

Buddhism as a Strategic Tool in India-China Himalayan Diplomacy

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Context

The strategic rivalry between India and China extends beyond military standoffs and economic competition. A less visible yet potent frontier of this conflict is **Buddhism in the Himalayan region**, where cultural influence has become a key tool in shaping identity, loyalty, and regional stability.

Introduction

While oceans dominate traditional geopolitical discussions, the real **India-China frontier today lies in the Himalayas**—not just for territorial control, but for **spiritual and cultural influence**. In this high-stakes zone, **Buddhism** has emerged as a **powerful symbol of identity and soft power**, with both countries attempting to influence Buddhist institutions and followers.

Why Buddhism in the Himalayas is Strategically Important

- **Buddhism originated in India** around the 6th century BCE and gradually spread across Central, East, and Southeast Asia.
- The **Himalayas and Buddhism are historically intertwined**, with the Buddha born in the Himalayan foothills.
- **Early Indian Buddhist Sutras** reached the Himalayan region by the 2nd century CE as the faith expanded into China and Central Asia.
- Today, **monasteries in the Himalayas** are no longer just spiritual centres; they are also

symbols of sovereignty and national influence.

- **Ladakh, Tawang, and Bhutan** are witnessing how Buddhist culture is increasingly shaped by geopolitical calculations.
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The Geopolitical Chessboard of Buddhism

- In inaccessible Himalayan regions, **soft power becomes hard power.**
 - The **reincarnation of lamas** is no longer merely spiritual—it reflects national sovereignty.
 - **Controlling Buddhist identity in borderlands** is seen as crucial by both India and China, where political maps often blur into cultural realities.
 - **Monasteries and religious networks** play pivotal roles in defining allegiance and territorial integrity.
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China's Evolving Strategy Over Buddhism

- **Buddhism as Statecraft:** China views control over Buddhism as an instrument for **governance and regional integration.**
- Since the **1950s**, Beijing has sought to dominate **Tibetan religious life**, **exiling** independent lamas and **co-opting monastic institutions.**
- China now **claims exclusive authority to approve the reincarnation** of high-ranking lamas.
- In **2007**, it declared that any “Living Buddha” must be **sanctioned by the state**, placing political authority above spiritual legitimacy.
- A **government-maintained database** tracks recognised reincarnated lamas and monitors monasteries across Tibet.
- China uses **Buddhist heritage sites as tools of soft power diplomacy**, investing in **infrastructure around Lumbini** (Nepal) and **courting Bhutanese monastic communities.**

India's Buddhist Diplomacy: Evolution and Efforts

- After independence, India took initiatives to **revive and reclaim its Buddhist legacy**, which had faded over centuries.
- Hosting the **Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile** since 1959 gave India **moral and cultural stature**.
- India uses Buddhism as a **soft power tool** to strengthen ties with **Asian countries with Buddhist heritage**.
- Projects such as **Buddhist circuit tourism, international conferences, and heritage restoration** help portray India as the **spiritual homeland of Buddhism**.
- Over the last decade, India has actively promoted its **Buddhist lineage** and funded **regional pilgrimage networks**.
- However, these efforts remain **fragmented** when compared to China's **centralised and coordinated strategy**.

Challenges in Buddhist Diplomacy

- The **current 14th Dalai Lama**, now in his 90s, has indicated that he may **reincarnate outside of Chinese territory**, likely in India.
- China, in response, has declared that it will appoint its own Dalai Lama using the **"Golden Urn" method**.

Golden Urn Method

- **Introduced by:** Qing Dynasty in 1792
- **Purpose:** To regulate the reincarnation of important Tibetan lamas and consolidate Chinese control.

- **Method:** A lottery-style process where **names are placed in a golden urn** to select the reincarnated leader.
 - **Implication:** May lead to **dual leadership**, with one Dalai Lama recognised by the exile community and another by Beijing.
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Divisive Politics and Future Geopolitical Realities

- A **dual Dalai Lama** scenario would create religious and political divisions across **Ladakh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nepal, and Bhutan**.
 - If the legitimate spiritual figure resides in India, **allegiance may grow toward New Delhi**.
 - If seated in Lhasa under Chinese patronage, the **gravitational pull may shift eastward**, boosting China's soft power.
 - In **Arunachal Pradesh**, China backs its territorial claim to **Tawang**—birthplace of the 6th Dalai Lama—not just militarily but through **cultural narratives**.
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What Lies Ahead

- India can utilise **internal divisions and debates within Buddhist circles** to construct a coherent regional strategy.
- There is scope to collaborate with **Buddhist-majority countries** to formulate a **collective approach to lama succession**, ensuring **peace and continuity** in the Tibetan region.
- A long-term strategy should blend **spiritual legitimacy, regional cooperation, and cultural influence** to **counterbalance China's assertive moves**.