

HIMALAYAN BUDDHISM INDIA& CHINA: INTERNATIONAL RELATION

NEWS: China, India and the conflict over Buddhism

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

The strategic rivalry between India and China is increasingly playing out in the Himalayas, with a focus on leveraging Buddhist religious institutions and spiritual succession for geopolitical advantage amidst escalating maritime tensions. This marks a significant paradigm shift where spiritual influence is becoming a key component of national strategy.

Spirituality and Sovereignty — The Shift in Paradigm:

- **Militarization of Monasteries:**
 - Traditionally, monasteries in the Himalayan regions like Ladakh, Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh), and Bhutan served purely as serene centers for meditation, spiritual learning, and cultural preservation.
 - However, their strategic location in sensitive border areas has transformed them into focal points of national strategy. They are no longer just religious sites but symbolize a powerful fusion of sacred space with broader state objectives, becoming potential zones of influence or points of contention.
- **Reincarnation as Political Legitimacy:**
 - The complex and deeply spiritual process of recognizing the next Dalai Lama has transcended its religious boundaries. It has now become a critical question of national sovereignty, particularly for China.
 - China overtly asserts exclusive authority over this selection process, notably through its controversial 2007 "Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas" ordinance, aiming to control the spiritual lineage and, by extension, the political allegiance of Tibetan Buddhists.
- **State-Sanctioned Faith:**
 - China has actively institutionalized its control over Buddhism within its borders through various bureaucratic tools. This includes the creation of a centralized database of recognized lamas and elaborate procedures for their "approval" by the state.
 - Beyond its borders, Beijing is systematically repurposing religious diplomacy as a strategic tool. It uses these efforts to consolidate its cultural influence across the entire Himalayan belt, aiming to align Buddhist communities with its geopolitical narrative.

India's Reactive Posture and Emerging Strategy:

- **Legacy of Hosting the Dalai Lama:**

- Since 1959, India has provided asylum to the 14th Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile, which has endowed India with significant "moral capital" on the global stage, particularly concerning human rights and spiritual freedom.
- However, for decades, this advantage lacked a clear, proactive strategic orientation. Only recently has India begun to consciously leverage its Buddhist heritage and connections through "Buddhist diplomacy," including promoting pilgrim circuits and heritage sites.
- **Asymmetry in Buddhist Outreach:**
 - There's a significant imbalance in "Buddhist statecraft" between the two nations. China operates with a centrally coordinated, top-down approach to Buddhist engagement, often integrating it with its broader foreign policy objectives.
 - In contrast, India's engagement with Buddhist communities, despite the Himalayan region's crucial strategic importance, remains largely fragmented and often reactive. It lacks cohesive policy backing, dedicated resources, and a unified strategic vision.
- **Dalai Lama Succession Dilemma:**
 - The impending succession of the 14th Dalai Lama poses a unique and critical challenge. It is widely anticipated that his successor will be identified and recognized outside Chinese territory, most likely in India, to ensure spiritual authenticity free from Beijing's influence.
 - This scenario could lead to the emergence of "dual claimants" to the Dalai Lama's title—one recognized by Beijing and another by the Tibetan religious establishment. Such a schism risks deeply dividing Tibetan Buddhism globally and would compel regional actors to take sides, forcing ideological and political alignments.

Borderlands, Loyalties, and Soft Power Warfare:

- **Religious Allegiance and National Identity:**
 - In India's sensitive border regions, such as Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, and Sikkim, where Buddhist communities are prominent, the spiritual legitimacy and influence of high lamas are extremely potent.
 - The allegiance of monastic communities to either India or China can profoundly reinforce or destabilize nationalist sentiments among the local populations, making monastic loyalty a critical strategic asset in these contested territories.
- **China's Subtle Influence Operations:**
 - Beijing is engaged in systematic and methodical efforts to build influence among Himalayan Buddhist communities. This ranges from significant infrastructure investments, such as those seen in Lumbini (Nepal), aimed at fostering economic dependence and goodwill.
 - It also involves quiet monastic diplomacy, particularly in countries like Bhutan, where China aims to cultivate relationships with influential lamas and communities to align them with its geopolitical interests and potentially erode Indian influence.

- **Proxy Conflicts within Tibetan Buddhism:**

- Internal sectarian rifts and doctrinal disputes within Tibetan Buddhism are being exploited by both India and China, transforming what were historically religious disagreements into arenas for geopolitical maneuvering.
- Examples include the divided leadership of the Karma Kagyu school and the contentious Dorje Shugden practice. These internal divisions provide both powers with opportunities to gain influence by supporting one faction over another, creating proxy conflicts and establishing geopolitical footholds within the wider Tibetan Buddhist world.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/china-india-and-the-conflict-over-buddhism/article69843709.ece>