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Key Players and their Soft Power Diplomacy

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REVIVAL OF NALANDA UNIVERSITY: KEY PLAYERS AND THEIR SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY

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An Overview

The proposed revival of the once world-renowned Nalanda University is taking place in Bihar, one of the most backward provinces of India. Moreover, despite long-standing hostility between China and Japan and between China and India, the proposal enjoys extensive support from the most powerful countries of Asia - China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and India. Though the idea of reviving this ancient university was initiated in the late 1990s, it picked up momentum in February 2006 when the former Indian President A P J Abdul Kalam suggested taking up the idea again to his counterpart in Singapore. Since then a partnership of Asian countries, especially Singapore, China, Japan, and South Korea have played active roles in reviving the university. The leaders of Singapore and South Korea, during their bilateral discussions on the sidelines of the second East Asia Summit, decided to support the efforts to revive the university.¹

Now the question arises as to why are seemingly hostile countries of the Asia-Pacific working together to translate this programme into reality by 2009. Is it only about the revival of an ancient Buddhist university in India or a part of larger politico-strategic calculations based on culture-driven soft-power diplomacy? Does their involvement have any bearing on their foreign policy objectives? Is culture becoming an

important conduit of international cooperation in the Asia-Pacific or is it being pushed forth to secure strategic ambitions in the region? In order to address these questions it is important to understand the politico-strategic considerations of major players involved in the revival programme. Before examining the strategic imperatives of each player, it is important to know what Nalanda University signifies and what its revived shape and structure is going to be.

Historical Significance of the University

Built in the 4th Century A.D. by Kumargupta, a ruler of the Gupta dynasty in ancient India, Nalanda University is considered to have been the most famous academic institution of its time in the world. The significance of this university emanates from its international outlook, contribution to the spread of Buddhism in Asia, and the academic scope and range of studies.

As a completely residential academic institution, the Nalanda University gained an international outlook and drew students and scholars from almost every part of Asia with its total intake of approximately 10,000. These students, after returning to their respective countries, spread Mahayana Buddhism in different parts of Southeast and East Asia. Fa-Hsien, who received Buddhist knowledge at Nalanda University in 5th century A.D., spread Buddhism in China while serving at the royal court of Sung

¹ "Singapore, S Korean Foreign Ministers Meet on Sidelines of ASEAN Summit," *Channel NewsAsia*, 12 January 2007.

Dynasty of China.² Besides establishing links between India and China, Fa-Hsien also translated and preserved Buddhist texts, a trend continued and furthered by Hsien Tsang. In fact, Hsien Tsang has proved to be an important link in the scholarship of Nalanda and the spread of Buddhism in East Asia. He visited India in 7th century A.D., and studied and taught in Nalanda University for twelve years. He translated and brought Buddhist Sutras, the basic canonical books of Buddhism, back to China and also spread Buddhism in his home country.³ In fact, Hsien Tsang's writings are one of the most authoritative literary sources on ancient India and the spread of Buddhism in Asia.

Furthermore, despite being a Buddhist university, the range of academic curricula covered not just Buddhist philosophy but also art, mathematics, medicine, literature and several other streams of knowledge. Instead of focusing on theological orthodoxy, Nalanda University offered space for logical and scientific thinking and emerged as the most renowned centre for learning of its time. The university not only produced authentic translation of religious texts in different languages but also conducted 'groundbreaking work in mathematical theorems and astronomy.'⁴

² Jan Yun-hua, "Buddhist Relations between India and Sung China," *History of Religions*, Vol. 6, No. 1, (August 1966), p. 38

³ "Chinese Foreign Minister in Nalanda for Xuan Zang Memorial Opening," *Indo-Asian News Service*, 11 February 2007.

⁴ Jeffrey E. Garten, "Really Old School," *The New York Times*, 9 December 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/09/opinion/09garten.html>.

Emerging Structures of the University

With the idea of keeping its international outlook of ancient times, the Indian government has formed an 11-member 'Nalanda Mentor Group (NMG),' headed by the Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen with the mandate of discussing the administrative structure of the university, academic curricula and funding for the university.⁵ The NMG – comprised of internationally-known scholars and intellectuals and political leaders, and bureaucrats – held its first meeting on 13-14 July 2007 in Singapore and released a nine-point press statement laying out the primary objectives of the proposed university, curriculum development and securing international support in setting up the university and its future maintenance.⁶ The NMG has decided to set up an 'Advisory Council' of scholars from Thailand, Sri Lanka, China, South Korea and India to further streamline the curriculum and academic

⁵ The members of the group are George Yeo, Foreign Minister of Singapore, Ikuo Hirayama, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, Wang Bangwei, University of Beijing, Sugata Bose, Harvard University, Meghnad Desai, London School of Economics, N K Singh, Deputy Chairman of the Bihar Planning Commission, Tansen Sen, City University of New York, N Ravi, Secretary (East), Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Wang Gungwu, National University of Singapore, and Susumu Nakanishi, Japan. See, "Mentor Group for Ancient Nalanda University Meets in Singapore," *Channel News Asia*, 14 July 2007, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/288192/1/.html>

⁶ "Nalanda Mentor Group Meeting Press Statement," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore*, 15 July 2007. URL: http://app.mfa.gov.sg/2006/press/view_press_print.asp?post_id=2835

structure of the university.⁷ The NMG will hold three more meetings in Tokyo, Beijing and Bihar before submitting its report to the Indian government in 2008.

The Indian government, with the help of other partner countries, has decided to develop a US\$1 billion corpus fund to be used for the university's construction and administrative management. Out of this sum, half will be spent on infrastructure development and the other half on maintenance.⁸ The Indian government is planning to set up an Asian Consortium led by Singapore, to oversee the collection.⁹ N K Singh, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Board of Bihar, stated, "Singapore can play the role of facilitator, a catalyst in being able to garner support of countries in this region."¹⁰ Other countries of Southeast and East Asia have also agreed to contribute to the revival of Nalanda.

⁷ *Ibid*; see also "Nalanda Mentor Group to Submit Report by Early Next Year," *Indo-Asian News Service*, 24 July 2007.

⁸ Jeffrey E. Garten, "Really Old School," *The New York Times*, 9 December 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/09/opinion/09garten.html>

⁹ Earlier Japan had offered its role in funding the entire revival plan, which would have meant no Chinese participation in the revival programme. In order to project the revival effort as a pan-Asian initiative India decided to utilize the good offices of Singapore, which was acceptable to both China and Japan. "George Yeo Joins Panel to Revive Historic Indian Varsity," *The Straits Times*, 20 June 2007.

¹⁰ Goh Sui Noi, "S'pore Asked to help Revive Ancient University; India says Republic can be Catalyst in Rebuilding Nalanda, a former centre of Buddhist Scholarship," *The Straits Times*, 14 November 2006.

The NMG has already suggested a tentative administrative structure for the university, though it will become concrete only after the submission of its report. An internationally known scholar will be the chancellor of the university, overseeing the work of four hundred teachers, including forty-six scholars from outside India and 6,000 students from within and outside India.¹¹ The university will be spread over 200 acres of land, which has already been acquired by the provincial government of Bihar through the necessary legislation.¹² The total student enrollment will be 1,100 students in the first year and will reach 4,500 students in five years.¹³

The NMG, in its Press Statement, outlined five important areas of study. These are:

- Philosophy and Buddhist Studies;
- Regional History (focusing on Comparisons and Connections among Asian Countries fostered through culture and trade);
- Business and Management Studies;
- International Relations and Peace Studies; and
- Study of Languages including Asian Languages, both classical and modern, as well as linguistics.¹⁴

¹¹ "Crumbling Nalanda will Shine Again," *Hindustan Times*, 16 June, 2007.

¹² *Ibid*;

¹³ "200 Villages around Nalanda Varsity to be Developed," *Indo-Asian News Service*, 27 March 2007.

¹⁴ "Nalanda Mentor Group Meeting Press Statement," *op.cit*;

Nalanda as an Instrument of Soft-Power Diplomacy

Defining soft power as ‘co-optive power’ – the ability of a country to get others do what it wants – Joseph S Nye, Jr. identifies soft power as non-material or intangible resources of power, such as culture, ideology or institutions.¹⁵ In contrast to coercion, soft power rests on attraction value and universal acceptability. Given the difficulties and growing opposition to the application of hard power – military and economic strength – in an interconnected and interdependent global society of the 21st century, countries have begun to rely more on soft-power diplomacy to achieve their foreign policy objectives.¹⁶

The involvement of major Asian players in the revival of Nalanda reflects the growing desire of the participating countries to use soft power diplomacy while pursuing their foreign policy objectives. The soft power value of Nalanda is manifest in, at least, three distinct ways. First, Nalanda represents the entire Buddhist world and therefore can facilitate cooperation at the much wider geographical scale of Eastern Asia. Enabling greater people-to-people connectivity, Nalanda can further expand the arena of cooperation and create local constituencies for mitigating inter-state tension. Second, the ancient nature of Nalanda instills a sense of getting reconnected with the roots, which was somehow disrupted in the past, and offers its utility in developing a sense of

community and shared interests. Finally, Nalanda offers a confidence-building platform for the countries to facilitate cooperation between hostile states and foster peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific.

However, in order to truly understand the underlying objectives of various players in reviving the University of Nalanda, it is important to understand as to how each player approaches the issue and how they want to use Nalanda to further their politico-strategic interests.

India's Two-fold Agenda: East Asian Integration Local Development

India's initiatives for the revival of Nalanda University are driven by two overriding concerns – greater integration with the East Asian community and attracting foreign investment for local development, especially in infrastructure. The politico-cultural integration agenda, which forms a key component of India's Look East Policy (LEP), has been articulated by the central Indian government. The central government identifies Nalanda as a platform from which it can project the idea of shared culture, shared interests and mutual understanding of the strategic atmosphere in the Asia-Pacific. While giving an update on the progress in the revival efforts, Pranab Mukherjee emphasized that the Nalanda University Project “will rekindle ancient links between East and South Asia and will help us come closer together.”¹⁷

The provincial government of Bihar has focused more on the development of its economically backward but historically

¹⁵ Joseph S. Nye, Jr. “The Changing Nature of World Power,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 105, no. 2. (Summer 1990), pp. 177-192

¹⁶ Joseph S Nye, Jr. “The Changing Nature of World Power,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 105, No. 2. (Summer 1990), pp. 177-192.

¹⁷ “Statement by External Affairs Minister, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, at the East Asian Summit Foreign Minister’s Lunch,” 31 July 2007, <http://meaindia.nic.in/pressrelease/2007/07/31pr01.htm>.

and culturally important places, such as Bodh Gaya, Rajgir, and Nalanda. Nalanda has figured prominently in its explanations for the revival of Nalanda University. Laying emphasis on the development aspect of Nalanda revival programme, N K Singh, argues that the Nalanda project is “part of a larger vision to develop the infrastructure of Bodh Gaya, Gaya, Nalanda and Rajgir as a region to attract the pilgrim, the tourist,” and build “Brand Bihar by harnessing the goodwill generated by the project.”¹⁸ The local development element was echoed also when Abdul Kalam identified the revival of Nalanda as one of the ten visions for development of Bihar in his address to the joint session of provincial legislature in March 2006.¹⁹

Singapore's Agenda of Asian Renaissance, Regional Stability and Development

Singapore has played a central role in efforts to revive Nalanda by generating financial resources and bringing on board countries of Southeast and East Asia. Emphasizing Singapore's catalytic role, N K Singh argued that Singapore will facilitate the ‘partnership of countries in the region and hopefully in the management of the university.’²⁰ In addition, Singapore is playing a key role in mobilizing inputs from scholars and practitioners from across the world. On the special initiative of its Foreign

Minister, George Yeo, the city-state organized a 16-country Nalanda Buddhist Symposium at the National University of Singapore in November 2006. The Singapore government also organized an exhibition in Singapore on 31 October 2007 on the spread of Buddhism in China and Southeast Asia by Chinese Buddhist monks.

The key impetus for Singapore's active participation comes from what Yeo calls the ‘Asian Renaissance,’ which can be viewed as an extension of the country's continued emphasis on ‘Asian Values,’ and growing euphoria over the 21st century becoming the ‘Asian century.’ While interconnecting these three conceptual formulations, two arguments become prominent. First, Asia need not look to the West for cultural or material sources of inspiration and prevailing western discourses of Asia as ‘the other’ needs to be re-visited as the scene of activity shifts towards Asia. Second, the Asian way of political and social life is distinct from the Western way of life and therefore an exception should be made while propagating Western liberal democracy.²¹ However, the Asian Century argument cannot be advanced as long as the hostility of the past continues that involving the three major powers of the Asia-Pacific – China, Japan and India.

Nalanda serves the two-fold objectives of Singapore. First, Nalanda offers a model of cultural development which predates any Western model. Continuing these arguments further, Yeo, in his

¹⁸ N K Singh, “Building Brand Bihar, the Nalanda Way,” *The Indian Express*, 26 November 2006.

¹⁹ “Japanese Delegation Meets Nitish to revive Nalanda University,” *Hindustan Times*, 30 May 2006.

²⁰ “Singapore to Play Important Role in Setting up of Nalanda Uni in India,” *Channel NewsAsia*, 13 November 2006.

²¹ For details on how Singapore has put forth its Asian Values agenda see, Alan Chong, “Singaporean Foreign Policy and the Asian Values Debate, 1992-2000: Reflections on an Experiment in Soft Power,” *The Pacific Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, p. 96

presentation at the Nalanda Buddhist Symposium, stressed on developing Nalanda as an 'icon of the Asian renaissance,' fostering 'a centre of civilization dialogue and inter-faith understanding,' and serving as an 'inspiration for the future of Asia and the world.'²² Second, the Buddhist element of Nalanda connects people culturally across Asia and offers an issue through which important powers in the Asia-Pacific can work together and promote regional peace and stability. Nalanda fits into Singapore's politico-strategic framework also because of its own fear of these players getting into conflictual mould. The fear of regional instability emanating from any possible tension or conflict between India and China further echoed in his speech when Yeo argued that sandwiched ASEAN countries have a 'strong interest in seeing good relations between these two giants.'²³ He expressed his hope that the Nalanda project would further improve inter-civilizational understanding and cooperation and identified Nalanda as an important element in connecting millions of people across Asia.²⁴

Another important underlying objective of Singapore is the development of

tourist circuits in India. The main objective of the visit of Balaji Sadasivan, Singapore's Senior State Minister for External Affairs to Nalanda was to focus on developing Buddhist tourist circuits in Bihar including Nalanda and Rajgir and to further explore the potential of tourism, trade, and education in the province.²⁵

Japan's Agenda of Developing Buddhist Circuits and Engaging India

Japan has expressed its keen interest in reviving Nalanda University. The Japanese government has agreed to invest approximately US\$100 million for setting up of the proposed Nalanda University. As per the Joint Statement on Japan-India Strategic and Global Partnership signed during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh to Japan in December 2006, the two countries agreed to develop Nalanda as an important centre of learning through regional cooperation.

The Japanese interest in reviving Nalanda should be understood in two contexts – the policy of reaching out to the Buddhist world through development activities and engaging India in the larger politico-strategic equation emerging in the Asia-Pacific. First, Japan has had a long-term involvement in the development of Buddhist tourist circuits in South and Southeast Asia. There is hardly any famous Buddhist place in these two regions which have not received Japanese investment. The Japanese government has been investing in the maintenance of Buddhist structures and development of infrastructure in various countries like Thailand, Myanmar,

²² "The Asian Renaissance," Speech by George Yeo, Minister for Foreign Affairs at the Nalanda Buddhist Symposium, 13 November 2006, http://app.mfa.gov.sg/2006/press/view_press.asp?post_id=1881

²³ George Yeo, "Can China Emerge Peacefully," *Straits Times*, 22 October 2007, http://app.mfa.gov.sg/pr/read_content.asp?View,8584,

²⁴ Goh Sui Noi, "S'pore Asked to help Revive Ancient University; India says Republic can be Catalyst in Rebuilding Nalanda, a former centre of Buddhist Scholarship," *The Straits Times*, 14 November 2006.

²⁵ Conversation with Balaji Sadasivan in Singapore on 5 June 2007; see also "Singapore Keen on Reviving Nalanda University," *Patna Daily*, 27 September 2006

Indonesia, Cambodia, Bhutan, India, Nepal and even Bangladesh.²⁶ Japan has also been investing in developing Buddhist tourist circuits in India. The Japanese Bank of International Cooperation had signed an agreement with the provincial government of Uttar Pradesh as early as 1988 in developing the Sravasti-Kushinagar road. Being the land of Buddha, Bihar has received a special emphasis in this regard. Bodh Gaya and Rajgir have been primary recipients of the Japanese assistance to Bihar.

Japanese willingness to participate in the efforts to revive Nalanda is a continuation of the Japanese policy to get connected to Buddhist world and more so with the land of Buddha. The influx of large numbers of Japanese tourists to Buddhist destinations in Bihar, further validates Japanese support for Nalanda. As reported by the tourism minister of the Bihar provincial government, more than 91 per cent of Japanese tourists coming to India visit Bihar.²⁷ With the idea of developing the Buddhist tourist circuits in Bihar, the Japanese Ambassador to India, Yasukuni

Enoki paid a visit to Nalanda, Bodh Gaya and Rajgir in October 2006.²⁸ Following this, the Japanese Bank of International Cooperation entered into an agreement with the provincial government of Bihar over funding the conversion of three roads into four-lane highways, covering the distance of 320kms.²⁹

The second context in which to understand Japanese involvement is the emerging politico-strategic equation in the Asia-Pacific, which includes the rise of China and India as major players in the region, growing India-Japan strategic partnership and continued Sino-Japanese hostility. Japan played an important role in getting India its membership of the East Asia Summit, despite opposition from China, thereby, ensuring India's presence in any future East Asian community-building process and its active role in the strategic deliberations in the region. Both India and Japan are members of the US-led Quadrilateral Initiative and have been part of two sets of Malabar exercises – one off the coast of Japan and another in the Bay of Bengal. Nalanda offers both India and Japan a soft platform which could enable the two countries to engage in cooperative ventures in the Asia-Pacific. It is precisely due to the ongoing tussle between China and Japan for greater influence in the Asia-Pacific that India has decided to make the revival of Nalanda a regional initiative coordinated by neutral Singapore. The Japanese

²⁶ Buddhist places developed with the Japanese investment include Paharpur and Mainamati in Bangladesh, Borobudur in Indonesia, Sukhotai in Thailand, Angkorvat in Cambodia, Sravasti, Kushinara, and Sarnath in India. See Mizan R Khan and Mahfuzul Haque, "BIMSTEC-Japan Cooperation in Tourism and Environment: Bangladesh Perspective," *Centre for Studies in International Relations and Development (CSIRD) Discussion Papers*, no. 27, May 2007, <http://www.csird.org.in/pdf/DP27.pdf>.

²⁷ "Japanese Tourism Magazine to Hard Sell Bihar," *The Tribune*, 19 September, 2007, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2007/20070920/biz.htm#9>.

²⁸ "Japanese Envoy to Discuss Nalanda University Proposal," *Indo-Asian News Service*, 6 October 2006.

²⁹ These roads are (a) Patna-Jehanabad-Bodh Gaya, (b) Bodh-Gaya-Rajgir and (c) Hajipur-Deoria. See "Japanese Bank to Fund Road Project in Bihar," *The Times of India*, 24 December 2006.

government had earlier offered to bear the entire expenses to be incurred in the revival of Nalanda. Viewed in this perspective, Japan's decision to invest in Nalanda can also be viewed as acting on its desire to play a leading role in any regional initiative and to engage India in a 'countering China' framework.

China's Agenda of Positive Image Construction and Engaging India

Chinese participation in the rehabilitation of Nalanda is a projection of its 'peaceful rise' and growing engagement with India. During the last few years, China has been presenting itself as a responsible player and positive force in Asia through soft-power diplomacy. Chinese efforts include fostering cultural linkages, offering developmental aid, pursuing its 'good neighbour policy,' and regularly participating in and contributing to international deliberations.³⁰ To present a benign image, the Chinese government set up more than 30 Confucius Institutes in 23 countries, which make available Chinese language instruction and cultural resources to host countries.³¹ Similarly, the number of Chinese scholarships to students from the ASEAN countries has increased manifold.³²

While China's 'peaceful rise' approach offers conceptual justification for Chinese support to the Nalanda project, the Chinese policy of engaging India as civilizational forces offers the practical thrust. Taking part in the formal inauguration of the Xuan Zang Memorial Hall in Nalanda in February 2007, Ye

³⁰ Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang, "Sources and Limits of China's Soft Power," *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2006, pp. 17-36.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 18

Xiaowen, the Director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs in China, stressed the important role of Buddhism in establishing communication between the two countries in the past, present, and future.³³ India and China have declared 2007 as the "friendship through tourism year."³⁴ The joint declaration signed by both the Indian and Chinese governments during the visit of Hu Jintao, Chinese President, clearly states, "The centuries-old cultural contacts between the two peoples provide a strong foundation for enduring friendship between India and China. The initiatives to rediscover those historical linkages and revitalize them in the present day context...will further strengthen these bonds."³⁵ The rehabilitation of Nalanda offers such a context for Sino-Indian cooperation at the bilateral and regional levels.

Conclusion

It is obvious that major impetus to the involvement of important players in the revival of Nalanda has come from different politico-strategic considerations. Emerging as an important example of soft-power diplomacy, Nalanda offers a multi-focal template of regional cooperation, cultural assertion and integration, geopolitical rivalries, and normalization of long-standing bilateral

³³ "Buddhism to Help Cement Sino-Indian Friendship: China," *Press Trust of India*, 8 February 2007.

³⁴ "Remarks by External Affairs Minister, Shri Pranab Mukherjee at the Inauguration of the "India-China Year of Friendship Through Tourism – 2007," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 14 February 2007, <http://meaindia.nic.in/sshome.htm>

³⁵ "Buddhism to Help Cement Sino-Indian Friendship: China," *Press Trust of India*, 8 February 2007.

hostile relationship. If operationalized, the Nalanda project could very well be a trendsetter for the growing applicability and necessity of soft-power diplomacy in bringing together divergent and hostile players of the Asia-Pacific. Moreover, the Nalanda project lends greater credence to the viability of the East Asia Summit as a framework for regional cooperation.

However, amidst all these discourses of politico-strategic equations and the use of Nalanda as an instrument of soft-power diplomacy, there is a growing fear of losing out the very essence of the entire exercise – developing a world-

class academic institution in Asia, which can parallel Harvard, Oxford or Cambridge in the Western world. The academic discourse has its own narrators, a few in number and scattered all over the world. This discourse stands apart despite the focus on the politico-strategic underpinnings of the revival of Nalanda. Scholars and intellectuals, both from the West and the East, put forth a common agenda – develop Nalanda as a world-class centre for learning. For them, Nalanda is the first comprehensive and institutionalized human endeavour towards scientific learning, cutting across boundaries and empires.