

Bhutan's Engagement in Global Politics Over and Above India and China: A Tryst with Transfiguration of Regional Geopolitical Locus

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Abstract

This article intends to add something new to the body of scholarship on Bhutan's IR by moving away from a solely India–China frame of reference. Small, non-island and non-western governments, like Bhutan, are increasingly important yet under studied in international relations, and it is an important reason to pay greater attention to them. The article also highlights how conventional studies of Bhutan have only concentrated on Bhutan's relationship with India as well as Chinese threats. This results in a better understanding of Bhutan's internal drivers of foreign policy, such as its position on the Doklam crisis. This study postulates new dimensions and insight into Bhutan's global diplomacy.

Keywords: Global diplomacy; International relations; Doklam; Bhutan; India; China.

INTRODUCTION

Bhutan a small developing country that receives little attention from the international community. A landlocked nation sandwiched

between two rapidly emerging Asian powers; it is possibly the only one with a dearth of academic IR research on its strategic importance. A legacy of imperialism, geopolitics treats tiny nations as simple contestation grounds and influence spheres among large powers. This paper argues that studying Bhutan's diplomatic history may help us better understand the Himalayan region's geopolitical tendencies and their consequences for small nations in regions of strong rivalry among larger entities.

Historical assessments of the nation and geopolitical interpretations of its actions have been often dependent on rehashing a limited collection of references and worn cliches. Many studies have

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focused on Bhutan's historical ties to British India, vehement declarations of its close relationship with India from 1947 onwards¹, and, most recently, certain descriptions of Bhutan's transition to democracy in 2008.² Geopolitically, Bhutan is framed as "asymmetrical between India and China" in existing researches. Contemporary Bhutanese political dynamics, however, have received little attention, and the country is viewed via the polarising lenses of "Shangri La" with "Southern Problem".³ The current paper recognises the modern dynamics and political developments that are taking place in Bhutan since the advent of the twenty-first century.

Bhutan's political landscape has changed dramatically in the twenty-first century, and it is worth noting that the country undertook an "elite-led transition to democracy", which was widely despised in Bhutan; held three general elections; and engaged in internal contests over the potential influence of each of the three major political parties. Contrary to this, complete diplomatic connections or the resolution of a border issue in an area considered critical by India may restrict Bhutan's diplomatic flexibility with China. On a variety of regional economic, social, and political indices, Bhutan is growing faster than other South Asian countries.⁴ According to the report of Vision of Humanity (2019), Bhutan is the only South Asian nation to make it into the top 20 of the Global Peace Index. The country is commercially linked to India and on an accelerated path toward democratic consolidation and incremental internationalisation. In light of this, the article explains Bhutan's IR by stressing endogenous viewpoints and motives.

BHUTAN: A TINY STATE AND IR

Bhutan has barely ever been studied in the global IR literature on tiny nations. Economics, bilateral relations with India, and Chinese threats or engagement have been the focus of "neorealist structural" research. Even studies of tiny state "foreign strategy" do not include Bhutan.⁵ Additionally, many who question the universal applicability of theories on "small state" behaviour perceive the diversification of tiny state tactics as binomial, with wealthy Western states creating norms and poorer non-Western governments focusing on regime survival.³

Bhutan, with limited resources and small territory, but significant normative influence via norm advocacy and example setting, adds complexity to this paradigm. A unique carbon negative nation,

it is a thriving Asian welfare state, which has aggressively promoted Gross National Happiness (GNH) as a measure of progress.⁶ Even though it does not meet the economic vulnerability requirements, it will be a lower middle-income nation by 2023 due to its positive developmental and social indices.⁷ Located between two of the world's most populated countries, India and China, with the latter being the epicentre of the pandemic, Bhutan is also a popular tourism destination for Chinese visitors. On the hand due to national lockdowns in many countries, Bhutanese students came home from severely affected places throughout the globe⁸; even then Bhutan succeeded to fight the coronavirus epidemic in 2020–21 with 891 total cases⁹, and one death¹⁰, unlike the other countries in Asia and beyond.

Several publications on the country's foreign affairs focus on its bilateral or "friendship" connection with India. They emphasise Bhutan's ties to India. Unlike Nepal, which focuses on balancing India and China, Bhutan's proclivities are supposedly with India.¹¹ Bhutanese concerns are seldom acknowledged in discussions of Sino-Bhutanese border negotiations, although they do occur. Bhutan's border issue is vital to its security and destiny; scholars have suggested a hardline approach and indicate that it's time to assert itself. Others think India should monitor what China and Bhutan do.¹²

Bhutan remained isolated until the 1960s, when, facing Chinese invasion, it tilted towards India. This lent credence to IR theories of tiny state behaviour. Bhutan's foreign policy revolves around India-Bhutan friendship, which was solidified in 1958 when Indian PM Nehru visited Bhutan. Bhutan has since remained faithful to India, despite continual Chinese hostility and territorial invasion. Bhutan implemented a "one nation, one people" policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, expelling some ethnic Nepalese from the south.^{5,13,14} And in 2007, India agreed to amend the 1949 treaty with Bhutan, granting it greater latitude in foreign affairs, which it didn't need since India has always been an ally. Bhutan's first elected government following its 2007–08 democratic transition made overtures to China, but was voted out in the next elections. Bhutan must recognise the benefits of its unwavering allegiance to India, which includes keeping China at bay. The Doklam Crisis wherein India stepped up the presence of Armed Forces in response to land grabbing by China is an example.

BHUTAN'S FOREIGN TIES: FRIENDLINESS AND MORE

The presence of social ties, institutionalised cooperation, trust development via partnerships, common "symbols and practices", consultative procedures, "integrated regionalism, solidarity and reciprocal commitment" are all likely to be present before a relationship can be defined as such. It is possible to have hatred, friendship, or limited diplomatic interaction with another country.¹⁵ They have always been at the heart of geopolitics in terms of both history, strategy, and even number of diplomats. Understanding international relations from a lateral, interpersonal, and mutual perspective gives for a more in-depth understanding. International Friendship can be described as a "special relationship" that grows between two people in a multi-member security community.¹⁶

Indo-Bhutan friendship, on the other hand, is an excellent example of a partnership between two "non-Western" governments that inherited an "imperial" past that required negotiation and navigation.

a) Friendship and Beyond

Following the 1949 ties with India, "Jawahar Lal Nehru's" 1958 visit to Bhutan was seen as a crucial landmark in Bhutan-India friendship. That has been a long-standing practice with King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck's regular visit to New Delhi. Nehru's 1958 visit to Bhutan was a geopolitically spectacular¹⁷ with the image of Nehru with little Indira riding a yak for days to reach distant Bhutan. The Wangchucks and the Gandhis forged a bond that spans not just two nations, but also two families.¹⁸

"Some may think that since India is a great and powerful country and Bhutan a small one, the former might wish to exercise pressure on Bhutan. It is therefore essential that I make it clear to you that our only wish is that you should remain an independent country, choosing your own way of life and taking the path of progress according to your will", Nehru stated in a speech in the scenic valley of Paro on September 23, that year.¹⁹

Despite a revised 2007 treaty that does not require Bhutan to seek India's "advice" in its international relations, Bhutan has remained attentive to India's concerns about China since then.¹⁸

b) What the Research Indicates

According to a Bhutanese researcher, in September 1958, Nehru rode into Bhutan to encourage it to end its isolation policy.¹⁷ Another Bhutanese author views their friendship in this way: it's not only Nehru and commercial ties that count, but also educators, labourers, and Buddhist philosophers like Ambedkar. An Indian critic, on the other hand, says, "Nehru gave Bhutan its first road after a long journey".²⁰

Intricate linkages of internal situation to the international context are complex and state-centric theories based on a unified definition of national interest seem inadequately equipped to explain them. Recovering often overlooked archival material and regional monitors reveals the indigenous underpinnings of Bhutanese policy from 1949 to 1970. Bhutan, for example, remained 'noncommittal' immediately after Nehru's visit, even as the situation in Lhasa worsened in 1959. Even while Bhutan finally accepted Indian help, it banned all commerce with Tibet in the north in 1960, causing severe economic damage. It was a Bhutanese choice. Important factors that make and drive Bhutanese policy aren't given enough attention. UN Security council took strong nationalist approach and decided on Feb 7, 1971 to allow Thimphu to join the United Nations as the 128th member state.²¹ In the same way, Bhutan decided to recognise Bangladesh as a country on its own.^{22,23} From the late '70s, With the "Bhutanisation of government offices", new citizenship legislation, and "Jigme Singye Wangchuck's" unorthodox democratisation, the interlinkages of internal and foreign factors are clear.²⁴ No decision we make is anti-India, as the fourth Bhutanese King briefed the Indian reporter.²⁰

In 1960, the National Assembly demanded that Bhutan's border with India be recognised as an "international" boundary.²⁵ In addition, the monarch said Bhutan is sovereign and independent and may negotiate directly with China if it wishes. "Just over a year ago China offered to negotiate a boundary arrangement; also, to recognise Bhutan's sovereignty, extend diplomatic recognition, and give technical assistance," said Bhutan's PM Jigme Dorji. PM Jigme Dorji denounced Indian forces wandering into Bhutan during the 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict. "Can you think that a big nation like India has to take it lying down from a little country like Bhutan?" Indira Gandhi addressed her audience in an October 1979 speech.²⁵ On the India-China border issue, Bhutan has been neutral. A Chinese delegation was invited to the fourth King's

coronation in 1974. Since the fourth King's (Jigme Singye Wangchuck) coronation, ambassadorial visits have taken place between China and Bhutan.²⁶

Prior that the changes which happened in 1980s in the Bhutan-China relationship must be remembered. Achieving independence and economic support are the incentives, while boundary claims or encroachments are the sticks. The border discussions began in 1984 after a Chinese invasion in September 1979, and a peace accord was concluded in 1998, with China acknowledging Bhutanese sovereignty and stating that it "completely respects Bhutan's territorial integrity and independence".^{27,28}

As the political observations made by several experts, China is eager towards "package deal" instead of "sector-by-sector" mechanism. Another facet in the form of trading of 495 square kilometres of land by China during 1990s for 269 square kilometres of land in northwestern Bhutan was observed.²⁹⁻³¹ However, the northwestern region is seen as strategically significant for India, which was at the heart of the Doklam crisis as it has developed over the last several years. Menon and Kanisetti argue that "the Indo-Bhutanese relationship cannot, and indeed must not, be taken for granted. Bhutan's silence on China's takeover of Doklam might be explained by the fact that Bhutan views Doklam as unimportant to its own survival. Bhutan now looks to be breaking out on its own and negotiating with China independently".³ The authors do not subscribe to the above view as all the newspapers of that time read Doklam is a contested region near "the tri-junction" of China, Bhutan, and India. In contrast to China and Bhutan, India does not claim Doklam but supports Bhutan's claim to the territory.^{29,31-36} Rather, Bhardwaj³⁷ in his post (2017, August 9) in Mint wrote, "Doklam may bring Bhutan closer to India".

The Chinese PLA built a road from "Dokola in the Doklam area to the Bhutan army camp in Zompelri" on June 16, violating the binding commitments between the two nations to preserve "peace and tranquilly" and the current state of affairs until a negotiated deal on the border issue.²⁹⁻³¹ To stop the road development, Bhutan's Envoy to India wrote to the Chinese Embassy in Delhi on June 20. As stated in a press release on June 30, this development would represent a significant departure in the power structure, with serious security implications for India. For 12 weeks, Indian and Chinese troops fought a tense standoff on Bhutanese frontier. This is likely the first time Bhutan has strongly condemned Chinese invasions and stated the territory is contested between Bhutan and China.²⁹⁻³¹

In the backdrop of Sino-Indian conflict over Doklam, India has real power in the area. China hasn't been able to show that it backs Bhutan's policy choices, which would make it more secure both in real and perceived terms. China wants to control and run the area, but the kingdom has a long-standing claim to it. It is vital for Indian security that China and Bhutan resolve their disagreements.³¹ As a tiny state, the adoption of 'friendship' rhetoric helps to stabilise and handle the security challenge, but it also necessitates a kind of diplomacy on Bhutan's side, such as the Doklam crisis, which deserves greater attention. Bhutan has found the friendship rhetoric advantageous in its own security calculations, as India is often seen to be the net supplier of border protection.

For peace to come through accommodation, smart diplomacy is needed. Techniques of persuasion and negotiation may be just like those used to pressure. People who think diplomacy is important don't agree with this.³⁸ They think it's important for powerful countries to use diplomacy, but they think it doesn't work for smaller states. In diplomatic language, one state talks to another to try to get information across. When the "standoff" was settled, the major players in focus were India and China. Bhutan made its position known to China and opted neither to confirm or deny that Indian forces had been invited to Doklam, a strategic choice having 'face saving' ramifications for both India and China. "This crisis has brought about some real questioning about Bhutan's position and vulnerabilities for the first time in decades," a senior official said. "This isn't to say there is a crisis in the Bhutan-India relationship there isn't but there is going to be a lot of hard thinking on what needs to happen next".³⁹

A story like this is unusual, but it underscores the frequently unnoticed significance of the tiny state in regional peace. However, even in a disagreement involving Bhutan, most of the literature concentrates on India and China's actions and attitudes. In November 2020, news appeared that the Chinese had established a hamlet near the Bhutanese border.⁴⁰ The Bhutanese envoy to India rejected the accusations "There is no Chinese village inside Bhutan," said Vetsop Namgyel, Bhutan's ambassador to India⁴¹, but Indian media and analysts felt it was true.⁴² From a different axis, barely nine kilometres from the Doklam confrontation site, China has resumed road building. It has also built at least one village.⁴³ It's important to note that, as any international relations theorist will tell you, sovereignty is a very difficult

concept to understand.

The concept of "state sovereignty" is useful to back up "claims and counterclaims", which can cause a lot of anxiety and hardship for people who don't care about it. People who live in sparsely populated high altitude mountainous areas, like the Sino-Bhutan border, don't care about state sovereignty very much.

BHUTANESE DIPLOMACY: EXTENDING VISIONS

Bhutan, a tiny country between two growing powers, is strategically located. The two super powers India and China claim contrasting identities as democratic and communist, attracting a broad spectrum of additional neighbours and global players.

As contrast to narratives that portray Bhutan like a passive "placeholder" in context with domestic actions, it indicates the necessity of "foreign policy trajectory" in the perspective of "descriptive and analytical" aspects. It is also observed that the determination of Bhutan's "foreign policy trajectory" is governed by international and internal issues, both. This worry stemmed from territorial claims as well as formal treaty stipulations, existed till the developments took place with the beginning of current century. Even though Bhutan had never been colonised, after a monarch-led, heavily opposed transition to democracy in 2007, Bhutan has respected and reaffirmed its sovereignty at every conceivable opportunity.^{44,45,3}

Due to the changing regional context, a modernising Bhutan started strengthening bilateralism with its "transit state" India, in the second part of the twentieth century.⁴⁶ It opted to internationalise in waves, and it wanted to be a norm "entrepreneur" state by introducing "Gross National Happiness". Weak militarily but strong diplomatically, it has pursued an interwoven "multi-vector"⁴⁷ foreign strategy, including with other tiny nations. This little Asian welfare state has yet to negotiate its northern border with China; nevertheless, its cautious diplomacy has helped escape a full-blown conflict between the two superstates in its neighbourhood, so it remains a net source of regional stability.

Until date, most articles about Bhutan's foreign relations have concentrated on its economic situation, bilateral ties with India, and interactions or dangers from China for example, Menon 1968; Sunanda K. 1981; Kohali 1986; Mathou 1994; Bisht 2012; Panda 2017; Sarki 2019; Shasiharani 2020.⁴⁸⁻

⁵⁴ These are predicted given the importance of structural elements in "neorealist" IR. Bhutanese international policy uses diplomatic connections in a diverse and sequential way. Despite its initial diplomatic relations with "India in 1968", its internationalisation trajectory shows a geographical and ideological diversity.

Unsurprisingly, a Bhutanese researcher's investigation of small state cognitive theory in foreign policy finds them lacking important implications. Rakesh Chetri⁵⁵ (1988), highlights the need of "multi-perspectival" security thinking and India's reliance on Bhutan. But few experts have ever stressed how India is reliant on Bhutan. It is evident that the little state's dependence on its larger transit state is for energy, business, and employment.⁵⁶ It's critical to deconstruct distance's function in geopolitics. In critical international relations, we must acknowledge that geography is hardly simple nor predetermined. The choice of adjectives shapes depictions and creates possible framings. The advancement narrative defines Bhutan as 'mountainous', connoting 'isolated' and 'inaccessible'; a similar framing of the nation as 'small' is strikingly lacking. The framing counts, so highlands do not stifle progress, and tininess is associated with both size and mindset.

Using a political geography perspective, we can explain how diplomacy is affected by distances in a variety of ways. Different conceptions of distance influence various aspects of global diplomacy, each with its own logic. In addition, three types of distances must be considered: "gravitational, topological, and attributional".³ The number of nations with which Bhutan has developed friendships shows an international affair largely focusing on Buddhist culture Smallness and monarchy. Until the 1970s, Bhutan had diplomatic connections with India and Bangladesh, which were the initial steps toward globalisation for the isolated kingdom. The Netherlands and fourteen more nations were all involved in Bhutan's internationalisation between 1980 and 1992. Affiliations to political parties or economic systems are less significant than Buddhism or monarchy in some nations like Kingdom of Denmark, Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, the Maldivian archipelago, Kingdom of the Netherlands and State of Kuwait, but they aren't the only factors to consider. After substantial developments in South Korea and Pakistan, the relationship was established in September 1987 and December 1988, respectively.⁵⁷

Paused from 1992 until 2002, however, Bhutan

joined many multinational organisations dealing to “environment, transport, and communications” (this should be regarded in light of Bhutan having exposed to “internet” and tv in 1999). Prior to the democratic transition in 2007–08, three new bilateral diplomatic ties with “Australia, Canada and Singapore” were established in 2002–03. The economic issues seem to dominate. In reality, the mental barrier between Bhutan and Australia will be shrinking.⁵⁸

In 2007, after the democratic transition, the first administration (DPT) started broadening the international relations, which took place from 2007 to 2013. Bhutan developed bilateral diplomatic contacts with several nations during this time. This period is devoid of any characteristics associated with monarchy, Buddhism, or “economic” power. There is no evidence of “gravitational or attributional” distance being bridged in this fourth phase of internationalisation. Bhutan's own initiatives to promote happiness through “niche diplomacy”.³ From 2013 through November 2020, no new bilateral or multilateral diplomatic connections were established. The third elected administration (a new political party, DNT) established diplomatic ties with Germany in November 2020, two years into its tenure. In December 2020, official connections with Israel were established.⁵⁹ These developments signal a fifth phase in internationalisation (like the third phase when economics rules).

The idea of distance in all of its forms aids understanding of Bhutan's international relations and its links to value domains, role conception, and domestic affairs. Despite its “gravitational distance” from India, nations such as Kingdom of the Switzerland, the state of Kuwait, the kingdom of Thailand, and Japan may be viewed as near to Bhutan, despite their actual distance. Paying enough attention to experiences may help us better grasp Bhutan's direction. Both the kingdom is land-locked Asian republics, yet their strategies have diverged; Nepal chose to balance with India and China, but Bhutan chose India.

Bhutan, a tiny nation with such a peculiar narrative of actual progressive and cautious globalisation, has profited from the historical experiences of other nations in the area. Bhutan's Kings have helped establish geopolitical space for Bhutan across South Asia and beyond⁶⁰ by ceremonial, historical, and empathic actions. The Bhutanese ruler grew in worldwide repute by decentralising authority throughout the same era. Bhutan's diplomacy has evolved over time on its mutual relations with India, with a layer of protection added by gradual

internationalisation over generations. Bhutan's relationship with India is based on protracted friendly politics and collaboration, which is counterbalanced by India's worry of China.

CONCLUSION

New insights into how minor nations might play a role in the Mountainous region's political trends are critical in order to question the simple depiction of major power agency and tactics. In this article, the author explains how Bhutan, as a serene self-governing tiny Mountainous state, an integrating democracy, and an ecologic norm influencer, has used a range of tactics in its international policy to secure the future of its citizens, and to pursue its national interest in a direct path toward independence. Bhutan's foreign ties are more complex than just being dominated by India as an ally and China as an adversary. Further the Doklam incident shows how tiny states may prevent conflict on a hazardous boundary. This paper invites further research into the role of tiny states in Asia's larger political processes and the world by overlaying a knowledge of Bhutanese diplomacy within modern IR research.

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