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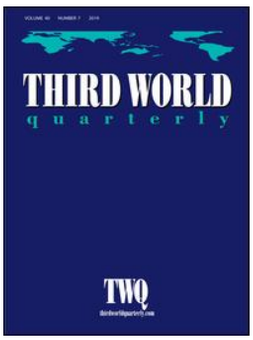

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The political economy of Norwegian peacemaking in Myanmar's peace process

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ABSTRACT

Norway is widely accepted as a global leader in peacemaking, due to its lengthy track record of involvement in complex peace processes. Its predilection for peacemaking is usually interpreted as a form of 'status-seeking' by a smaller state, aimed at enhancing Norway's influence and reputation in the international system. However, this perception offers a limited view and obscures other motivations that drive Norway to peacemaking. Aimed at addressing this gap, this paper dissects Norwegian peacemaking efforts in Myanmar between 2011 and 2019. The paper utilises a critical political economy lens to uncover the deeper motivations underpinning Norwegian peacemaking, drawing on new interview fieldwork with diverse stakeholders in Myanmar's peace process. The paper finds that material interests, including the desire to access new markets in the Global South, have played a significant role in influencing Norwegian peacemaking, highlighting the instrumental potential of 'status-seeking' in foreign policy. Concerningly, this strategy has served the interests of dominant power groups in Myanmar, contributing to the subordination of minority actors, thus compromising their engagement and revealing an image of Norway that belies constructivist perceptions of its status as a moral or humanitarian 'great power'.

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Introduction

Norway has developed a formidable track record in peacemaking since the end of the Cold War, contributing to perceptions of it being a humanitarian or morally minded power. Its policy of involvement in peace processes places it amongst an elite crop of smaller and middle powers playing leading global roles, disproportionate to their sizes, in tackling multilateral issues. These states challenge neo-realist assumptions of such states as 'mere followers of the great powers' (Behringer 2005, 306). While recent constructivist scholarship has encapsulated this phenomenon of small-state peacemaking as a form of 'status-seeking' (Neumann and de Carvalho 2014) or 'norm entrepreneurship' (Ingebritsen 2002), minimal scrutiny has been placed on Norway's peacemaking in practice, with the literature steeped in idealistic language that paints Norway simply as a 'good international citizen'. From a

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practical as well as a foreign policy perspective, this is problematic, obscuring or downplaying other national interests and motivations underlying the actions and behaviour of states.

Aimed at offering a more critical interpretation of Norway's peacemaking, this paper examines Norwegian involvement over the lifespan of Myanmar's peace process, between 2011 and 2019. Drawing on over 80 semi-structured interviews with diverse stakeholders in the peace process, conducted over several years but particularly during 2018, this paper utilises a political economy approach to examine the material interests entangled with Norwegian peacemaking in Myanmar. Using this approach, the paper finds that Norway's peacemaking is not merely teleological but also instrumental, affording Norway access to markets of conflict-affected states in the Global South for its own capital interests. However, this paper finds that in doing so, Norway perpetuates the interests of dominant power groups in Myanmar, bringing into question aspects of its impartial peacemaking reputation, and its actual contribution to complex peace processes.

The rest of this paper is organised into five main sections. The first provides a brief overview of Myanmar's peace process, locating Norway's support in the broader landscape while highlighting its image as an unobtrusive, neutral actor. Extending this, the second section reviews the literature on Norwegian peacemaking, elaborating upon status-seeking as a key concept, before offering political economy as a more critical lens. The third section provides details on our methodology, before a fourth explores the interview data on Norwegian peacemaking in Myanmar in light of the literature, using a political economy approach to uncover more obscured motivations. The concluding section offers some implications based on these findings for contemporary understandings of Norwegian peacemaking, questioning the common assumptions of constructivist scholarship, and signposting areas for potential further research.

Norway and Myanmar's peace process

Myanmar's peace process is extraordinarily complex. After seven decades of civil war, 21 ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) are now engaged in political dialogue with both the Myanmar government and the military, together with myriad political parties and civil society groups (Burma News International 2016). The process was initiated by the Thein Sein-led Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government in 2011, and underwent a slew of changes after the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) government was elected in 2015. Under Thein Sein's government, eight EAOs signed an official Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) to great fanfare in October 2015, in the presence of a large number of international witnesses (ISDP 2015). Since then, however, despite two more EAOs signing, progress has been decidedly slow and the peace-conflict situation in Myanmar has deteriorated rather than improved, particularly in northern Shan and Rakhine states. The Rakhine conflict has been especially devastating, with heavy fighting between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army (AA) resulting in more than 230,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Tint Zaw Tun 2020). Because of this, the AA in March 2020 was designated a terrorist organisation by the Myanmar government (Mathieson 2020) and excluded from the fourth Union Peace Conference (also known as the 21st Century Panglong) that August. Similarly, fighting has continued with other non-signatories, such as the Ta'ang National

Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in northern Shan state, with little scope for dialogue or engagement.

The AA's exclusion from formal talks prompted other non-signatories belonging to the Northern Alliance, and to the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), to decline an invitation to the fourth Union Peace Conference. Recent informal discussions with the AA (November 2020), with a cessation in armed conflict and the removal of their status as a terrorist organisation, suggests a potentially new pathway (Tint Zaw Tun 2020). However, troublingly, Myanmar's government has faced similar hurdles with NCA signatories in eastern and south-eastern Myanmar. The Karen National Union (KNU) and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), two of the largest signatory groups, temporarily withdrew from formal peace talks in late 2018 due to accusations that agreed arrangements were not being implemented by the government side (Jagan 2020). The KNU have since engaged in further fighting with the Myanmar military in the Karen hills, further reflecting the high levels of dissonance among the government, military and EAOs. Other groups, such as the Kayah National Progressive Party (KNPP), have simply refused to participate in the formal dialogue process.

Myanmar's peace process has thus remained precarious throughout, inhibited further by the lack of an official third-party mediator and the very recent coup. The involvement of foreign powers has long been a thorny issue. EAOs along the Chinese border have long received tacit support from China, complicating its relationship with the Myanmar government. During the signing of the NCA, for example, these 'China-aligned' EAOs expressed concern over the presence of international witnesses from the US, the United Nations (UN), Japan and EU member states (ISDP 2015, 6). Besides China, Myanmar's government and military have deliberately limited international actors' roles to solely providing technical and funding support (South 2018), further diminished by the Aung San Suu Kyi-led government since 2016.

In this complicated environment, Norway's involvement in Myanmar has been noteworthy, especially under the Thein Sein government. Despite the government's emphasis on a nationally led peace process, Norway was swiftly called upon by Thein Sein to coordinate international support when the process commenced in 2011 (MPSI 2014). The logic behind approaching Norway stemmed from Norway's global reputation as a peacemaker. Since the end of the Cold War, Norway has accrued an impressive track record in peacemaking, participating in numerous peace processes globally, including Sudan, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Israel–Palestine, Guatemala and Mali (Kelleher 2006). Furthermore, Norway was perceived as an unthreatening presence, seen as a smaller power with minimal geostrategic interests in Myanmar compared to larger powers such as China and the US. Norway's history of engagement with Myanmar is also rather positive, having supported Myanmar's democracy movement, awarding Aung San Suu Kyi the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, and providing a voice for political exiles operating the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) out of Oslo.

Perceptions of Norway as a peacemaking power originate from its initial, landmark efforts in brokering the Oslo accords in 1993, as part of the Israel–Palestine peace process. Despite the eventual failure of these accords, Norway continues to be viewed as the world's leading peacemaker, contributing to its favourable early entry into Myanmar's peace process. However, other motivations underpinning Norwegian peacemaking remain murky, and reasons for its involvement in Myanmar are not necessarily fully apparent. While its history of engagement with the democracy movement in Myanmar may offer a plausible reason,

the geostrategic value of its involvement in a fragile peace process remains similarly ambiguous.

Norwegian peacemaking as status-seeking

Understanding Norway's proclivity for peacemaking necessitates an examination of its broader foreign policy culture through the prism of international relations theory. Existing scholarship on Norway's foreign policy and its peacemaking is largely based within a constructivist paradigm, characterised by small states being preoccupied with status-seeking. Challenging neo-realist assumptions of smaller and middle powers as 'mere followers of the great powers' (Behringer 2005, 306) struggling to survive in an anarchic system, constructivists instead view smaller states as positional units competing for status in a hierarchical system. Because smaller states are forced to rely on their ideational resources or 'soft power' (Nye 1990) to compensate for their hard-power deficiencies, they are left with few options to expand their value in the international sphere (Chong 2010; Neumann and de Carvalho 2014). This behaviour manifests itself through various forms of 'norm entrepreneurship' (Ingebritsen 2002), including mediating peace processes (Østerud 2005; Wivel 2016). Through this prism, Norway's peacemaking is emblematic of status-seeking (Leira 2014), giving Norway the opportunity to consolidate a 'niche' (Cooper 1997) for itself in global affairs and, through that, to enhance its international reputation (Gigleux 2016; Kelleher 2006).

Being recognised as a good or moral power allows smaller states the opportunity to access positions of influence within international institutions. As Nye (1990) has identified, influence is a key element driving soft-power diplomacy, and Norway has regularly held disproportionate sway in multilateral bodies, such as the UN (Wohlforth et al. 2018), based on its peacemaking credentials. Engaging deeply in such institutions has afforded Norway the ability to mitigate the asymmetrical nature of power in the international system and contend with the major powers without causing tension (Björkdahl 2007).

The constructivist literature does not suggest this behaviour is unique to Norway. It must be considered in the context of other smaller powers, including other Nordic states, as well as Switzerland and Canada, all similarly prevalent in multilateral institutions and global peace efforts, regularly promoting the cause of states in the Global South (Brommesson 2018; Hyde-Price 2018). The Nordic states, in particular, are peaceful and prosperous, with limited colonial histories, and despite Norway and Denmark's ongoing North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) memberships, are perceived as neutral and thus naturally suited to peacemaking (Moolakkattu 2005). Canada and Switzerland are similarly perceived as non-intrusive powers spared from colonial baggage, with significant track records in peacemaking and peacekeeping. Through this perspective, the promotion of peace is presented as a niche carved out by a set of smaller, liberal powers that have sought to build and leverage their status to gain access to the highest echelons of international institutions.

Norway is, nonetheless, exceptional amongst even these states, for its status as *the* global peacemaker, due to its reputation after brokering the Oslo accords in 1993 between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) (Wohlforth et al. 2018). By mediating the 'mother of all conflicts' (Wohlforth et al. 2018, 535), Norway swiftly propelled itself to the 'top division of international peacemakers' (Waage 2013, 35). Subsequently, Norway was able to secure its status as the world's 'foremost peacemaker' (de Carvalho and Lie 2014, 60). Even though it has long been the host nation of the Nobel Peace Prize, a key status marker

of peace (Leira 2014), Norway's success with the Oslo accords has been more influential in determining its consistent acceptance in peace processes (Moolakkattu 2005). Being recognised as the leading global peacemaker, or a 'better' power amongst a crop of 'good' powers, is beneficial for Norway, allowing it to extract social and psychological utility from its status (Wohlforth et al. 2018, 542). Conversely, if other powers surpass Norway in the realm of peacemaking, it risks diminishing the unique value of Norway's status, implying that status is relational rather than absolute (de Carvalho and Lie 2014). Using this perspective, it is understandable why Norway has deliberately labelled itself as a 'humanitarian great power' over the past two decades (Wohlforth et al. 2018).

There is also a smaller literature examining some troubling deficiencies associated with Norwegian peacemaking, foreshadowed in the Oslo accords. While it is widely agreed that the Oslo accords were a bold exercise in peacemaking from a small international player, the accords ultimately failed to materialise into a comprehensive, formal peace treaty. A key reason for this, Waage (2013) argues, is that the process leading up to the Oslo accords was highly asymmetrical. Due to its small size and its limited, self-defined role as a facilitator, the success of the Oslo accords required Norway to acquiesce to the demands of the more powerful Israeli government, resulting in an agreement that ultimately helped legitimate the stronger party's control over disputed territories (Waage 2013).

Similar issues have been highlighted in Sri Lanka's peace process, where Norway was often accused of exhibiting a bias towards the Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE) (Höglund and Svensson 2009). Although technically the weaker party, the LTTE was militarily strong, having won several key battles by the time Norway arrived and commenced negotiations. Because of this dynamic, any harsh criticism of the LTTE risked curtailing the peace process, leaving Norway in a difficult position that ultimately resulted in criticism of its role (Höglund and Svensson 2008). It is worth noting, likewise, that several well-intentioned attempts by the UN to broker peace have similarly led to the privileging of either incumbent regimes or stronger parties. UN interventions in Mozambique, Angola and Cambodia are key examples illustrating this point. In the case of Norway, though, accusations of bias bring into question common perceptions of its status as an impartial peacemaker (Moolakkattu 2005), and are perhaps why criticism for its role in Sri Lanka has been so strong.

Norway's peacemaking reputation, however, has not suffered overall. Within this literature, Norway's peacemaking continues to be framed as a form of status-seeking, with minimal scrutiny applied to specific Norwegian mediation efforts. Moreover, most literature on Norway provides little insight into the utility of continued status-seeking for its foreign policy. If Norway has long established its status as the world's leading peacemaker, on account of the Oslo accords, what compels Norway to be consistently involved in complex and risky peace processes such as Myanmar's? For constructivists, status is perceived as a relational good that requires consistent reinforcement (Wohlforth et al. 2018). However, inherent to this assumption is that status is sought for its reputational or soft-power value, devoid of any further instrumental value that may yield other tangible rewards (de Carvalho and Lie 2014). This perspective is born out of idealistic conceptions of smaller and middle powers as good international citizens (Patience 2014), offering limited scope to scrutinise specific Norwegian peacemaking efforts, and consequently obscuring the motivations that drive its peacemaking. As the data later reveals, material interests have played an important role in determining Norway's peace support. For this reason, more critical theoretical perspectives are sorely required.

Political economy lenses on Norwegian peacemaking

An alternative and significantly more critical literature adopts a political economy lens on Norwegian peacemaking. As political economists argue, international relations scholarship displays a tendency to overlook the economic dimensions of statecraft, despite how inextricably linked political and economic forces are internationally (Gilpin and Gilpin 2001). Exploring status-seeking and Norwegian peacemaking using a political economy approach offers a potential avenue to consider the instrumental value of 'status-seeking' by Norway.

Some political economists draw a parallel between economic and security concerns, reasoning that economic prosperity coexists with political stability (Ripsman and Lobell 2016, 2). Influenced by neoliberal ideas, they see economic interdependence consolidated through liberalisation as a clear pathway for conflict-affected states to participate in the global economy, leading them away from civil conflict (Gartzke 2007, 17). Primarily aimed at states in the Global South, this 'liberal peace' paradigm reasons that peace emerges from increased globalisation, free trade and a subscription to liberal norms, with states such as Norway acting as agents tacitly propagating this agenda through their mediation of peace processes. The roots of this ideal are found in Kantian philosophy and can be traced to the end of the Cold War, with the victory of the West viewed as a triumph of liberalism, captured appositely in Fukuyama's end of history argument (Fukuyama 1992), encouraging the intensification of peace projects by liberal states since the Cold War's end.

Beyond the ideological dimension, however, peacemaking states in the Global North are also seen to be driven by a desire to access untapped markets in the Global South and further their own capital investments, under a sort of 'capitalist peace' doctrine (Weede 2005, 34). Pursuing this strategy also supports the continuation of the existing international order, which liberals accept as the most successful peace architecture (Richmond 2020). Through this 'capitalist peace' prism, it would be entirely consistent for Norway to concomitantly promote this neoliberal ideal through peacemaking and pursue capital expansion in the Global South (Bandarage 2011, 233).

More critical political economists, however, argue that doing so is effectively a covert strategy for the Global North to perpetuate their interests and consolidate their hegemony (Pugh 2005; Richmond 2020). States in the Global North, having dictated the international system for the past two centuries, are essentially employing tools through which to prolong their dominance, with this strategy characterising contemporary North–South interactions, with interventionist peacemaking states being legitimised by being seen as a benign 'international community' (Hughes 2003). Half a century ago, Galtung (1971, 92) identified this sort of behaviour as economic imperialism, a form of structural violence, allowing states in the Global North to control markets in the Global South for continued exploitation. Through this, pre-existing hegemonic discourses are merely reproduced under the guise of an emancipatory model, for conflict-affected states in the Global South. The economic subordination of these states is further entrenched in the international system, and competition between competing economic blocs and countries located in the North is intensified. Contrary to the liberal view, Galtung argued that economic interdependence, rather than producing an equitable form of peace based on mutual trust, exhibits and facilitates a form of structural violence (Galtung 1971). This critique is still valid, and widely argued (Selby 2008, 19). Thus, neoliberal narratives surrounding globalisation and economic liberalisation problematise

constructivist interpretations of Norwegian peacemaking. Numerous scholars and studies suggest Norway has promulgated this existing orthodoxy through its peacemaking, including its wider agenda of economic liberalisation, hiding motives of economic expansionism under perceptions of neutrality and morality.

A fundamental flaw with the 'capitalist peace' lens, as Bandarage (2011, 232) has highlighted, is the assumption that corporate bodies and the state are disparate entities. In Norway's case this is especially dubious given its social democratic framework, where the state plays a significant role in driving corporate interests, and politico-business elites also have considerable capacity to mould political processes to suit their own interests (Jones 2014, 146). By way of example, the Norwegian company Statoil Hydro (now known as Equinor) has dealings in 40 countries, is 67% state owned, and is part of Norway's broader activism in oil and gas exploration in countries in the Global South (Bandarage 2011, 232). During Sri Lanka's peace process, Norwegian companies expressed an avid interest in seeking investment opportunities in that country, illustrating how Norway, because of its commercial interests, has often held an untenable dual role as peace facilitator and economic investor (Bandarage 2011). Further to this, Norway continues to be one of the largest arms exporters to the Global South and faced accusations of providing the LTTE with arms (Bandarage 2011), contrasting with perceptions of Norway's moral authority. These examples also indicate an intriguing discrepancy between Norway's domestic and foreign policies: promoting privatisation abroad while domestically practicing strong government participation in the local economy; and engaging in both peacemaking and state-connected economic investment concomitantly.

A political economy lens suggests Norway's peacemaking sits at the nexus of the country's political and economic national interests, with complex mixed motives obscured by the dominant status-seeking framework that allows Norway to be characterised as no more than a good international citizen. Norway's peacemaking is supported heartily by its wealth and institutional structure, with 2.27% of the Norwegian government's budget dedicated to its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Seitz 2020). The political economy angle implies that Norwegian peacemaking carries instrumental value, derived from dominant capitalist interests tied to the state (Pugh 2005, 38). Considered in the wider context of small-state foreign policy behaviour, Norway, limited in its foreign policy options, finds developing a favourable reputation offers an attractive option that can facilitate its global, political and economic interests (Chong 2010). As critical scholars argue, though, this contributes to the subordination of states in the Global South. Bandarage (2011) notes that, despite over 20 years of Norwegian peacemaking, these efforts have not contributed to the redistribution of global wealth, the alleviation of poverty, or lasting peace outcomes in most cases. On the contrary, Norway's peacemaking has favoured groups in dominant power positions at the time, to secure outcomes that advance their status more than long-term outcomes, as the examples of the Oslo accords and Sri Lanka's peace process illustrate.

Methodology

Having mapped out two competing understandings of Norwegian peacemaking in the literature, and surveyed the Myanmar peace process, the remainder of this paper examines Norway's efforts in Myanmar through over 80 informant interviews. The interviews represent a diverse range of stakeholders in Myanmar's peace process, including senior advisors, military

officials, embassy staff, development practitioners, EAO representatives, non-governmental organisation (NGO) actors, civil society, UN officials, independent consultants, academics and journalists. Interviews were conducted over several years, the majority during 2018. Access to these information-rich informants was obtained through personal and professional contacts, with the second author in particular possessing longstanding connections to Myanmar, alongside snowball referrals from informants recommending close contacts also involved in the peace process. Selection was criterion-based, and as such it was important informants were involved, at some level, with the peace process – or at the very least had been closely involved with key elites in Myanmar's peace process. Beneficially, the snowball approach was able to mitigate issues associated with accessing elites in a sensitive space. Moreover, snowball referrals ensured contact could be made swiftly with informants through a reliable source until a point of saturation was achieved, evident through the repetition of key names and organisations.

This research was conducted under ethics approval from Deakin University. All informants were given full disclosure of the purpose of the research through a plain language statement prior to the interviews. Written, informed consent was obtained from all informants, who were granted the option to remain anonymous and/or withdraw consent at any stage. Unsurprisingly, given the nature of this research, the majority (but not all) of the informants opted for anonymity.

In turning to the data, the next section considers two key questions. First, which of the two literatures fits better – meaning, is Norwegian peacemaking primarily teleological, or is it indeed instrumental as the political economy literature suggests, aimed at safeguarding or furthering Norway's status as the world's foremost peacemaker (de Carvalho and Lie 2014)? Second, if Norway's peacemaking is instrumental, then what implications does this possess for constructivist conceptions of Norway's peacemaking status, and, more broadly, what is the utility of status-seeking for smaller states such as Norway in the Global North?

Norwegian peacemaking in Myanmar's peace process

All stakeholders in the peace process who were interviewed expressed an understanding that Thein Sein's government requested Norway's assistance due to its reputation and perceived wealth of skill in supporting peace processes (see also MPSI 2014, 5). Informants widely agreed that Norway brought with it a 'culture' of peace visible in its foreign policy behaviour. Through these perspectives, stakeholders clearly confirmed that Norway's coveted reputation as a peacemaker allowed it a smooth entry into the peace process, immediately propelling it to a privileged position in Myanmar's peace-donor landscape.

Beyond its status as a global peacemaker, Norway's longstanding support and engagement with Myanmar, particularly during the military years, was cited as an additional reason for its swift entry into the peace process. However, in this regard, Norway was also criticised by a minority of stakeholders, for sharply reducing its support for the democracy movement and reorienting this behind Thein Sein's government, which – despite its commitment to reform – was effectively a military proxy. A former Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC) leader recalled how this placed Norway in a precarious light:

> Norway has been portrayed as controversial, in a sense because Norway wanted to support the reform in Myanmar and support U Aung Min and the peace process. But that support can also be portrayed as supporting the military. Because Norway had been a good friend to the opposition camp, they had given full support to the DVB and then came a policy shift to directly support U Aung Min. When U Aung Min made the first visit to Norway, they coincided that visit with the announcement of the lifting of sanctions.[1]

By reducing support for democracy groups and exiles outside of Myanmar, and instead directing resources towards assisting the USDP-led government, Norway provided early indications of a pragmatic approach to the peace process, but once again supporting incumbent power. Presumably, Norway acted to secure a positive reputation in Myanmar with the dominant political forces, as without government support Norway could have little involvement. Thus, the Myanmar government's praise for Norway's early funding, at a time when such funding was sorely required, was important for Norway. The MPC, for example, which effectively served as a government secretariat, strongly supported this Norwegian assistance, and became pivotal in progressing the peace process in its early phases. During this period Norway also provided funding to the Joint Monitoring Ceasefire Committee (JMC, via the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)), the main government body ensuring compliance with the NCA. Significantly, many stakeholders considered Norway's support for the JMC to have been risky, with the JMC facing capacity issues. Inadvertently, this appears to have reinforced perceptions amongst stakeholders of Norway's penchant for bold and creative peacemaking, encouraged further by Norway's maintenance of informal backchannels in the peace process.

The change of government when the NLD took power in 2016 brought sweeping changes to Myanmar's peace architecture, including the dismantling of the MPC. This was replaced by the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC), a mechanism that has since proven to be ineffective compared to its predecessor. Nonetheless, despite the NRPC's greater disinclination towards international involvement, Norway continued its previous support, including aid to the JMC. Norway pragmatically adjusted to the political developments in Myanmar, ensuring it remained in a favourable position with the key powers in the peace process. Norway's reorientation from supporting activists to supporting Thein Sein is best explained in terms of capitalising on its status as a global peacemaker, likely motivated to further exude moral power. However, the approach in Myanmar to date appears more pragmatic than moralistic.

Apart from its support for government mechanisms, Norway has coordinated international donor engagement, providing funding for various civil society groups and NGOs supporting the process. Similar to other international actors, though, Norway is restricted to offering technical and advisory assistance, rather than formal mediation. The Myanmar government has demonstrated considerable control over the extent and direction of Norwegian support, ensuring primary support is afforded to EAOs that are NCA signatories. A local Civil Society Organization (CSO)-based informant, for example, recalled an incident where the military-controlled Ministry of Home Affairs dispatched a letter to Norway requesting them not to continue support to CSOs based in a non-signatory area.[2] With administration shared between competing government and military power bases, conducting projects that are against the military's wishes is effectively untenable. In turn, this leaves Norway susceptible to criticism for abandoning support to non-signatories, when in fact this is an issue that is more symptomatic of the structure of Myanmar's peace process.

Balancing the political ramifications associated with being an external actor in Myanmar with its reputation for being an impartial peacemaker is challenging for Norway. Contending with the military's overwhelming role whilst also maintaining engagement with CSOs and ethnic actors leaves Norway vulnerable to accusations of bias. Norway's adoption of a pragmatic approach is thus logical. However, this also problematises the idealist perception of Norway as a neutral, moral peacemaker. A minority of stakeholders interviewed were strident in their criticism of Norway's peacemaking status, believing they have used their reputation to mask shortcomings and failures. A director of an International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO) outlined this view in some detail:

> They [Norway] are trying to create an identity as international mediators, so that draws them to places of conflict. It is more in terms of self-interest, in building their identity and demonstrating that they can play a constructive role in the world in terms of mediating processes. Unfortunately, playing that constructive role, because it gives you higher profile, is more about trying to be the mediator that helps strike a grand bargain, than it is about bringing sustainable, just peace to the country.[3]

As this perspective argues, securing a favourable position with the government suggests Norway is perhaps more concerned with profile than just with outcomes, in a competitive donor environment. Stokke (2012) argues Norway has demonstrated the same approach in other contexts, pursuing quick tangible gains in the form of ceasefires or agreements, often to the benefit of stronger parties in peace processes. Strikingly, several informants cited Norway's troubles in Sri Lanka as emblematic of the limitations associated with Norwegian peacemaking in Myanmar, echoing criticism of a self-interested approach by Norway (Höglund and Svensson 2009) that belies notions of its status as a neutral, smaller power with minimal interests (Moolakkattu 2005). Through this prism, then, Norway's willingness to adjust to the Myanmar governments' approaches is more problematic than it initially seems.

Examination of the Norwegian-led Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI) extends these concerns. Set up by the Norwegian ambassador in 2012 at the request of both the Myanmar government and leaders of key EAOs such as the KNU and the New Mon State Party (NMSP), the MPSI was created with the stated intention of testing the viability of the ceasefires and the overall peace process. Drawing on the experience of numerous international consultants (many of whom were interviewed for this research) and led by Charles Petrie, a non-Norwegian former UN resident coordinator in Myanmar (2003–2007), the MPSI created opportunities for dialogue between EAOs, political parties, CSOs and communities, concomitantly opening up humanitarian space. The MPSI's Kyauk Kyi Pilot project, for example, resulted in the MPSI providing support packages to IDP communities in KNU areas, while also facilitating an unprecedented level of engagement among the Myanmar government, the military, the KNU and the affected communities (MPSI 2014). The MPSI, however, did not last long and its eventual disbandment brought to the fore problems in Norway's engagement.

Firstly, the MPSI was quickly restricted by Norway's own domestic politics, with a new incoming Norwegian government in 2013 less inclined to support initiatives set up by the previous government.[4] By 2015, with a less receptive NLD on track for a landslide victory, Norway lost the will and closed MPSI. In the interim, however, this limited the capacity of the MPSI consultants and decision makers.

More concerningly, MPSI informants reported they were constrained by Norwegian fears their work was becoming 'too political'. Charles Petrie, the former head of the MPSI, explained in detail how the MPSI came to its premature end:

> We were asked to help build confidence in the peace, and so we did it through testing individual clauses of the ceasefire, inviting groups to tell us which clause they wanted us to look at, and through that it became clear the issue was not the credibility of the ceasefires, it was actually the implementation of the ceasefires and the next phase. Having tested the credibility of the document, we thought what needed to be done was to build these mechanisms of interaction on the ground, between the military, the armed groups and the communities, and set up these interim governance structures while peace was going to be negotiated over the long term. So, we proposed the Norwegians start focusing on that, but for them it was too political, so they told us not to.[5]

Petrie, together with other MPSI informants, reported a reluctance by Norway to transgress the Myanmar government's boundaries in its nationally led peace process, and appear 'too political'. By complying or aligning with the Myanmar government's wishes, Norway avoided jeopardising its own position and interests, thereby reinforcing the government and military's position as the main drivers of the peace process, despite being a key disputant in the process (South 2018). Concerningly, the site of the MPSI's Kyau Kyi pilot project has since become the centre of a recent outbreak of fighting between the Tatmadaw and KNU 3 and 5 Brigades (Petrie and South 2021). Furthermore, there is disturbing evidence Norway sought material benefits from its peace support in Myanmar, leaving questions over whether Norway's economic interests have influenced its peacemaking, including the decision to eventually close MPSI.

While informants widely acknowledged Norway's peacemaking status, many also expressed concerns over its conflict of interest between commercial interests and peace engagement. In Myanmar's case, this comprised burgeoning interests from Norway in telecommunications, hydropower mega projects, drilling and mining, primarily in south-east Myanmar, the main ceasefire areas where most of Norway's peace support is concentrated. As a former MPSI member and research analyst conveyed, the role of Norway's former ambassador to Myanmar epitomised this tension:

> Norway has economic interests here and they have been very smart. Telenor, Statoil, they are all here. These are all state-owned enterprises […] the ambassador who set up MPSI and engaged this government not only on peace but economics; she resigned from her diplomatic post and she joined Telenor. So, yes you have the peace agenda but at the same time you have huge economic interest, and then comes the question: how can you leverage?[6]

> Essentially economic interests are at play, Norway has been working on hydropower projects and the previous Norwegian ambassador later became the head of Telenor. […] Ultimately, it is a problem, intertwining commercial and political interests because badgering on about human rights and democracy then does not become feasible.[7]

The rapid growth of Telenor, a Norwegian state-owned multinational telecommunications company, exemplifies this. Awarded one of two 15-year contracts in 2013, the previous Norwegian ambassador then shifted to be the head of Telenor in 2014. By 2019 they operated the largest 4G network in Myanmar (Telenor 2019). Bearing a resemblance to its

previous efforts in Sri Lanka (Bandarage 2011), Norway has come to hold a dual role in Myanmar as both peace facilitator and major economic investor. In this context, then, Norway could be seen to be driven by neoliberal zeal from state-owned companies, viewing ceasefires and tangible gains from its peace support as a valuable product that it can trade upon to pave the way for its capital interests (Stokke 2012, 221). Perhaps Norway even sees these economic investments as a peace dividend, albeit prematurely, before political dialogue has produced an accord.

A more conciliatory interpretation, offered by a few informants, is that Norway has simply applied the multitude of skills it has built a reputation for, including in extractive industries and natural resource management, in addition to peace support. However, as other informants have queried, how can Norway be an impartial third-party actor, keeping the Myanmar government accountable, if it is fearful of harming its economic interests in the country? In the view of many informants, Norway's business interests appear to have increasingly taken precedence over its peace support, contributing to fears of appearing 'too political'. Mirroring Norway's eventual failure with the Oslo accords, which ultimately legitimated and consolidated the stronger party's grip over disputed territories (Waage 2013), complying or aligning with the Myanmar government's wishes has reinforced the state's position. Norway's economic conflicts of interest have almost certainly contributed to this adverse outcome.

A minority of informants avoided criticism of Norway's economic interests. Their reasoning stemmed from a view that, given Myanmar is an emerging market, Norway's economic interests are not inappropriate. Responding to this, however, a Western embassy-based informant highlighted the issue of scale, rather than the presence of economic activities *per se*. Norway having clear business interests is fine, and this diplomat highlighted Norwegian companies are doing some really interesting work with the KNU, in particular, around hydro projects. Development is needed in ceasefire and conflict areas, and the fact that Norway has worked in collaboration with the KNU can be interpreted as a positive step towards supporting post-conflict zones. However, as this informant argued, where the scale of support is disproportionately large, it undermines its position as a peace actor. After all, this was the basis upon which Norway first entered Myanmar.

Norwegian peacemaking: caught between peace and economics?

From the interviews, growing economic interests have significantly impacted on Norway's peace engagement in Myanmar. Constructivists have presciently signposted the value of status in reinforcing small states and their foreign policy, with Norway's status as a global peacemaker enabling it an early, swift entry into the peace process. As the MPSI case has illustrated, though, status – or more specifically 'status seeking' – is not merely teleological but also instrumental. Trading on its reputation as a 'humanitarian great power' (Waage 2013, 223), Norway established its position early in the peace process through the MPSI. However, its peace role emerged in conjunction with its growing capital interests in Myanmar, highlighting a troubling paradox in the Norwegian approach. Hastened by the changes in government in both Norway and Myanmar, the initiative was ultimately disbanded, though not without Norway having first established its interests in the process.

The 'capitalist peace' doctrine assumes that peace will naturally emerge from economic liberalisation, globalisation and broader development (Gartzke 2007; Weede 2005). As the critical perspective argues, though, it is important to consider which parties benefit most from

this approach. In Myanmar's case, Norway's 'capitalist peace' approach has accentuated the military and government's power to dictate the peace process. Recognising Norway's capital interests, Myanmar's government has realised that it can simultaneously win valuable investments from Norway whilst also determining the scope and direction of Norway's engagement in the peace process. Consequently, Norway has concentrated its engagement with ceasefire areas, implicitly promoting the government's ceasefire agenda, fundamentally affording the central government greater control over its periphery (see also Woods 2011). As critical political economists have often lamented, the neoliberal capitalist peace approach, instead of offering an emancipatory model, contributes to the entrenched subordination of disadvantaged actors (Selby 2008). Using Galtung's conception of 'economic imperialism' (Galtung 1971), Norway has contributed to both the perpetuation of existing hierarchies in the international system and the reproduction of asymmetrical power dynamics in Myanmar, further entrenching the military's pervasive control over its peripheral, ethnic territories. Considering as well that a peace agreement remains elusive, this approach is even more problematic, echoing wider criticism over the state of international engagement in the peace process (South 2018).

It is also worth considering, however, that Norway has, despite criticism, maintained an engaged profile with EAOs and remains well received by civil society. Indeed, this aligns with its peace and reconciliation policy, which stipulates that Norway engages with all stakeholders in conflict prevention efforts (Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2016). While this softens the argument that Norway has empowered the government's agenda, it is also worth considering that the government and military are perhaps aware of Norway's association with ceasefire groups and civil society, seeking to utilise this to its advantage. Thus, even if one argues that Norway has not sought to perpetuate the government's power, its investment in Telenor has inadvertently undermined or eclipsed the cause of the EAOs. From the perspective of Norway's peace role, this appears to be a tactical error, emphasising how its commercial interests have superseded its political involvement.

Rather than moral compulsion, as constructivists assume, the desire to *appear* a 'better' power or a 'good international citizen' seems to be a vital aspect that characterises Norway's engagement in Myanmar, and potentially worldwide. For this reason, Norway has maintained informal back channels that have become a hallmark of the Norwegian 'brand' of peacemaking since the Oslo accords (Bandarage 2011, 224; Waage 2013), and funded the JMC early in the peace process. This showcases the more proactive, risk-taking and imaginative side of Norway's peacemaking. However, in light of Norway's capital interests, accruing and demonstrating these minor instances of goodwill also serve an instrumental function. Without these instances of creative engagement, entering Myanmar with an economic instrument would arguably elicit far more stringent criticism from various sides.

Norway's engagement in Myanmar can be interpreted, more accurately, as a case of *status maintenance*, where the ideational and material dimensions sustain one another. Norway has already earned its peacemaking status and is maintaining this status through continued engagement in global peace processes, whilst now also pursuing other agendas. This is further assisted by the limited analyses and evaluations of Norwegian peacemaking, which tend to originate from Norwegian-sponsored sources, ensuring minimal criticism of Norway (Bandarage 2011). Fundamentally, 'status', as a relational good, becomes transformed into a product, which Norway can trade upon to leverage its economic interests, demonstrating the instrumental purpose of status and thus the importance of maintaining status for Norway. This belies

constructivist perceptions of its status as a moral or humanitarian 'great power'. Unfortunately, this has also significantly undermined the value of Norwegian peacemaking in Myanmar.

Scope remains to engage in a wider, comparative analysis, drawing upon the political economy approach, to explore other instances of Norwegian peacemaking in multiple contexts. To some extent, this shortfall has been addressed by drawing on Norway's efforts in Sri Lanka and the Israel–Palestine process, but nonetheless, scope remains to delve further. Moreover, from the perspective of literature on small states and status-seeking, other forms of political economy are likely to emerge in small-state foreign policy, with the role of states in the Global South as activists a relatively underexplored phenomenon. Pursuing these areas possesses the potential to build upon the findings from this study of Norwegian peacemaking.

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Notes

1. Interview with an ex-MPC member, Yangon, 23 February 2018.
2. Interview with CSO-based informant, Yangon, 6 March 2018.
3. Interview with an INGO director, Yangon, 21 March 2018.
4. Interview with Dr Alan Smith, independent analyst and former MPSI member, Skype, 24 April 2018.
5. Interview with Mr Charles Petrie, former leader of the MPSI, Yangon, 12 March 2018.
6. Interview with Mr Tim Schroeder, Ethnic Peace and Resources Project, Yangon, 23 February 2018.
7. Interview with Myanmar-based research analyst, Yangon, 3 April 2018.

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