China’s 21st Century Strategy: The Colombo Lotus Tower and the Belt and Road Initiative

Abstract

The Chinese-built Colombo Lotus Tower—inspired by the Lotus Sutra in Buddhism—will soon be inaugurated in Sri Lanka as a hallmark of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Buddhist diplomacy between the two countries trace back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). After staying on the island for two years (411-12), the famous Chinese scholar-monk Faxian (Fa-Hsien) described Sri Lanka as the Buddhist “Kingdom of the Lion” while the venerable Chinese monk Xuanzang (602–64) called it the “Sorrowless Kingdom.” The Emperor Kublai Khan (1260-94) sent Marco Polo to Sri Lanka, followed by the Ming admiral Zheng He (1371-1433) who visited the island several times during his voyage. More recently, during his historic visit to Sri Lanka in 2014, President Xi Jinping characterized the Buddhist nation a “splendid pearl” as part of the rejuvenation of religious and cultural heritage for a global community of shared destiny. Born in Sri Lanka, the former American diplomat and UNESCO commissioner Professor Patrick Mendis will examine the long-history of religious and cultural exchanges between the Buddhist Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom for a glimpse into the prospects for the 21st century.

(The views expressed in the lecture are Professor Mendis own and do not represent the institutions of his affiliation in the past or present).