

# India woos Sri Lanka with Buddha's bones

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NEW DELHI (RNS) India plans to lend rare fragments of the Buddha's bones to Sri Lanka for the 2600th anniversary of Buddha's Enlightenment in May, and some see it as part of India's strategy to gain a regional edge over neighboring China.

Indranil Banerjee, head of New Delhi-based think tank Security and Political Risk Analysis, said India's move to enhance its "existential bond" with a Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage could have a powerful influence.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa "personally requested" the favor of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan when he visited New Delhi last June, the Indian mission in Colombo said in a statement.

India will also organize an international conference on Buddhism in Sri Lanka's Central Province in March, and install a 16-foot tall statue of the Buddha there, it added.

New Delhi's Buddhist overtures are significant given China's growing influence in Sri Lanka, strategically located off India's southern coast and a key naval link between western Asia and southeast Asia.

However, a "crude attempt" to leverage the Buddhist connection would

not work, said Banerjee. "The message needs to be conveyed at a profound level," Banerjee said. "And that would be a challenge."

According to Buddhist traditions, the Buddha attained enlightenment around 500 B.C. in Bodh Gaya in eastern India. It is believed that Indian emperor Ashoka's son Mahinda introduced Buddhism in neighboring Sri Lanka, now one of the few remaining Buddhist countries in South Asia, in the second century.