

China's way of using *Buddhism* as a soft power strategy in Sri Lanka: An Historical Perspective

Abstract

1. Introduction

The notion of power in global history has been mainly viewed through realist lenses showing how states used coercion, deterrence and invasion to manifest their superior status. Machiavelli emphasizes that men are by nature prone to violence and combat; they are inherently antisocial. (Machiavelli, 2013) This parochial reading on the idea of power was altered at the end of the Cold war era, especially with Joseph Nye's conceptual creation of "Soft Power". According to Nye, soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. (Nye, 2005) Since Nye's coinage, the idea of Soft Power has received an enormous attention in International Affairs scholars as a tool that palpably shows how state interests oscillate.

Both China and India have developed a proclivity towards soft power as a core feature in their international affairs. (Malone, 2015) From a vantage point, both countries possess a legacy that aggrandizes idiosyncratic values as two old civilizations on earth. Indeed, it can be an interesting study to observe how China has been striving to increase its soft power diplomacy in Sri Lanka, where Beijing has invested heavily as a crucial destination in their most ambitious global governance project "Belt & Road Initiative". This paper seeks to examine China's soft power strategy in Sri Lanka by utilizing the historically rooted links to the island nation and how it would assist in forming a favourable stance towards China in Sri Lanka. Moreover, this paper will look into the concept of Buddhist diplomacy as China's most astute mechanism in Sri Lanka with the island nation's national identity with Buddhism. The usage of Buddhism as a soft power tool in Sri Lanka is akin to Beijing's grand plan initiated by President Xi Jinping in 2011 at the 17th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, which was mainly devoted to the issue of culture. In 2014, a year after China embarked on Belt and Road Initiative, President Xi announced "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative and better communicate Chinese message to the world". (Shambugh, 2015) Notwithstanding the Communist party's anathema to religion driven by Marxian stances, Xi Jinping views religions as parental values which would bolster the realization of "Chinese Dream". As a pragmatist, he has pointed out that China's historical role as a civilization was not entirely attributed to the military power or conquests but rather on much profound appeal resonated with China's rich culture. In particular, President Xi seems to have taken Buddhism as a more convenient tool to express Chinese message to the modern world with its intrinsic connectivity echoes from China's past. The ancient Silk Route the former avatar of modern BRI was mainly a road of different religious, cultural beliefs where Buddhism thrived in the heyday of Tang dynasty in China.

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In the backdrop of Xi's "Chinese Dream" or the rejuvenation of China, the projection of Buddhism became a crucial soft power mechanism. In 2015 parallel to Beijing's interest in building its soft power globally, Buddhist Association of China (BAC) acknowledged the relevance of promoting Buddhism as a key activity. (Shambaugh,2016) BAC encouraged Chinese Buddhist monks to go out of China to share China's unique Buddhist legacy with the world. Objective of restoring Chinese Buddhism was an embodiment of three elements, "soft power" (*ruan shili*), "public diplomacy" (*gongyi Waijiao*), "person to person diplomacy" (*renjian waijiao*) and this triangle was intended to be linked to BRI.

2 Purpose and Research Question

The geographical proximity of Sri Lanka so close to India so as to lose its insular character and the indomitable Buddhist inheritance that Sri Lanka received from India during the period of emperor Asoka have always played as the two indispensable factors that carved Sri Lanka's relations with India throughout the history. In the closing years of the British raj in India, the policymakers in Delhi knew the strategic importance of Sri Lanka to the Indian Ocean governance, also they were well aware of the island's imbued destiny with the Indic civilization. Post independent India's strategist K.M Panikkar was fascinated with the idea of forming the centrality of India in Indian Ocean as "*Mare Nestrum*" and he was one of the first few Indian strategists who predicted a possible Chinese intention on embarking on a large scale naval expansion, because Panikkar believed in China's historical role in Indian ocean through the ancient maritime Silk road. (Pannikar, 1968)

In order to understand Beijing's Buddhist diplomacy in Sri Lanka, one has to realize that China's affinity with the island nation based on Buddhism dates back to 5th century A.D. Chinese scholar monk Fa Xian visited Sri Lanka during the reign of king Dhatusena in Anuradhapura kingdom in search of *Vinaya* texts of Theravada Buddhism. But, he witnessed the great schism between Mahavihara which represented the Theravada tradition and Abayagiriya which was the leading centre of Mahayana learning in Anuradhapura kingdom in the 5th century Sri Lanka. Fa Xian stayed two years at Abayagiriya in Sri Lanka and he copied some important Mahayana texts such as "*Dirgagama*", *Samyuktagama* and *Sannipata*, all of which were new to China.¹ (Lahiri,1974)Also, it's an interesting fact to observe that all the Chinese scholar monks Fa Xian, Hiuen-Tsang and then I-ching in the 6th century A.D had mentioned the veneration of Buddha's tooth relic and how the monks in Abayagiriya acted as its custodians. Memoirs from these Chinese monks who visited Sri Lanka in the 5th and 6th century A. D's denote the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism prevailed in the island. Another important aspect stemming from the history of Chinese traveller monks to Sri Lanka is that their visits were coincided with the Chinese commercial activities in the island. The spiritual purpose of Buddhism drew parallel to the mundane matters like trade and the Sri Lanka's crucial position in the maritime silk route in the past intensified Chinese interest in the island. At the end of his stay in Anuradhapura, Chinese monk Fa

Xian returned to China in a large merchant vessel. After Fa Xian, Xuan Zang was the next important Chinese monk who had left some important description on Sri Lanka in his memoirs after spending fourteen years in India studying various schools in Buddhism. Despite the vivid description that Fa Xian compiled on Sri Lanka, he was not able to visit the island due to the political instability that prevailed in the Kingdom of Anuradhapura in the 7th century A.D. Xuan Zang's elucidation on Sri Lanka provides a vast array of information regarding the genesis of Sinhalese nation and the expansion of Buddhism in the island. It is by all means not an easy task to provide a description on a place without visiting it, yet Xuan Zang clung to the challenge of studying about Sri Lanka and its Theravada practice of Buddhism while residing in Kanchipuram in South India. To this day, the description compiled by Xuan Zang has been regarded as one of the comprehensive and acute historical sources studying the political and religious history of Sri Lanka. (Lahiri, 1978)

In addition to the predilection shown by both Fa Xian and Xuan Zang regarding the Buddhism in Sri Lanka, they had a genuine enthusiasm on the socio-political structure in Sri Lanka. It should be underlined without any ambiguity that the writings of both monks continued to aspire Chinese understanding of Sri Lanka from antiquity to present day. In his visit to Sri Lanka in 2014, Chinese president Xi Jinn Ping pointed out how Buddhism played an indispensable role in strengthening the historical affinity between China and Sri Lanka, which was created by Chinese traveller monk Fa Xian.

The sacred tooth relic of Buddha was the paramount element for the relations between Sri Lanka and China in the medieval past. Both countries revered Buddha's tooth relic, whereas it was considered a symbol of statehood in Sri Lanka. The Chinese interest in sacred Tooth relic can be traced to the Yuan dynasty as its Mongol founding emperor showed ardour in acquiring the Tooth relic for the cause of Chinese unification. It was in year 1282 Kublai Khan commissioned Venetian traveller Marco Polo to begin his voyage to Sri Lanka and the main intention of this voyage was to obtain the tooth relic. (Jackson, 1999) In his memoir, Polo recalls that Khan asked the Tooth relic in return for the value of a city, but the then king of Sri Lanka stated that he would not sell it for all the treasure of the universe. Polo states how Chinese emperor was confounded by this answer, yet he admitted the verdict. Two hundred years later, during the heyday of Ming dynasty Sri Lanka was visited by Admiral Cheng Ho as a part of his famous seven voyages. His first visit to Sri Lanka was a pacific one as he arrived in the island with "perfumes and flowers" symbolizing typical Confucian diplomacy. According to Chinese source *Pien-i-tien*, Cheng Ho persuaded the ruler of Kotte kingdom Alakeshvara to give up his heretical practice and follow the path of Buddha. Nevertheless, the ulterior motive of the first visit of Admiral Cheng Ho was deeply rooted in the firm ambition of obtaining the Tooth Relic. Another Chinese source named *His-Yu-chi Fu-chi* indicates that Cheng Ho requested the sacred tooth relic of Buddha from Alakeshvara and he resented that suggestion firmly. Furthermore, Chinese sources have lampooned the ruler of the Kotte kingdom in Sri Lanka "Alakseshvara" as a barbaric tyrant who showed no sense of civility to the Chinese. (Eliman, 2019) From the Chinese perspective, this was a blatant act against Ming supremacy with its imperial projection as the middle kingdom. But, on the other hand, Alakshevara's denial of handing over the tooth relic was a justifiable act due to its

both religious and political significance to the Kotte kingdom. Any attempt to take it away was seen as an act to usurp the political sovereignty of the ruler. In his third expedition around 1409 A.D Admiral Cheng Ho touched the Galle harbour where he displayed exotic Chinese goods to the natives, also this expedition was a monumental one that embodied China's strategic Buddhist diplomacy and the Ming dynasty's imperial ambition of spreading its hegemony across the oceans. Following the tradition of setting up the commemorative tablets, Admiral Cheng Ho erected a trilingual inscription in Galle, which highlighted the pomp and benevolence of the Ming emperor. Moreover, the Chinese version of the inscription has made an offering to Buddha. (Devaraja,2006)

It should be noted, the Chen Ho's visits to Sri Lanka was not seen by the local ruler in the Kotte kingdom from a friendly perspective. Cheng Ho's previous efforts to obtain the tooth relic, the vastness of his fleet and the way he installed an inscription bearing the name of Ming emperor would have agitated Alakshevara. Indeed, the objective of Cheng Ho was akin to a pure imperial mission to gain the allegiance of the Kotte kingdom to the Ming emperor. (Fonseka, 2010) But, is important to understand that the diplomacy that Cheng Ho adhered was not a hostile one and his methods were driven by Confucian-Buddhist ethics. This act was completely different from the Europeans who followed the Chinese to the Indian ocean a century later. Both Europeans and Chinese essentially focused on commercial success. Chinese clung to more pacific methods such as influencing the locals and offering gifts to the people. Most importantly, the projection of Buddhism played a pivotal role in Chinese diplomacy during the Ming dynasty. Compare this with the behaviour of the Portuguese, the first European nation who ventured into the Indian Ocean whose trade policies were equated with plunder. (Devaraja, 2006) China's attitude to the "use of force" arose from the notion of self-defence and necessity. In the case of Sri Lanka, Admiral Cheng Ho did not forget the outrage of Alakshevara in his previous visit. Under the imperial order of the Ming emperor, Cheng Ho subdued the ruler of the Kotte kingdom Alakshevara in 1409 A.D after six battles which resulted in the capture of Alakshevara, his royal family as prisoners. The Chinese sources have affirmed that Royal prisoners from Sri Lanka were pardoned by the Ming emperor and treated honourably. It is said that the Chinese emperor advised the captives from Sri Lanka to choose a virtuous person as their ruler according to Buddha's teachings. (Somaratne, 1969)

Overall, the historical encounters that China had with Sri Lanka was primarily shaped up by Buddhism as the common thread. More generally, alongside the analysis above on China's historical role in Sri Lanka, the current geopolitical strategies that Beijing determines to implement denote the power of Buddhism as a civilizational factor.

3 Analysis

The fans of Dan Brown indeed adore the protagonist Prof. Robert Langdon and his imaginary subject called "*religious symbology*", which does not exist in reality at Harvard or any other university. But, Brown's fans might be really curious, if they fathom the usage of Buddhist symbols behind Chinese investment projects in Sri Lanka. In modern soft power diplomacy ideas and practices of the glorification of nations have been frequently presented by their intrinsic ways such as food, sports and the projection of cultural practices. Given such a wide array of

soft power strategic manures, China seems to have embraced a unique way of blending Theravada Buddhist culture with Mahayana tradition as a soft power innovation propelled by its civilizational saga with Sri Lanka.

The Architectural depiction of the Chinese invested skyscraper “Lotus Tower” in Colombo, Sri Lanka unfolds the gravity of Buddhist symbology that Beijing has reckoned on as a crucial element in its strategic interests in Sri Lanka. The choice of Lotus as an idiosyncratic feature of the tallest skyscraper in Colombo, that has been built as Chinese investment is a palpable embodiment of China’s novel strategy of blending its historic Mahayana Buddhist values under Sri Lanka’s Theravada Buddhist doctrine. From a vantage point, Lotus is an intrinsic icon for both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists. Lotus is being often used as a metaphor in Theravada tradition to describe the extraordinary life of Buddha. (Mendis, 2013) As how lotus blossoms in the depth of the impure mud while remaining pure, Buddha’s character was narrated in Theravada Buddhist tradition as a sage who lived in a mundane society with no attachment. In Mahayana Buddhism, there is a Buddhist discourse named “*Lotus sutra*”, which is considered one of the most influential Mahayana sutras and it was translated into Chinese during the era of the Western *Jin* dynasty by monk *Dharmaraksa*, who happened to be one of the prominent Chinese Buddhist monks in the 2nd century A.D. (Lai, 1989) Having known Sri Lanka’s Theravada Buddhist legacy rooted in the island’s every socio-political corner, China utilized a mutually significant symbol in its soft power projection in Colombo. Apart from, “Lotus Tower”, Nelum Pokuna Mahinada Rajapaksa theatre in Colombo Sri Lanka is another iconic edifice built under Chinese donation where the significance of “Lotus” remains visible. The image of Lotus as the overarching architectural design of *Nelum Pokuna* Mahinda Rajapaksa theatre has brought to the fore a powerful historical representation of “*Nelum Pokuna*” a pond built by Sri Lankan monarch *Parakramabahu the Great* during the 12th century in Polonnaruwa kingdom. But beneath this embodiment, China’s Mahayana Buddhist relevance of Lotus “*莲花*” stands firm displaying Beijing’s successful attempt to harmonize Chinese Buddhist presence with Sri Lanka’s historic roots.

While the world still remains culturally “*Americna*” based on American ideals from food to architecture, China’s attempt to uplift its soft power strategies still stands in the infancy stage. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that China’s enthusiasm to project their civilizational legacy through BRI distinguishes Chinese way of soft power diplomacy from the Americans.

By now the “Colombo Port City” project has become a news making topic with its unique nature and it is by all means the biggest infrastructure undertaking in Sri Lanka’s history with \$1.4 Billion by state owned Chinese engineering firm China Communication Construction Company (CCC). Built on 665 acres (2.6 sq km) of land being reclaimed from the Indian Ocean, the city is designed to be a smaller Singapore, with its own business-friendly tax regime and regulations and possibly a different legal system to the rest of Sri Lanka. Artistic impressions of the future Port City show a brightly lit cityscape comparable to Dubai or London’s Canary Wharf. Developers say 1.5 million sq. meters of office space will be available and private investment could reach \$13bn. Dense high-rises give way to lower-slung residential areas, crisscrossed by parks and canals. A marina and beach

line the city's edges. Within a few years, however, Port City will be the site of glass skyscrapers, a busy financial district, hospitals, hotels and even a theme park.

Although the above explanation represents the essential message of the Chinese mode of globalization in Sri Lanka, the underneath presentation that China has portrayed in the construction of the Port City project is indispensably relevant to fathom how China has clung to the notion of Buddhist diplomacy. The geometric positions chosen by the Chinese investors and the numerical values given to the reservation of the land implicitly connote China's sheer civilizational projection behind the Port City.

It should be noted that China's sudden interest in restoring its Buddhist heritage is strongly linked to its rivalry with India. India is the land where Buddhism was born and flourished before it reached its gradual ebb. But, under the colonial yoke, Indian nationalists were deeply moved by the shared Buddhist values between India and China to strengthen Indo-Sino relations as a Pan-Asian league. (Stolte, Fischer, 2012)The Hindutva view of Buddhism was mainly based on portraying it as a reformed school of Hinduism and leading Hindutva leaders like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar considered Buddhism as the unifying identity marker of Asia: the Hindu-Buddhist religion". (Jain,2012)But, this romanticized Indian tutelage as the country that introduced Buddhism to China has been widely critiqued by modern-day scholars. According to Tansen Sen, China's interaction with India based on Buddhism was confined to the 2nd and 3rd centuries as Chinese Buddhist doctrine saw its own development, moreover, after the 4th and 5th centuries Chinese Buddhism took a critical stance in Indian Buddhist doctrine. (Sen, 2003)

In the present day, India has again looked for Buddhism as a key element in its global soft power projection with its relations with the Asian countries. Especially Indian premier Modi was quick to gauge the relevance of Buddhism as a key aspect of his foreign policy by stating "Without Buddha, this century cannot be Asia's century". (Pethiyagoda,2015) It was a profound appeal emerged from New Delhi to uplift it's Buddhist legacy as India's greatest gift to the world. When it comes to Indian-Sri Lankan relations in the recent past, India seemed to have rely on projection of Buddhism as a pivotal factor. In his visit to Sri Lanka in 2015, prime minister Modi invoked the Buddhist links in his address to Sri Lanka parliament, promising "We will bring our shared Buddhist heritage closer to you".(Aurora,2015) But, in realty the modern India's cultural and political space do not adequately providing a nourishing ground for Buddhist diplomacy. The moral foundation of Buddhism is embedded in Buddha, Dhamma (Doctrine) and Sangha (the priesthood) commonly known as the "*Thrivida Rathna*" in Pali, but the practice of this concept has been extinguished from India mainland although Buddhism was born there. In reality, the status of Buddhism in modern India is no more than aggrandizement from the past, thus Modi's grand ambition of presenting Buddhism as a soft power tool is likely to become a bemused project. On the other hand, Modi's prime obsession with "Hindutva" consists of some doctrinal anathema to Buddhism as modern-day pioneer of "Hindutva" concept Savarkar had lampooned Buddhism as a weakening force which became disastrous to the national virility.(Heredia,2009) Hence, it appears to be a paradoxical move that Modi attempts to focus on restoring Buddhism as a key soft power tool while admiring Savarkar's "Hindutva" ideology. Now what is puzzling about Delhi's

projection of Buddhist diplomacy, as described here is the structural defects it contains to proceed as a key pillar of India soft power. Notwithstanding India's portrayal of herself as the cradle of Buddhism, present-day India does not have a considerable Buddhist population, also it lacks think tanks or renowned Buddhist teachers to spread Buddhism.

This conspicuous lacuna of India's attempt to use Buddhism as a strategic tool has paved the path to China. Beijing is possessing all the necessary capabilities to utilize its identical Buddhist heritage as the country which is the home for the largest Buddhist population in the world. China has witnessed a steeping growth of Buddhism under the leadership of the president Xi Jinping, who himself took a keen interest to uplift China's Buddhist heritage in the global sphere as a formidable strategy. Indeed, the policy that Xi Jinping has harbored in promoting Buddhist diplomacy has altered the face of Buddhism from its Indic roots to a Chinese version of Buddhism (*Zhongguo fojiao*) and this policy clearly stands to counter India's hegemony in Buddhist diplomacy. (Raymond,2020) For instance, the Nanhai Buddhist Academy was opened in 2017 in People Republic of China under state patronage as a rival institute to India's recently revived Nalanada Buddhist University. In addition, the certain policies adopted by China in promoting "Chinese projection of Buddhism" in specific countries are strongly aligned with that country's Buddhist history and it's civilizational link to China. In the policy paper authored by Yoshiko Ashiwa and David. L Wank to the Brookings institution, authors have indicated that China strives to utilize its global promotion of Buddhism as an influencing factor in Asia and the image of Buddhism that China promotes is a pure aggrandizement of Sinocentric Buddhist values embedded with the ideals that Chinese civilization. (Ashiwa,Wank,2020)

Xi Jinping's alacrity on Buddhist diplomacy and promotion of Buddhism globally resembles the imperial Japanese tradition widely used in the early 20th century which legitimized Japan's interventions in East Asian countries. But, history has clearly shown us the Japanese military ventures in East Asia met with strong Anti-Japanese resistance regardless of Japan's depiction of herself as the protector of the Buddhist creed.

Given China's lack of global soft power image, "Buddhist diplomacy" has been captured by Beijing as the last resort of building Chinese pacifism globally and the most notable salient feature in this wide Chinese global Buddhist diplomacy lies in the manner how China distinguishes herself from Indian Buddhist traditions. The remarks made by president Xi in 2014 regarding Buddhism's paramount importance in China with Chinese features was a reminder arose from the political apparatus of Beijing on the novel strategy of promoting a Sinocentric Buddhism in the global sphere. In his speech at UNESCO headquarters Xi Jinping emphasized

"Buddhism originated in ancient India. After, it was introduced into China, the religion went through an extended period of integrated development with the indigenous Confucianism and Taoism and the finally became Buddhism with Chinese characteristics. 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 and Southeast Asia and beyond".(Johnson,2017)

David Scot has analyzed Xi's vision of promoting Chinese vision of Buddhism as a reflection of China's past, where China was the "Middle Kingdom" and rest of the neighboring states appeared under the orbit of China. (Scot, 2016) Thus, the Chinese characteristics that president Xi mentioned were rooted in the belief that China should hold the helm in world Buddhist diplomacy.

Results

As this paper examined, the Chinese strategy of using Buddhism as a soft power tool in Sri Lanka has seen a rapid growth with the increasing presence of China in the island nation. Nevertheless, it is rather undeniable that the spiritual debt that Sri Lanka is owing to India stands as the biggest setback before Chinese Buddhist projection. Especially, the Sinhalese Buddhists in the island still maintain a spiritual connection with India as the land where Buddha was enlightened, carried out his *dhamma* and finally attained "*nibbana*". The strong Theravada tradition that has been nourished for more than two thousand five hundred years of affinity with India still plays a profound role as a catalyst factor in the relations between the two countries. Despite the constant invasions that came from the Indian mainland in the course of history to the integrity of the island, the reverence toward India has been continuing as India lingers in the Sinhalese Buddhist psyche as a spiritual shrine. From a theoretical point of view, the bulk of India's strength in deploying Buddhist diplomacy was ahead of the curve in the post-independent India under its first premier Nehru, who patronized first Buddhist Congress in Sanchi in 1954. (Thero,2011)

It is within that context that one needs to understand how China attempts to utilize Buddhist diplomacy in Sri Lanka, which is a place where strong Indic oriented Theravada Buddhist tradition remains unshaken regardless of the political discontents of the two countries. Above all, revival of China's interest in Buddhism and its global promotion appear to be paradoxical with the avowedly aesthetic nature of Chinese Communist party. Furthermore, the past atrocities committed during the cultural revolution in China against the Buddhist monks are another strong grim memory which can question the sudden rejuvenation of China's interest in global Buddhism.

Alongside this historical burden that has been chasing China's present endeavours, the success that Beijing has gained in Sri Lanka on Buddhist diplomacy is rather impressive. As we discussed in this paper, the historical projection of Mahayana Buddhist links with Sri Lanka that derived from the time of Fa Xian carried a legacy rooted in Chinese characteristics of Buddhism and the current strategies adopted by Beijing in Sri Lanka represent the same ethos.

One of the notable manifestations of China's practical approach to using Buddhist diplomacy in Sri Lanka is that its rapid success in making a rapport with the local Buddhist monks. China is well aware of the fact that making any hostility toward local Theravada Buddhist monks is inimical for its public diplomacy in Sri Lanka. Therefore, Beijing has aptly adhered to forming an amicable alliance with leading Sri Lankan Buddhist monks and this strategy is grounded on retrospection of the island's historic ties with Chinese civilization to buttress the overarching success of China's Buddhist diplomacy in Sri Lanka. According to some sources, Beijing played a crucial role in harboring former president Sri Lankan Mahinda Rajapaksa's election campaign during the 2015 presidential election.

(Abeyanayake,2018) The reports indicate that a huge amount of money was given by the Chinese to Rajapaksa's campaign through a Chinese company named "China Harbor" which is a state-owned entity that built the Hambantota port in Southern Sri Lanka. The report has further unveiled that out of these funds, \$38,000 were donated to a popular Buddhist monk who took Sinhalese Buddhist chauvinist and pro-Rajapaksa stance. (Sharma,2020)

To evaluate what China expects from Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka requires the understanding of how Sinhalese Buddhist pulsation functions in Sri Lankan society and it is evident that China has clearly understood the gravity of Buddhist monks as a dynamic factor in the political apparatus of Sri Lanka. The 9th Article in the Sri Lankan constitution enshrines the importance of Buddhism and the role of *Sangha* (Buddhist Monks) is contingent on the success of any political upheaval in the island. During his tenure, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa maintained a rapport with Buddhist monks which was more palatable and grounded on the common conviction of Sri Lanka's post-independent populist doctrine of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. It is a fact beyond a conjuncture that many Sri Lankan Sinhalese Buddhist monks share a sceptical attitude toward modern Indian nations state replete with resentment as they believe India is culpable of planting the seeds of Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka. (Dixith,1997)

These idiosyncratic features prevalent among the traditional belief of Sri Lankan Buddhist monks have been aptly captured by China in its recent Buddhist diplomacy strategy in Colombo. The subsequent actions taken by the Chinese after Mahinda Rajapaksa's political defeat in 2015 shows how cleverly Beijing attempted to approach the Buddhist sangha in Sri Lanka. For instance, in 2015 Chinese ambassador in Sri Lanka arranged a meeting with the chief monk of the Asgiriya chapter of Siam nikaya in Sri Lanka, one the two important Buddhist orders in Sri Lanka.(Sharma,2020) The chief Buddhist monk of Asgiriya chapter was a vocal supporter of former president Rajapaksa. It was in this context that China forged a closer bond with a powerful Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka, which was followed by an invitation to Sri Lankan Buddhist monks to participate in the Fourth World Buddhist Forum in China. The establishment of the China -Sri Lanka Buddhist Association is another platform in Sri Lanka that is a more sanguine hope for China to galvanize its influence among the Sri Lankan Buddhist monks. When the COVID outbreak started in Wuhan in China, a large group of Sri Lankan Buddhist monks under the sponsorship of China-Sri Lanka Buddhist Association conducted a special prayer ceremony in Anuradhapura to invoke the blessings for Chinese people and to express Sri Lanka's solidarity.(Huaxia,2020) The choice of "Abayagiriya" as the venue to conduct the prayer ceremony was a symbolic factor that reminds of China's legacy in the island dates back to Fa Xian's stay in Abayagiriya in the 5th century A.D.

Recommendations

China may have clung to appeasing the Sinhalese Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka as an indispensable strategy to counter any possible resistance that may arise from the most influential community in Sri Lanka society for the BRI projects. However, the recent vilifications that emerged within Sri Lankan public opinion including Buddhist monks regarding China's presence on the island raise the question of whether Beijing has succeeded in projecting its Buddhist diplomacy as an echoing voice. In particular, Colombo Port City, which is purely a Chinese invested project has been lampooned by Sri Lankan civil society led by Buddhist monks as a blatant breach of Sri Lanka's territorial sovereignty. (Moorthi,2021) Thus, it is rather ambiguous to assume that China would possibly penetrate the Sri Lankan Buddhist order by projecting its historical Buddhist ties with the island nation. The practicality of Chinese projection of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, despite its growing influence, is a questionable matter by virtue of Sri Lanka's Theravada Buddhist tradition which is closely linked to India. Also, it should be noted that the people to people contacts existed between two countries after independence through the prism of religious tourism is an indomitable factor that China cannot overcome overnight. But, the contention that we built in this paper on the intensity of China's Buddhist diplomacy in Sri Lanka has shown the emerging growth of Chinese strategy in its liminal period, which is likely to grow fervently in future. In some ways, Beijing's ardor of carrying out the Buddhist diplomacy in Sri Lanka needs to be understood as a type of influence operation. Gregory V Raymond has analyzed the strength of influence operations executed during Xi Jinping's era for past few years, which were undertaken by China's United Front Work Department (UFWD) that reported directly to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.(Raymond, 2020) Contrary to the Communist denial of religion, UFWD has taken a paternal interest in promoting Chinese projection of Buddhism in the Eastern Asian Buddhist societies through the common prism of shared world view. Raymond suggests that Buddhist diplomacy became China's shield in Southeast Asian states to counter the furore against BRI. Beijing seems to have understood the cosmological value of Theravada Buddhist doctrine in those states as a colossal figure in the political structure. The significance of religion by creating a shared worldview is benign which constitutes some shared common values that would inevitably lead to independent polities, which is tantamount to what Hedley Bull described as an "International Society".(Bull, 1966)

Overall, the intensified mechanism of projecting Buddhist diplomacy in Sri Lanka buttresses China's influencing position in the island regardless of the strong Indian impacts in Sri Lanka's socio-cultural domain. While China will always cope with an array of setbacks in utilizing Buddhism as a soft power strategy in Sri Lanka to the overarching success of BRI, it has the advantage of newly emerged pro-Chinese Buddhist intelligentsia in the island nation. This paper has traced the steeping increase of Chinese influence over the Buddhist monkhood in Sri Lanka as a pivotal factor that fortifies Beijing's orbit in Sri Lanka and the question that comes to the fore is that how it would vanquish the age-long civilizational tryst with India. In contrast to this strong Indian visibility in every nook and cranny of Sri Lanka's national identity, the acute mechanism China developed in Sri Lanka has emphasized reviving the Chinese elements in Buddhism and its historic significance to Sri Lankan Buddhist identity. This article began by considering the antecedents of Chinese involvements in Sri Lankan history and their contemporary relevance, it has also examined how China underpins its intrinsic Buddhist tradition

which distinguishes it from Indic roots in Sri Lanka through framing the Chinese blend of Buddhism through the architecture. Despite the obvious impetus conceived by China in Sri Lanka in forming the projection of Buddhism, its fullest objective may be difficult to attain as a soft power strategy. Nevertheless, it would not be an exaggeration to describe the Chinese Buddhist diplomacy as a clever mechanism that still stands in its infancy stage and its outcome may be a bulwark for the Chinese presence in Sri Lanka.

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