

Bhutan India Security Relations: Conflicting Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

Bhutan-India relations are shaped by the changing geopolitical need and conflicting security arrangements in the Himalayas. Unique geographical location, connecting two major rising powers with opposite political philosophies and international attention in Asia in the new century puts Bhutan in a more critical position. The countries call it 'warm relations' which are rather defined by the changing political interest of the stronger neighbour - India. Bhutan has historically balanced its relation between India and Tibet, although it has been more closed to India for last six decades. This article shall look into the geopolitical shift in the Himalayan belt, its influence in Bhutan and tuning of the Bhutanese security policies to suit the need of the hour. It shall also examine the reasons for shift in those security policies at different time periods.

Keywords: Conflict, geopolitics, Himalayas, military

Historical connections

Bhutan shares most of its borders with India – they are porous and easy to access in east, south and west whereas the border in the north with China is impenetrable stopping frequent connections at people's level between the two countries.

Political equations, security dynamics and geopolitical confrontation define borders. Small states have often been the

‘objects of conquest’ in the big powers’ scramble for dominion (Penjore, 2004). Weaker nations must create the ideology of distinctiveness – primarily through culture - with its stronger neighbour in order to preserve its sovereignty. ‘State political power is often employed in an attempt to create a national culture’ (Walcott, 2010) and Bhutan is one primary example of defending borders based on state created culture. I call this soft politics.

Bhutan’s state-created culture shares a closer affinity with its northern neighbour – Tibet, China. If few southern districts are removed from Bhutan’s cultural map, the Buddhist nation has nothing in common with Hindu dominated India. This is where Bhutan plays smart to defend its borders to protect cultural identity yet shifts its alliance based on the geopolitical need in the region.

Bhutan-India security connection go back much before the formation of the modern states. The earliest conflict is traced back to later part of the first millennia where historical legends relate that the mighty king of Monyul invaded a southern region known as the Duars, subduing the regions of modern Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar in India (Worden, 1991).

We don’t have recorded evidence of conflict in the regions for a long period of time, though the region was prone to conflicts due to its fragile political structure. Rather Indian saints like Padmasambhava (whom Bhutanese refer as Guru Rinpoche) helped subdue internal conflict and consolidate the Buddhist teachings in areas included in the modern-day Bhutan. It was invaded several times by northern neighbours (Tibetans and Mongols) but emerged triumphed in most of these battles which helped strengthen its control over the weaker neighbouring kingdoms in southern foothills.

Soon after entering India as traders, Europeans begun exploring the Himalayan region through missionaries. The first such mission to visit Bhutan was in 1627 - Portuguese Jesuits Estêvão Cacella and João Cabral. Bhutan's relation with these expansionists did not go well.

Conflict with Europeans (British India) started when British pushed colonisation towards the Himalayas. Bhutan had in several occasions came in conflict with English forces in its attempt to support the kingdoms in southern foothills against the aggressions.

British-India not only pushed for trade with Bhutan and Tibet but forced Bhutan to accept their terms. British records always cited 'cross-border raids by Bhutan or sheltering of dissidents as the immediate cause (for their actions); however, modern historians note Britain's imperialist ambitions in the region to be the actual pretext. Bhutan was not only 'a vital cog in the Indo-Tibetan trade but also the commercial viability of Duars region for supporting tea plantations was well-known among Company officials' (Kaul, 2021).

The conflict was obvious as British aggressively moved to occupy the fertile plains because 'the Duars was the most important part of Bhutanese territory, both fiscally and economically (Ura, 2002). There were 18 Duars in Assam and Bengals regions measuring approximately 8,000 square kilometers.

Relation became rocky after the interests of the British and Bhutan clashed in Cooch Behar, resulting into the first Anglo-Bhutan War in 1772. This was the beginning of the British interests in Bhutan to create a gateway for British trade with Tibet (Penjore, 2004).

British sent several missions to Bhutan in their effort either to persuade the country to allow trade route to Tibet or to be a

catalyst for internal conflict making it easy for British to be kingmaker and impose its interest. Until the nineteenth century, Bhutan had been actively involved in the “diplomacy” of the Himalayan region and thus also engaged with India (Rose 1977). However, as British and Chinese power extended in the Himalayas, “Bhutan’s response was to isolate the country and to place strict controls over intra-regional trade between India and Tibet” (Holsti 1982).

The British annexation of Assam in 1829 further exacerbated the political situation in the Duars, ‘leading to hostility with the East India Company and later with the British Empire (Penjore, 2004). East India company was de-facto ruler in India prior to 1857. In 1857 it was replaced by British government.

The most significant of these missions was led by Ashley Eden in 1863-64, which was dispatched in the wake of a civil war (Kaul, 2021). Eden proposed a rather humiliating treaty agreement that Bhutan surrender all the Duars in south, British captives in Bhutan and Bhutanese citizens who committed any ‘crimes’ in Duars (Eden, 2005). Bhutan rejected the offer and Eden claimed to have been mistreated (Rennie, 1866). Bhutan’s refusal to accept British mission and denial to establish any relations with them was interpreted as ‘mistreatment’ of the mission officials.

Under this pretext, British invaded Bhutan in November 1864. Bhutan never had neither regular armed forces nor any ammunitions like British. Those in charge of the fortress and dzongs had to face the well-equipped British army. British faced initial setback at Dewangiri when Bhutan made surprising attacks (Adhikari, 2012) but had final victory. Bhutan finally agreed to the terms of British through Sinchula Treaty in 1865. The British took over Bhutan’s role in Sikkim and Cooch Behar in return for non-interference in its internal matters (Penjore, 2004). And Bhutan lost its authority in Assam and Bengal Duars.

The treaty was the first step towards opening Bhutan's southern border and political relations with India. Subsequent treaties have rooted to the fundamental principles of this document despite several amendments. Following the treaty, Bhutan's political and economic relations continued to tilt south and reduced communications with Tibet. Bhutan stood by British in its military invasion of Tibet in 1903 wherein Bhutan's first king Ugyen Wangchuk was a part. For this support in the 'Great Game²', British believed creating a buffer state in Bhutan would stop the Chinese and Russian forces from marching south of the Himalayas. This led to establishment of monarchy in Bhutan. Ugyen's action would have further worsened the Tibet-Bhutan relations forcing Bhutan to rely on British India and then with India for everything, thereafter. Had Bhutan not fought battle with British India and rejected Sinchula Treaty terms, likelihood of monarchy in Bhutan today would be an imagination.

As movement for independence in India gained momentum, Bhutanese rulers were worried about their future under Indian leadership. Bhutan king was unhappy with Indian freedom fighter Mahatma Gandhi. Bhutan's fear was absorption of Bhutan into new Indian federation. The other fear was the possible escalation of political instability in Bhutan if the movement in India expanded. This phenomenon was already observed in Nepal where movement against the Rana regime was waging with the support of freedom fighters in India. The Bhutanese king was outraged at Gandhi for meeting the brother of an incarnate of Shabdrung, who was exiled from Bhutan, considering him as threat to the Bhutanese monarchy.

² The power struggle between British and Russia to control Centra Asia in 19th century is generally referred to as the 'Great Game'.

Bhutan and the new India

India received independence in 1947. Dorjies in Darjeeling were entrusted to building rapport with new India and King was in most cases guided by the Dorjies on foreign affairs. The proposal of Jigme Palden Dorji to maintain direct relation with UK against new India was rejected by the British authority in London compelling this tiny Himalayan kingdom to adjust with the new leadership of independent India. Bhutanese king took no time in communicating with the new leadership. The Indian leadership assured the protectorate status of Bhutan to continue and that they would not seek any political changes in Bhutan.

Bhutan and new India revised their treaty in 1949 with no substantive changes of terms of the 1910 Punakha Treaty. Bhutan would continue as the protectorate of India with foreign policy and security handled by New Delhi.

Bhutan faced first internal turmoil in 1950s with some southern Bhutanese raising flags for democratic changes. This was more an influence from Nepal's success in dethroning Rana regime than the Indian independence. There was only one recorded demonstration in Sarbhang (now spelled as Sarpang), that too attended by 'about 100' individual volunteers. The leaders were operating from India. Indian leadership appeared to have not lent any support for this uprising other than turning blind eyes to leaders taking shelters in West Bengal.

In 1951, the new communist China took control of Tibet. Bhutan feared Chinese annexation might further expand beyond the Himalayas. In 1959 the PLA occupied eight Bhutanese enclaves in western Tibet and that same year, Chinese Premier Chou En-Lai expressed China's desire for a direct bilateral border talk with Bhutan (Penjore, 2004). Bhutan recalled its diplomatic mission in China, closed its northern borders and handed itself to India for survival. India too was fearing further advancement of the Chinese

forces south of the Himalayas barriers will be the biggest threat for Indian. Bhutan agreed to allow India dispatch Indian Army in some of the critical points along Bhutan-China borders to stop further aggression from Chinese military. The initial agreement was to train the Bhutanese armed forces through the project called Indian Military Training Team (IMTART). However, it established a permanent base in Bhutan. These Indian security installations are still actively checking Chinese activities along northern Bhutan borders.

Bhutan not only handed its security keys to India but also sought economic support to come out of isolation. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India was invited to the Paro palace³ to discuss India Bhutan relations and economic co-operations.

In 1959, when Dalai Lama fled Tibet to take shelter in India, thousands of Tibetan refugees fled to Bhutan as well. While the large number who fled to India and then to third countries settled well economically to continue their anti-China movement, Tibetans in Bhutan were silenced. One of the influential figures of the Tibetan refugees was a fiancée of the third King – Yanki – from whom he had several children. During 1974 turmoil led by Yanki, Tibetan refugees were given choice either to get Bhutanese citizenship to abandon Tibetan dreams or leave country to follow Dalai Lama in India. Many expressed not to take Bhutanese citizenship but remain refugees (Denyer 2008). By 1981, Tibetans had left Bhutan, but small numbers remain who have now been naturalised. Through this Bhutan eliminated any form of any anti-China voice. Bhutan was still hopeful to reconnect with China in future.

³ <https://youtu.be/JELLYxKHmBI>

Bhutan during Sino-Indian war

Bhutanese military did not participate directly during the Sino-India war even though Indian military were stationed in the country. This was partly because of the new economic relations established with India while cultural and traditional relations with Tibet was the bigger influence in its foreign and security policies. Bhutan under Indian sponsorship had just initiated planned development projects.

India sponsored to build infrastructures in Bhutan. The road infrastructures not only connected Bhutan with India economically but opened up access to Indian military for travel in case required for defence. The construction of roads became the main issue of discussion in Bhutan's subsequent Assembly sessions, and India was considered the only possible source of aid because of the entire absence of diplomatic relations with other countries (Priesner 2004: 219).

While the war was in progress, Bhutan was busy building its first road networks. Further, the war concentrated outside the Bhutan-China borders which did not require for an active involvement of Bhutan.

Indian security installations in Bhutan

Indian security dimension changed when Chinese troops took control of Tibet. The immediate threats were the Himalayan nations that act as buffer states to veil the confrontation between the Asian giants. Bhutan and Sikkim were the immediate target of the likely Chinese aggression. Bhutan requested security from the new Indian leaders. As a protectorate of the India bound by 1949 treaty, there was no other options for Bhutan but to seek Indian security blanket in its northern borders. However, the fact is unless briefly in 1911, China has never proclaimed Bhutan to be its part.

The first team of military personnel was sent in May 1961 led by BGS XXXIII Corps Brigadier J. S. Aurora. He was replaced by Colonel B. N. Upadhyay of the 9th Gorkha Rifles on 20 July 1962 to lead a team of about 15 officers. The Wangchuk Lo Dzong Military School (WLDMS) was raised on 16 October 1962 and commenced training with 22 officer cadets and 49 non-commissioned officers (Indian Army, nd).

It was formalised into the IMTART following the defence agreement in 1965. Its bases are located in Thimphu, Haa, Trashigang and Wangduephodrang (Schottli, 2015).

Initially, then, the economic aid given by India was highly influenced by security concerns, and thus enabling Bhutan to have an essential infrastructure (Trivedi, 2008). Today a 1,000 person-strong Indian Military Training Team is permanently based in western Bhutan to train and regularly cooperate with the Royal Bhutan Army (Ramachandran, 2017).

Border Disputes with China and Indian Engagements

‘For Bhutan, the border problem is its biggest security challenge and is critical to its future as a nation-state. Hence, Bhutan regards border solution as an end in itself, and wants a speedy settlement’ (Kumar, 2010.)

Bhutan’s effort to finalise its border demarcation with China is viewed worriedly in India. While demarcated and peaceful Bhutan-China borders would address India’s many security concerns, Indian establishment wish it remained volatile and conflicting. One of the reasons for such Indian wish would be to avoid better Bhutan-China relations. On many occasions, Indian

media and politicians debated more seriously about Bhutan-China border than Bhutanese themselves.

India is dominant in all aspect in south Asia – economic, cultural, political and security. While India has its own reason to have its direct intervention in the neighbouring state, the dominance has resulted in rather confronting outcome. The geographical Indo-centricity on the ground has strongly contributed to this phenomenon, not only reinforcing India's supremacy in the region but further making it extremely difficult for the smaller states to bypass India and actively engage with each other directly. Landlocked countries like Nepal and Bhutan are highly dependent on India for trade and transit (Sauvagerd, 2018). The regional predominance has led to India facing primary hostility from among its neighbouring countries (Destradi 2010 & 2012; Prys 2012).

Bhutan is highly significant to India because of its geopolitical location (Murthy, 2000). The country functions as one of the buffer states between India and China. Bhutan's sovereignty is of great importance to India because a "Chinese-dominated Bhutan would flank India's position in the upper Assam, and strategically place the Chinese south of the Himalayas" (Belfiglio, 1972).

Soon after taking over the reins of the country, current King Jigme Khesar travelled to India to revise the bilateral treaty. Bhutan had made it clear, at least for the public consumption, that the country was not keen to establish diplomatic relations with any of the five permanent members of the UN security council (Chaudury, 2017).

The revised bilateral treaty in 2007 removed the provisions of Indian guidance on security and foreign affairs – practically ending the protectorate status of the country. This was the first time Bhutan managed to get out of the status of Indian protectorate – able to handle its own foreign affairs and security.

Bhutan no longer required to consult India to purchase ammunition or to establish diplomatic relations with other countries.

Bhutan transitioned to ‘controlled democracy’ in 2008 with the introduction of a parliament elected through adult franchise. The national constitution, prepared with support from Indian experts, has mandated the King for security and foreign affairs of the country.

An elected government was installed under the leadership of Jigmi Thinley of the *Druk Phuensum Tshogpa* following elections in 2008. This government expanded Bhutan’s diplomatic presence in many countries. The initiative was not digested by New Delhi.

When Thinley met with China’s Premier Wen Jiabao at the sidelines of the Rio+20 Summit in Brazil in 2012, the Indian political circle read this as Bhutan’s wish to establish relations with China. Bhutan later said the two leaders discussed nothing related to diplomatic relations. There was no formal statement from India’s foreign ministry, but Indian media reacted with alarm. Multiple news headlines such as “China, Bhutan ‘ready’ to establish diplomatic ties” (Krishnan, 2012), and “Bhutan switches focus to China” (Arora & Simha, 2012) drew attention. Indian media claimed that “India confronts a new strategic situation in its neighbourhood as its staunchest ally Bhutan prepares to establish full diplomatic ties with China” (Bagchi, 2012). While Bhutan continued its efforts at the top level to convince its intentions to Indian leadership, the Indian media stunts acted as catalyst to sour relations between the two countries.

It’s a media culture in India to provoke for dismantling India’s relations with neighbouring countries as an instrument to gain political favour or wider attention. Imaginative, provocative and

unverified news and opinions have been new normal for Indian news media for last few decades.

Some say Thinley's attempt to establish diplomatic ties with China should be seen as a statement being made — that the 2007 revision of the Treaty of Friendship with India is not enough, and that Bhutan wishes to now have an independent domestic and foreign policy (Rizal, 2015). Other argued Bhutan “committed an unforgivable sin in New Delhi's eyes” (Madsen, 2013).

A year later, unexpectedly, New Delhi withdrew the fuel subsidies for Bhutan. The Indian government officially reasoned that this decision was purely “developmental, financial, and technical” (Thinley, 2014) but was later revealed there was in fact an order to this effect (Lamsang, 2013). The action was deliberately introduced just before the second parliamentary elections in Bhutan, which led to fall of the Thinley government (Dikshit, 2013). Thinley, thus, became ‘a scapegoat for both India and the king’ (Rizal, 2015).

The new government under Tshering Tobgay, of the PDP, completely halted Bhutan's spree of establishing diplomatic relations with foreign countries. This was more desirable result for India. Tobgay did not initiate any formal communication with senior Chinese leaders too.

The latest development was the dispute in Doklam, a tri-junction of Bhutan-China-India in western Bhutan. It was Indian news media that first broke the news claiming Chinese building infrastructures inside Bhutanese territory. Bhutan neither denied this fact nor claimed it to be true. Bhutan maintained its silence and innocence and engaged Chinese and Indian leadership diplomatically. While Indian attention was concentrated on Doklam, Bhutan completed its mission to connect Tibet through road network in the central north.

Threats from India

India's northeast is the most volatile, possibly in Asia, in terms of politics, demography and environment. It is for this volatility that India's biggest fear is China's attack along the Siliguri corridor will completely disconnect two Indias. The regions, along with neighbouring countries are sometimes referred to as 'time bombs in the subcontinent' (Mehta, 2001). Losing control in Siliguri corridor will disconnect India's connection with its seven sister states and other countries in South East Asia.

There are insurgent movements from about 50 groups rooted in history, language and ethnicity, tribal rivalry, migration, local resource control, drugs, centre and state government negligence and foreign powers involvement (Penjore, 2004). The active separatist militant groups such as United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front for Bodoland (NDFB) and Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) are primary threats to Bhutan's security. These and many other militant groups have at some point used Bhutan as their operational bases. Any political disruptions in the region will negatively impact Bhutan - politically and economically.

Bhutan claimed it knew presence of Indian militants in its territories in 1996. Bhutan understood the potential danger, and beginning 1997 the issue dominated the National Assembly discussions (Penjore, 2004). However, there are also claims, Bhutan sought support from these militants for expulsion of Nepali speakers from the south (Verma, 2004; Kumar, 2004). Bhutanese king had met these militants in their own camps several times (Rehman, 2007; Telegraph India, 2004). When the threat was more serious, Bhutan sought assistance from Indian Union government to run 'Operation All Clear' in 2003. The operation flushed out the militants out of Bhutan.

The biggest threat for Bhutan is absorption by India or China. Its immediate neighbours Tibet was absorbed into China and Sikkim into India. The security confrontation between the Asian giants in the region will pose serious threat to Bhutan's sovereignty. Increasing US presence in the region, as it encircles China, the regions is certain to become the battle ground in future for dominance.

The rivalrous and hostile dynamics between India and China are the biggest security threat to Bhutan, and therefore Bhutanese foreign policy and diplomacy has consistently sought to placate India with assurances of its friendship and take the fallout of Indian trust deficit with a strategic silence (Kaul, 2022).

US interests in Bhutan

Bhutan's geopolitical location is strategic not only to India but to United States as well when it comes to its mission to establish its presence in those countries that share borders with China. US's diplomatic communication with Bhutan is handled by its embassy in New Delhi while 'Bhutan maintains a consulate general in the United States'⁴.

US Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) for Bhutan, which was approved on 8 February 2023, presents new opportunities associated with expanding US-Bhutan relations. That said, the ICS does not prescribe any concrete bilateral engagement apart from identifying areas of cooperation (Acharya, 2023).

The US offered to resettle majority of the Bhutanese refugees – that had been the headache for Bhutan for decades – in hope Bhutan would agree to open its doors for diplomatic relations, at least a consular presence if not an embassy. The US regularly

⁴ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-bhutan/>

engaged Bhutan during the resettlement process and sent several high-ranking officials. These visits have stopped following the conclusion of resettlement. Bhutan no more expresses interest in building rapport with the US. Thinley-cabinet had made attempts to connect with US by establishing diplomatic presence with US allies such as Australia and Israel but that's no more likely be the case anymore.

India is worried about the US presence in Bhutan. India and the US have conflicting geopolitical interest in the Himalayas. While US interest is to encircle China through 'chain of air bases and military ports (Reed, 2013)', India's primary interest is to avoid direct confrontation with China by ensuring stable buffer state. India has closely read the instability in Nepal where US presence has overtaken Indian interests and continued political unrest has affected India more. India will unlikely accept any US presence in Bhutan.

India's security interests in Bhutan as well as the structural differences between the two countries make the relationship extremely complex, and offer an interesting and rather unusual set of circumstances compared to other South Asian countries. Additionally, Bhutan is the only former Indian protectorate that exists as a sovereign country today, having agreed to let India control its foreign policy until 2007 (Sauvagred, 2018).

China too expressed its interest not to incorporate Bhutan into its imperial world. China too is worried about US presence in Bhutan but is comfortable about Indian engagement. The only worry for Bhutan remained is the resettled or migrated Bhutanese (especially in the US) who would be empowered or encouraged to boost their anti-Bhutan campaign.

Conclusion

Bhutan's relations with India is longstanding. This relation is 'open to economic coercion and diplomatic manipulation' yet better option for Bhutan is to maintain comfortable and trusted equidistance with both India and China. Indo-China rivalry at Bhutan's borders increases insecurity to all three countries.

While maintaining its closer cooperation with India, Bhutan has gradually shifted its path to reconnect China. For practical reasons, Bhutan feels safer in Chinese and Indian dominance compared to that of US. As long as the two neighbours remain committed to ensuring sovereignty, Bhutan is likely to forgo its interest in connecting US and its allies any further. That too will largely determine how India maintains its relationship with US during its dealings with China.

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