

# Lumbini: Strategic opportunity for India-Nepal friendship

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In the intricate chessboard of 21st-century geopolitics, hard power, comprising majorly of military might and economic muscle, still commands attention, yet soft power increasingly decides the game. Soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others through cultural appeal, shared values, and moral authority rather than coercion. It wins hearts, builds enduring alliances, and turns historical ties into strategic assets. In an era of great-power competition, nations that master soft power, think America's Hollywood or South Korea's K-pop; project influence far beyond borders.



Buddhist monks offer prayers at the Mayadevi temple on the occasion of Buddha Purnima, which marks Gautama Buddha's birth anniversary, in Lumbini, Nepal on May 16, 2022. (AFP)

Nowhere is this more evident than in Asia, where Buddhism, an ancient philosophy of compassion, non-violence, and interconnectedness, has become a potent tool of cultural diplomacy. The Lumbini Buddhist project between India and Nepal exemplifies this dynamic, offering a model of collaborative soft power while quietly underscoring the subtle contest with China. As Nepal inaugurates a bold new government under Prime Minister (PM) Balendra Shah, the moment demands deeper India-Nepal engagement to cement a friendship rooted in shared heritage. Lumbini, in Nepal's Terai plains, is no ordinary site. It is where Queen Maya Devi gave birth to Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, around the 6th-5th century BCE. The sacred grove, marked by the ancient Ashoka Pillar and the Mayadevi Temple, embodies Buddhism's core tenets: impermanence, mindfulness, and universal

peace. As one of the faith's four holiest pilgrimage centers (alongside India's Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar), Lumbini draws millions seeking spiritual solace. India's International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage (IICBCH), or Indian Vihara, rising here since its 2022 foundation stone laid by PMs Narendra Modi and Sher Bahadur Deuba, is a masterpiece of soft-power architecture.

Designed as a lotus-shaped dome using zero-net sustainable technology, the Rs. 1.6 billion project will house meditation halls, research facilities, and exhibitions showcasing India's Buddhist legacy; from Ashoka's edicts to Nalanda's scholarly traditions. Construction, now well advanced, symbolises not just bilateral goodwill but India's proactive role in nurturing the faith born on its soil yet flourishing across borders.

This matters profoundly in geopolitics. Buddhism transcends nationalism, preaching the Middle Path and interdependence, values that counter extremism and foster dialogue. India, as the cradle of the Buddha's enlightenment and teachings, leverages this heritage to project itself as a civilisational power. The Greater Lumbini Buddhist Circuit, linking Nepal's birthplace with Indian sites, promises spiritual tourism, economic upliftment, and people-to-people bonds. It aligns perfectly with India's Neighbourhood First policy, transforming cultural affinity into tangible cooperation. In a region prone to border tensions and resource rivalries, such initiatives build trust where guns cannot.

The China angle is pertinent in this context. Beijing has long recognized Buddhism's soft-power potential, viewing it as a bridge to Himalayan neighbours. In 2011, a Hong Kong-based, Chinese-aligned foundation proposed a \$3 billion Buddhist Special Cultural Zone in Lumbini, complete with an international airport, universities, and luxury infrastructure. The plan, framed as a Vatican of Buddhism, raised eyebrows in New Delhi for its scale and proximity to the Indian border, just eight kilometres away. While local protests and geopolitical sensitivities stalled the mega-project, China persists through subtler channels: tourist inflows, academic forums, and initiatives like the Lumbini China-South Asia Peace and Development Forum scheduled for April 2026 at Lumbini Buddhist University. Beijing positions itself as a partner in "shared development," often blending economic incentives with cultural outreach. This is classic soft-power competition: China seeks influence in Nepal's strategic terrain, where it already invests heavily in infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative.

India's Lumbini response is not confrontation but complementary emphasis on authentic, people-centric heritage, highlighting its deeper civilisational stake without the strings of debt or ideological overlay. The India-Nepal partnership, however, stands on firm ground. Open borders, interlinked rivers, and millennia of cultural osmosis make the two nations natural allies. Buddhism reinforces this: Nepali pilgrims flock to Indian sites, while Indian devotees revere Lumbini. Joint events like the 2025 India-Nepal Cultural Festival and academic seminars at Lumbini Buddhist University underscore a "common legacy." Economically, the project boosts Nepal's tourism, which is a vital revenue source; while India gains goodwill and pilgrimage traffic. Recent World Bank funding for greater Lumbini development further amplifies this win-win partnership.

That said, even exemplary projects have very few gap areas that India and Nepal could address collaboratively to elevate the Lumbini initiative. First, deeper local community integration: While the vihara advances sustainably, more targeted skill programmes for Terai youth, training guides in Buddhist philosophy or eco-tourism, could ensure benefits reach grassroots levels, reducing any perception of elite-driven development. Second, accelerating digital and green infrastructure: enhancing virtual reality pilgrim experiences and expanding renewable energy micro-grids around the site would align with global sustainability goals and attract younger, tech-savvy devotees. Third, streamlining cross-border logistics for the Buddhist Circuit, simpler visas, joint marketing campaigns, and improved road-rail links could multiply footfalls without major new investment. These are minor, fixable gaps, not flaws; addressing them through a joint task force would demonstrate agility and reinforce the partnership's maturity.

Nepal's new government, sworn in on March 27, 2026, under 35-year-old PM Balendra Shah of the Rastriya Swatantra Party, presents a golden window for such engagement. Shah's landslide victory- the first single-party majority since 1999; followed Gen Z-led protests against corruption and instability. A former rapper and Kathmandu mayor, he leads Nepal's youngest-ever cabinet, signalling a generational shift toward reform, anti-corruption, and development diplomacy. His manifesto envisions Nepal as a vibrant bridge between India and China, prioritising economic growth over ideology. PM Modi's swift congratulations and invitation for a visit underscore India's readiness. Shah's focus on jobs, stability, and youth empowerment aligns seamlessly with India's strengths in capacity-building, energy cooperation, and cultural ties.

New Delhi must seize this moment. With Shah's reformist mandate, India should propose high-level talks on expanding the Lumbini project, perhaps co-funding a regional Buddhist research hub or joint conservation efforts. This would counterbalance any external overtures while honouring Nepal's sovereignty. Friendship with India is not transactional; it is familial, forged in shared rivers, festivals, and faith. By engaging proactively, through people-to-people exchanges, infrastructure support, and cultural initiatives, India can help Nepal realise its potential as a stable, prosperous neighbour. In turn, Nepal's success strengthens South Asia's resilience.

Lumbini's lotus dome is more than architecture; it is a metaphor for enlightenment amid complexity. In a world grappling with division, soft power through Buddhism offers unity. As Nepal's new leadership charts a fresh course, India is walking alongside, in this sacred project and deepening an unbreakable bond. The dividends which include, peace, prosperity, and mutual respect will echo far beyond the Himalayan foothills.

(The views expressed are personal)

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