



From Philosophy to Practice: Buddha's Panchsheel in the Modern Diplomatic Arsenal of Small States

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Article History

Received: 28.06.2024

Accepted: 03.08.2024

Published: 06.08.2024

Abstract: Small states face significant challenges in the global system due to their limited economic and military capacities. However, they can overcome these obstacles by employing philosophical and ethical concepts. This article analyses the translation of Buddha's Panchsheel (Five Precepts) into the Panchsheel (Five Principles) of international relations. These principles, which emphasise non-violence, compassion, and peaceful coexistence, impact small states' foreign affairs. The article examines how these principles contribute to preserving these states' autonomy in contemporary geopolitics. Case studies conducted in Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, and other nations provide evidence of how these principles influence diplomatic strategy, promote regional stability, and foster international collaboration.

Keywords: Buddha's teaching, Panchasheel, foreign policy, small states, peaceful coexistence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Small states are susceptible to international vulnerabilities, often overshadowed by larger, more influential nations. Due to their constrained economic and military capabilities, they must adopt a strategic approach to international affairs that surpasses conventional power dynamics. This article examines how philosophical and ethical frameworks, particularly the Panchsheel principles, offer small states distinct diplomatic techniques to protect their sovereignty and foster stability (Gethin, 1998). Buddhism's founder, the Buddha, was born in 623 B.C. during a full moon day. His philosophy of politics, as demonstrated by the Panchsheel principles, is rooted in a profound sense of interdependence, with a strong emphasis on fearlessness and equal concern for the well-being of others (Thera, 1982; Long, 2021).

Based on nonviolence, compassion, and peaceful coexistence, Buddhism offers a strong basis

for formulating foreign policies that emphasise harmony and mutual respect (DeVotta, 2009). The Panchsheel principles, which are fundamental to Buddhism, encompass the values of mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence. These principles provide a foundation for small states to engage in fair international relations (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2009).

This article analyses cases from Nepal, Bhutan, The Maldives, and other nations with a Buddhist majority or that subscribe to the principles of Panchsheel. It aims to illustrate how these philosophical foundations are manifested in tangible diplomatic efforts. Small states can mitigate geopolitical risks by prioritising conflict resolution, providing humanitarian help, promoting environmental sustainability, and fostering regional cooperation in an increasingly complex global context.

Citation: Sunil Thapa & Pramila Bakhati (2024). From Philosophy to Practice: Buddha's Panchsheel in the Modern Diplomatic Arsenal of Small States. *Glob Acad J Humanit Soc Sci*; Vol-6, Iss-4 pp- 159-166.

II. From Ethics to Diplomacy: Buddha's Panchsheel in the International Relations

The Panchasheel principles of international relations, which are based on the teachings of Buddha, have had a profound impact on contemporary diplomatic strategy, especially among small states. Incorporating conventional philosophical principles in modern geopolitics highlights the importance of these principles in international relations. The fundamental principles of Buddha's Panchsheel, which include abstaining from killing living beings, lies, stealing, sexual abuse, and intoxication, are reflected in the diplomatic principles of mutual respect, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence (Thakur, 1993).

The Panchsheel, also known as the Five Precepts, are essential ethical principles and fundamental moral qualities for individuals in Buddhism. The precepts prioritise non-violence, truthfulness, refraining from theft, avoiding sexual misbehaviour, and abstaining from intoxication. These principles aim to create a peaceful and respectful atmosphere (Diep, 2019; Ven. Faxun, 2011; Dahlke *et al.*, 2008; Harvey, 2000). The idea of non-violence advocates for refraining from causing harm to any living beings while promoting compassion and fostering peaceful coexistence. Truthfulness prioritises the values of honesty and integrity in both verbal communication and behaviour, hence promoting trust and openness. Abstaining from theft promotes respecting others' property and justice while prohibiting fraud or exploitation. The principle of sexual abuse highlights the significance of ethical sexual conduct, fostering reverence and accountability in partnerships. Finally, the idea of intoxication or mindfulness discourages the use of intoxicants that impair cognitive function, promoting mental clarity and awareness in the process of making decisions.

Conversely, the Panchsheel principles in international relations were conceived as a framework to enhance world peace and security. President of Indonesia Dr Sukarno proposed incorporating the five principles of Panchsheel into the political system, which he called 'Pancasila' in the Indonesian context. These principles include nationalism, humanism, freedom, social justice, and faith in God (Sanghani, 2022). Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru further explained these concepts in his speech in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on April 29, 1954, referencing Indonesia. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai proposed and endorsed the utilisation of Panchsheel in the Sino-Indian agreement on the same day. This initiative aimed to construct a structure for peaceful coexistence in the context of the geopolitical tensions

prevalent during the Cold War era (Saha, 2022; Sanghani, 2022).

The teaching of Panchsheel by Buddha and its profound relation with the cultural history of these two nations, which are among the oldest civilisations in the world, were the creators of the five principles. The link between Buddha's philosophy and the international relations between India and China was established because of the historical basis of Buddhism and its spread in China (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2004). The Panchsheel principles promote reciprocal respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in domestic affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (Chakravarti, 2014).

Moreover, the Bandung conference, which took place in April 1955, was a momentous occasion that officially supported the Panchsheel ideas. The conference reassigned the Panchsheel principles as fundamental parameters for international relations among recently independent and small states (Mishra, 2019). By embracing these ideals, the conference emphasised the need for ethical and peaceful cooperation in international diplomacy. Small states, specifically, discovered in the Panchsheel principles a structure for establishing their autonomy and parity on the global stage. This endorsement resulted in the initiation and establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement, a coalition of states like India, Indonesia, Nepal and many other small states that aimed to maintain their autonomy and distance themselves from the dominant power blocs - the US bloc and the Soviet Union bloc - during the Cold War (Jha, 2014). Therefore, the Bandung conference had a crucial impact on spreading this philosophy worldwide and remained a guiding force for international relations, advocating for a global system founded on moral behaviour and harmonious cohabitation.

Both principles prioritise ethical behaviour, respect, harmony, and peaceful coexistence. However, their applications vary: one set applies to personal and social ethics, while the other applies to state-to-state interactions or diplomacy. Furthermore, these principles are intricately linked, as they aim to realise a far-reaching vision of excellence, honesty, and global harmony through nonviolent collaboration, reciprocal sustainable progress, the prevention of conflict and hostility, acceptance, and benevolence (Kafle, 2022).

1. **Abstaining from killing (non-violence) and mutual non-aggression**, as taught by Buddha, can be immediately applied to mutual non-aggression in international relations. Similar to how individuals are advised to refrain from causing harm to

others, states are strongly encouraged to peacefully resolve problems and abstain from engaging in armed aggression (Schelling, 1960).

2. **Abstaining from lying (truthfulness) and showing reciprocal respect for the authority of nations (sovereignty)** are interconnected. Being truthful and honest in personal behaviour aligns with respecting other countries' sovereignty in international relations. Truthfulness and openness establish confidence among individuals while acknowledging and honouring each other's independence, which promotes trust and collaboration across nations (Buzan, 1983).
3. **Abstaining from theft (non-stealing) and non-interference.** Similar to the discouragement of theft, meddling in another country's internal affairs is discouraged, with an emphasis on maintaining respect for its territorial

boundaries and political independence (Morgenthau, 1948).

4. **Abstaining from sexual misconduct (non-sexual abuse) and promoting equality and mutual benefit** is based on self-restraint and upholding ethical behaviour. States, like individuals, should practice self-control in their aspirations and interact with one another on an equitable basis, guaranteeing that their interactions are advantageous to all parties concerned (Carr, 1946).
5. **Abstaining from intoxication (non-possessiveness or mindfulness) and peaceful coexistence** involves avoiding attachment to material possessions, such as refraining from intoxication to maintain mental clarity. States are advised to prioritise peaceful coexistence through diplomatic interactions rather than pursuing aggressive growth or dominance (Harvey, 2000; Waltz, 1979).

Buddha's Panchsheel →	Ultimate Goal ←	International Relation's Panchsheel
Abstention from killing (Non-violence): Respect for life	Ethical conduct and Peaceful coexistence	Mutual non-aggression
Abstention from speaking lies (Truthfulness): Respect for honesty		Mutual respect for sovereignty
Abstention from theft (Non-stealing): Respect for others property		Mutual Non-interference in internal affairs
Abstention from sexual misconduct (Non- sexual abuse): respect for nature		Equality and mutual benefit
Abstention from intoxication (Mindfulness): respect for clear mind		Peaceful coexistence

III. Brief case studies of Panchsheel in practice:

Incorporating Buddha's Panchsheel principles into international politics, especially for small states, signifies an evolution from individual moral values to shared political strategies. For example, Bhutan, influenced by Buddhist beliefs, has placed greater importance on Gross National Happiness than on Gross Domestic Product. This means that they support policies that prioritise the well-being of its citizens and ethical government (Ura *et al.*, 2012). The foreign policies of countries such as Nepal, Mongolia, Laos, Cambodia, the Maldives, and Bhutan have been influenced by the Panchsheel principles. These countries aim for peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit in their diplomatic engagements (Khadka, 2000; Heissig, 2000; Stuart-Fox, 1997; Chandler, 2008; Shafeeu, 2000; Pommaret, 2006). This integration showcases Buddhist ethical principles to provide a practical framework for international relations, promoting a collaborative and non-aggressive attitude in the political sphere. The historical development of these ideas demonstrates their adaptability and lasting

significance, spanning from ancient moral teachings to modern diplomatic initiatives (Thakur, 2013).

Limited economic and military strengths are two specific obstacles that small states frequently encounter in international relations. The Panchsheel principles provide a diplomatic approach prioritising sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual benefit. These principles are particularly beneficial for small states since they allow them to safeguard their interests without conflicts (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2009). It has emerged as a fundamental aspect of global diplomacy, relying on peaceful means and persuasion, particularly benefiting small states that can assert their independence and equal rights. This fosters a global atmosphere where power imbalances are addressed through mutual respect and collaboration rather than confrontation and control (Saha, 2022; Mishra, 2019).

The Buddhist focus on nonviolence is in line with the goals of small states, as they usually lack the military might of larger nations and hence benefit from promoting peaceful coexistence (Phuntsho, 2013). Moreover, the Buddhist concept of dependent

origination, which highlights the interdependence of all beings, reinforces the significance of multilateralism and international cooperation for small states (Harvey, 2000).

1. Nepal:

It, located between China and India, strategically leverages its Buddhist heritage to promote global peace and non-violence while strongly emphasising sovereignty and non-interference. Notably, the Buddha was born in the sacred garden of Lumbini, Nepal, in 623 B.C.E. (UNESCO, 2022). This is evident via its active participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions and its emphasis on dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution in diplomatic engagements (Khanal, 2018). Nepal has undertaken over 60 missions in several countries since 1958, including Lebanon, Congo, South Sudan, Haiti, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Cyprus, Sudan, Timor-Leste, and Sierra Leone (Shrestha, 2015; United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.). Nepal hosts international Buddhist conferences, such as the Lumbini conference held on 19-20 May 2020, to foster cultural diplomacy and strengthen its ties with other countries where Buddhism is widespread (Poudel, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

Nepal's foreign policy is heavily influenced by the principles of Panchasheel, which prioritise the preservation of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. Nepal strategically oversees its diplomatic ties with India and China to safeguard its national goals of maintaining its sovereignty and promoting regional stability (Baral, 2012). Nepal effectively navigates its geopolitical challenges and safeguards its independence amidst complex regional dynamics by promoting mutual respect and non-interference principles. Nepal maintains a stance of neutrality in the India-China border confrontations, which encompassed the Sino-India war of October-November 1962, the Doklam stalemate of 1986-87, and the Galwan Valley collision and tensions in eastern Ladakh in 2020. This position protects its national interests while being impartial to both parties (*Reuters*, 17 June 2020; *Al Jazeera*, 18 August 2017; *BBC News*, 24 October 2012). Nepal has actively participated in regional organisations such as SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) since 8 December 1985 and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) since 6 June 1997. This illustrates Nepal's commitment to promoting harmonious coexistence and regional collaboration (Sarkar, 2017; Sahoo & Acharya, 2018; BIMSTEC, n.d.; SAARC Secretariat, n.d.).

2. Bhutan:

It is a prime example of effectively integrating Buddhist ideals into its foreign policy. The country's Gross National Happiness (GNH) ideology integrates the Panchsheel principles with Buddhist values, prioritising sustainable development, environmental preservation, cultural conservation, and effective governance (Ura *et al.*, 2012; Mathou, 2000). Bhutan refrains from participating in armed conflicts and emphasises diplomacy and regional cooperation, per Buddhist teachings and the Panchasheel principles (Rose, 1977). For instance, Bhutan's commitment to environmental conservation is seen in its determination to maintain a minimum of 60% forest coverage across its territory. The plan was founded upon Bhutan's Gross National Happiness doctrine, officially acknowledged in the country's constitution on July 18, 2008 (Government of Bhutan, 2008). This approach aligns with Buddhist principles of ecological balance and reinforces Bhutan's international reputation as a trailblazer in sustainable development. Bhutan's diplomatic ties, especially with India and China, reflect its focus on peaceful coexistence, non-interference, and respect for sovereignty. Bhutan's diplomatic relations are focused on mutual respect and non-interference, which aligns with its policy of peaceful coexistence. Bhutan has successfully preserved its sovereignty and stability despite its geopolitical vulnerability by following the Panchsheel principles (Phuntsho, 2013).

3. The Maldives:

Although predominantly Islamic, the Maldives also incorporates its Buddhist tradition in cultural diplomacy. This approach emphasises historical ties, peaceful coexistence, equality, and mutual advantage. The Maldives promote environmental diplomacy in accordance with the Buddhist principle of interconnectivity. It promotes global cooperation on climate change and sustainable development (Shareef, 2014).

The Maldives adheres to the Panchasheel principles to establish fair and mutually beneficial partnerships, particularly in trade and environmental initiatives. As a small island state, the Maldives prioritises the significance of cooperation in addressing climate change and promoting sustainable development (Naseem, 2013). Due to its location as a low-lying island nation, the Maldives has been actively involved in international climate change negotiations since the early 1990s, as it is vulnerable to rising sea levels. It has engaged in multiple international conferences, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), to promote more vital global actions in addressing the escalating sea levels and other environmental concerns (United Nations, n.d.). This proactive strategy is per the Panchasheel

principle of equality and mutual benefit, and it enhances the diplomatic standing and influence of the Maldives in global environmental policy (Shafeeu, 2000).

4. Cambodia:

Due to its historical association with Buddhism, Cambodia has integrated the Panchasheel ideals into its foreign policy. After the Paris Peace Agreements were signed in October 1991, Cambodia employed Buddhist principles to rebuild and establish a framework for peace and democracy as it emerged from a conflict throughout the early 1990s (United Nations, 1991). The government's foreign policy advocates global cooperation in eradicating landmines and restoring areas affected by violence following Buddhism's healing and reconciliation principles (Chandler, 2008). Cambodia's role as a host for global Buddhist events not only strengthens cultural diplomacy but also fosters international goodwill. A notable occurrence is the International Tipitaka Chanting Ceremony, held in Phnom Penh from November 1-7, 2019. The assembly brought together Buddhist monks and practitioners from around the world to chant sacred scriptures and promote the teachings of Buddhism (*Phnom Penh Post*, 1 November 2019).

Cambodia places a high importance on peaceful collaboration and abstains from participating in violence and intervention as core values in its foreign policy. Cambodia's active participation in the activities of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) contributes to the maintenance of peace and stability in the region (Chandler, 2008). During its tenure as the Chair of ASEAN in 2012, Cambodia played a crucial role in mediating regional concerns, particularly the conflict in the South China Sea. Cambodia promoted a peaceful conclusion through communication and teamwork. By adhering to the principles of Panchasheel, this approach enhances Cambodia's diplomatic standing and contributes to the preservation of stability in the region (*BBC News*, 20 July 2012; Chandler, 2008).

5. Laos:

It, a landlocked Southeast Asian country, has incorporated Buddhist principles into its foreign policy to promote regional stability and cooperation. These principles include harmony, mutual respect, non-interference, and peaceful coexistence. Laos has demonstrated its commitment to these principles through its diplomatic engagements within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) since July 23, 1997, as well as with neighbouring countries like Vietnam, China, and Thailand (Acharya, 2009; ASEAN, n.d.). It has aggressively encouraged the peaceful resolution of conflicts and utilised its Buddhist heritage to further its influence, fostering

closer cultural and diplomatic ties with adjacent countries (Stuart-Fox, 2009).

Laos fosters a cooperative and peaceful regional environment in Southeast Asia by prioritising mutual advantage and stability (Stuart-Fox, 1997). Laos actively engages in ASEAN initiatives aimed at enhancing regional economic integration and political cooperation. This policy adheres to the principles of Panchasheel and enhances Laos's regional diplomatic standing while safeguarding its sovereignty. Furthermore, Laos showcases its commitment to peaceful coexistence by actively seeking to mediate regional conflicts and promote dialogue among the ASEAN member states.

6. Mongolia:

It, situated between Russia and China, adheres to the principles of Panchasheel, which emphasise mutual tolerance, non-interference, and peaceful coexistence. Due to its advantageous geographic location, Mongolia must engage in meticulous diplomatic negotiations to sustain equitable relationships with its influential neighbouring countries and safeguard its independence and sovereignty (Heissig, 2000). Mongolia's "third neighbour" approach exemplifies its dedication to fostering strong diplomatic and economic ties with countries beyond its immediate region, such as the United States, Japan, and European states (Bumochir, 2016). The "third neighbour" policy was introduced in the early 1990s as a response to Mongolia's transition towards democracy and a market economy after the breakup of the Soviet Union. This policy aimed to expand Mongolia's international networks and reduce its dependence on its two powerful surrounding nations, Russia and China (Mongolia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). This policy strengthens Mongolia's control and defence of its territory, guaranteeing its security and promoting peace and cooperation in the region.

Similarly, Mongolia incorporates Buddhist principles of compassion and interconnectedness into its foreign policy. The nation's diplomatic efforts focus on delivering humanitarian assistance and promoting regional cooperation. Mongolia's choice to host the Ulaanbaatar debate on Northeast Asian Security from June 5-7, 2019, showcases its commitment to peaceful coexistence and dialogue rooted in Buddhist ideals (Anudari, 2019; Enkhsaikhan, 2016). The nation's dedication to non-intervention and reciprocal advantage is apparent through its involvement in regional institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and its endeavours to foster peace and stability in Northeast Asia.

Incorporating Buddha's teachings and the Panchsheel framework into these nations' foreign affairs emphasises the eternal significance of these intellectual values. By prioritising nonviolence, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence, these small states have successfully managed intricate geopolitical terrains, asserted their autonomy, and made valuable contributions to regional and global stability.

IV. Challenges and Opportunities in the 21st Century

While the Panchsheel principles provide a solid foundation for small states, modern global politics provide additional obstacles. Climate change, cyber threats, and economic dependencies necessitate novel applications of these earliest concepts. For example, non-interference must be balanced against collective action on global concerns, and mutual benefit must consider long-term sustainability (Thakur, 2019).

Furthermore, the growth of populism and nationalism worldwide raises questions of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. Small states must manage these altering political landscapes by renewing their commitment to these ideals while adapting to the evolving global order (Acharya, 2018). The growing relevance of digital diplomacy and cyber security necessitates a modern understanding of non-interference, prioritising the integrity of digital infrastructure and information sovereignty (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

Small states can exploit the Panchsheel ideals in the twenty-first Century by becoming more involved in global institutions and regional organisations. These forums enable small states to raise their voices and work together on common issues like climate change, human rights, and sustainable development. Small states can help to make the international system more stable and equitable by promoting peaceful coexistence and mutual gain (Keohane, 2005). The Panchsheel principles are consistent with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which provide a moral and ethical framework for achieving global peace and prosperity (UN, 2015).

V. CONCLUSION

Small states can negotiate the intricacies of modern geopolitics through the philosophical roots of Buddha's Panchsheel. By advocating nonviolence, mutual respect, and peaceful cohabitation, these nations may make their sovereignty known, help stabilise their region, and encourage collaboration on a global scale. The flexibility of these principles will provide valuable insights for effective and ethical diplomacy even as global circumstances change.

Integrating philosophical wisdom into practical policies is essential, demonstrating that the earliest teachings can provide valuable insights for contemporary international relations. Since Buddha's teaching is known for its emphasis on righteousness, adopting Buddha's central philosophy could provide a middle path or balanced approach to addressing misunderstandings and other diplomatic issues among neighbouring countries in the contemporary world.

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