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CHINA'S RELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY FOR ITS BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: A REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Authored by Dr. Juyan Zhang, professor of communication at the University of Texas San Antonio, this policy brief analyzes China's religious diplomacy surrounding its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an interagency effort that serves multiple goals ranging from image cultivation to diplomatic engagement. Zhang reviews China's diplomatic engagement with Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and Taoists before and after 2015. The brief concludes by assessing the factors that impact the effectiveness of China's religious diplomacy.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The People's Republic of China started to tap religion as a statecraft and diplomatic resource in the early 2000s. Religious diplomacy became a concern for its Belt and Road Initiative after 2015.
- Religious diplomacy involving the five officially recognized religions is sanctioned, controlled, and coordinated by the state. In terms of involvement with the BRI, Buddhism is the most active, while Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism) is the least active. Islam and Taoism are in between.
- Factors such as competition with the United States, the sustainability of the BRI, and China's doctrine of religious Sinicization, as well as its emphasis on "ideological national security" and its internet regulation, among others, will influence the effectiveness of China's religious diplomacy.



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INTRODUCTION

China has had a long history of religious diplomacy, which may go back 2,000 years to when Buddhism was first introduced to China. Since then, the Chinese state has engaged in constant interactions with foreign religions, including Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Islam, and Christianity. The country has also promoted to foreign lands its native-born faiths such as Confucianism and Sinicized Buddhism. Today, as China becomes a major power in the world, it has enlisted religion as a resource for traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy.

The five officially recognized institutional religions in the People's Republic of China (PRC) are Buddhism, Catholicism, Taoism (Daoism), Islam, and Protestantism.¹ The goals of the PRC's religious diplomacy are multipronged, including but not limited to:

- cultivating China's international image as a country that allows religious freedom (e.g., the Bible exhibition in the United States),
- gaining international understanding and acceptance of China's religious policy (e.g., inviting Islamic countries' representatives to visit Xinjiang),
- defending China's actions involving religious matters (e.g., releasing a white paper on China's human rights),
- repairing China's reputation in a crisis (e.g., holding international interfaith dialogues during the COVID-19 pandemic),
- addressing domestic ethnic and religious issues (e.g., engaging in diplomacy over Tibetan issues and talking with the Vatican over China's family church issue),
- engaging other countries through religion (e.g., engaging Middle Eastern and African countries through religious diplomacy),

- resolving disputes and conflicts (e.g., Sino-Vatican diplomacy).

China's religious diplomacy is an interagency effort coordinated between the State Bureau of Religious Affairs,² the Information Office of the State Council, the Ministry of Culture, the Communist Party's United Front Work Department (UFWD), the Communist Party's Department of Liaison, the Communist Party's Department of Publicity, and the national associations and councils of the various religions. Two semi-official organizations, China Committee on Religion and Peace (CCRP)³ and China Religious Culture Communication Association (CRCCA),⁴ are tasked with handling religious diplomacy activities, with the collaboration of the national associations and councils of the five major religions. The CCRP was founded in 1994 as part of the Religions for Peace network, the world's largest multireligious coalition. The CRCCA was founded in 2005 as an instrument to implement China's religious diplomacy.

CHINA'S FAITH DIPLOMACY BEFORE THE BRI

The major religions in China were all subjugated to strict state control after the Communist Party of China (CPC) took power in 1949. The Chinese government has become more tolerant of these religions since 1978 when it started the reform and open-door policy. Before the 1990s, China had occasionally enlisted religious figures and artifacts in its diplomacy. For example, China displayed the Buddha's relics in Southeast Asian countries back in the 1950s. In 1995, as part of state diplomacy, Buddhist monks from China, Japan, and South Korea met in Beijing. In 1997, China published a white paper to defend the country's religious policies. The Chinese government arranged for representatives from China's five major religions to take part in Religions for Peace and its Asian network.⁵

Not until the early 2000s did the Chinese government start to seriously regard religion as part of domestic statecraft and as a useful diplomatic resource. In 2001, China's President Jiang Zemin (in office from 1990 to 2002) stated that religion could act as a stabilizing force in society and, as such, could be mobilized as a positive force for national development.⁶ President Hu Jintao (in office from 2002 to 2012) embraced the notion of "soft power" proposed by American scholar Joseph Nye.⁷ He declared that "it is a paramount state mission to improve China's soft power."⁸ China started to set up Confucius Institutes around the world, and at the same time it sought to tap religion as a diplomatic resource. In the first decade of the 2000s, all five major religions in China were involved in the country's religious diplomacy. Below is a brief review of China's religious diplomacy during this period of time.

Buddhist Diplomacy

China's Buddhist diplomacy in the first decade of the 2000s focused on the following aspects:

1. Sponsoring international Buddhist conferences. The Chinese government hosted two World Buddhist Forums, in 2006 and 2009, each of which brought in more than 1,000 monks and scholars from all over the world. Wuxi, Jiangsu province, has become the permanent site of the forum.
2. Holding the annual China-South Korea-Japan Buddhist Friendly Interaction Conference as a public diplomacy effort to promote the relationship between the three countries. The conference was first held in 1995. By 2022 it had been held 22 times.
3. Contributing to pan-Asia initiatives to revive Nalanda University that were initiated by the Indian government. In 2006, China donated US\$1 million to the project. China and India agreed to collaborate on the digitization of Buddhist manuscripts.⁹ China's foreign minister inaugurated a memorial to the ancient Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang near the university's ruins in Bihar, India.¹⁰
4. China proposed plans for the redevelopment of Lumbini, Nepal, the Buddha's birthplace. The plan includes an airport and seminary-cum-monastery. The estimated cost is US\$1 billion to US\$3 billion.¹¹
5. China lent the remains of the Buddha's tooth to Thailand in 2003 to honor the seventy-fifth birthday of the Thai king.¹² The Chinese government sent a 160-member Buddhist orchestra group to India in April 2010 to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of Indo-China diplomatic ties. The group has also been sent to South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia.¹³
6. Countering the Dalai Lama's influence. When the Dalai Lama planned to visit the traditionally Buddhist regions of Russia in 2010, the Russian government assured the Chinese government that he would not be granted a visa.¹⁴ In 2011, the South African government denied the Dalai Lama's request for a visa after allegedly facing Chinese pressure.¹⁵

Islamic Diplomacy

In the first decade of the 2000s, China's Islamic diplomacy initiatives were limited to business and the provinces where there are large numbers of Muslims, such as Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Yunnan, Gansu, and Xinjiang. China's Islamic diplomacy focused on the following activities:

1. "Hajj diplomacy" and trade with Islamic countries. China has allowed Chinese Muslims to make pilgrimages to Mecca since 1979, but the number of pilgrims were strictly controlled. Since the 2000s, China has allowed increasingly more hajj pilgrims to travel to Mecca, with numbers rising to 13,500 in 2010.¹⁶ Since 2006,

- China has hosted the China International Muslim Entrepreneur Peak Forums three times, inviting more than 600 Muslim entrepreneurs and diplomats from China and around the world.¹⁷
2. Cultural exchanges. Islamic artists from Ningxia and Xinjiang visited Indonesia in 2010 as part of the initiative to improve bilateral relations. Officials from the Ministry of Publicity of Ningxia traveled to Beijing to showcase the province's Islam-related culture to diplomatic missions from 23 Islamic nations in a bid to attract investment.¹⁸
 3. Crisis communication. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, the Islamic Association of China issued condemnation of the attack on behalf of the 21 million Chinese Muslims. After the ethnic unrest in Xinjiang in 2009, the Chinese government brought to Xinjiang four representatives from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to meet Chinese officials and brief them about the causes and consequences of the unrest.

Christian Diplomacy

The Chinese government has become more tolerant of international exchanges between Chinese Christian churches and overseas Christian churches. In the first decade of the 2000s, China's Christian diplomacy focused on the following aspects:

1. Détente and power competition with the Vatican. In 2000, the Vatican canonized several Catholics who died in China, an action that caused strong indignation on the part of China. When Beijing was gearing up to host the 2008 Olympic Games, however, there was a short period of détente between China and the Vatican. In May 2008, the China Philharmonic Orchestra performed Mozart's *Requiem* with the Shanghai Opera House Chorus for Pope Benedict XVI in Rome.
2. Dispute with the United States over religious issues. The U.S. Department of State annually releases its Report on International Religious Freedom, and China has consistently been a target of criticism. China has rejected the accusations. When the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom planned to visit Hong Kong in 2003, China discouraged it, and as a result the visit to the Chinese mainland was canceled. President George W. Bush invited Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen to the White House in 2007 as a gesture of U.S. support for religious freedom.¹⁹
3. China allowed overseas Christian organizations, such as the National Council of Churches USA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, to train Chinese faculty and church leaders. These groups have donated materials to print Bibles in China.²⁰
4. The Chinese Christian Council held Bible Ministry Exhibitions in the United States and other countries. The 2006 exhibition in the United States was co-sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of New York, American Bible Society, and the Council of Churches of the City of New York. In 2011, the Chinese State Bureau of Religious Affairs sponsored other Bible Ministry Exhibitions in four U.S. cities.²¹ In the same year, the China Christian Council, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and the China Religious Culture Communication Association held the Sino-U.S. Christian Leadership Forum. The forum was lauded as the first such high-level forum in Sino-U.S. history.²²
5. Overseas churches, through collaboration with Chinese churches, operated educational, medical, and charity programs. A 2009 annual review by the *Gospel Times*, based in China, shows that visits to Chinese churches by Christian

leaders from the United States, Australia, South Korea, Japan, and Norway were frequent.

Taoist Diplomacy

China's State Bureau of Religious Affairs sponsored the International Forum on the Dao De Jing (or Tao Te Ching, the Taoist canon) in Hong Kong in 2007. Wang Zuoran, the director of the bureau, made recommendations in 2010 for how to improve the religion's institution and management so as to better adapt it to religious diplomacy.²³ Overall, Chinese Taoism was barely involved in religious diplomacy during this period of time. However, there were occasional international visits by representatives from the China Taoist Association. For example, in October 2011 representatives from the China Taoist Association visited the U.K.-based Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) to promote environmentally conscious pilgrimage.²⁴ This later became a theme for Taoist diplomacy.

RELIGIOUS DIPLOMACY FOR THE BRI SINCE 2015

China unveiled its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. Religion did not become a major concern of the BRI until the 2015 annual meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a political advisory body made up of representatives from sectors such as religious groups, professional organizations, and chambers of commerce. During the conference, representatives from Buddhist, Islamic, and Christian communities recommended that religion should be a significant concern for the BRI. The representatives made a number of points:

- the BRI would reach 4.4 billion people in 65 countries,
- major religions were transmitted to China in ancient times along the same routes that the BRI covers,

- religion could serve as a bridge and vehicle of the BRI,
- the BRI would encounter complex religion-related challenges such as religious extremism and even terrorism; therefore, religious exchange and dialogue should be a top concern of the BRI.

The representatives recommended that the China Religious Culture Communication Association be designated to handle religious diplomacy associated with the BRI.²⁵

In the same year, the CPC's Department of Liaison initiated the BRI Alliance of Think Tanks, a network of think tanks based in China and BRI partner countries. Some think tanks based in Chinese universities are entrusted to conduct research and make policy recommendations on religious diplomacy (e.g., the Research Institute of Ethnicity and Religion, Northwestern University of Political Science and Law).²⁶ Since then, many research reports on BRI and religion have been published, and numerous academic conferences on the topic have been held.²⁷ Among them was the series of research reports between 2016 and 2017 by the World Religions Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, China's most important think tank. The reports focused on assessing religious risks related to the BRI.²⁸ In 2016, the minister of the CPC's United Front Work Department, when meeting with Chinese religious figures, stressed that religious communities should "stick to the direction of Sinicization" and serve the BRI.²⁹

According to a Chinese government report, by 2020, Chinese religious communities have "established friendly relationships with their counterparts in more than 80 countries and have actively engaged in the operations of important international religious organizations such as the World Fellowship of Buddhists, World Council of Churches and the Islamic Federation of States." Through holding events such as the World Buddhist Forum and the International Taoist Forum,

China has, the report claims, “promoted its excellent religious culture to the world.” The report goes on: “To better serve the BRI, China promoted the exchanges between religious communities with the relevant countries; China has enhanced dialogue with world religions to tell good stories about Chinese religions.”³⁰

Religious diplomacy activities surrounding the BRI were active before 2019 but were limited by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some activities have been moved online. A major event of religious diplomacy took place during the 2021 annual conference of the Boao Forum for Asia, a China-led international organization with 29 member states designed to “promote economic integration in Asia.”³¹ The CRCCA and CCR hosted an interfaith dialogue seminar on “Inclusiveness, mutual learning, collaboration among ten-thousands of states: The wisdom and mission of religion on the Belt and Route.” Chinese religious leaders and their counterparts from Cambodia, Russia, and Sri Lanka participated in the seminar.³² A similar seminar was held during the 2022 Boao Forum. Religious leaders from South Korea, Italy, and the European Union participated online.³³

Islamic Diplomacy

China’s BRI involves 65 countries, and half of them have Muslim majorities.³⁴ Such a reality prompted China to revise its half-hearted Islamic diplomacy. In 2015, the China Islamic Association convened a conference to discuss how China’s Muslim communities could better serve the BRI. Top officials from the CPC United Front Work Department expressed hope that the Chinese Muslim community could “continue to Sinicize itself, combat extremism, separatism and terrorism, and contribute to the BRI.”³⁵ China has shown increased interest in incorporating Islamic finance and banking into its BRI, which represents a unique financial mode that is governed by Islamic law. Chinese provinces where large Muslim populations live, such as

Ningxia, Gansu, and Qinghai, have shown eagerness to tap into Islamic financial and banking provided by Arabic countries.³⁶

China seems to have made some gains in terms of its Islamic diplomacy along the BRI. In the past few years, China had been embroiled in a fight with the United States and European countries over how Uyghurs in China’s Xinjiang have been treated. In defending its policies, China gained support from Islamic countries. In 2019, 37 countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, signed a letter to the UN Human Rights Council praising China’s “contribution to the international human rights cause” and how China restored “safety and security” after facing “terrorism, separatism and extremism” in Xinjiang. Iran, Turkey, and Qatar did not criticize China.³⁷ The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited diplomats from Islamic countries to visit Xinjiang to showcase the development of the province.³⁸ In October 2022, the UN Human Rights Council rejected a Western-led motion to hold a debate about China’s policy in Xinjiang, which was regarded as a victory for Beijing. Muslim-majority countries, including Uzbekistan, UAE, Sudan, Senegal, Qatar, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Indonesia, voted against the motion. The outcome reflected the effectiveness of China’s Islamic diplomacy.³⁹ Some analysts argued that China’s gain in the Middle East was achieved through the Chinese Islamic Association, which assisted the Chinese government’s Islamic diplomacy.⁴⁰ That said, China seems to have harbored some unease in its Islamic diplomacy. For example, in 2016, about 15,000 Chinese Muslims visited Mecca; in 2018 it decreased to 11,500. It is reported that China started to restrict the number of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca.⁴¹

Christian Diplomacy

China’s Christian diplomacy has appeared to be lukewarm since the BRI began. Some events seem to be related to the BRI, but the scope

is very limited. In November 2016, the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Executive Committee held its executive meeting in China for the first time. In September 2018, the China Christian Council's official website launched its English version (en.ccctspm.org). In 2019, the China Christian Council, along with Chinese universities and think tanks, held an academic conference with the call to "promote the Sinicization of Christianity and contribute to the Belt and the Road." The conference highlighted the role of the China Christian Council in promoting collaboration with less developed countries.⁴² Compared to China's Buddhist, Islamic, and Taoist diplomacies, this is a belated move.

China's Christian diplomacy with the United States has become less active since 2012 as the two countries engaged in increased competition. The China Christian Council denounced the U.S. Department of State's Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom for "interfering in China's domestic affairs."⁴³ Chinese churches engaged in regular meetings with churches in the United States, but the scope and depth were limited. In 2020, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) announced that it would build a temple in Shanghai, but the Shanghai Municipal Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau said twice on its website it knew nothing about the temple.⁴⁴ The LDS church is not officially recognized by the Chinese government.

There have been major advancements made in Sino-Vatican relations. Probably motivated by winning Italy as a BRI partner, in 2018 China signed a secret accord with the Vatican, which gave the Vatican a say in appointing bishops in China. In return, the pope approved some of the bishops that were nominated by the Chinese government. When the accord was to be renewed in 2020, then-U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo flew to the Vatican to persuade the Vatican not to do so, but the Vatican did it anyway.⁴⁵ Visits to Beijing by Vatican representatives in 2022 indicated that the accord would be further renewed.⁴⁶

Not surprisingly, Italy was the first European country to become a BRI partner, signing a Memorandum of Understanding on the BRI in March 2019. Ironically, however, although China signed and renewed the secret accord with the Vatican, President Xi has shunned the pope at public forums. President Xi and Pope Francis have appeared in the same vicinity three times, but they have not met. These include New York in 2015, Italy in 2019, and Kazakhstan in 2022.⁴⁷

Buddhist Diplomacy

China's public diplomacy use of Confucius Institutes saw significant resistance in North America and Europe. Many institutes have been shut down in the past three years. It appears, however, that China has increased its investment in Buddhist diplomacy. President Xi frequently referred to Buddhism in his 2017 BRI Forum speech, 2014 UNESCO speech, and during his 2014 visit to Sri Lanka. When he visited India in 2014, he delivered a speech at the Indian Council of World Affairs and lauded how Buddhism played a significant role in the cultural exchanges between the two countries. He gifted *Xuanzang's Journey*, a documentary about the seventh-century Chinese monk who trekked to India to obtain Buddhist texts, as a birthday gift to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.⁴⁸ It is believed that Xi favors Buddhism to convey Chinese culture in the modern world.⁴⁹

In 2015, the Buddhist Association of China started the first Buddhist English Summer Camp in Wuxi, Jiangsu. In the following year, students from China, Southeast Asia, Europe, and the United States, along with 30 "English Ambassadors," attended the summer camp in Guangdong, China. The theme of the camp was "The Belt and the Road, a Journey of Beliefs."⁵⁰ Although China participated in India's plan to revive Nalanda University, China had its own plan for a Buddhist college. In 2017, the Nanhai Buddhist Academy was inaugurated as the world's only Buddhist college that teaches Chinese Buddhism,

Tibetan Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism. The college, promoted as “China’s Nalanda University,” is designed for 3,000 students. The first cohort of students included 40 students from Laos and 60 from Cambodia. The dean of the academy, Yin Shun, is the abbot of Zhong Hua Buddhist temple in Lumbini and vice president of the Buddhist Association of China. He has closely worked with Thailand and Nepal to create Buddhist BRI to link Lumbini, Wuxi, and Hainan. Wuxi has been turned into a permanent venue of the World Buddhist Forum by the Chinese government.⁵¹

China has founded Buddhist centers in Thailand, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. The *ANI*, an Indian news agency, documented some of the Chinese Buddhist diplomatic initiatives. These include taking control of the Common Text Project undertaken by the International Council Day of Vesak (ICDV) through significantly expanding Chinese textual sources and easing out Tibetan textual sources; gaining considerable influence in international Buddhist organizations such as ICDV, World Fellowship of Buddhists, and the World Buddhist Forum (its fifth session resolved to support the BRI); showing interest in developing Pakistan’s Gandhara trail of Buddhism; and providing financial and technical support for conserving Bangladesh’s Buddhist sites, among others.⁵² China has been exploring how to utilize Tibetan Buddhism in the BRI, including training Tibetan Buddhist teachers and promoting exchanges of Tibetan Buddhism and associated art on the BRI.⁵³

China uses two more Buddhist events to engage the countries in South and Southeast Asia. One is the Chong Sheng (Temple) Buddhist Forum that has been held in Dali, Yunan Province. Buddhist monks, scholars, and diplomats from South and Southeast Asian countries attended. The forum had been held seven times between 2007 and 2017. Another is the Buddhist Conference in the Lancang River and Mekong River Region. The conference has been held as part of the Vesaka festival to commemorate the Buddha’s

birth. Buddhist monks from China, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Cambodia attended the meetings.⁵⁴

Other Chinese Buddhist diplomacy activities include:

- Annual meetings of the China-Korea-Japan Buddhist conference.
- 2016. Started training Buddhist language students for the BRI.⁵⁵
- 2017. Chinese Buddhist delegates visited Sri Lanka and delivered relief funds to the country’s president.⁵⁶
- 2017. China-U.S.-Canada Buddhist Forum in Toronto.⁵⁷
- 2018. Photo Exhibition of Chinese Buddhist Heritage in Bombay, India.⁵⁸
- 2019. Faxian Culture and Maritime Silk Road in the New Century Forum in Colombo, Sri Lanka.⁵⁹
- 2019. Chinese Buddhist chanting and music troupe performed at the Lincoln Center, New York.⁶⁰

Taoist Diplomacy

After a number of years of preparation, China’s Taoism appears to be ready for religious diplomacy. Compared to Buddhism, however, its scope is limited. First, it appears that China’s Taoist diplomacy focuses on holding the International Taoist Forum at China’s Taoist holy mountains. The forum was held in Hong Kong and Xi’an in 2006; the Hengshan Mountain, Hunan, in 2011; the Longhu Mountain, Jiangxi, in 2014; and the Wudang Mountain, Hubei, in 2017. The fifth forum is to be held in Maoshan Mountain, Jiaosu. The forums attracted participants from the rest of the world and have shown potential to become a branding tool for Chinese Taoism and China’s Taoist diplomacy. The key messages of these forums focus on the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature and Taoist health techniques such as Tai Chi.

Second, it appears that China's Taoist diplomacy prioritizes Southeast Asia as the target region, where many overseas Chinese live and Taoist gods have been worshipped for centuries. Establishing the root connections between the Taoist patriarch halls in China and the overseas Taoist temples has become a useful diplomatic instrument. In August 2019, the Chinese Taoist Association and the Malaysian Taoist Association held a China-Malaysia Taoist Culture Exhibition and Performance in Kuala Lumpur to celebrate the forty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of a formal diplomatic relationship between China and Malaysia. Taoists from China, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand attended the show. The theme of the celebration was tied to China's BRI: "Hand in Hand with Southeast Asia to narrate the Path and Virtue—the Sail on the Maritime Silk Road."⁶¹ In 2021, the China Taoist Association and the Taoist Federation (Singapore) held the "China-Southeast Asia City Gods (Cheng Huang) Cultural Events Series" in China's Yiwu, Zhejiang Province. The Chinese organizers stated that events aim at "telling a good story about Chinese religions" and facilitating Chinese culture to "go out."⁶²

Lastly, China's Taoist diplomacy is also reaching out to Europe and the Americas. In September 2018, the Chinese Wu Dang (Mountain) Taoist Culture Exchange Troupe visited Canada to celebrate the first China-Canada Taoist Cultural Festival. Taoists, Chinese diplomats, and Canadian politicians took part in the show.⁶³ In July 2022, the China-West Taoist Online Conference was held to "strengthen exchanges, deepen collaboration, and promote the overseas dissemination of the Taoist culture."⁶⁴ Officials from the CPC United Front Work Department attended the conference.

FACTORS AFFECTING CHINA'S FAITH DIPLOMACY FOR THE BRI

Many factors may come into play when China engages in religious diplomacy on its BRI. I will offer reflections on nine of these factors.

First, the BRI saw great fanfare when it was unveiled in 2013, but it soon faced resistance from the United States and its allies. Even countries that previously agreed to be BRI partners, such as Australia and the Baltic nations, withdrew due to concerns such as debt crisis, climate change, and political conflict. Sri Lanka, one of the key BRI partners, is in serious financial crisis and social turmoil. In 2021, the Biden administration announced a U.S. infrastructure financing mechanism for low- and middle-income countries, dubbed "Build Back Better World," to rival the BRI. China's quarantine policy during the pandemic, its deflating housing bubble, its de facto alignment with Russia in the invasion of Ukraine, and the increasingly tense confrontation with the United States in the Indo-Pacific region have all cast doubt on the sustainability of the BRI.

Second, historically China has been dominated by Confucianism, which is more a system of moral and political beliefs than a religious faith. Religions have long been subjected to state power. Chinese emperors at times banned foreign religions. Buddhism was banned four times (in the years 446, 574, 845, and 954 CE) and Catholicism once (in 1721). Such an attitude by the state toward religion was reinforced by Marxist ideology, along with modern secularism.

Third, although Chinese Buddhism had influence in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, China has been mostly on the receiving end of religious transmissions in the Eurasian continent. Of the five major religions in China, only Taoism originated from within the country, while all other religions originated elsewhere.

Fourth, China's state-directed religious diplomacy is widely perceived as lacking autonomy and authenticity. The state has

taken a utilitarian approach toward religion, regarding it not as sacred but as a useful social, political, cultural, and diplomatic resource. In the long run, this approach may undercut the effectiveness of China's religious diplomacy and tarnish the image of China's religious communities.

Fifth, the Communist Party's latest doctrine on religion is Sinicization and localization. This doctrine was said to be first laid down by President Xi in 2015. It may be loosely understood as being rooted in China, being a part of the Chinese civilization, autonomy from foreign domination, no alignment with foreign religious institutions, and localization.⁶⁵ Islam and Christianity have been part of Chinese history for a long time but are still perceived by the state as not fully Sinicized, unlike Buddhism. The party's mouthpiece had warned that "some religions have showed signs and tendencies of straying away from the direction of Sinicization," which requires the party to "continuously work hard and stick to the road of Sinicization of religions."⁶⁶

Sixth, religion is always perceived to be associated with ethnic issues in China. The perception that Islamic extremism is associated with Uyghur separatism, Tibetan Buddhism with Tibetan separatism, and Catholicism with Hong Kong separatism have all made the Chinese state regard religion as a risk or nuisance. In some cases, religion is even regarded as a "non-traditional security risk" and an issue of "ideological national security."

Seventh, China's narrative regarding Euro-American religions tend to reflect a victim mentality resulting from China's modern history, in which it has suffered from colonialism and imperialism. This has led to continuous mistrust and sense of insecurity toward Christian organizations. It is not rare to see state rhetoric calling for "high vigilance toward and strong prevention of use of religion to infiltrate into China."⁶⁷ Government officials visiting the China Christian Council repeatedly stressed Sinicization, Three Selves (self-propagation, self-governance, and

financial self-support), and "resistance against foreign infiltration."⁶⁸

Eighth, as China becomes increasingly assertive in its foreign relations, there are discussions on how to make Chinese religions "go out" to the world. The Chinese Buddhist temples built in India's Bodh Gaya and Nepal's Lumbini are cited as examples of success.⁶⁹ But so far, such initiatives are limited.

Ninth, China applies the concept of national sovereignty to cyberspace. In 2021, China promulgated a regulation that restricts dissemination of religion online. The regulation mandates licenses for any religious group that wants to disseminate religious content on the internet, and only the five authorized religions in China can do so.⁷⁰ Such restrictions will inevitably affect China's religious exchanges with foreign nations.

CONCLUSION

As the current research shows, China has turned the five major religions into useful diplomatic resources for its BRI. However, the extent of their involvement differs. If the religions are placed on a continuum from "passive" to "active" participation of the BRI, Buddhism is the most active while Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism) is the least active. Islam and Taoism are in between. In addition, factors such as the sustainability of the BRI, China's competition against the United States and its allies, the party's Sinicization doctrine, China's cyberspace law, and its perceptions of history will shape the outcome of the country's religious diplomacy.

NOTES

1. In this research I did not look into Confucianism or China's public diplomacy use of Confucius Institutes on the grounds that Confucianism is more an ethical and political system than a religious faith. It is also not one of the PRC's five state-sanctioned religions.
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