



Research Article

Geopolitics of Buddhism and Its Impact in Buddha's Birthplace

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Abstract

Nepal, the birthplace of lord Buddha, a cultural corridor, and transmission of Buddhism between Indian and Chinese civilizations is transforming into the geopolitical battleground of Buddhism between India, China and USA on the verge of selection of the 15th Dalai Lama. The study aims at studying the geopolitics of Buddhism in the Himalayas, the probable conflict between the Dalai Lama Foundation and Beijing regarding the selection of the 15th Dalai Lama and its implications on the birthplace of Lord Buddha-Nepal. The study adopts Alexander E. Wendt's 'Agent-Structure Problem in International Relation Theory' to analyse the actors of geopolitics and structural culture in the Buddhism geopolitics of the Himalayas. The study is qualitative in design and primarily based in secondary data collected through various journal articles, books and websites. The primary data required for the study are collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to understand the Buddhist diplomacy and geopolitics of Buddhism on the selection of the 15th Dalai Lama. The study discovers that the conflict is inevitable between Dalai Lama and Beijing on the reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama which leads to the selection of two Dalai Lamas. It brings clear division and confusion among the Buddhist communities all over the world which will shape the security and political dynamics of the Himalayas nations. The study confirms Nepal will be more sufferer on the Buddhism geopolitics among the big powers which is more likely to raise question on its non-alignment and neutrality policy.

Keywords

Buddhism, Geopolitics, Dalai Lama, Diplomacy, Reincarnation

1. Introduction

The Himalayas are a crescent-shaped mountain range extending from Namcha Barwa in the east to Nanga Parbat in the west, stretching approximately 2500 km with a width of 150 km - 350 km [31]. China, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan are the nations which controls various significant trade routes in the Himalayas. The high Himalayas stretches from Namcha Barwa to Nanga Parbat acts as a natural barrier between Indian sub-continent and China from an ancient time. However, the limited narrow passes of the Himalayas have established

the line of communication between Indian and Chinese civilizations through which the trade has been facilitating and culture has been transmitting from an ancient time. Nepal, Bhutan, India, China (especially Tibet) are highly influenced by the Buddhism and the culture of the people living both in the northern and southern belt of the Himalayas are deeply rooted in Buddhism. Therefore, Buddhism is a cultural bridge among the Himalayan people of India, Nepal, China and Bhutan which influences the political and security dynamism of

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Himalaya nations. The fled of Dalai Lama from Tibet and his asylum in India in 1956 A.D., formation of exile government of Tibet (Central Tibet Administration-CTA) in Dharamshala, the support of USA to Tibetan Khampa's armed struggle against China conducted from the territory of Nepal are the geopolitical activities rooted in Himalayan Buddhism which has shaped the political and security dynamics of Himalayan nations. Ninety-year-old present fourteenth His Holiness Dalai Lama decided to be a spiritual leader only, and handed his political power to his fellows in 2011 [43]. The old age of the present 14th Dalai Lama, the selection of the 15th Dalai Lama, rivalry between India and China to lead Buddhism in the world obviously influences the traditional cultural ties between the monasteries and people along the Himalayas. The tussle and lack of understanding between the Dalai Lama Foundation and Chinese authority during the selection of the 15th Dalai Lama seems to increase the geo-cultural tension among Himalayan nations which influences the political and security dynamism of the Himalayas.

The study identifies Buddhism as an unavoidable geopolitical element in the Himalayan region. It circumnavigates on analysing the implication on the political and security dynamics of Nepal because of the geo-cultural rivalry of Buddhism between India, China and USA. Evans and Newnham define geopolitics in international relations as a method of studying foreign policy through geographical variables. The geographical variables include natural resources, climate, demography, area studies and topography. The study of geopolitics helps to understand, explain and predict political behaviours [15]. The definition of geopolitics presented by Evans and Newnham is considered as an operational definition for the study. The study particularly underscores Buddhist culture as a geopolitical element on the geopolitics of the Himalayan regions. It focuses on analysing the connection between the Himalayan geography and Buddhist culture on shaping the political dynamics of Himalayan nations. The study presents geo-cultural perspective on the analysis of geopolitical rivalry between India and China in the Himalayan regions. The study also adopts Alexander E. Wendt's 'Agent-Structure Problem in International relations Theory'. China, India, Nepal, Tibet, USA are the important actors and their actions in international relations are analysed through shared culture of Buddhism in the Himalayas.

2. Methodology

The study is descriptive, analytical and content analysis. It is qualitative in design. The research is primarily based on secondary data. However, it also conducts KIIs with security expert and cultural expert of Buddhism to acquire primary data to understand geopolitics of Buddhism in the present context. The secondary data is collected from various publications including books, journals, news articles, and websites. The news required for the study is retrieved from various national and international daily and weekly online news portal. An open-

ended interview is conducted with retired Nepali Army Major General Suresh Kumar Karki (who completed NDC from China) on June 10, 2026 in Kathmandu. In 11 June 2026, another open-ended interview is conducted with Tibetan origin Nepali Buddhist regarding the cultural ties of Himalaya nations and reincarnation of fifteenth Dalai Lama. The collected data are interpreted to analyze the geopolitics of Buddhism in the Himalayas and its implications in the political and security dynamics of Nepal.

3. Literature Review

The literature review focuses on analysing the conflict between the Dalai Lama Foundation and Beijing during the selection of the 15th Dalai Lama. It also highlights the Buddhist diplomacy adopted by India and China and its role in shaping the security and politics of the Himalayas. The review also underscores the cultural diplomacy based on Buddhism adopted by India, China and USA in the infrastructural development of Nepal.

Stobdan (2019) mentions about the great geopolitical game between India and China regarding Tibet in the Himalaya region. The author also explains how the matter of Tibet connected with Buddhism has been shaping the geopolitics of Himalayan nations. He states the probable dispute between the Dalai Lama Foundation and Chinese authority regarding the declaration of the fifteenth Dalai Lama. The author also explains Sino-Indian diplomatic challenges on their rivalry to lead Buddhism in the world. The author explains how the unresolved border disputes between India and China, the Tibet issue and the exile Tibetan government (CTA), and the declaration of the Fifteenth Dalai Lama has been shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Himalayas.

3.1. Policy Review

The Buddhist Association of China (BAC) was established in 1953 and operating under United Front Work Development of Chinese Communist Party to ensure the Buddhist activities align to the core values of socialism and patriotism. The BAC regulates religious activities and monastic order throughout China. The BAC was banned during the cultural revolution of China, remerged in 1980 and oversee the registration and restoration of temples and monasteries following party's guidelines. The Xi administration implemented "Sinicization of Religion" policy which focuses on the subordination of all religious activities to the political agenda of communist party [35].

Rubin (2024) mentions that China has been intensifying the use of the BCA to spread its international influences through organizing World Buddhist Forum and discussing bilateral and multilateral religious cooperation with majority Buddhist population nation including Myanmar, Sri-Lanka, Thailand, Laos, Mongolia etc [32]. China has been investing on the renovation of Buddhist temples and monasteries, and promoting Buddhism and strengthening its soft power by organizing high

level visit of foreign officials to various Buddha temples and stupas in China. China also reinforced the consolidation of Lumbini Buddhist University of Nepal. (retired Nepali Army Major General Suresh Kumar Karki-NDC from China, Personal Communication, July 30, 2025).

The International Campaign for Tibet (2024) mentions Buddhist Association of China (BAC) as a state sponsored tool for an assimilation of Tibetan Buddhism to the strategy of Chinese Communist Party [18]. The BAC has become a powerful instrument to launch Sinification of Tibetan Buddhism through the establishment of special committee, introducing a five-year plan of patriotic education for Tibetan Buddhist, and the role for the search of Tibetan Buddhist reincarnations. The official website of the Central Tibet Administration (CTA) mentions that the unique cultural and national identity of Tibet has been continuously threatened and manipulated by Chinese authority by denouncing the Dalai Lama, introducing patriotic educational system to Tibetan Buddhist, and the regular influx of Chinese immigrants into Tibet which is changing the demography of Tibet converting Tibetan in minority inside Tibet.

On 24 January 2026, during an inauguration of the Second Global Buddhist Summit Minister for Culture and Tourism Gajendra Singh Shekhawat states that India emerges as a global platform for Buddhist dialogue under PM Modi's administration [2]. Bhattacharjee (2025) mentions the formation of the International Buddhist Federation, hosting the Global Buddhist Summit, advocating Buddhism in international forum by PM Modi, and underscoring shared Buddhist culture among Asian nations prove that Buddhism has taken central position of soft power in Indian diplomatic strategy [8].

United States of America issued three policies regarding Tibet; Tibetan Policy Act (2002), Tibetan Policy and Support Act (2019), and Resolve Tibet Act (2024). The Tibetan Policy Act, 2002 is directed to provide essential support to protect distinct identity of Tibetan and human rights. Tibetan Policy and Support Act, 2019 underpins the economic, diplomatic and humanitarian support to Tibet and underscores the selection of next Dalai Lama as a sole authority of Tibetan Buddhist. Similarly, the act seeks to establish Tibetan section in the US Embassy of Beijing and US consulate in Lasha, also inspire Nepal to issue legal documents for Tibetan residing in Nepal [39]. The Resolve Tibet Act, 2024 focuses on countering disinformation campaign of China regarding Tibetan history and underscores the dialogue between Dalai Lama representatives and Chinese authority for the peaceful settlement of disputes.

3.2. Empirical Review

Chia (2025) states that India and China are in hard rivalry to influence the Buddhist majority nations of south and south-east Asia. Both nations have highly emphasized Buddhism as a soft power to strengthen their cultural inspirations. India has presented itself as a land of origination of Buddhism and introduced 'Buddhist Circuit' whereas China has incorporated Buddhism in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. Both

nations have been hosting international Buddhist summits and conferences, and competing to be a steward of Buddhist heritage. Though both nations are connected through Buddhism, the unresolved border disputes along Himalayas, presence of Dalai Lama and exile Tibetan government in India seems more likely competition rather than cooperation between India and China [11].

Gupta (2025) explains the likely conflict between Tibetan government in exile and Chinese Authority regarding the reincarnation of the Fifteenth Dalai Lama and the spillover effect in India and Nepal. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama said that the sole authority of the declaration of the reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama remains only to the Gaden Phodrang Trust and nobody is authorized to interfere. Countering the statement of Dalai Lama, China issued the statement clarifying that the reincarnation and succession of Dalai Lama is its internal affairs. India issued a statement keeping far on the issue however India ensures freedom of religion to all and assured to continue it [20].

A former foreign secretary of India-Nirupama Rao (2025) explains that the Himalayan region has altered into a real geopolitical chessboard between India and China because of Buddhism and the probable conflict between Chinese authority and Tibetan Buddhist Community regarding the reincarnation of the Fifteenth Dalai Lama. The author predicts the reincarnation of two Dalai Lamas separately declared by the 14th Dalai lama and Chinese authority. The existence of two Dalai Lamas will be a global issue and creates a clear cleavage among the Buddhist communities of Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, Arunachal, and it also splits Buddhist nations from Mongolia to Sri-Lanka. India, as a host nation of the 14th Dalai Lama and Tibetan-Government-in-exile, and a likely reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama in India seems to increase geopolitical tension between India and China in Himalayas [30].

Namgail et al. (2025) argue that India has vigorously underscoring the Buddhism diplomacy under PM Modi's administration, and redirecting its diplomatic relationship with Buddhist majority nations of south and south East Asia. On the other, China also considers Buddhism as an instrument of diplomacy to facilitate its economic objective in the strategic areas in the neighbourhood of India especially Myanmar, Sri-Lanka and Nepal. The authors also mention about the probable conflict between the Dalai Lama Foundation and China regarding the reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama. The authors also suggest India to adopt 'ASHOKA' model to counter China's Buddhist diplomacy [28].

Jones (2025) argue that China venerated Kumarajiva for his contribution to Buddhism. The Chinese emphasis of Buddhism is deeply rooted in its geopolitical and ideological ambitions. China has aligned Buddhist diplomacy with its Belt and Road Initiative to spread cultural influence. The veneration of Kumarajiva also strengthens China's territorial and claims as well as reinforces its civilizational narrative [21]. Chung (2022) states that China considering Buddhism as a

shared faith is investing heavily in the construction and reconstructions of monasteries and temples, hosting Buddhist conferences and global summits of monks and nuns of Buddhist nations. It proves that China has adopted Buddhism as an important diplomatic initiative to spread its cultural influences in nations with shared beliefs of Buddhism especially Sri-Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, India, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Mongolia, Korea and Japan [12].

Bhandari (2019) argues that Nepal as a birthplace of Lord Buddha keeps significant geopolitical values to her neighbours. The Chinese proposal of developing Lumbini as a tourism hub was highly condemned by international media especially India labelling it as a hijack of Buddhism. Lumbini, a crest of peace is turned into the geopolitical battleground between two Asian giants India and China [7]. Tuladhar (2022) states that Lord Buddha visited Lumbini many times after Nirvana and made many monks who helped to spread Buddhism to other places. Nepal's should not be limited on claiming the birthplace of Lord Buddha. Nepal's foreign policy needs to be redefined based on Buddhist philosophy in the relation with her neighbours India, China and other Buddhist nations [50].

The unresolved border dispute between India and China, the rejection of Mc Mahon Line as a boundary by China, and the small skirmishes between Indian and Chinese Army in Himalayas has intensified the geopolitical rivalry between India and China in cultural and religious theatre as well. Tawang, the birth place of the Sixth Dalai Lama holds great cultural significance in Buddhism. The claim of China over south Tibet (Arunachal Pradesh), India's determined administration in Tawang, and the probability of reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama has made Tawang a possible flash point of the geopolitics of Buddhism [38].

The National Human Rights Commission of Nepal (NHRC) recommended government of Nepal to conduct detail investigation regarding Tibetan Origin Blood (TOB) involvement in Gen-Z protest of September 8 and 9. The investigation of NHRC uncovered that TOB used the youths and students as human shield, provoked to break security cordon, and systematically hijacked the Gen-Z protest [33]. In 13 sept 2025, Dalai Lama extended his congratulations to Sushila Karki, Prime Minister of interim Government of Nepal formed after Gen-Z movement. He also extended his gratitude to Nepal for hosting Tibetan refugees since 1959 [42]. Similarly, Sikyong Penpa Tsering- an elected president of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) congratulated Prime Minister Balendra Shah and highlighted the deep-rooted spiritual and historical ties, also mentioned that it is further strengthened by the Tibetan community residing as refugee in Nepal [10]. This is the first record of congratulating newly appointed Nepali Prime Minister by Dalai Lama and the CTA president.

3.3. Research Gap

The reviewed literatures confirm the geopolitical rivalry of Buddhism between India and China in the Himalayas. The

Buddhist diplomacy adopted by China and India competes each other. The US policy considers the declaration of the 15th Dalai Lama as a sole authority of Dalai Lama foundation which is conflicting with the policy of China. The huge investment of China in strengthening Buddhism through construction and reconstruction of monasteries and temples, organizing global conferences, and extending international financial supports to Buddhist nations has reinforced China's soft power diplomacy in south and south East Asian nations. On the other, the Buddhist diplomacy adopted by Modi's Government and its attempt to take global initiative in Buddhism has intensified geopolitical rivalry in the Himalayas. The reviewed literatures also approve the competition between India and China rather than cooperation on the diplomatic use of Buddhism. There are limited literatures on Buddhism geopolitics and its impacts on the Buddha's birthplace. The Gen-Z movement held in Sept 8 and 9, 2025 has changed the political course of Nepal. It is necessary to analyse the role of TOB in Gen-Z movement, and the likely impacts to Nepal while declaring the 15th Dalai Lama. The literature review clearly identifies the research gap on the impact of Nepal because of Buddhism geopolitics between India, China and Dalai Lama foundation during the declaration of the incarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama. The study primarily focuses on analysing Buddhism geopolitics during the reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama and its implications on the birthplace of Lord Buddha.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Conflicting Policies

USA adopted Tibetan Policy Act (2002), Tibetan Policy and Support Act (2019), and Resolve Tibet Act (2024) to support Tibet and maintain its relation with Tibet. These policies focus on supporting Tibet to maintain their unique identity, ensuring human rights of Tibetan people, maintaining sole authority of Dalai Lama in the selection of his successor, combating disinformation campaign of China regarding Tibetan history, and promoting dialogues between Dalai Lama foundation and China for the peaceful settlement of the dispute. China considers Tibet as it's integral part and the selection of the 15th Dalai Lama as its internal issue. China doesn't accept any intervention in any form regarding Tibet issue. China considers the act of Dalai Lama and the Central Tibet Authority (CTA) as a separatist action against the territorial integrity of China [4]. The Buddhist diplomacy adopted by India and China as a soft power to influence Buddhist nations of south and south east Asia intensifies geopolitical rivalry between India and China to lead the Buddhist world which will create friction along Himalayas. India has been hosting spiritual leader Dalai Lama and the CTA since 1959, and allowing Tibetan Buddhist in religious and spiritual activities. In 2023, the preplanned visit of Dalai Lama to Sikkim and West Bengal was postponed and the visit of Arunachal Province was can-

celled because of the geopolitical complications arouse between India and China [47]. It shows that India is conscious about the political activities of Tibetan Buddhist and Dalai Lama, and its drawback in its bilateral relationship with China. India and China do not want to ruin their bilateral relationship further; therefore, lot of diplomatic manoeuvres and summits are in progress between India and China [6].

4.2. Geopolitics of Buddhism

The culture of Himalayas nations is deeply rooted in Buddhism. A shared faith between the people of Tibet Autonomous Region (China), India (Sikkim, Ladakh, Arunachal, Himachal), Bhutan and Nepal shape the political and security dynamism of the Himalayas. China has incorporated Buddhism in diplomacy as a soft power in strengthening relationship with Buddhist nations as well as countering Tibetan Buddhist's separatist activities. Similarly, India as an origination of Buddhism has been promoting Buddhist diplomacy to secure its national interests. Both India and China are directed

to spread its influences through Buddhist diplomacy among the Buddhist nations of south and south east Asia. The study supports the idea of Phunchok Stobdan (2019) regarding the great geopolitical game in the declaration of the reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama. The contradicting policies of USA and India with China regarding the reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama has added complexities on the geopolitical game of Buddhism in the Himalayas. Dalai Lama's declaration regarding the reincarnation of his successor outside China, large Tibetan Buddhist Community residing in India, India's commitment towards religious freedom, and USA's policy regarding the sole authority of Dalai Lama on the declaration of his successor have added new geopolitical friction in the Himalayas. The declaration of the 15th Dalai Lama separately by China and Dalai Lama Foundation questions the spiritual and traditional legitimacy of the new Dalai Lama. It will also divide the Buddhist communities around the world and it is more likely to commence Buddhism based religious conflict in Ladakh, Himachal, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunachal and Tibet.

Table 1. Buddhist Population in the world in 2026.

S. No.	Country	% of Buddhist Population	Buddhist Population	S. No.	Country	% of Buddhist Population	Buddhist Population
1	Cambodia	97.1%	16.2M	11	Macau	19.6%	130K
2	Thailand	94.4%	67.6M	12	Taiwan	19.2%	4.5M
3	Myanmar	89.1%	47.2M	13	South Korea	19%	9.8M
4	Bhutan	74.7%	580K	14	Malaysia	18.9%	6.4M
5	Sri Lanka	69.6%	15.7M	15	Hong Kong	8.4%	630K
6	Laos	64.2%	4.7M	16	Nepal	8.2%	2.4M
7	Mongolia	51.1%	1.7M	17	Brunei	6.3%	30K
8	Japan	37.2%	47M	18	China	3.7%	53.4M
9	Singapore	30.8%	1.7M	19	Australia	2.6%	670K
10	Vietnam	23%	22.6M	20	Canada	1.7%	660K

Note: Adapted from *Buddhist Countries 2026* by World Population Review. Copyright 2026 World Population Review.

As shown in Table 1 (World Population Review, 2026) most of the south east Asian nations are influenced by Buddhism. Similarly, south Asian nations particularly, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and India are also influenced by Buddhism. India's 0.09% (9.6 M) population are Buddhist [52]. Buddhism also influences the process of shaping political environment in south east and south Asian nations. Therefore, Buddhism can be practiced as a feasible diplomatic tool in the bilateral relationship among the south and south east Asian nations.

The conflict during the declaration of the 15th Dalai Lama is inevitable between Beijing and Dalai Lama foundation. The

possibility of agreement between Dalai Lama and Beijing seems less likely, therefore there will be two Dalai Lamas declared by Beijing and the Dalai Lama Foundation. It will divide the Buddhist communities all over the world. The legitimacy of the next Dalai depends on the selection criteria and approval of Beijing. The majority of Tibetan Buddhist living inside Tibet are found satisfactory with the infrastructural development, economic progress, security and stability in Tibet which has quelled the voice of free Tibet inside Tibet. The Tibetan people living as refugee outside China especially in India, Nepal and Bhutan are in minority. The 15th Dalai Lama

declared by Beijing will be wholeheartedly accepted by the Tibetan Buddhist living inside Tibet. However, there is great possibility of demonstrations by the minority Tibetan Buddhist living as refugee outside China whose impact may be hyped in international media but it will have insignificant impact in Tibet. The Chinese diplomatic, economic and military might, and its traditional veto of the approval of the selection of Dalai Lama ensures legitimacy to Beijing established the 15th Dalai Lama. The loss of legitimacy of the 15th Dalai Lama by the majority of Tibetan People living inside Tibet adversely affect the exile Government of Tibet. Dalai Lama is considered as a bedrock of Central Tibet Administration, and the lack of legitimacy of Dalai Lama questions the existence of exile Government of Tibet. Therefore, the CTA is more likely to die with the demise of His Holiness 14th Dalai Lama (Tibetan Origin Nepali Buddhist Chheden Sherpa Bhote, Personal Communication, June 11, 2026).

4.3. Tibet Card

India has been hosting Dalai Lama since 1959 and the exile government of Tibet along with 100,000 Tibetan refugee in Dharmashala which provides a diplomatic leverage to India in its relationship with China [29]. Arunachal Pradesh which includes culturally important Tawang area is a highly disputed area between India and China. In 2008, Dalai Lama announced that the disputed Tawang between India and China; is a part of India [23]. This can be taken as a best example of Tibet Card played by India to secure its national interest. The 'Tibet Card' seems less effective on the condition of India's acceptance Tibet as a region of China in 1954, Tibet itself left the issue of independence, and the proposed 'Middle Way Approach' of Dalai Lama seeking cultural autonomy instead of independence [18]. India has repeated its commitment towards 'One China Policy' [16]. Most importantly, the military, diplomatic, technological, and economic power of China pose direct challenge to any form of 'Tibet Card' played against it. On the other, USA also raises human rights issue of Tibetan and provide support to preserve Tibetan's unique identity. In 2011, China condemned the meeting between US President Barrack Obama and Tibetan spiritual leader and accused USA using 'Dalai Lama' as a card against China [40]. In 2024, China also showed its strong objection regarding the meeting between US politician and Dalai Lama in India, and China remarked playing 'Dalai Card' by USA is a lousy move [19]. The study proves that playing card against a powerful nation is also a risky game which also harms to the card player as well. The great risk will be to a nation which will be used as a card in the game of big powers.

4.4. Political and Security Dynamism of the Himalayas

The long-standing unresolved border disputes between India and China, Sino-Indian military stand-off in Himalayan

frontier, Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Sino-Pakistan all weather bilateral relationship, a four-day military conflict between India and Pakistan in May 2025, unilateral suspension of Indus Water Treaty (IWT) by India, construction of hydro-electricity dam in Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) in great U Bend by China, and Tibet issue along with reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama has been shaping the political and security dynamism of the Himalayas in different approach. On 8 May 2026, China confirmed that its engineers provided Pakistan on site technical support in the arial war between India and Pakistan in May 2025 [37]. Previously, China was accused of providing real time information and military assistance to Pakistan during war. The global warming and melting of glacier due to climate change has changed the geopolitical climate of Himalayas. Himalayas also considered as a water tower of Asia provides multiple freshwater ecosystem service (FES) to the Himalayan nations including China [36]. The construction of hydroelectricity dam in big rivers controlling water flow and the unilateral suspension of existing water treaty has opened new front of geopolitical game of water resources in the Himalayas. The G219 national highway of China (Appx. 10065 KM) runs parallel to the Himalayas along its southern and western borders provides strategic leverages for the rapid deployment of the troops in southern and western frontier, facilitates logistic movement during war, confirms the territorial integrity of the remote areas by linking with mainland [9]. The well build up villages along the G219 national highway also strengthen internal security and stability in Tibet. The strategic leverages which China gained through the construction of G219 highway has created security dilemma to India [13]. The surfaced conflict between the Dalai Lama Foundation and China regarding the incarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama has added Buddhism geopolitics in the Himalayas.

4.5. Nepal as a Battleground of Buddhism Geopolitics

Nepal, geographically a small landlocked nation acted as a cultural corridor between two different Indian and Chinese civilizations. Nepal also played crucial role on the transmission of Buddhism from Indian sub-continent to China. Nepal as a birthplace of Lord Buddha is a scared place to all the Buddhist people of the world. Lumbini, where Lord Buddha was born is a great pilgrimage of Buddhist like 'Mecca to Muslims'. Though, the visit of Dalai Lama to Lumbini is not a religious obligation, the visit keeps great spiritual and political value for Dalai Lama. The present Dalai Lama visited Lumbini last time in 1987 and never had an opportunity to revisit Lumbini because of geopolitical situations [48]. The next 15th Dalai Lama also needs to visit Buddha's birthplace for his/her spiritual legitimacy and religious influence among the Buddhist people and especially among the Tibetan Buddhist residing inside and outside Tibet. If there is no understanding on

the declaration of the 15th Dalai Lama between China and Dalai Lama, and there are two Dalai Lamas, then Nepal will be pushed into the deep geopolitics of Buddhism. That will have adverse impact on the internal security and politics of Nepal as well as in the international relation of Nepal with its neighbours, Buddhist majority population nations and sympathizer nations of Buddhism.

In 2025, Dalai Lama announced that he will have successor and the next Dalai Lama will be born in free world outside China. He also declared that his Gaden Phodrang Trust has the sole authority for the declaration of next Dalai Lama. Pointing towards China, Dalai Lama mentioned that no one has authority to interfere on the declaration of his successor. USA also considers the sole authority of Gaden Phodrang Trust for the declaration of the 15th Dalai Lama [26]. In July 2024, Kiren Rijju, Indian Minister of Earth Sciences participated on the celebration of 90th birthday of Dalai Lama in Dharmashala and supported the announcement of Dalai Lama regarding the declaration of his successor as a sole authority of his trust. India assures religious freedom and doesn't take any position on the religious faiths and beliefs [49]. Countering the announcement of Dalai Lama regarding the reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama, the official of Chinese Communist Party mentioned that the Government of China will discover next Dalai Lama using domestic search [34]. The Tibetan Policy and Support Act 2019 of USA also consider the sole authority of Dalai Lama in the selection of his successor. The conflicting policies of India, China and USA regarding reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama will transmute Nepal into the geopolitical battleground of trilateral power. The weak intelligence and security mechanism of small nation Nepal is likely to face severe geopolitical challenges of Buddhism which will adversely impact the internal politics and international relations of Nepal.

The Tibetan refugees are residing in Nepal since 1959 after Dalai Lama left Tibet and took asylum in Dharmshala, India. The Tibetan refugees were sheltered in a dozen of refugee camps in mainly in Kathmandu and Pokhara. The highest number of Tibetan refugees recorded approximately 20,000 before 2008 and the numbers of refugees is found gradually declining [44]. In 2023, the Home Ministry of Nepal states that there are about 12,000 Tibetan refugees sheltering in Nepal among them 9,101 refugees live in Kathmandu valley and the large number (4,546) of refugees live in Baudha area [46]. In 1974, Nepal successfully suppressed the armed Khampa rebellion initiated from 1960 against China from the territory of Nepal which was also supported by USA and India [22]. This is an experience on which Nepal was selected as a battleground between USA, India and China regarding Tibet. The cycle of tripolar geopolitical rivalry between India, China and USA regarding Tibet using Nepal seems more likely to revolve on the same circumference after a half-century.

The Asia Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation

(APECF), a quasi-governmental Chinese NGO signed an agreement with United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) to provide 3 billion US Dollars for the development of Lumbini as a foremost Buddhist pilgrimage which includes the construction of airport, hotel, temples, Buddhist University, convention centers etc. [3]. In 2024, Nepal and China signed an MOU on "Friendly and cooperative relationship between Lumbini Sacred Garden, Nepal and Leshan Giant Buddha Scenic Area, China", which extended the bilateral relationship at local level through the promotion of tourism based on Buddhism [24]. In 2022, PM Modi's helicopter directly landed into Lumbini skipping Gautam Buddha International Airport (GBIA) developed by Chinese contractor delivering message of not supporting the involvement in infrastructural development of China in Lumbini [17]. In 2024, Air China conducted a chartered flight of Buddhist pilgrimage to GBIA, Nepal. The GBIA is not fully operational because of reluctance of India to provide air route to Gautam Buddha International Airport [1].

In 2024, Indian PM Narendra Modi and Nepali PM Sher Bahadur Deuba jointly laid the foundation of 'Indian International Buddhist Culture and Heritage Center' in Lumbini with the aim of promoting Indian Buddhist heritage. The center is constructed under the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC), a New Delhi based Buddhist umbrella organization [25]. In 2014, during PM Modi's visit to Nepal, India and Nepal signed an MOU of Nepali Rs. 44.42 million for the construction of residential building of a monastery in Mustang district [41]. India also provided financial assistance for the reconstruction of ruined 15 monasteries across 9 districts including few northern districts of Nepal [14]. In 2023, The local body Barha Gaun Mukti Chettra Rural Municipality of Mustang (a bordering district to China) send a letter to Embassy of India, Kathmandu requesting financial assistance for the establishment of Buddhist college. The correspondence of the local body of Nepal to Indian Embassy, Kathmandu has created political turbulence in Nepali politics which was refuted by the Government of Nepal stating no Buddhist college will be established in Mustang [45].

In 2021, US spend USD 285,000 for the reconstruction of monastery at Lo-ghekar Damodarkunda Rural Municipality of Mustang [27]. USA contributed USD 100,000 for the reconstruction of Dzong monastery in Mustang under the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) in 2019. AFCP is a direct grant support which is provided by US government for the preservation of cultural heritage. USA has spent USD 3.37 million in 24 different projects (projects also conducted in Mustang and Humla districts) in Nepal [51]. US Assistant Secretary of State for south and central Asian affairs-Samir Paul Kapur visited Kathmandu from 22-24 April 2026, senior US officials met with the Tibetan community of Nepal. Mr. Kapur clearly underscores the difficulties of Tibetan refugees in the meeting with Nepali Foreign Minister Sishir Khanal. He also urged Government of Nepal to support Tibetan refugees by ensuring identity cards to refugees for their involvement in

economic activities. Similarly, the discussion was focused on growing Chinese influence and regional stability [5].

The smart power composed of economic, diplomatic, informational and military might of China has consolidated China's capabilities to address both internal and external challenges to be aroused during the selection of the 15th Dalai Lama and Free Tibet Movement. The Tibet Card which was used earlier against China has become outdated and lousy. No nation whether it is India or USA want to be involved directly against China regarding Dalai Lama and Tibet. However, the possibility of influencing a large population of Tibetan residing in India and Nepal still exists. The big powers are more likely to launch proxy missions using the territory of other nations. The development and investment in the northern districts of Nepal bordering to China, Nepal's past experience of Khampa rebellion, global involvements of big powers in open proxy missions to fulfill their interests, and the declining security and administrative capabilities of Nepal has made Nepal a geopolitical battleground of Buddhism geopolitics between China, India and USA. Analyzing through the Agent-Structure Theory of Alexander E. Wendt's; China, India, USA, Nepal and Bhutan are the main actors in the geopolitics of Himalayas which share the culture of Buddhism. China has proved itself as a strong actor in the geopolitics of Himalayas which keeps the strength of setting the structure through its soft, hard and smart power. India and USA are also significant power which keeps the capability of disrupting power structure, and challenging China if they are able to set common interest of containing China in the Buddhism geopolitics of the Himalayas. The most vulnerable is small nation Nepal which do not keep any power to alter the cultural structure of Buddhism, and Nepal has no options rather to act as a beanbag on the geopolitical game of the big powers. Nepal will be walking in the tight rope of contradicting interests between China, India and USA on the geopolitics of Buddhism in the Himalayas which is more likely to undermine its neutrality, sovereignty and non-alignment policy.

5. Summary and Conclusion

His Holiness 14th Dalai Lama is 91 years old and the 15th Dalai has not declared yet. The understanding on the selection of the 15th Dalai Lama between China and the Dalai Lama Foundation is least likely. Therefore, the conflict between Dalai Lama and Beijing seems inevitable, and there is great possibility of two Dalai Lamas selected separately by China and the Dalai Lama Foundation. It will also bring a clear division and great confusion among the Buddhist community all over the world. The confusion and division among the Buddhist community living along the Himalayas of India, China, Nepal, and Bhutan shapes the security and political dynamics of the Himalayas in a difficult condition. India and China both have adopted Buddhism as a soft power to strengthen their national interest. It has opened a new front of rivalry of Buddhism geopolitics between India and China. India and USA cooperated

previously against China to support Free Tibet Movement by providing financial, armament and logistic supports to Khampa rebellion sheltered in Nepal. India and China are continuously conducting reconstruction projects of monasteries in Mustang and other bordering districts of Nepal with China. USA has been continuously advocating the human rights conditions of Tibetan people and US senior officials are regularly meeting Tibetan Community residing as refugee in Nepal. The big powers rarely involve in the direct war; however, they involve in open proxy conflicts to secure their interests. Nepal, birthplace of Lord Buddha, with constrained power is not in the position to set the cultural structure of Buddhism in the Himalayas, rather will be forced to accept the decisions of big power India, China and USA. The geopolitics of Buddhism among India, China and USA in the Himalayas is likely to shape the security and politics of Nepal adversely which will impact the internal politics of Nepal increasing instability, and international relation of Nepal compromising non-alignment and neutrality policy of Nepal.

Abbreviations

AFCP	Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation
APECF	Asia Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation
BCA	Buddhist Association of China
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CTA	Central Tibet Administration
FES	Freshwater Ecosystem Service
GBIA	Gautam Buddha International Airport
Gen-Z	Generation Z
IBC	International Buddhist Confederation
IWT	Indus Water Treaty
KII	Key Informant Interview
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NDC	National Defense Course
NHRC	National Human Rights Commission
PM	Prime Minister
TOB	Tibetan Origin Blood
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
USA	United States of America

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Madhav Thapa: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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