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Towards ICCS 2022

Buddhist Diplomacy: Potential for Regional Cohesion

By Jack Meng-Tat Chia

SYNOPSIS

In recent years, a number of Asian countries have increasingly turned to Buddhism as a balm to relieve tense relations and foster cultural understanding. Buddhist diplomacy has the potential to encourage regional cohesion and interfaith harmony in the region.



Xi Jinping accompanied Narendra Modi on a visit to Da Ci'en Monastery and the Wild Goose Pagoda in Xi'an. Source: YouTube screengrab..

COMMENTARY

ON 24 FEB 2022, Sri Lanka's High Commissioner to India, Milinda Moragoda, met with the leader of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Mohan Bhagwat, to discuss a range of issues, including cultural and religious relations between [India and Sri Lanka](#). The two leaders explored how Buddhism and Hinduism — both of which originated in India — can help strengthen bilateral relations between their countries.

Numerous scholars have highlighted the growing influence of [religion in international relations](#), demonstrating how religious factors can affect human decision-making and international politics. However, this burgeoning body of work, which focuses primarily on monotheistic religions, has often overlooked Buddhism, a religion often perceived to be politically inert and therefore, remaining as a quiescent entity in diplomacy.

A Long History

Perhaps unknown to many, Buddhist diplomacy is not new to South Asia or the broader Asian region. The Buddha himself was a diplomat of peace: In his lifetime, he resolved tensions and prevented wars between rulers of neighbouring kingdoms.

For centuries, religious and political leaders had been engaging in Buddhist diplomacy. For instance, Buddhist diplomacy between [China and India](#) facilitated diplomatic exchanges and trading relations during the Tang dynasty (618–907).

In [mainland Southeast Asia](#), Buddhist kings drew on Buddhist concepts and terms to communicate among one another, both in times of peace and conflict. They often relied on monks as diplomats when strengthening relations, especially during crises.

During the colonial period of Sri Lanka, monks such as [Hikkaduve Sumangala](#) (1827–1911) contributed to fostering diplomatic relations between colonial Lanka and the royal courts and monastic communities of Southeast Asia.

Examples of Buddhist diplomacy extends from conflict resolution like the Buddha's attempts to prevent the invasion of Kapilavastu, to the exchanges of Buddhist monks and sacred objects to forge positive diplomatic and trading relations. Therefore, some suggest that Buddhist diplomacy has the potential to promote peace and reconciliation.

Rapprochement and Engagement

Buddhist diplomacy had contributed to informal engagement and diplomatic rapprochement during the Cold War period. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the atheist Chinese Communist Party strategically utilised Buddhism to develop cultural exchanges and religious ties with neighbouring Buddhist-majority countries.

The [Buddhist Association of China](#), established in 1953 as China's national Buddhist organisation, has hosted Buddhist visitors from other East, South, and Southeast Asian countries, emphasising discourses of Buddhist ecumenism and shared heritage within the Asia-Pacific region.

Buddhist leaders from [China and Japan](#) leveraged on Buddhism as a common cultural identity and participated in religious exchanges to rebuild relations previously shattered by the Sino-Japanese War. Formal diplomacy, along with informal engagement, gradually led to the rapprochement between China and Japan in 1972.

China had also sought to build cordial relations with Theravada-majority Buddhist countries in Sri Lanka and mainland Southeast Asia during the 1950s and 60s. For instance, the Chinese government loaned the Buddha tooth relic for a tour in U Nu's Burma, and subsequently to Sri Lanka, where it was enshrined with a second tooth relic at Kandy.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution in China, Chinese authorities revived the use of Buddhist diplomacy with other Asian countries. During the 1980s, Singaporean monk [Hong Choon](#) (1907–90) made eight visits to China, where he met national and religious leaders, and cultivated informal relations between both countries, prior to the official establishment of diplomatic ties in 1990.

Buddhism as Soft Power

Several scholars and journalists have highlighted China's increasing use of Buddhism as a tool for public diplomacy, particularly to support its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese leader Xi Jinping supports the promotion of Chinese Buddhism as a form of [soft power](#) that he believes will contribute to presenting Chinese culture positively to the world.

The Chinese government has sponsored [BRI-related Buddhist diplomacy](#) to court Theravada leaders and communities in mainland Southeast Asia. It has also hosted significant international Buddhist conferences, such as the World Buddhist Forum, to attract Buddhist leaders to China in the spirit of Buddhist ecumenism.

Concomitantly, India, the Buddha's historical homeland and home to seven of the eight Buddhist sites, actively uses Buddhism as a soft power tool for diplomacy and as an attraction to promote tourism. In August 2010, the Indian Parliament passed a resolution to reestablish the Nalanda University to recover its Buddhist heritage, which Singapore's former foreign minister George Yeo considered to be an important part of the "[Asian renaissance](#)".

In recent years, India's Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) has relied on India's Buddhist heritage to draw closer relations with its two neighbouring Buddhist-majority countries — China and Sri Lanka. He has also made deliberate efforts to invoke shared Buddhist history and visit Buddhist temples during his official trips to other countries.

With approximately [481 million Buddhists](#) in the present-day Asia-Pacific region, representing 99% of total Buddhist population in the world, Buddhism is certainly a persuasive soft power tool in the region.

Building Peace, Fostering Cohesion

Buddhist teachings of peace and compassion can help strengthen cohesion in the region. The best possible outcome can be achieved when Buddhist leaders work closely with political leaders to achieve a cohesive society domestically and maintain amicable relations internationally.

Given the growing tensions over Sino-Indian border dispute, cross-strait relations, and the South China Sea, Buddhist diplomacy has the potential to soothe tenuous relations and cultivate neighbourly ties. Religious communities can play a role in facilitating and synergising informal diplomacy when official relations are strained.

Buddhist diplomacy may also serve as a platform to bolster intercultural understanding and interfaith dialogue, bringing together Buddhists, non-Buddhists, and state actors in dialogue on the subject of religious harmony.

Hence, this flourishing of Buddhist diplomacy requires further academic exploration and policy consideration.

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