DHARMA DIPLOMACY: BUDDHISM
IN INDIA AND CHINA

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Monograph

Dharma Diplomacy: Buddhism in India and China

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Abstract

Buddhism is the world’s fourth-largest religion, with over 520 million followers world-wide. The Buddhist religion and philosophy developed from the teachings of the Buddha (born and known as Siddhārtha Gautama), a teacher who lived between the mid-6th and 4th centuries, BCE. In Sanskrit, Buddha translates to ‘awakened one’. Buddhism is believed to have originated in North east India, spreading from there to many regions in Southeast Asia such as China, Japan and Sri Lanka. Buddhism has always been one of the most prevalent religions in Asia, as well as around the world, and has played a central role in the spiritual and cultural life in many parts of the continent.

Buddhism has made its presence and popularity felt in several locations. However this religion has not remained static. It has long been a source of attraction for travelers and tourists. Both India and China have developed many tourist spots over the years in order to draw the attention of travelers looking for Buddhist pilgrimage and historical tour options. In addition, the growth of Tibetan diaspora in India has enhanced interest in the religion in India. This was after the arrival of the 14th Dalai Lama in 1959, along with the settlement of over 85,000 Tibetan refugees at Dharamsala (Himachal Pradesh), Bylakuppe (Karnataka), etc. China, although possessing fewer historical links to Buddhism than India, is a major player in cultivating the Buddhist essence to attract tourists and followers from around the world. Interestingly, China’s Buddhist tourism circuit is reportedly being developed with a green economic policy, by ensuring coal reliance is reduced especially in Tibet. Beijing is also focusing on upgrading infrastructure, marketing, hotels, services and translation facilities in order to cater to the needs of foreign tourists who visit in interest of Buddhism.

Aside from cultural and social interests, India and China also hold considerable leverage vis-à-vis Buddhism. As the county of origin for this religion and the current location of the exiled Dalai Lama, India sparks perhaps the most interest for a traveler seeking to explore Buddhist tourism. Travelers and tourists have more freedom to seek permission to meet him in Dharamsala.
whereas travel is restricted in Tibet. Although China is investing far more in creating an attractive Buddhist circuit, the extent to which foreign tourists are convinced of Beijing’s efforts remains to be seen. On the other hand, Chinese locals appear to have more faith in their government’s initiatives. Another factor that negatively influences China’s Buddhist circuit is the dispute between the Tibetan government in exile and China about the legitimate holder of the Panchen Lama title (a spiritual and religious leadership position in both Tibet and its Buddhism). Neither the Chinese nor the Tibetan exile governments recognize each other’s selection of the Panchen Lama. Most Buddhist followers do not view the issue from the Chinese government’s stance because of the latter’s questionable moves done to bolster Beijing’s bearings in the dispute.

Ultimately, Buddhism is of essence for both the countries. In India, the home and birthplace of Buddhism, the religion is viewed by leaders and civil society members, as a way of not only strengthening cultural and economic ties with various Southeast Asian countries, but also as a means of fostering connections and preserving the religious and cultural practices of Tibetan Buddhist refugees in India. In contrast, China’s increasing claims that Buddhism is a Chinese concept by releasing propaganda that it is an “ancient Chinese religion” is being furthered by building temples and promoting tourist trails, not only within the country but also in Southeast Asia. Preserving domestic stability, diffusing hostility in Tibet and acquiring access to influential Buddhist organizations seem to be China’s goals at present.

In fact, Buddhism’s influence and reach extends beyond the borders of India and China and has been an intensifying factor for Asian bonding and connectivity. Buddhism is embedded into several Southeast Asian countries’ nationalistic policies and has served as a unifying force in countries like Myanmar and Thailand. Buddhism has already gained prominence in India’s diplomacy for fostering deeper engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries as part of the ‘Look East’ and ’Act East’ policy. The Buddhist conferences hosted by India at Nalanda have invited monks and dignitaries from Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam. China has also attempted to host Buddhist gatherings in the form of
World Buddhist Forums (WBF) in 2009, 2012 and 2015 to convey to neighboring countries that Chinese communist authorities approve of Buddhism.

Given the common goals and desires of both the Indian and Chinese governments in using Buddhism to enhance their economies and improve cultural and political ties with other countries, there is potential to result in far-reaching consequences that could impact India-China ties and Southeast Asian countries.

In light of the dynamics observed above, this monograph explores answers to the following questions:

1. What are China’s intentions behind its policies, decisions and propaganda about Buddhism?

2. What are the contours of initiatives undertaken by India and China with respect to Buddhist tourism?

3. How does India and China’s Buddhist diplomacy shape relations with Southeast Asia?

4. What are the potential sources of friction in using Buddhism as a soft-power enhancing measure (eg. China’s claims on Buddhism as an ancient Chinese religion as well as their hostility towards Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama) between the countries? Is there scope for cooperation between the countries while promoting Buddhist tourism?
Introduction

Dynamics of Buddhism

Buddhism is known as a dharmic religion. Although there is no single word translation for dharma in the English language, in Buddhism, Dharma (in Sanskrit) or Dhamma (in Pali, another ancient Indian language) means “cosmic law and order” and is applied to the teachings of the Buddha. This religion encompassed a vast variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices which have resulted in many interpreted and evolved philosophies. Scholars generally recognize two major existing branches of Buddhism: Theravada which means ‘The School of Elders’ in Pali and Mahayana which means ‘The Great Vehicle’ in Sanskrit. Theravada Buddhism has a widespread following in Sri Lanka and by the end of the 14th century, it was established in Myanmar (then Burma), Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. On the other hand, Mahayana Buddhism was thought to have originated in India in the 1st Century CE, and became largely popular in China and Japan. Mahayana Buddhism also spread to parts of mainland Sumatra and Java (islands in Indonesia) and Central Asia. Tibetan Buddhism preserves Vajrayana teachings attributed to Mahayana Buddhism and is practiced mostly in the Himalayan regions, in countries such as Mongolia, Nepal, and in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), China.

During its first century of existence, Buddhism spread from its place of origin in Magadha throughout much of northern India, including, but not limited to, the areas of Mathura and Ujjayani in the west. Although by the end of the 19th century, Buddhism was virtually extinct in India, since 1950, the number of Buddhists has increased significantly. A contributing factor in this increase was the flood of Buddhist refugees from Tibet following the Chinese invasion of the country in 1959. The centre of the Tibetan refugee community, both in India and around the world, was established in Dharamsala, but many Tibetan refugees settled in other places of the subcontinent as well. Another significant contributing factor was the induction of Sikkim, a region with a predominantly
Buddhist population, into the Republic of India in 1975. According to the national census conducted in 2011, 8.4 million Buddhists individuals make up 0.7% of India's population. Interestingly, India is ranked 9th in the world with its Buddhist individuals making up only 1.9% of the world’s Buddhist population, as stated by the Pew Research Center.¹

The story of Buddhism’s entry in China is a bit different. Buddhism most likely entered China gradually, first through Central Asia and later through the trade routes in Southeast Asia.² During the 5th and 6th centuries, Buddhist schools were established in China. The religion was a powerful and intellectual force in China; many believing it to be egalitarian and rational. Between 1966 and 1976, the Buddhist community was the victim of severe cultural repression and many temples and monasteries were destroyed. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government pursued a more tolerant policy, albeit with restrictions, towards religious expression. As of 2010, it is estimated that 244 million Buddhist individuals make up 18.2% of the country’s total population. China is home to 46.4% of the world’s Buddhists, making it the country with the largest Buddhist population in the world.

**India and China’s interest in Buddhism**

Even though Buddhism is the most cited example of a historical Indo-China relationship which has, over the years, provided scope for both friendship and rivalry, it is now more significant than ever. Both of these countries are proud of their long and rich histories and ancient civilizations, in which Buddhism is an overlapping factor. Thus, initiating the dialogue over this topic is relevant as China and India are trying to inculcate Buddhism in tourism efforts, in socio-cultural diplomacy and in soft-power enhancing measures.

To begin with, it is interesting to note that India’s interest in Buddhism has long been a focus of India’s tourism sector. The promotion of religious circuits has become a cornerstone of India’s tourism industry which aims to capture the attention of not only neighboring South Asian countries but also the West’s as well. Buddhism has provided a peaceful but resilient foundation to India’s century's old cultural links to countries in South, Southeast, and East Asia. Buddhism’s influence remains present in Indian art, culture, and architecture.
On the other hand, China’s quest for power and global domination has always veered in the political, military and economic territory. In recent times, China attempts to seek influence extend to the spiritual, cultural and religious realms as well. Buddhism appears to be one of China’s trump cards and they have been striving hard to extend their influence over Buddhist practices – whether it is through the tourist spots, the pilgrimages, the monasteries or the community gatherings.

Chapter 1: Determinants of China’s Policies on Buddhism

The fact being that China is the country with the largest Buddhist population in the world; it is understandable as to why the Chinese government has identified Buddhism as crucial in its geopolitical strategy viz. TAR, via public policy and diplomacy with other countries. This is clearly a contrast from China’s state government having declared the country as an atheist state. After the Communist Party of China (CPC) took over the nation’s governance in 1949, atheism was promoted throughout the country. In 2016, Xi Jinping publicly stated that members of the party must be “unyielding Marxist atheists”. For much of its early history, the government maintained that religious thought would disappear under Marxist thought. In fact, during the Cultural Revolution, many religious buildings and monuments were destroyed or used for secular purposes. A matter of concern for international observers came up when Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns were disrobed by orders of the CPC during this period.

A Slight Change in Direction

Since the 1970s, there was a shift in the method by which Buddhism was treated by Chinese authorities. This was due to the opening up of China’s economy by the then Paramount Leader of the country, Deng Xiaoping. During this reform period, the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) began allowing freedom of religion albeit with a number of restrictions. Article 36 of the Constitution specifies that “No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.” Since then, massive programs have
been introduced to rebuild and refurbish Buddhist and Taoist temples that were destroyed in the Cultural Revolution. These actions have clearly been carried out to with an aim of enhancing China’s image across the globe, as will be examined in detail subsequently.

In the present era, President Xi Jinping, unlike Mao Zedong, has embraced religious faith as part of his ‘Chinese Dream’ and the ‘Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)’. The nominally atheist ruling CPC has recognized that religion is a key component of Chinese history and is a powerful tool in domestic governance and international diplomacy. Contradictory to this belief which is projected by the CPC, China is a state known for the prosecution of its Uighur Muslims. More than one hundred thousand minority Uighur Muslims have been indefinitely detained in “re-education” camps in China’s northwest province, Xinjiang. These detention/internment camps aim to erase the detainees’ ‘Islamic beliefs’ through methods such as forcing them to eat pork and drink alcohol. Recent reports also show that the Chinese government is curbing other minorities in the country, such as Christians and Tibetans.

Given the facts about the CPC’s aversion to religion, the question arises on why the Chinese government is interested in Buddhism. There are numerous factors that come into play here. Firstly, a growing number of Chinese are rediscovering dormant Buddhist traditions – motivated by a desire to partake in volunteering and to find a spiritual anchor in the fast-paced society. The Tibetan sect of Buddhism is, in particular, attracting new converts. Though many are interested in the cultural aspects of the religion, several others view it as a lifestyle choice. Secondly, Buddhism is a very integral part of China’s cultural diplomacy. A diverse cultural diplomacy strategy helps project an international image, gain influence and shape bilateral relations. Buddhism can increase China’s influence in the region as well as project a harmonious image to religious neighbors with whom China seeks to increase its influence. Thirdly, President Xi Jinping has some personal links with Buddhism which may be an influence. His father wore a watch gifted by the Dalai Lama; his wife is practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism and his mother was buried with Tibetan Buddhist rites. All of these suggest China’s as well Jinping’s personal awareness
about not only the prevalence of Buddhism in China but also its positive contributions to Chinese society.

**Communist Propaganda**

President Xi Jinping has exerted several efforts to not only reassert control of Buddhism in China, but also further the religion in the country. The government’s new-found approach in this mix of faith and politics hints at a “re-imagining of the political-religious state that once ruled China”\(^9\). Essentially, China now finds itself in a position where it needs to balance its economic brawn with a new brand of universal appeal invoking a ‘peaceful identity’ in the midst of regional and international tensions. Xi Jinping has used Buddhism in delineating his public vision of China’s standing in the modern international society. At the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) headquarters in 2014, Xi was quoted saying “The Chinese people have enriched Buddhism in the light of Chinese culture and developed some special Buddhist thoughts. Moreover, they also helped Buddhism spread from China to Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia and beyond.”\(^10\)

It is ironic that, despite the importance given to Buddhism, Beijing applies a severe high-handedness in Tibet which been Chinese territory since 1951. According to the Human Rights Watch\(^11\), the Chinese authorities are imposing increasing amounts of administrative controls on the Larung Gar, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery. An eight-month expulsion and demolition program\(^12\) that ended in April 2017 reduced the number of residents to 5000 or so, but the takeover by officials from the Chinese government could have far more significant impacts. CPC cadres and officials are taking over management, finances, security, admissions and even controlling the curriculum in the monastery. There is also emphasis on increased security and controls on monks and nuns with rigid limits being placed on the number of them allowed to stay there.

This comes in the heels of the Party’s claims that religious beliefs of the country’s citizens are ‘constitutionally protected’. It is difficult for Buddhists, however, to protect their own rights because there is no religious law in China,
only a regulation on religious affairs, which was released in 2004. Sheng Hui, the vice president of the Buddhist Association of China hoped that the government could formulate a new religious law as “some powerful people take away the temples’ tangible and intangible assets.”

The Buddhist Association of China (BCA) was founded in 1953 but disbanded during the Cultural Revolution. It was reopened during the years of rebuilding. The BCA shares jurisdiction in China with the State Administration for Religious Affairs. The Association is known for developing bridges that link the practicing Buddhists to the Chinese government and also mobilizing them to comply with national laws. At all levels, the BCA is under and administrative subdivision of the government. This suggests that the ‘religious freedom’ the government boasts about is not only exaggerated but also contradicting because the government imposes many of its own controls and restrictions.

The future of Buddhism in China remains uncertain and puzzling. It remains to be seen whether or not effective communications can be fostered between officials and followers of Buddhism without the onus of expectations from the government. Nevertheless, for now China is investing heavily in promoting the country’s image to its citizens and to people of other countries. This soft power mechanism involves the enhancement of Buddhist tourism in China.

Chapter 2: Dynamics of Buddhist Tourism in China and India

Buddhist Tourism Initiatives in China

Over the last few decades, local authorities in China have been encouraging projects undertaken for both the development and restoration of Buddhist temples, in order to boost the local tourism industry and add to the economic growth. The Jing’an Temple in Shanghai is a case in point. The temple had earlier been converted into a plastic factory during the Cultural Revolution. Later, the municipal governments enabled the rebuilding the Jing’an temple which was renovated by 2010. Several plans were also made for developing a commercial district in the vicinity, organizing fests and establishing a pedestrian street alongside the temple.
While both India and China are investing in promotion of Buddhist tourism, what China seems to be doing differently is banking on a massive green makeover – focusing on ecotourism and green initiatives while shifting away from reliance on coal and other non-renewable sources of energy. Because ecotourism can improve the natural environment and contribute to economic prosperity, local governments in China focus on ecotourism when developing their economic policies, and most of the local residents support this focus. Chinese ecotourism has been prevalent in historic sites and landmarks considered holy by local Buddhists. For example, The Leshan Giant Buddha (the earliest known Buddha statue in China) and the Emei mountain are located in areas wherein ecotourism has been, recently, embraced by the Chinese market and public. The Yungang grottoes, situated in another province that underwent a ‘green makeover’, home to towering Buddhas carved into sandstone, were key sites and considered to be central in plans to attract foreign tourists.

In East China, atop the Tiantai Mountains, the Guoqing temple is considered the birthplace of China’s first Buddhist sect. On May 19, 2017, it become one of the only tourist sites in the country to offer a free entry to visiting tourists – a policy intended to boost local tourism and the regional economy. However, residents state that local businesses are yet to accrue benefits while tourists complained about a lack of facilities.

At this juncture, it is worthwhile to examine why China has chosen to accelerate Buddhism-based tourism efforts. Aside from appealing to its sizeable Buddhist population, most other motivations seem to point to China’s economic interests. Primarily, the commercialization of historic Buddhist monuments and landmarks is the key to advancing the economic performance of the region. Due to the cultural and historical significance of sites such as the Yunggang Grottoes, some of China’s Buddhist locales are among the most visited travel destinations. Hence, there is great potential in contributing to local economic development, creating jobs and stimulating economic activity. At the rapid rate of development that China is currently enjoying, it could greatly benefit from financial surpluses which will in turn help bolster its political legitimacy, in the global international system.
Second, Buddhism has been more deeply rooted in China (having emerged and disseminated around two thousand years ago) than other religions like Christianity, Islam or even Hinduism. The doctrines and teachings of Buddhism in the country bear a strong “Chineseness”, from a cultural point of view. Additionally, Buddhism is a very convenient resource given that several of China’s neighbours are influenced by Buddhism. Finally, it is worth noting that China may have realized the need for softening its stance on religion due to international scrutiny, especially regarding the detention of Uyghur Muslims. Time will tell what China plans to do to bolster its image as a religion-friendly country via a diplomatic approach.

**Buddhist Tourism Initiatives of India**

While India appears to have several more Buddhist projects in the pipeline than China, most of them seem to come to a halt during the implementation phase. The aftermath of some projects have not been collected or released for public viewing. In 2014, a combined initiative by the Government of India, the Ministry of Tourism, the State Governments of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, several private sector businesses, Buddhist monasteries and the International Finance Corporation (IFC; an arm of the World Bank) launched a strategy for integrated tourism development of the Buddhist circuit in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The strategy has been laid out until the end of 2018. Anand Kumar, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Tourism, has said, “Total cost of the project will be around Rs 450 lakh, out of which IFC will be contributing Rs 180 lakh (40 per cent), Rs 225 lakh (50 per cent) coming from the Ministry of Tourism, and Rs 22.5 lakh (5 per cent) each from the State Governments of UP and Bihar.”

Although the results have not been well-documented, high levels of investments in these popular Buddhist sites are welcome and beneficial.

Additionally, the Indian government will be expanding the Buddhist Circuit from its originally envisaged 7 sites to 21 other states. The state tourism departments are tapping into previously under-discovered regions around the country, which are not well explored in terms of Buddhism. These include a new Himalayan circuit of Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh (Jammu and Kashmir), the Andhra Pradesh Buddhist circuit (Sanctioned Cost (INR Lakhs): 5233.91, Date of Sanction: 25-09-2017), the Madhya Pradesh Buddhist...
circuit (Sanctioned Cost (INR Lakhs): 7494.08, Date of Sanction: 18-07-2016), and a Maharashtra Buddhist circuit where the popular Ajanta-Ellora caves are located.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shown a keen interest in developing a Buddhist circuit in Gujarat (Sanctioned Cost (INR Lakhs): 3599.11, Date of Sanction: 28-06-2017). Modi visited Buddhist monasteries during his earlier trips to Japan, South Korea and Mongolia, gifted the countries a sapling of the sacred Bodhi tree. In fact, the Buddha has long figured prominently in India’s international engagement. In his comradery to and with leaders from Nepal to Japan and China to Myanmar, Modi has projected Buddhism as one of India’s bridges to these nations.

**Case-study: India’s Buddhism Diplomacy with Japan**

The Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation, MTDC, has signed a MoU with the Japanese Government to promote Buddhist destinations in the Indian state. The Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is providing funding for Ajanta Ellora Conservation and Tourism Development Project (AEDP). The corporation also plans to establish interpretation centers in Mansar, Nagpur and Nalasopara for providing information about the sites and their relevance to Buddhism.

The governments of India and Japan have established a partnership between the culturally rich cities of Varanasi and Kyoto. The Japanese government provides financial assistance under Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECD) and Japan Bank of International Cooperation (JBIC). Kyoto is expected to play a vital role in Varanasi’s transformation into a Smart Heritage City. The partnership is expected to focus on urban development in addition to tourism, arts, culture, heritage preservation and Buddhist education. “We have put in quite a bit of money already, but we are also in touch with the World Bank as well as the Japanese government to see if we could have some big money coming in so that we can create the necessary infrastructure here,” said K.J Alphons, tourism minister of India. Although the talks are still in the preliminary stages, K.J Alphons is keen to take up money upon the finance
ministry’s approval. He remarks that a few billion dollars are required to create world-class infrastructure.\textsuperscript{19, 20, 21}

**Benefits of Buddhist Tourism for India**

Widely considered to be a sunrise sector in India, tourism is seen as a potential game changer in driving large scale employment in several sections of the society. India’s vast cultural and religious hub can be developed to promote the Buddhist Circuit. The popularity of Buddhist tourism has generally been on the rise since the Action Plan for the Development of the Buddhist Circuit was launched in 1986.

The Action Plan proposed four main outcomes\textsuperscript{21}:

1) Identify exact locations at which accommodation and mid-way facilities are required to be put up with central assistance;

2) Identify sites where stupas can be constructed such as Piparhawa (Uttar Pradesh), Vaishali (Bihar) and Amravati (Andhra Pradesh) that will contain relics of the Buddha;

3) Identify segments of national/state highways which need improvement and repairs to make them adequate for use by foreign and national tourist coaches and private cars and;

4) Suggest a phasing of activities so that viable sectors can be commissioned without delay

Since the launch of the action plan, many other national and international groups have taken interest in India’s Buddhist circuits. One such group is the International Finance Corporation under the World Bank Group. According to a joint-report\textsuperscript{22} published by the Ministry of Tourism and the International Finance Corporation, the Buddhist Circuit is an important pilgrimage destination for over 450 million practicing Buddhists. The sited dotted along the historical route are all over 2500 years old and are among the most significant
and revered for all Buddhists. Most of the destinations are situated in Uttar Pradesh including Nalanda (a center of Buddhist learning and teaching), Sarnath (where Buddha delivered his first sermon) and Kushinagar (where Buddha passed away). Bodhgaya (where Buddha attained enlightenment) and Vaishali (where Buddha delivered his last sermon) in Bihar are also important places.

Figure 1: Buddhist Tourism Circuit in North India
Image courtesy: ifc.org

Various tourism investment projects by the states and the Government of India have fragmented efforts to develop the popular, mainstream Buddhist Circuit as a tourism product. While monks and devotees frequent the sites along this circuit, for pilgrimage, the experience that most tourists face lacks interpretation and is not satisfactory in terms of quality. In order to stimulate demand, improve the quality of service and promote longer stays, it is essential to have efforts that go beyond just trips to monuments and temples. Destinations along this circuit should enable and encourage learning and
stimulate curiosity. This will require planning and skills development, larger access to markets and wider access to finance.\textsuperscript{23}

In the study conducted by IFC and the Ministry of Tourism, the Government of India identified several major weakness spots in the Buddhist Circuit. For example, there appears to be a low standard of tourist-related services and products; limited or unsatisfactory quality restaurants, amenities and facilities such as multi-lingual guides; limited opportunities to shop for authentic local crafts and goods etc. Another significant weakness in these tourist sites is that there are very limited tourist activities beyond Buddhist pilgrimages. Museums and guided tours display many relics and artifacts but often offer limited interpretation or historical information on the rich heritage behind them. The Buddhist community has also had qualms with the fact that there is limited involvement and engagement by the global community in site operations.

The rationale behind investing in the Buddhist Circuit is to improve the experience of visiting these sites for travelers and tourists. The vast economic potential of the tourism sector also means that sustainable and inclusive economic growth can be achieved via job creation, income-generation opportunities and a growing tax base. Small business owners and micro enterprises can also contribute to the generation of revenue in these tourist sites by selling their local products or essential services. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, two of India's most populous and least developed states could benefit from Buddhist tourism and enjoy vital growth. It is also anticipated that more than 10,000 jobs will be created with the help from the World Bank, improving livelihoods for several low-income communities in these highly populated regions of North India.\textsuperscript{23}

The benefits of improving Buddhist sites and travel locations are numerous. Suman Billa, the Joint Secretary for the Indian Ministry of Tourism was quoted saying, "We are receiving a minuscule number of Buddhist tourists, just 0.005 percent of the total Buddhist population in the world, despite being a key pilgrimage destination for millions of practicing Buddhists around the world. The idea is, even if we are able to remove one zero and make it 0.05 percent, that'll still bring in billions of dollars into our tourism economy."\textsuperscript{24} Aside from
financial and economic gains, tapping into the Buddhist circuit will possibly bring in many other advantages:

1. The possibility of tapping into unexplored and underdeveloped markets and segments, such as service-oriented jobs
2. Developing unique local shopping opportunities for arts, handicrafts, food, clothing and produce
3. Developing local supply chains and income-generating opportunities
4. Mainstreaming the Buddhist Circuit as an extension to the northern and north-east Indian tourist circuit
5. Increased investment opportunities in hotels, restaurant, tour operating agencies, travel agencies and local businesses
6. Potential to provide and improve rail and road access to previously inaccessible spots, allowing the local transport units to flourish

Tourism in India has always been popular, particularly among Western nations, but has also had its downfalls in terms of quality. Sincerely focusing on Buddhist trails as a starting point can draw crowds, generate revenue and overall improve the quality of life for the millions of people living in the vicinity. What is indeed novel about these inter-Asian partnerships and bilateral aid agreements to strengthen the Buddhist circuit, is that they exemplify an appreciable and concentrated effort from the state towards a more outward looking demonstration of tourism through strategic investment in religion. Non-Buddhist travel has been very limited and concentrated, with a majority of tourists heading towards the widely-visited North Indian destinations (Delhi, Agra and Jaipur). Developing this unique circuit can attract attention of prospective visitors, ranging from backpackers to lucrative spenders, especially those who come from countries where Buddhism is not very widely practiced.

Not only top officials and government employees seem to have this view point, but also Tibetan Buddhists too. For instance, Tsewang Dorji, a Ph.D. Research Scholar from the University of Madras in Politics and International Relations (a Buddhist from Tibet as well), is of opinion that the Dalai Lama has done more to promote Buddhism in India than the Indian government has. He says
the Indian government has to give support to institutes in India such as the many monasteries in South India. Additionally, India can give more funds and protection to Buddhist initiatives and focus on the Nalanda University because it is a legacy of India. “This is the right time to do it because China has already started. India has the resources to do it because the Dalai Lama is here and many monasteries are here, in this country. India just has to push and facilitate the one who is doing it in order to be a champion of soft power,” he claimed.25

Moreover, Buddhist tourism is one of the ways in which India can project its Buddhist origins and show the world its multicultural diversity as well as improve its soft-power standing on the international stage.

Chapter 3: Buddhist Connections with Southeast Asia

With the rising economic influence and inter-dependence in various parts of Asia, there is a consequent rising investment by Asian countries, in mass transportation through connected roads and routes, infrastructure, amenities and facilities. Buddhism is both a cultural and religious linking factor that comes into play with respect to this region’s countries. This is clearly evident with the rising number of Buddhist monasteries, temples and guest lodges designed to facilitate international, cross-border cultural flows, within the Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN). There have also been multiple conferences and events bringing together all of these countries in order to discuss and share ideas about Buddhism in the 21st century context and its usefulness in the grand scheme of promoting the religion.

Examples of Buddhist activity in Southeast Asia

In Thailand, a secular government’s ministry supervises and funds Buddhist temples and monks. Backed by a certain amount of government oversight, Buddhist institutions are granted special benefits by the governments. In Bhutan, the government provides annual subsidies to Buddhist monasteries and shrines. The Bhutan, Tourism Corporation Limited (BTLC) was privatized in 1991 and now works towards protecting cultural heritage and environment. In Borobudur, Indonesia, the government organized the ‘Borobudur International
10k’, a festival combining tourism and sports in the form of competitions between international and national athletes.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Figure 2: Paro Taktsang Buddhist Site, Bhutan  
Source: pixabay}

Ultimately, Buddhism has proven to be a very important factor for providing Asia a cultural coherence. With 97% of the world’s Buddhist population residing in Asia, the religion has managed to integrate a myriad of regions and societies. Democracy and Buddhism have proven to be compatible, especially in the Southeast Asian scene, a reflection of how the diversity of Asian value systems have allowed certain Asian nations to develop and flourish without completely emulating secular Western systems.

P Stobdan explains, in one of his articles\textsuperscript{36}, that the core ethics of Buddhism stress on the nature of interdependence and interconnectivity which has allowed numerous Asian societies to adapt to changes with time while reforming its political regimes. The evolution of Buddhism and the democratization of many Asian nations thus were accepted as mutually exclusive in nature. This argument especially holds true given that India is a secular democracy yet shares a high level of compatibility with the Buddhist
disposition in terms of their pluralistic approach to society and fundamental principle of right to liberty and equality.\textsuperscript{26}

Across the eastern border, in China, even if all cults and religious activities are under strict supervision, experts would like to believe that Chinese Buddhism and Taoism enjoy a relatively preferential treatment in comparison with religions deemed to foreign influence\textsuperscript{27}. Belief systems based on deeper Chinese roots are more compatible with Xi Jinping’s vision of the Chinese nation. For a Communist party that tolerates religion conditional to supervision and guidelines, it is curious to see the country’s commitment to strengthen social ties and legitimizing its position on the international stage, using Buddhism (The West has not embraced this concept of using religion to promote development or modernization in recent decades) and international socialization, whilst accepting economic and technological skills and other necessary modern requirements for development as deemed by Western schools of thought.\textsuperscript{26}

China

China’s focus with respect to promotion of Buddhism seems to be on bringing together Buddhists from around the world, under one common roof to discuss, ideate and share. The World Buddhist Forum (WBF) is the first major international religious conference to be held in China. Co-hosted by the China Religious Culture Communication Association and the Buddhist Association of China, the WBFs are hosted periodically once in every few years to convey to both Buddhist populations in China as well as neighboring countries, that Chinese Communist authority approve of Buddhism. The first Forum was held in Hangzhou and Zhejiang cities from April 13 to 16 in 2006. The first WBF was attended by over 1000 Buddhist monks and experts from 37 different countries, including India.\textsuperscript{28} Touted to be a success; the WBF projected China’s increasing interest as well as investment in Buddhism related endeavors.

The fifth iteration of the WBF was scheduled for October 28-30 2018, in the coastal city of Putian. A record number of over 1,000 Buddhists, scholars and representatives from 55 countries and regions attended the fifth World Buddhist Forum. This year’s forum focused on a wide range of topics, covering
“positive roles of religious people in economic and social development, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the building of a community with a shared future for mankind”. In addition, the main forum was accompanied by 10 sub-forums that will cover discussion about ‘Buddhism and marine silk road’ as well as ‘Buddhism and environmental protection’. The conference was projected as a success by Chinese media websites. The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres sent a congratulatory letter, as did Buddhist organizations from countries including Japan, the Republic of Korea, Canada, the United States, Russia, Cambodia and the Philippines. The careful selection of these topics of discussion seem to indicate that China would like for Buddhism to be front and center in a wide array of their other activities including the hyped BRI.

The objectives of the World Buddhist Forums seem to be apparent: to demonstrate to Southeast Asian countries and the rest of the world that China is in support of the domestic and global Buddhist community and protect/enhance China’s global leadership in Buddhism. Other motives possibly include enhancing the tacit recognition of the Chinese-selected Panchen Lama. Since the Dalai Lama fled Tibet and took refuge in India, the Chinese government in Beijing has not invited him to the World Buddhist Forums justifying their reasons by saying he is a “disruptive element”. Since the Chinese government regards him as a “separationist”, there is condemnation and rejection of Dalai Lama’s proclamations, including his selection of the subsequent Panchen Lama. Seeking to influence and be a part of the selection of high-ranking monks, the WBFs are also used as platforms to popularize and legitimize Gyaincain Norbu, China’s official selection. China is also keen on spreading its influence among the Tibetan Buddhists who mainly inhabit the Indo-Himalayan belt, whilst undermining the Dalai Lama.

Since 2007, China has also been trying to undercut the Dalai Lama’s influence in other countries, by persuading foreign leaders to neither invite nor receive him for diplomatic or cultural events. For instance, Mongolia’s ties with the Dalai Lama have sometimes complicated the country’s relations with China. In November 2016, Mongolia welcomed the Dalai Lama despite stern Chinese warnings not to do so. The Dalai Lama pointedly utilized the four-day visit to exercise his religious authority by approving and authenticating the identity of
the tenth incarnation of the third-highest ranking lama of Tibetan Buddhism, the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, who now resides in Mongolia.

China subsequently hoped that Mongolia would “scrupulously abide by its promise” not to invite the Dalai Lama again.\textsuperscript{30} Coming on the heels of this remark and a phone call from Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Tsend Munkh-Orgil, Mongolia’s foreign minister made claims that the government “feels sorry”\textsuperscript{31} for allowing the Dalai Lama to visit the country. He also made it clear that it is very unlikely that the Dalai Lama will be visiting again during the leadership of the current administration. A clear indication that China pressurized Mongolia over the contentious issue of the Dalai Lama, this move is another example demonstrating both China’s strong influence over its neighbours vis-à-vis Buddhism but also its strong desire to delegitimize the Dalai Lama.

In one sense, China’s reaction to the Dalai Lama’s visit and Mongolia’s subsequent apologetic reaction is predictable: Mongolia is a seeking a large loan from Beijing to deal with its financial problems and slowing economic growth. After China placed heavy economic sanctions of Mongolia in the form of tariffs, Mongolia was forced to comply with China’s coercive pressure. In the other sense, the move has elicited confusion because Mongolia has become a military partner to the United States, while distancing itself from China and Russia. One would wonder why Mongolia still fears China when it has the support of the US and when it is no longer as close to China as it was before. Mongolia has always been a traditionally Buddhist country – harboring ancient ties to both Tibetan Buddhism and the creation of the Dalai Lama post. The entire incident had reignited debates about China’s might in diplomatic capacity to sway, in particular, its smaller and weaker neighbours.\textsuperscript{31}

Nepal has been the prime location for ongoing efforts by the Chinese government to both oversee and influence the selection of Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders. After successfully blocking the Dalai Lama’s visit to Lumbini in Nepal, in 2012, Nepal’s then Culture Minister, Minendra Rijal, said the Dalai Lama might visit Lumbini sometime in the future after which the leadership of China should find ways to deal with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, which will be respectful of the Chinese people.\textsuperscript{32}
Other countries in Southeast Asia—including Myanmar and Vietnam—that have large Buddhist populations and ties to Buddhism, have not permitted a visit by the Dalai Lama.\textsuperscript{32} Vietnam, a strongly Buddhist nation, did however enable a meeting in May 2018 between entrepreneurs, artists, intellectuals and youth members from its delegation and the Dalai Lama, at his residence in Dharamsala.\textsuperscript{33} Vietnam has initiated efforts to improve relations with China’s other rivals such as Japan and India by consolidating bilateral engagements through the ASEAN. China and Vietnam have experienced a rift in their relations in recent years amid escalating territorial disputes over the South China Sea. Dispute both the countries being former close allies as well as communist friends, Vietnam has now expressed wishes to diversify its strategic engagements.\textsuperscript{34}

In spite of these dynamics at play, Vietnam remains careful of China’s sensitivities about the Dalai Lama. One can speculate that Vietnam would like to avoid any possible ramifications concerning the MoU signed in 2017 as the reason for the same. Furthermore, Vietnam supports the Belt and Road Initiative framework on the principles of mutual benefit and respect.\textsuperscript{35}

All of these instances clearly show us that China is very serious about not only having a firm grasp over the selection and approval of eminent Buddhist figures, but also that that it desires to control other countries’ attitudes towards the same.

\textbf{India}

India has been actively promoting Buddhist thought and culture in recent years as a soft power channel. The Global Buddhist Congregation (GBC), hosted in November 2011, in association with the Indian government, helped bring representatives of numerous Buddhist traditions and schools together. Marking it as one of the largest gatherings of Buddhist leaders, approximately 900 prominent figures in Buddhism attended and participated. As an outcome of the conference, the International Buddhist Confederation was established. The gathered heads of the Buddhist organizations concluded that there was a need for a centralized body to interpret issues concerning Buddhism, including the preservation of the traditions and practices of various sects. The GBC hosted in
India in 2011 impacted the WBF in 2012, leaving the latter a relatively muted affair.

In September 2015, the International Buddhist Confederation, the Vivekananda International Foundation, and the Tokyo Foundation organized and hosted a joint Buddhist and Hindu three-day conclave focusing on conflict avoidance and environment consciousness.

A similar affair was conducted in March 2017, when a three-day international Buddhist conference was held in Bihar, at the Rajgir International Convention Centre in Nalanda district. Entitled “The Relevance of Buddhism in 21st Century: Perspectives and Global Challenges”, the conference was organized by the Indian Union ministry of Culture and the Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, a deemed university. Over 350 scholars, academics, spiritual leaders and monks from 35 countries including Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Vietnam addressed different topics and issues pertaining to Buddhism. The Nalanda conference has improved India’s stance in the Buddhist community.36 “The revival of Nalanda University, the ancient seat of learning, has now become a showpiece project of India and epitomises age-old cultural and spiritual linkages between India and Southeast Asia region. India has signed pacts with several ASEAN and East Asian countries to make Nalanda University an international knowledge hub” says an article published on the Ministry of External Affairs Website.37
Most recently, the International Buddhist Conclave took place from 23rd-26th August 2018. The Conclave was organized by the Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with the State Governments of Maharashtra, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh at New Delhi and Ajanta (Maharashtra), followed by site visits for attending delegates to Rajgir, Nalanda and Bodhgaya (Bihar) and Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh). During the conclave, the Ministry launched its website landofbuddha.in and a new film showcasing the Buddhist sites in the country. These measures were taken in order to boost India’s image with respect to its developments on the Buddhist circuit and increase the online presence of this particular theme in the tourism circles. The event was attended by participants from countries having significant Buddhist populations including the ASEAN region and Japan. “The aim of the Conclave is to showcase and project the Buddhist Heritage in India and boost tourism to the Buddhist sites in the country and cultivate friendly ties with countries and communities interested in Buddhism... a very small percentage of them visit the Buddhist sites in India each year. So the potential of encouraging more tourists to visit the Buddhist destinations where Lord Buddha lived and preached is immense. The “ASEAN was the Guest of Honor during IBC, 2016 and Japan would be the ‘Partner Country for IBC-2018,” The official document stated.38

India has become aware of how essential Buddhism is with regards to its ties with other Buddhist practicing populations and more importantly, how Buddhism can be revitalized and used to its advantage in terms of cultural and geopolitical diplomacy. ‘Unity in Diversity’ has always been India’s tagline/motto so using Buddhism to bring to light the country’s long-dating history and bonds with the religion puts it on the global map as a crucial place for practitioners, scholars, researchers and even politicians.

Thus, it comes as no surprise to see that the Indian government has made Buddhism a crucial element of its bilateral diplomatic efforts, which have been particularly noticeable with Japan. Looking at the burgeoning relationship between Japan and India, from either the economic or cultural angle, both the
countries’ strategies and goals seem to be in alignment. As aspirants for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, India and Japan are currently benefitting from this mutual gain relationship. Buddhism adds glue, with thousands of Japanese tourists visiting Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India and Japan helping India promote Buddhist destinations. The Japanese government has also showed strong interest in the multinational effort to revive the Nalanda University in India – signs up until now seem to point towards Japan showing a genuine interest in cultural revival efforts, contrasting China’s apparent ulterior motives.

Buddhism is a culturally unifying factor, linking India to the rest of South and Southeast Asia – developing abiding and mutually beneficial relationships along the way. With the new ‘Look East, Act East’ being brought into fruition, cross-border trade and tourism exchanges are anticipated to grow at a swift pace. A press release from the Ministry of External Affairs stated that “India continues with stepped up efforts to forge closer partnership with concerned regional and multilateral organisation such as ASEAN, ARF, EAS, BIMSTEC, ACD, MCG and IORA. On the Civilizational front, Buddhist and Hindu links could be energized to develop new contacts and connectivity between people. On connectivity, special efforts are being made to develop a coherent strategy, particularly for linking ASEAN with our North East. Measures, including building transport infrastructure, encouraging airlines to enhance connectivity in the region, contacts between academic and cultural institutions are underway.”

India’s Buddhist heritage provides not only a strong economic tie-up, but also links these myriad cultures into a unified fabric of regional cooperation, providing opportunities for fostering cultural interaction, peace and solidarity. Taking into account that China’s ongoing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects will potentially increase competition from the point of tourism as well as from a macroeconomic perspective, it is essential that India focuses on its rich Buddhist tourist circuit.  

**Chapter 4: Buddhism as an Element of Soft-Power**

**Soft Power Advantages of Buddhism**
Joseph Nye coined the term ‘soft power’ to demonstrate “the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion”. A country’s soft power “rests primarily on three resources: its culture, its political values and its foreign policy.”

It also strongly depends upon a country’s reputation within the international community. Features of a country which are identified as a source of power include the spread of a national language, popular culture, media, tourism, religion and culture. India is frequently described as a model of soft power and many leaders around the world speak positively about the country’s soft power potential. India earns a lot of respect and attention in the international community for its soft power via foreign policy, exhibited particularly by Buddhism and cultural studies offered to visitors from around the world.

Weighing in on Buddhism from a soft power angle, Tsewang believes there is a contest between India and China for the stakeholder or Buddhism. He thinks that in today’s world, Buddhism is one of the most important indicators of soft power for these two neighbours.

Buddhism’s untapped potential and utility in foreign policy is derived largely from the aftermath of the Second World War, when Buddhism was revived in many countries – particularly in India. The resurrection of this faith had an international outlook to it and focused on extending beyond geographical boundaries. Given its long history with Buddhism, it is surprising in fact, that India did not market Buddhism as a soft power tool until Prime Minister Modi took office in 2014. Gestures such as presenting the Xian government a sapling of the holy Bodhi tree from Bodh Gaya signal strong religious ties and bolster soft power image. Strong emphasis has also been placed on record in saying that India’s Buddhist message is a cultural, not religious one.

Where India lacks in international engagement and hard power, it has often benefited from real and tangible ways from its soft power. Whether it is through building upon political and diplomatic efforts such as its Incredible India tourism campaign or International Yoga day recognition from the UN, India’s strategies for enhancing soft power are gradually growing. Surely, the fact that China is edging in on a religion that originated in India is worrying for
India and so PM Modi was quick to address Buddhism once he came into power, placing it at the center of his diplomacy initiatives with other Asian countries, citing Buddhism as an essential ‘amalgamation of cultural and faith-based diplomacy’. "Buddhism in Asia is one of our greatest assets, a definite element in our soft power. And being home to the Dalai Lama, who is the acknowledged leader of a large section of the Buddhist community, gives us a major advantage," said former Indian foreign secretary Krishnan Srinivasan. However, India does have plenty of weaknesses in this area with a lack of credible institutions or any prominent world-renowned Buddhist masters/leaders, aside from being home to the Dalai Lama.

Throughout the years, Tibetan Buddhism has become a fundamental venue through which the Dalai Lama and his associates have gained international sympathy and support for their political cause. The Dalai Lama’s cause and diplomacy has received support from the United States since the Cold War era. That India granted him refuge and took under its wing thousands of Tibetans has always been met with praise and positive regard from the international community.

Buddhism affects the moral legitimacy and continuing insecurity of China’s political control over Tibet. While the Chinese government would like to affirm the Tibetan issue as a matter of Chinese sovereignty, it still remains sensitive over foreign interference in Tibetan Buddhism affairs. This brings to light the instrumental adoption of Buddhism in Chinese foreign policy, diplomacy and soft-power building – perhaps instigated by worries over any weakening of its security grip over Tibet.

Further leverage the Dalai Lama has helped India gain is with respect to its eastern most borders. The McMahon Line, which was born out of the Shimla Agreement of 1914, demarcates the border between Tibet and India, and this line is recognized by India. For China, the Line is a colonial legacy that doesn’t hold water today. To recognize and acknowledge it would be against its claim to Tibet as an inalienable part of China. Hence, China’s claim over Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh (which is reality is an integral part of India’s sovereign territory) is an attempt by Beijing to reinforce its claim over Tibet. For India, it
was fortuitous to have had the Dalai Lama recognize the validity of the McMahon line back in 2008, stating that “Tawang is a part of India.”

The Dalai Lama’s influence and international leadership position as a spiritual guide and Nobel Peace Prize winner makes his statements extremely legitimate and strengthens India’s position in border talks with China. Even his most recent visit to Tawang in 2017, under the Indian patronage and support from the Central Government of India, seriously undermines China’s claims to Arunachal Pradesh.

When it comes to China’s possession and projection of cultural appeal, Tsewang is under the impression that China is only lacking soft power (they are strong militarily, culturally and economically) to become a superpower. “Moral power is soft power and this comes from Buddhism. Communists don’t believe in religion but in spite of that, they try to use Buddhism’s soft power because they want to serve national interests.”

Across India’s eastern border, there is a growing fear and anticipation in the international community that China will eventually be able to translate its economic brawn into spiritual weight. With China’s increasing interest in Buddhist organizations and conferences, it is building spiritual, religious and cultural links with other nations. Religious and cultural diplomacy such as these are helping the Chinese push its economic projects and convince other countries to lend their support in infrastructural projects (such as the BRI) in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar and elsewhere. China has drawn on Buddhism’s pacifist image to assure the world that the country’s rise as a global power is peaceful.

China’s deployment of Buddhist soft power has predominantly been through the “diplomatic use” of the Buddha’s tooth that has been preserved in China. This relic diplomacy soothed tensions between the countries as well as encouraged closer ties between the Lingguang temple in Beijing and the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon. In 1955, the tooth was sent for displaying purposes in Myanmar and later loaned to Taiwan along with a part of a finger bone. Dr. Jabin Jacob believes all of these tactics serve to keep the Dalai Lama in his place. China wants to ensure that they have a handle on, influence and lend legitimate intervention in this succession.
Today, 97% of the world’s Buddhist population lives in the Asian continent. The established transnational network and the role it plays in the lives of millions across the world, making Buddhism attractive to India and China and their respective foreign policy and diplomacy. With an inherent focus on non-coercive power, as a peaceful religion, Buddhism’s pan-Asian presence makes it ideal for soft power diplomacy. As in most other areas of political significance, India and China have found both scope for competition and cooperation in this realm.

**Potential for Friction**

India and China’s Buddhist diplomacy has a competitive element to it. India and China see each other as rivals for Buddhist leadership. China likes to portray Buddhism as its own ancient religion and stakes to claim leadership on the grounds that its revival efforts were far more impactful than those of India’s as evidenced by it being the home to the world’s largest Buddhist population. Countering this argument, India points out Buddhism’s origins and legacy plus the fact that it has provided refuge to Tibetan Buddhist refugees fleeing Chinese oppression.\(^{49}\)

Given the Chinese government’s inability to grant full religious freedom at home and its continuing hostility towards the Dalai Lama, China may always find it difficult to realise the full potential of Buddhist soft power. Having ended its neglect of Buddhist heritage, India is making good strides by investing in, preserving and protecting it.

Another realm of potential friction may be the Kathmandu factor. Nepal has always been a source of interest for China because Lumbini is considered to be the modern-day location for the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama. Nepal has traditionally followed pro-India and pro-Hindu policies concerning Buddhism. However, following the collapse of Nepal’s Hindu monarchy in 2008, Chinese officials have been ready to play the Buddha card in this new post-Hindu setting in Nepal. A Beijing-based organisation, the Asia Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (APECF), signed a framework agreement with the Nepalese government for the Lumbini Buddhist Special Cultural Zone in May 2011. Talk of infrastructure links to bring Buddhist tourism trails from China
into Nepal through an extension of the Qinghai–Lhasa railway line down to Lumbini has been a source of concern for India. In light of that event, a counterproposal was made by Narendra Modi in his official trip to Nepal in August 2014 for assistance for development of Janakpur, Baraha Chhetra, and Lumbini, including linking Lumbini with the Buddhist Circuit of India.\[50\]

The gravitation of Sri Lanka towards China has also created tensions between India and China, and was compounded during the ten-year presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa from 2005 to 2015, during which time Sri Lanka accepted Chinese infrastructure projects at Hambantota and Colombo. Sri Lanka has also lent firm support to China’s BRI (which India had grave reservations about), and granted docking facilities to Chinese submarines at Colombo in 2014. Modi stressed Buddhist links in his address to the Sri Lankan Parliament in 2015, promising, “We will bring our shared Buddhist heritage closer to you”. He also offered alms to Buddhist monks at the Mahabodhi Society in Colombo, an overtly religious act that that Xi would not be able to do.\[44\]

**Tibetan Angle**

Scholars and researchers, such as Jayadeva Ranade\[32\], are under the viewpoint that India’s soft power projection should be credited to the Tibetan refugee movement, more than India’s own efforts. The Dalai Lama’s immense soft power appeal has also contributed significantly to India’s own. Divides over Tibetan Buddhism are particularly deep in the ongoing disputed frontier between China and India. The presence of the Dalai Lama and the in-exile Tibetan government in Dharamsala has bolstered India’s image among the global Buddhist community. China’s negative regard to the Dalai Lama as “anti-Chinese” and someone who threatens Chinese sovereignty has been a source of contention between the two countries. Since 2007, China has been trying to undercut the Dalai Lama’s influence by pressuring foreign leaders not to officially receive the Dalai Lama. The Chinese government appears to not want to inflame internal tensions or replicate the situation with two Panchen Lamas while trying to persuade Tibetans to accept Gyaincain Norbu, China’s choice for the next Panchen Lama.
The Dalai Lama’s participation in the GBC 2011 was objected by the Chinese. Beijing even cancelled border talks in India scheduled around the same time, in lieu of India’s invitation of the Dalai Lama to the event. Similar events occurred in early 2017 as well. In March of that year, the Dalai Lama was invited to inaugurate and partake in the seminar on ‘Buddhism in the 21st Century’ at Nalanda. The Chinese state not only condemned the act but also urged India to respect China’s core concerns and avoid China-India relations from being further disrupted and undermined.44

The Chinese government has granted itself the power of approving the next Dalai Lama as per their 2007 State Administration for Religious Affairs regulations. The Chinese leadership has given itself similar such powers in appointing the Panchen Lama, in efforts to undermine the choices made by the
present Dalai Lama and further strengthen their control over Tibetan Buddhism.51

Another vital point of consideration is the 14th Dalai Lama’s reincarnation – an event not so far in the future that will almost certainly become an issue for not only ties between India and China but also other major Buddhist countries. The Chinese government continues to insist that a reincarnated 15th Dalai Lama must get its approval; the 14th Dalai Lama has made no promises or claims with certainty about the next reincarnation. In fact, he has even said that there may be no reincarnation. Foreseeably, if the 15th Dalai Lama is found in the United States, India, Mongolia, or Russia, he or she would certainly become a flashpoint between China and the other concerned countries.52

Despite all of these efforts, it is apparent that Tibetan Buddhists are not on the same page as China. It is evident that they will not be ready to accept a Chinese-appointed spiritual leader. Speaking about this issue, Tsewang recounted that China has already introduced so many programs and initiatives, especially for the reincarnation of the Lamas. “China has been nurturing and giving education to these young Tibetan boys. When they grow up, they will become the spiritual leaders and if they have very good connections and influence under their regimes, that regime has an easy way to influence the rest of the Buddhists. To control the population, you don’t need to bring in guns or tanks or military occupation. One Lama is okay to bring peace to the society. Tibetan people reject Chinese legitimacy because China has already occupied Tibet by force. So far, the Tibetan issue has not been resolved yet.”55

**Scope for Cooperation and Collaboration**

Buddhism is a religion known for its peaceful values and methods. Its practitioners certainly believe that Buddhism brings in a new opportunity for friendship and becoming allies. On this note, Kirthi Jayakumar, a practicing Buddhist who is pursuing a master’s degree from Coventry University, is of the opinion that Buddhism holds the promise for peace in the contemporary world. She says, “We are very fond of hatred and use anger as a weapon and in this day and age, hate capital is overtaking social or skill capital - and that's getting scary.” She is convinced that Buddhism allows one to introspect and incline
oneself to peace in a way that can sustain, rather than pay cosmetic lip service. Adopting a Buddhist outlook using tools of compassion and empathy can lead to using peaceful means to attend peaceful ends. She also remarks, “As a religion, Buddhism has much to offer for the socio-cultural path, As a foreign policy tool, Buddhism’s eightfold path is an interesting option: right though, action, speech, meditation, effort, belief, resolve and livelihood – if cultivated right, can bring about a revolutionary peace!”

With the same spirit, an anonymous post-graduate student studying history, who practices Buddhism, thinks that the Indian and Chinese governments can use compassion in diplomacy and human rights prioritization, and make policies that help people grow in order to promote Buddhism in the respective countries. Conversely, Kirthi Jayakumar is not of the opinion that it is Buddhist to promote Buddhism (in diplomacy or socio-cultural relations) because it is a non-capitalist religion.

It is quite possible that the superficial adoption of particular norms by governments for short-term tactical reasons, can lead to norms being internalised at a deeper, more genuine level, if they are continued by habit, regardless of motivations. This possibility can also be raised vis-à-vis China’s continuing deployment of Buddhism within its public diplomacy. Buddhism stresses on non-violent means of conflict resolution and if this is able to gradually pacify China, border disputes and tensions could reduce drastically in the future. Such a process would improve China–India relations.

Taking into consideration all of these factors and positions, for India to seek rivalry with China over Buddhism is unpragmatic. It would be better if India reached out to the increasing number of Buddhist followers and extended them a warm welcome, as PM Modi did when he reached out to Chinese Buddhists using Weibo, a microblogging site, on Buddha Jayanthi in 2015. This ongoing cultural transformation in India and China will undoubtedly impact the ties between both these Asian giants as well as other countries, at large.

Collaborating with China for reviving old Buddhist heritage sites such as monasteries and temples that were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, can help India strengthen its religious ties with its neighbor. In the past, India
and China have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in 2005 which stipulated that India would build a Buddhist temple in the complex of the White Horse Temple located in the Henan province. While the Chinese government allotted land for the construction, India provided the building materials and architectural design which was inspired by the Sanchi Stupa. Former President of India, Pratibha Patil, inaugurated the temple on May 27, 2010. S. Jaishankar, India’s Ambassador in China was quoted saying “There is a perception that India and China are distant in history with little to do with each other. This temple is a reminder that we are actually quite close.” The shrine will enhance people to people contacts between two countries and highlights the relationship between two countries in terms of cultural history.\textsuperscript{56}

Speaking of people-to-people contacts, Tsewang also perceives Buddhism to be playing a bridging role between India and China - especially in the Himalayan regions like Tawang, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, where disputes are prevalent. Buddhism can bring peace and resolve problems, through mutual understanding without the use of arms or force. In this context, Buddhism is a very powerful tool to peaceify all these sensitive areas, he posits.\textsuperscript{55}

India is also spearheading a multinational effort (including India, Japan, Singapore and China) to set up and international university at Nalanda in order to revive the ancient Buddhism. Although the idea was first proposed in the late 1990s, (a pan-Asian) momentum did not pick up until 2006. The Indian government set up a Nalanda Mentor Group (NMG) as an interim governing board. Furthermore, the Indian parliament passed a bill in August 2010 approving plans for reconstruction and committed USD 10 million for the project. China had also donated USD 1 million in 2006, for a Chinese Studies Library, ensuring that it will not forget its links with Buddhism. In addition to sending professors from the Beijing University to be a part of both the mentor and planning boards, China also agreed to digitize Buddhist manuscripts and provide funds for the Xuan Zang Memorial Hall in the university.\textsuperscript{57}

Overall, China’s growing influence in the continent and the world as a whole cannot be ignored on the international stage. Because of its proximity to China, India can play an active countervailing role to counter the increasing dominance projected by China. Strategically, this would be a beneficial move,
because of the Act East policy. India can simultaneously assert its presence in the region while also strengthening ties with ASEAN countries.

**Chapter 5: Conclusion**

“Buddhism was India’s ancient geopolitical tool that could still be employed to meet the challenges of the new millennium”\(^50\).

- P. Stobdan

In China, President Xi Jinping has begun to embrace and encourage religious faith as part of his foreign policy and recognized its vitality in domestic governance as well. In encouraging Buddhism in the country (albeit on the government’s terms), it is clear that China expects the followers to give their first allegiance to the CPC. Any kind of help or support to the Buddhist community comes with the condition of loyalty and evidently, the CPC has motives of self-interest while lending its support.

A diverse cultural diplomacy strategy can help China project a peaceful image to neighbors and influence them with their new-found mix of politics and religions. As China continues to spread propaganda that Buddhism is an ancient Chinese religion, Beijing also continues to wield influence over Buddhist politics in deciding who would be the next Panchen Lama and maybe even the next Dalai Lama, according to Chinese perceptions. Its Buddhist propaganda and promotion are important means for soothing domestic discontent and dissent while also attempting to maintain claims on territorial integrity and keeping its citizens in check with its ideals.

China has traditionally looked to its neighbours in the East Asian region as the most important countries to engage with in terms of its foreign policy. This is mostly because Southeast Asia is a region strongly influenced by China’s art, culture, religion and even languages. In addition to cultural ties, human ties have spread throughout visibly but not exclusively via business and employment. Overseas Chinese form an important part of the economic fabric of all these countries. Chinese security concerns and interests also stem largely from this region. Underneath all of these ties, the spread of Buddhism has provided and will continue to provide a unifying foundation. Buddhism is
surely a contributing means for China to continue to dominate this region politically, economically and culturally.

Meanwhile, India will also look to grow and plant sufficient buttresses in this region to strengthen ties and takeover more leadership responsibilities.

While there has been an acknowledgment on India’s vast potential for using Buddhism as geopolitical tool, in government talks and projects, there have been minimal efforts to truly capitalize on it. In India, Buddhism is used to energize religious traditions by enhancing the country’s cultural strength. Buddhism is also a way of strengthening its relationship with Tibet and Southeast Asian countries by preserving the religious and cultural practices of the Tibetan Buddhists who have sought refuge in India. This will help India increase its image as a secular country.

Most immediately, India needs to take effective steps to rebuild millennia-old tourist spots in Buddhist sites. By improving infrastructure and connectivity, India can not only provide lucrative employment to millions but also attract millions of tourists from all around the world.

The Modi government should move beyond mere tokenism and avoid half-hearted commitment towards sanctioned projects. With most of the policies and initiatives being just contained to rhetoric, the results have been lackluster and nothing to boast about. India has many points in its favor at the moment – abundance of pilgrimage sites, the presence and support of the Dalai Lama, international goodwill as well as good intentions. Revitalizing the Nalanda University project can encourage Buddhist studies and exploration. Introducing a Buddhist version of the Haj subsidy could be an effective measure to promote the Buddhist pilgrimage sites that are currently in development. The subsidy can provide discounts for air travel/train travel as well as cheaper accommodation. The Indian government and partnered businesses can reap the economic benefits while providing incentives for Buddhists to visit important sites celebrated by their religion.

Focusing on peaceful coexistence and cultural exchange between India, China and its neighbours can assist policymakers to reduce political incentives for antagonism or any kind of religious contempt. Both China and India’s ambition
to rise in international standing is helped by policymakers and influencers’ historical awareness and ability to utilize Buddhism effectively in all matters of diplomacy.

Additionally, Buddhism will continue to be an important element of soft power that both China and India are likely to use in the future, to evince bilateral cooperation with other powers in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly Southeast Asian countries. This can be achieved through the Buddhist conferences, the exchange of important Buddhist relics, the participation in developing the Nalanda University project and collaborating on the reconstruction of important Buddhist monuments. Overall, Buddhism’s role as a genuine bridge between China and India leaves something to be desired.

One shouldn’t forget that there are also some elements of regional competition between the two states, vis-à-vis Buddhist diplomacy. While India stands its ground against China’s demands regarding the Dalai Lama, the government continues to involve him closely in projects and initiatives related to Buddhism. What will be crucial in the coming years is India’s response to the Chinese appointment of the next Dalai Lama and how the current Dalai Lama will exercise his authority. The potential for future developments seem to entail a continued mix of cooperation and (greater) competition around Buddhism, representing a microcosm of China–India relations as a whole.

To conclude, Buddhism and its role in tourism, diplomacy and soft-power projection sees no signs of slowing down or diminishing in importance, as these two Asian giants engage in ongoing pursuit of Buddhist cultural diplomacy.

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About the Author

Vaishnavi Pallapothu is a student in University of London pursuing her Bachelor of Science in International Relations and Affairs. An avid reader and writer she is deeply interested in teaching and social activism including learning new languages. She was an intern with the Chennai Centre for China Studies.
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