

BUDDHISM: A NEW FRONTIER IN THE CHINA-INDIA RIVALRY

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For both China and India, Buddhism is a useful enhancer of cultural soft power. The religion has, over the past decade, increased in importance for India as New Delhi tries to re-energize the religious tradition and integrate it into the country's cultural strength; for China, meanwhile, Buddhism is an important means of soothing domestic discontent and staving off risks to its territorial integrity. Buddhism, which China has begun describing as an "ancient Chinese religion" and allowing its citizens freedom to practice, is especially significant for China in preserving domestic social stability and diffusing restiveness in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Tibetan areas elsewhere in China. China is also using Buddhism to increase its influence in nearby regions by acquiring predominant access to powerful Buddhist organizations. Meanwhile India, which has been home to Buddhism since its birth, sees Buddhism as a way of strengthening its relationship with Southeast Asian nations and as a means of preserving the religious and cultural practices of the Tibetan Buddhist people who have sought refuge in India.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DALAI LAMA

Central to these matters is the fourteenth Dalai Lama, who is recognized as the reincarnated traditional leader of Tibetan Buddhism and who remains the most prominent figure in the religious tradition today. The present Dalai Lama's advancing age underscores the increasingly crucial and time-sensitive issue of who will identify his reincarnation. Communist China sees this as an opportunity to finally resolve the nettlesome issue of the Dalai Lama's status vis-à-vis Beijing so as to enhance its political control over Tibet. Chinese government officials have publically declared that China will appoint the next Dalai Lama, who will be born in China.

The Dalai Lama's status in relation to China has remained unsettled for centuries, as successive Dalai Lamas have contested China's sovereignty over Tibet. For their part, Chinese emperors historically considered Tibet a part of China. The seventh-century marriage of Chinese Princess Wencheng, niece of Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty, to Songtsän Gampo, who is credited with bringing Buddhism to Tibet, is portrayed by the Chinese Communist leadership as an attempt to civilize and project influence over Tibet.

Centuries later, China occupied Tibet in 1950, but the Chinese leadership has not been able to calm the situation in Tibet or win over the Tibetans and get them to accept their

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presence. In fact, Beijing has long feared the possibility of a secessionist movement in Tibet. As a result, Beijing is keen to have the fourteenth Dalai Lama return to China before his death as a symbolic recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. Failing that, China is intent on appointing the next Dalai Lama in an attempt to try to directly control the Tibetan religious hierarchy under his leadership. Apart from the Dalai Lama, China, incidentally, hosts the Panchen Lama—the second highest ranking figure in Tibetan Buddhism—as well as 870 *rimpoches* (also known as *tulkus* or living Buddhas).

INDIA'S BUDDHIST LEGACY

Like China, India has deep historical connections to Buddhism, which modern policymakers can draw on in efforts to enhance the country's soft power. Buddhism has provided a quiet but resilient foundation to India's centuries-old cultural links to countries in South, Southeast, and East Asia. India is the birthplace of Buddhism, and the religion is part of India's spiritual heritage. When India was at the height of its power, Indian priests and scholars travelled abroad and spread Buddhism widely: across Tibet and China and then on to Japan, and throughout Southeast Asia via Sri Lanka. Tibetan Buddhism in particular spread northward to Tibet and China, while the Theravada school of Buddhism was promoted in South Asia and throughout Southeast Asia.

Buddhism's influence remains present in Indian art, culture, and architecture. The three lions of the Ashoka pillar, which independent India adopted as its national emblem, are a symbol of the impact of Buddhist thought on the country and its people. As of 2011, there are over 8 million practicing Buddhists in India.

India has ties to Tibetan Buddhism through its own sizable Tibetan community. The first major wave of Tibetans arrived in India from Tibet with the fourteenth Dalai Lama in March 1959.¹ Following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950 and the Dalai Lama's flight to India in 1959, high-ranking Tibetan religious leaders, members of the Tibetan nobility, and ordinary Tibetans continued to flee to India, mainly via Nepal. Today, India remains home to the fourteenth Dalai Lama and the heads of all four main sects of Tibetan

Buddhism, namely the Gelug, Kagyu, Nyingma, and Sakya, in addition to the many other high-ranking Tibetan lamas. The main monasteries of these four sects are all, however, located in Tibet.

BUDDHISM IN INDIAN AND CHINESE DIPLOMACY

India has been promoting Buddhist thought and culture in recent years. In November 2011, with assistance from the Indian government, an organization called the Global Buddhist Congregation (GBC) helped bring representatives of a multitude of Buddhist traditions together in one overarching body. Roughly 900 patriarchs, supreme patriarchs, and high-ranking monks of various Buddhist traditions from around the world attended the GBC in New Delhi, making it one of the largest gatherings of Buddhist leaders since the time of King Asoka (268–232 BCE). The gathered heads of the Buddhist organizations agreed 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. As an outcome of the conference, the International Buddhist Confederation was established to further these objectives by promoting research and popularizing Buddhist practices and traditions.

A few years earlier, China had begun hosting its own international Buddhist gatherings in the mid-2000s, known as the World Buddhist Forums (WBF). The first was held in Fujian Province in 2006 and three subsequent gatherings have since been held respectively in Wuxi (in Jiangsu Province) in 2009, in Hong Kong in April 2012, and again in Wuxi in 2015. The WBF aims to convey to Buddhist populations in China and neighboring countries that the Chinese Communist authorities approve of Buddhism. A large number of Buddhist religious monks, scholars, and other figures, including some from India, have been invited to the WBFs. These periodic gatherings are reflective of China's effort to raise the profile of the China-appointed Panchen Lama, Tibetan Buddhism's second most influential figure, and convince Buddhists to accept him as the rightful holder of this position. Beijing has not invited the Dalai Lama to the World Buddhist Forums on the grounds that

he is a “disruptive element.”² The GBC hosted in India in 2011 impacted China’s efforts and the WBF in 2012 was a muted affair.

On occasion, Tibetan Buddhism has drawn attention to the ongoing border dispute between China and India. Uyghen Thinley Dorje, another prominent Tibetan Buddhist figure in exile in India, visited the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh in November 2016; he is recognized by the Dalai Lama and Chinese authorities as the Gyalwa Karmapa (head of Tibetan Buddhism’s Kagyu sect). China is especially sensitive to Indian political figures and the Dalai Lama visiting this state, which it claims is part of China. The Dalai Lama’s planned visit to Arunachal Pradesh in April 2017 is being interpreted by Beijing as indicative of New Delhi’s willingness to assert its sovereignty despite predictable Chinese protests. In March 2017, India is hosting a Buddhist conference in Nalanda meant to advance efforts to bring together all Buddhist lamas into the fold. Hosted by the Indian Ministry of Culture, the gathering is convening prominent Buddhist monks from over thirty countries—including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. The Nalanda conference will likely enhance India’s standing in the Buddhist community.

Meanwhile, since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014, the Indian government has made Buddhism an element of its bilateral diplomatic efforts, which have been particularly noticeable with Japan and Mongolia. Modi has put Buddhism on India’s diplomatic agenda with Japan. In August 2014, for instance, Modi visited two ancient Buddhist temples in Japan, and Buddhism was mentioned in the joint statement after a subsequent visit to Japan in November 2016. Private organizations have been involved in these efforts as well. In September 2015, for example, the International Buddhist Confederation, the Vivekananda International Foundation, and the Tokyo Foundation put together a joint Buddhist and Hindu three-day conclave on conflict avoidance and environment consciousness.

Buddhism also factors into India’s diplomacy with Mongolia. It is worth noting that since the Mongol ruler Altan Khan first conferred the title of Dalai Lama on the Gelug monk Sonam Gyatso in the late sixteenth century, subsequent

Dalai Lamas have looked to the Mongol rulers for support. Mongolia’s unique link to the Dalai Lama lends special significance to Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Ulaanbaatar in May 2015. Modi’s visit involved numerous references to India and Mongolia’s shared Buddhist connection. Two examples were his speech to the Mongolian parliament, which mentioned the Buddha and Buddhism seven times, and his visit to the Gandantegchinlen monastery.

Mongolia’s special link with the Dalai Lama has, at times, complicated the country’s relations with China. In November 2016, for instance, 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.

By comparison, other countries in Asia—including Myanmar, South Korea and Vietnam—that have strong links to Buddhism have not permitted a visit by the Dalai Lama. Myanmar and Vietnam, though strongly Buddhist, follow the Theravada tradition and are especially careful of Beijing’s sensitivities about the Dalai Lama. Like China, Vietnam is a Communist country, although the country’s Communist party allows its members to practice religion and many of them are Buddhist. South Korea, meanwhile, has adopted a form of Buddhism that blends elements of Mahayana with its own distinctive characteristics.

CHINA’S EFFORTS TO SHAPE TIBETAN BUDDHIST POLITICS

Since the fourteenth Dalai Lama began travelling abroad around 1980 to familiarize people with the Tibet issue and lobby for the Tibetan people, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has reacted to his actions and labelled him a “separatist.”³ As China has grown economically and militarily stronger, its protests have grown more strident. Since 2007, China has been trying to undercut the Dalai Lama’s influence and isolate him by pressuring foreign leaders and governments not to officially receive the Dalai Lama. Failure to comply has resulted in China taking punitive economic measures

that typically prompt an appreciable drop in foreign direct investment or exports for periods of at least six months to a year. This has often been accompanied by a suspension, or freezing of diplomatic contact, until an apology has been tendered.⁴ Beijing has toughened the policy in the past couple of months to include meetings with the sikyong, or prime minister, of the Tibetans in exile. The Dalai Lama issue has also, since 2007, begun figuring more prominently as a bone of contention in interactions between India and China at the official Track I and unofficial Track II levels.⁵

There are major reasons for increased Chinese concern. Beijing believes that what it deems to be hostile foreign forces will use the Tibetans to stir up trouble inside China. Beijing wants to avoid having a situation in which there are two Dalai Lamas, like the situation that exists in the case of the Panchen Lama; Beijing feels that this would inflame internal tensions.⁶ In the case of the Panchen Lama, though, the individual recognized by the fourteenth Dalai Lama as the Panchen Lama is in Chinese custody and kept away from public gaze while China tries to persuade the Tibetans to accept Gyancaïn Norbu, the individual appointed by China. China persists with its efforts to persuade the fourteenth Dalai Lama to return to spend his “last days” in his “motherland.”

China has sought to bolster its claims of being a country with a strong Buddhist heritage. In 2008, Chinese archaeologists discovered a skull bone of the Buddha inside a model of a stupa made of sandalwood, gold, silver, and gemstones, which was then interred in a temple in Jiangsu Province.

China’s efforts to undermine the Dalai Lama’s influence also have included supporting Shugden worship, which he banned in 1996. Chinese authorities have supported worshippers of the Shugden deity, disbursed generous subsidies to their monasteries, and instigated Shugden groups in India and elsewhere to initiate litigation against the Dalai Lama and stage protests to harass him. The Chinese government even invited prominent Tibetan Buddhist monks known to be Shugden practitioners, or otherwise critical of the Dalai Lama, to the sixtieth anniversary celebrations of what it describes as the peaceful liberation of Tibet to embarrass the Dalai Lama.

Moreover, China has been steadily trying to acquire influence over the various Tibetan Buddhist sects and subtly get them to break ranks with the Dalai Lama. China has consistently favored the Kagyu sect, which is numerous in western Tibet; in Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, and Sikkim in India; and in Bhutan. Journalists based in Jammu and Kashmir claim that the Chinese are also discreetly supporting the Drukpa Kagyu Rimpoche in Ladakh, who has made little secret of his differences with the Dalai Lama and has been urging supporters not to flock to the Dalai Lama when he is in Ladakh or participate in the Dalai Lama’s teachings.

BUDDHISM IN CHINA AND INDIA'S NEIGHBORHOOD: THE CASE OF NEPAL

One neighboring country where China is using Buddhism to expand regional influence is Nepal. China’s interest in Nepal is primarily because of the nearly 20,000 Tibetans residing there. Additionally, a number of people of Tibetan origin live in the northern fringes of Nepal bordering Tibet. China has serious apprehensions that what it refers to as hostile foreign forces—an oblique reference to the United States and India—may use Nepal as a base to create disturbances inside Tibet. China has expanded its influence in Nepal, and its embassy now interacts directly with Nepal’s police to restrict the activities of Tibetans resident there. China has specific interest in Lumbini, the birth place of the Buddha, which lies in Nepal just across the border with India. As a high-ranking Chinese official once told a Nepali reporter, “We visit Nepal because you have Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha.”

Nepal has been the site of ongoing efforts by Beijing to oversee, or at least influence, the selection of Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders. It has successfully blocked the Dalai Lama in Nepal. In fact, in 2012, Nepal’s then culture minister, Minendra Rijal, said the Dalai Lama might visit Lumbini sometime in the future after “the leadership of China will find ways to deal with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, which will be respectful of the Chinese people.” Meanwhile, the Sakya Tibetan Buddhist lineage and its sub-sects were permitted, after approval from Beijing, to become the only sect to hold Monlam celebrations in Lumbini. The Nyingmapa sect too has accepted Beijing’s contention

that it alone has the authority to choose and recognize high-ranking monks and followed the procedure prescribed by Beijing to secure its approval for Penor Rinpoche's reincarnation and enthronement in 2014. The Kagyu sect negotiated with Chinese authorities in mid-2014 when they insisted on performing the last rites of Shamar Rinpoche, the fourteenth Shamarpa and second highest spiritual figure of the Karma Kagyu Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism in Nepal. Initial approval accorded by the Nepali embassy in New Delhi was withdrawn under pressure from the Chinese embassy in Kathmandu, which objected to the presence of a representative of the Dalai Lama who was to accompany the body to Kathmandu and preparations by the Tibetan community for a rally in Kathmandu's Bouddha area. The approval was later restored.

China's interest in Lumbini first became public in June 2011, when a Chinese government-sponsored nongovernmental organization (NGO), the Asia Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (APECF), proposed a \$3 billion plan to develop Lumbini to the Nepalese government. The plans included hotels, an airport, and a Chinese-managed Buddhist university and seminary. Xiao Wunan, a senior CCP cadre who till his retirement late last year was a deputy director in China's National Development and Reform Commission in western China, was executive vice president of the foundation. The appointment of Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better known as Prachanda, who is the current Nepalese prime minister, as vice chairman of the APECF, emphasized China's interest in Nepal. While the APECF's proposal has been kept in limbo, the Nepalese government is unwilling to reject China's proposal. The establishment of the Greater Lumbini National Development Directive Committee under the chairmanship of Prachanda is indicative of this. To canvass support for the development of Lumbini, Chinese government-sponsored NGOs have since tried to co-opt prominent Nepal politicians and have appointed Madhav Kumar Nepal and Sujata Koirala to boards of Chinese NGOs. In 2013, the Buddhist Association of China, whose vice-president is the Beijing-selected Panchen Lama, announced plans to take over coordination of the Lumbini project. While more limited in its scope as compared to the APECF proposal, efforts have not moved beyond the planning stages.

Additionally, there are many Tibetan Buddhist monasteries strung across the entire length of the Indo-Himalayan belt that exercise almost unmatched influence on the local populations in their jurisdictions. Monasteries like Hemis in Ladakh and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh own considerable property and large tracts of land. The latter could at some stage become a nettlesome issue in negotiations between India and China. Viewed together with China's attempts to set up a monastery, seminary, and nunnery in Lumbini to educate and train young monks free of cost, there is a real possibility that China will use them to try and increase its influence along India's northern borders.

There are other concerns for the Dalai Lama's supporters and China too. Credible reports indicate rivalries within the Dalai Lama's office have grown.⁷ Gaining quiet momentum among foreigners supporting the Dalai Lama and the Tibet cause, as well as foreign-based Tibet support groups, is the view that India-based, or Indian Tibetans, are grabbing all political power in the wider community of the Dalai Lama's sympathizers. Implicit in this perspective is the suggestion that political authority should be shared, but it is unclear as to precisely with whom. The Chinese Communist leadership too appears to have become nervous at the rapid growth in the number of Buddhist adherents in China. Recent reports point to the authorities tightening the monitoring of the activities of Buddhist monks, especially of Tibetan Buddhist monks, and enforcing regulations restricting their activities and the places they can visit.

Buddhism is an intrinsic part of India's spiritual heritage. India's outreach to countries in Southeast Asia will be reinforced by Buddhism. Meanwhile, the presence of the heads of the various Tibetan Buddhist sects in India will enrich Buddhism and strengthen India's bonds with Buddhists around the world. The demographic changes taking place in China similarly make Buddhism increasingly relevant. China's leadership considers the return of its Tibetan Buddhist religious figures important for the country's stability. Beijing can be expected to continue to try and enhance its soft power by claiming a strong Buddhist heritage and strengthening its outreach to Buddhist populations within and outside its borders.

NOTES

1. Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 197–207.
2. Jayadeva Ranade, *China Unveiled: Strategic Insights into Chinese Thinking* (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2013), 284.
3. Lhasa Vice Mayor Jigme Namgyal at National People's Congress (NPC) session on March 10, 2010; Ranade, *China Unveiled*, 67.
4. *Ibid.*, 27.
5. Based on the author's personal knowledge.
6. Please see an interview with Professor Jin Wei, a senior faculty member of the CCP's Central Party School located in Beijing, published on June 6, 2013, in the Chinese-language Hong Kong–based *Asia Weekly* (*Yazhou Zhoukan*).
7. Based on interviews with senior figures in the Dalai Lama's office in Delhi and Dharamsala.

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