

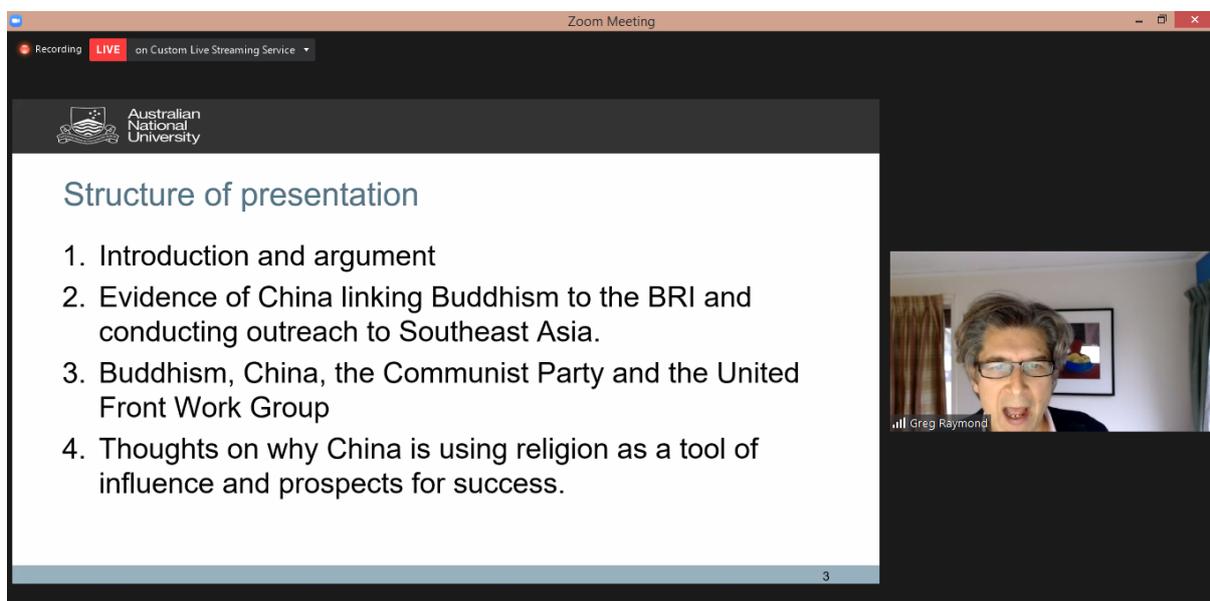
A REPORT OF THE LECTURE ON “CHINA’S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: USING BUDDHISM AS A TOOL OF INFLUENCE”



On 23 June 2021, the Nehginpao Kipgen Center for Southeast Asian Studies (NKCSEAS) organized an online public lecture on “China's Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia: Using Buddhism as a Tool of Influence”. The speaker for the event was Dr. Gregory Raymond, Lecturer in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at The Australian National University. Sanjana Dhar, Research Analyst at NKCSEAS, introduced and welcomed the speaker. She briefly discussed the theme of the panel discussion. The discussion was chaired by Prof. (Dr.) Sreeram Sundar Chaulia, Professor and Dean of Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University.

Opening remarks from Dr. Sreeram Chaulia

Through the welcome note, Prof. Chaulia remembered the work of the late Prof. (Dr.) Nehginpao Kipgen. He then briefly introduced the topic. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is understood with the lens of China's growing influence and domination in the Indo-Pacific Region and beyond. The BRI is to increase the power of China in the world. China's soft power has decreased since the pandemic, but the rat race of material can be balanced by the spread of Buddhism. China has a desire to be liked, loved and appreciated through Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Through spirituality, Buddhism, religion, and culture, China is using its soft power to convince the world about their influence.



The image is a screenshot of a Zoom meeting. At the top, it says 'Zoom Meeting' and 'Recording LIVE on Custom Live Streaming Service'. Below that is the Australian National University logo. The main content is a slide titled 'Structure of presentation' with the following list:

1. Introduction and argument
2. Evidence of China linking Buddhism to the BRI and conducting outreach to Southeast Asia.
3. Buddhism, China, the Communist Party and the United Front Work Group
4. Thoughts on why China is using religion as a tool of influence and prospects for success.

At the bottom right of the slide, there is a small video feed of a man with glasses, identified as 'Greg Raymond'. The slide number '3' is visible at the bottom center.

‘China's Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia: Using Buddhism as a Tool of Influence’ by Dr. Gregory Raymond

Dr. Raymond spoke about the use of Buddhism by China to influence the world and exercise its soft power. He explained the use of Buddhism to create a new order and put in effect the material aspect of the BRI through ideology. The BRI is creating a new connection in Southeast Asia through infrastructural development, building transportation, and improving transportation. Soft power is used to attract countries in Southeast Asia through values and ideology, but in the case of BRI, China is using Buddhism for influence and not Communism. China is using historical and cultural similarity to build bilateral relations. Buddhism is spread through reforms to increase religious influence in international relations, through the United Front Work Department (UFD) of China. There has been a rise in BRI-related Buddhist diplomacy with the involvement of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC). The

outreach activities of China have an increased focus on Southeast Asian countries which indicate the cultural influence of BRI in the region.

Dr. Raymond shared his experience and evidence that he discovered which indicate the use of Buddhism as a soft power of China's BRI. The Buddhist Summits and BAC's visits to Southeast Asian countries used the BRI to highlight China's relations with Southeast Asian countries and indicate a world order influenced by China's soft power through Buddhism. The Chinese Communist Party controls Buddhism in China and has unified Buddhist groups through the BAC. The Buddhist influence is high in Southeast Asian countries, and it is linked to politics and people's understanding. Buddhism is used to make decisions which leads to an increased influence, and the foreign policy of these countries is therefore influenced by Buddhism because people use politics through the lens of Buddhism.

China's BRI essentially remains centric on economic and political issues, and it can also spread to build cultural and ideological relations. The challenge for China is of authenticity. The leaders in Southeast Asia identify the use of religion by China to influence politics while being an authoritarian communist regime themselves. Moreover, many Buddhist leaders do not support China's use of Buddhism as soft power.

China is using a broader long-term approach of Buddhism to spread its ideas in the world and create a possible world order, but China needs to build an image that represents the communist ideals.

Questions and Answers

Q. Has India failed to use Buddhism in Southeast Asia to influence and build relations while China, due to its economic power of BRI, has been successful in using Buddhism as a binding force in Southeast Asia? How is China more successful?

A. India does not control the Buddhist communities because of democracy, but China has a better political grip on Buddhism; therefore it is able to use Buddhism as a tool to influence better than India. India is the home of Buddhism, but Hinduism is a focused religion for the Indian government, while China, with the help of BRI, can use Buddhism to influence Thailand, Myanmar, and other countries with Buddhist dominance and economic incentive.

Q. Is China using Buddhism as damage control in the post-Covid world?

A. China has not received high opposition in Southeast Asia for the Coronavirus, and there is a degree of gratitude for medical supply and vaccine rollouts. China's image has decreased in Myanmar, but the influence of Buddhism is not clear to improve the image.

Q. Is the interpretation of Buddhism for BRI another weapon of Confucianism by China and could it strengthen less democratic regimes in Southeast Asia?

A. China feels it is possible to use Buddhism to influence politics in Southeast Asia. The powerful countries in Southeast Asia have influenced countries in the region but the relations are limited to economic relations. Buddhism can be used to justify many political regimes including democracy.

Q. Can BRI help China become the leader of Buddhism in the world?

A. China is doing different things in Buddhist communities, but its actions are fragmented.

Link to the full video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKVwJnw5MKc>



NEHGINPAO KIPGEN CENTER FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES
Jindal School of International Affairs (JSIA), O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU)

cordially invites you to an

ONLINE PUBLIC LECTURE

on

CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: USING BUDDHISM AS A TOOL OF INFLUENCE

The material dimensions of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which encompass multibillion-dollar investments in transport infrastructure and industrial estates, are expected to make China a key player in the development and increasing integration of mainland Southeast Asia. This talk, however, will look beyond trade and hard infrastructure to examine China's emerging efforts to build influence at the ideational level through the use of Buddhism as a cultural resource. It documents government-sponsored outreach to Southeast Asia's Buddhist leaders and communities in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. It finds that there has been a surge in outreach from a range of Chinese provinces since the advent of the BRI in 2013. These outreach efforts warrant categorization as influence operations because they are orchestrated through the offices of the United Front Work Department, are being used to promote China's political goals, and are sanctioned by a party that remains staunchly atheist and forbids its members to practice religion. In broader terms, China's use of Buddhism as an adjunct to the BRI in mainland Southeast Asia suggests it is seeking to dampen disquiet about the BRI, including by fostering a sense of shared values with mainland Southeast Asian states.



SPEAKER

DR. GREGORY RAYMOND

Lecturer, Australian National University

Gregory Raymond is a lecturer in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs in the Australian National University (ANU) researching Southeast Asian politics and foreign relations. He is the author of *Thai Military Power: A Culture of Strategic Accommodation* (NIAS Press, 2018) and the lead author of *The United States–Thai Alliance: History, Memory and Current Developments* (Routledge, forthcoming 2021). His work has been published in journals including *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *South East Asia Research*, and the *Journal of Cold War Studies*. He convenes the ASEAN Australia Defence Postgraduate Scholarship Program, the Global China research spoke of the ANU Centre for China in the World, and is ANU Press Editor for the Asia Pacific Security series. He holds a PhD in political science from La Trobe University and an MA in Asian Studies from Monash University. Before joining the Australian National University, Greg was a policy adviser in the Australian government, including in the strategic and international policy areas of the Department of Defence and the Australian Embassy in Bangkok.

PROGRAMME

- 11:30 AM **OPENING REMARKS** by **Prof. (Dr.) Sreeram Sundar Chaulia**, Professor and Dean, Jindal School of International Affairs
- 11:40 AM **CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: USING BUDDHISM AS A TOOL OF INFLUENCE**, by **Dr. Gregory Raymond**
- 12:10 PM **QUESTION & ANSWERS SESSION**
- 12:30 PM **CLOSING REMARKS** by **Sanjana Dhar**, Research Analyst, NKCSEAS

Moderator: Sanjana Dhar, Research Analyst, NKCSEAS

WED 23rd JUN 2021
11:30 AM – 12:30 PM

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For any further queries kindly contact: cseas@jgu.edu.in