced engagement of the US in Myanmar.

The article adds to the burgeoning body of work that examine the engagement of emergent powers in various regimes of the liberal world order. In other words, it brings the broader discussion on the future of the liberal world order, to the arena of global peace and security policies, and to the realm of liberal peacebuilding. In doing so, this article points to the centrality of the agency of the conflict-affected states, who mediate such interactions. Conflict-affected states and their domestic political constituencies are active actors who seek to manipulate international engagement in their favor.

This form of ‘negotiated co-existence’ can provide a new framework to study the engagement of other emergent powers in their engagement in regional conflicts. This is particularly so, given that, despite their global rise, these emergent powers have concentrated their engagement in regional conflicts (Parlar Dal 2018). Similarly, Nepal and Myanmar provide interesting parallels with other conflict-affected states, as they deal increasingly with plural forms of international engagement.

Despite ‘negotiated co-existence’ being based on Indian and Chinese peacebuilding practices in the region, this conceptualisation has resonance outside the region. For one, if India and China are bound to ‘co-exist’ with Western states and institutions in their regional backyards, where they have much more leverage and core security related stakes, such ‘co-existence’ is likely be truer for countries outside their neighbourhood. Likewise, the ‘agency’ of conflict-affected states to foster ‘negotiated co-existence’ is likely to have parallels outside the region. Such agency has been noted already in the scholarship on ‘development assistance’, where countries receiving aid from multiple and competing sources, such as China and Western states, have played off and balanced various sources to carve out increased policy spaces for themselves (Mohan, 2015).

Core inferences from ‘negotiated co-existence’ as a framework also informs debate on the ‘crisis’ of liberal peacebuilding. Liberal peacebuilding today is seen to be challenged by alternative forms of conflict management, which are undercutting the attractiveness of peacebuilding, while also unleashing ‘illiberal peace’ and ‘authoritarian' forms of conflict management (Lewis et al. 2018; Smith, Waldorf, Venugopal, and McCarthy 2020). This article reveals that emergent powers can undercut, and constrain, the scope of engagement of liberal peacebuilding projects, in countries in their immediate neighborhood. Paradoxically, however, this article also finds that the alternative forms of conflict management, from countries like India and China, are facilitating an uncontested space for liberal peacebuilders, given that domestic elites in countries like Nepal and Myanmar turn to liberal peacebuilders to balance the entrenched nature of Indian and Chinese engagement. This, in turn, might mean a moment for liberal peacebuilders to reflect, and re-strategize liberal peace, rather than lamenting its perceived crisis.

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1. Interview with multiple civil society representatives, Kathmandu, Nepal, August 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Interview with a key peace negotiator, Kathmandu, Nepal, August 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The US initially designated the Maoist a terrorist group and had openly cited their apprehension of dialogue with the Maoist, but later accorded legitimacy to the Maoists. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Interview with researcher specialising on Nepal, New Delhi, India, October 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The book, in five volumes, archives all the documents used in conduct of formal India- Nepal relations between 1947- June 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Interview with Editor-in-Chief, 10 August 2017, Kathmandu [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Interview with former ambassador to Nepal (2), New Delhi, India, October 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Denmark, European Union, Finland, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, UK and the US. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Interview with a former Minister, Kathmandu, Nepal, September 2017. Also noted by Wagle (2016) on his assessment of aid from India and China in Nepal (Wagle 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Interview with scholar with expertise on Nepal, New Delhi, India, October 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Interview with academic focusing on South Asia, New Delhi, India, October 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Interview with Editor- in-Chief of a major newspaper, Kathmandu, Nepal, August 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Interview with a senior mediator, Yangon, Myanmar, November 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Interviews with representatives of different peacebuilding agencies, Yangon, Myanmar, July 2017, and November 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Interview with senior mediator, Yangon, Myanmar, November 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Interview with peacebuilding funder; Interview with Head of a Peacebuilding Consortium, Yangon, Myanmar, both July 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Interview with peacebuilding funder, Yangon, Myanmar, July 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Interview with Member of Parliament, Yangon, Myanmar, November 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Interview with senior mediator, Yangon, Myanmar, November 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Interview, Sichuan, January, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Interview with the representative of a key peacebuilding organization, Yangon, Myanmar, July 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Interview with Chinese academic with expertise on Myanmar, Chengdu, China, December 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Interviews in Kathmandu, Nepal, August-September 2017, and Yangon, Myanmar, July 2017, November 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Inferences from interviews in Nepal and Myanmar, 2017-2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Christine Bell, “Peace Settlements and Human Rights: A Post-Cold War Circular History,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 9, no. 3 (2017): 358–378 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Interviews with foreign policy researchers, and diplomats, New Delhi, India, October 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Interview with Chinese academic specializing on fragile states, Chengdu, China, December 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Apart from being demonstrated by the events on the ground in both Nepal and Myanmar, this was categorically highlighted in two interviews in China. Participants spoke of China’s absence of experience in security governance in conflict-affected states. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)