

Daily Editorial Analysis 23 July 2025

July 23, 2025 • vajiramandravi.com

Universities Everywhere Are in Crisis

Context

- In recent years, **universities, once celebrated as bastions of free thought** and intellectual exploration, **have increasingly come under political and economic siege.**
- The **attack on Harvard University's federal funding in July 2024** by the U.S. administration exemplifies a **broader international trend** in which right-wing governments seek to impose ideological control over higher education.
- **This global pattern manifests through weaponised budgets,** state interference, and market-driven pressures, all of which undermine academic autonomy and curtail open debate.

The Cases of Weaponising University Funding and Policy

• United States of America

- In the United States, **elite institutions like Harvard and Columbia have been cast as ideological battlegrounds,** accused of fostering anti-Americanism by right-wing leaders.
- Under the Trump administration, **visa restrictions for foreign students and threats to defund universities became tools of political coercion.**
- The **U.S. Supreme Court's 2023 decision to end affirmative action** in admissions further emboldened conservative activists, leading to intensified scrutiny of diversity and inclusion policies.
- The **forced resignation of Harvard's president, Claudine Gay,** and the withdrawal of millions in donor funding **underscore the fragility of academic independence** when financial levers are wielded as instruments of control.
- **Faculty and students now operate under the shadow of reprisals** for discussing contentious issues such as race, gender, and foreign policy.

• Australia

- This **phenomenon is not confined to the U.S. In Australia,** the government has invoked national interest to veto peer-reviewed humanities research, **while universities face pressure to conduct anti-foreign interference audits to safeguard lucrative international enrolments.**
- Critical topics such as China's political influence, Indigenous rights, and climate activism are **increasingly suppressed through self-censorship, reflecting how financial and political imperatives intertwine to silence dissent.**

Populist Narratives and State Control Across the Globe

- In India, **populist nationalism has transformed public universities into contested sites** of cultural politics.
- Once renowned for open debate, **Jawaharlal Nehru University now faces routine accusations of being anti-national.**
- The **South Asian University's expulsion of a scholar for referencing Noam Chomsky's critique of the Modi government illustrates the precariousness of academic freedom** in the face of political orthodoxy.
- Beyond India, **the crackdown is widespread.**
- **Hungary's Viktor Orbán expelled Central European University**, Turkey dismissed thousands of academics for supporting peace petitions, and Brazil and the Philippines have slashed social sciences funding to mute research on inequality.
- **Across the Gulf states**, topics such as gender, religion, and labour rights remain tightly controlled.
- **These examples demonstrate a disturbing pattern:** independent research is increasingly framed as a threat to national security, eroding the intellectual autonomy of universities worldwide.

The Neoliberal Transformation of Academia

- While direct political attacks are concerning, **a subtler yet equally corrosive threat lies in the neoliberal restructuring of higher education.**
- Universities have been recast as **corporate entities prioritising global rankings, patent production, and job-market metrics over critical inquiry.**
- **Humanities and social sciences**, fields that interrogate power structures and foster civic consciousness, are **dismissed as irrelevant or unprofitable.**
- **Students are reduced to customers**, faculty to precarious service providers, and trustees to brand managers.
- The **far right exploits this market logic, depicting universities as taxpayer-funded incubators of sedition** while simultaneously cutting the public funding necessary for intellectual diversity and critical scholarship.

The Way Forward: Defending Academic Freedom as a Democratic Imperative

- According to the Academic Freedom Index (2014–2024), academic **freedom has deteriorated in 34 countries**, not just in authoritarian states but **also in established democracies.**
- **Institutional autonomy**, research freedom, and campus integrity **are at their lowest levels since the 1980s.**
- This **decline imperils society's ability to address pressing global challenges**, climate change, the ethics of artificial intelligence, and the preservation of democracy itself.
- **Universities must reclaim their public mission** by protecting hiring, promotions, and funding decisions from political interference.

- **Donors should fund difficult but necessary conversations rather than dictate them**, while alumni can support independent academic chairs and legal defences.
- **Faculty must participate actively in governance, and students should view campuses as democratic commons** rather than transactional spaces for career advancement.

Conclusion

- The **global assault on universities is both ideological and economic**, driven by political populism and neoliberal market logic.
- If fear, profit, or majoritarianism dictate what can be taught or researched, **universities risk losing their role as incubators of independent thought**.
- In doing so, **societies risk not only the erosion of intellectual freedom but the weakening of democracy itself**.
- Defending academic freedom, **therefore, is not merely about protecting institutions of higher learning; it is about safeguarding the very foundation of open, democratic societies**.

Universities Everywhere Are in Crisis FAQs

Q1. What global trend is threatening universities?

Ans. Right-wing governments are using political and financial pressure to control higher education.

Q2. How has academic freedom declined in the U.S.?

Ans. Funding threats, donor pressure, and rulings like the end of affirmative action have curbed open debate.

Q3. What role does neoliberalism play in this crisis?

Ans. It turns universities into profit-driven entities, sidelining critical disciplines like humanities.

Q4. Which countries outside the U.S. face similar challenges?

Ans. Australia, India, Hungary, Turkey, and several Gulf states are curbing academic independence.

Q5. Why is defending academic freedom vital?

Ans. It safeguards democracy and enables societies to address global challenges like climate change and AI.

Source: **The Hindu**

China, India, and the Conflict Over Buddhism

Context

- As headlines focus on Chinese naval expansion in the Indo-Pacific and India's strategic countermeasures, **a quieter but equally significant contest is unfolding at the roof of the world, the Himalayas**.

- Here, **the battleground is neither oil nor trade, but faith.** At the heart of the geopolitical tension between India and China lies a struggle over the spiritual and cultural influence of Himalayan Buddhism.
- **What appears to be a tradition** of peace and non-violence has, **in the 21st century, transformed into a stage for geopolitical strategy.**

Buddhism as a Tool of Statecraft

- **China's Use of Buddhism**
 - **China has been particularly aggressive** in using Buddhism as a tool of statecraft.
 - Since the 1950s, **Beijing has systematically sought to dominate Tibetan religious life by marginalising independent lamas**, controlling religious institutions, and asserting its authority over the process of reincarnation.
 - **In 2007, China officially declared that all Living Buddhas must receive state approval**, effectively placing spiritual legitimacy under political control.
 - **Today, Beijing maintains a database of approved lamas, closely monitors monastic activities**, and invests heavily in Buddhist infrastructure as part of its broader soft power strategy.
- **India's Buddhist Diplomacy**
 - **India**, by contrast, **has been slower to respond.**
 - **Hosting the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile since 1959 gave New Delhi a moral advantage** but little strategic leverage.
 - **Only in the past decade has India begun to actively promote its Buddhist heritage**, positioning itself as the birthplace of the Buddha and investing in pilgrimage circuits to attract regional influence.
 - However, **these initiatives remain fragmented compared to China's well-coordinated efforts.** As one scholar aptly notes, while India practices Buddhist diplomacy, China pursues Buddhist statecraft.

The Dalai Lama Succession Crisis

- **The Dalai Lama**, who turned 90 in July, **has expressed his intention to reincarnate outside Chinese, controlled territory, most likely in India.**
- **Beijing, however, plans to select its own Dalai Lama** using the historical Golden Urn method.
- This **will almost certainly result in two competing Dalai Lamas**: one recognised by the Tibetan exile community and much of the Buddhist diaspora, and another installed under Chinese control in Lhasa.
- **Such a schism would not only divide Tibetan Buddhism** but also force Himalayan Buddhist communities, in Ladakh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nepal, and Bhutan, to choose sides.
- **Spiritual allegiance, in this case, could translate directly into geopolitical loyalty.**
- **If the Dalai Lama's successor is recognised in India**, it would strengthen New Delhi's influence. If China's candidate gains traction, it could tilt loyalties toward Beijing.

China's Expanding Cultural Influence

- **China is already using cultural and religious narratives** to assert territorial claims.
- In Arunachal Pradesh, particularly Tawang, birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama, **China combines military posturing with claims of historical and spiritual legitimacy**, arguing that the region is inherently Tibetan and therefore Chinese.
- In Nepal, **Beijing has heavily invested in Buddhist infrastructure, notably around Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha.**
- In Bhutan, **China subtly engages with monastic communities**, testing the kingdom's careful balance between tradition and foreign influence.

The Himalayas as the True Frontline and Soft Power as Hard Power

- **The Himalayas as the True Frontline**
 - While global attention remains fixed on maritime disputes in the Indo-Pacific, **the real strategic frontier between India and China may lie among the high peaks of the Himalayas.**
 - The **monasteries, prayer wheels, and chanting monks** of this region are not merely **remnants of a spiritual past but instruments of modern power.**
 - The **battle for influence is increasingly fought not with missiles and submarines** but with prayer beads, reincarnations, and the politics of faith.
- **Soft Power as Hard Power**
 - In the rugged Himalayan terrain, **where roads and infrastructure are sparse, soft power often functions as hard power.**
 - **A monastery shifting its allegiance can alter the balance** of influence in an entire region.
 - **India's challenge is to prevent its border populations from being swayed by Chinese-controlled spiritual figures**, particularly in sensitive areas like Ladakh.
 - The **stakes will only rise after the Dalai Lama's passing.** His succession will not remain a bilateral issue but will reverberate across Buddhist-majority countries such as Mongolia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

- **The unfolding struggle over Himalayan Buddhism highlights a deeper truth:** geopolitics is not confined to territory, trade, or military might.
- **India and China continue their contest for regional dominance;** the future of Asia may be shaped as much by spiritual succession as by strategic deterrence.
- **The Himalayas, far from being a remote periphery,** have emerged as the stage where religion and realpolitik converge, where the next great **Asian rivalry will be waged not only on land or sea but in the realm of the sacred.**

China, India, and the Conflict Over Buddhism FAQs

Q1. What is the new geopolitical frontier between India and China?

Ans. The new geopolitical frontier between India and China lies in the Himalayas, where control over Buddhism and

cultural identity plays a crucial role.

Q2. Why is the Dalai Lama's succession significant?

Ans. The Dalai Lama's succession is significant because it could lead to two rival Dalai Lamas, dividing Buddhist communities and reshaping regional political loyalties.

Q3. How does China use Buddhism strategically?

Ans. China uses Buddhism strategically by controlling the recognition of reincarnate lamas, funding monasteries, and employing Buddhist diplomacy to expand its soft power.

Q4. What is India's approach to Buddhist influence?

Ans. India's approach to Buddhist influence focuses on promoting its heritage as the birthplace of the Buddha and developing pilgrimage circuits, though its efforts are less centralised than China's.

Q5. Why is soft power important in the Himalayas?

Ans. Soft power is important in the Himalayas because spiritual allegiance can influence political loyalty, which in turn affects control and stability in border regions

Source: **The Hindu**

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/daily-editorial-analysis-23-july-2025/>

© Vajiram & Ravi. For personal use only.