

Building a Stronger Partnership: India's Proactive Approach towards Bhutan under the Modi Government

SUKHWINDER KOUR

SUNEEL KUMAR

University of Jammu

Amidst the intricate geopolitical environment, Bhutan holds a crucial position in India's strategic and security calculus in South Asia. Bhutan offers a vital linkage between the Indian ascendancy and its security interests concerning its northeastern states. In contrast to his predecessor, Prime Minister Modi visited Bhutan in 2014 to acknowledge India's augmented consideration towards Bhutan. Modi's visit to Bhutan is regarded as one of the most decisive for Modi's regional stratagem. Since then, the Modi government has taken different steps for strengthening India's ties with Bhutan and also, to curb the growing Chinese footprints in South Asia. In this context, the present paper examines India's foreign policy endeavours towards Bhutan under the Modi government.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Security, Strategy, South Asia, India, China, Bhutan

Small states possess distinct advantages in the realm of international relations. They can utilise it to enhance their positions and accomplish their objectives. The concept of "small state diplomacy" is based on the premise that smaller states can leverage their size and adaptability to their benefit, rather than being hindered by their size. Due to their limited political, economic, and military capabilities, small governments are often perceived as impartial and non-hostile by other states. As a result, they might serve as intermediaries in resolving conflicts. The seeming impartiality of small governments can facilitate their involvement in resolving conflicts between larger and more influential states, as well as fostering peace, stability, dialogue, and compromise in international relations. These contributions can provide substantial advantages for global security. Small states can also leverage their diminutive dimensions to cultivate intimate alliances with neighbouring states. Due to their limited resources and less influence compared to larger states, small states may need to depend on partnerships and collaborations to accomplish their objectives. This can foster the establishment of robust and mutually advantageous alliances between smaller and larger states, enabling the smaller countries to acquire resources, knowledge, and markets that would otherwise be inaccessible (Thorhallsson & Bailes, 2016, pp. 296-299). Moreover, the concept of "smart power" pertains to the capacity of smaller states to employ a blend of forceful (hard) and persuasive (soft) tactics to accomplish their objectives in the realm of global affairs. Small governments possess the capability to exert influence over other states through their military or economic might, as well as through cultural or diplomatic methods

to establish connections and influence outcomes. For example, countries may employ cultural diplomacy, such as promoting their arts, literature, or cuisine, to increase their visibility and strengthen their influence. By engaging in this action, small states can enhance their impact on international matters and contribute to a more secure and prosperous global environment (Nye 2009, pp. 160-163). Furthermore, small states can provide tangible advantages to larger states. Small states might offer advantageous strategic positions for military deployments or facilitate access to crucial resources and markets. Furthermore, smaller states have the capacity to serve as pioneers, experimenting with novel policies or technologies that can be adopted by larger states. This can be especially advantageous in fields such as renewable energy and sustainable development. Furthermore, collaboration between small and large states can be mutually advantageous. Small governments can have a significant influence on international relations by leveraging their size, adaptability, and distinctive capabilities, thereby making valuable contributions to global stability and prosperity. Small states can facilitate the advancement of free trade, safeguard human rights, and peacefully resolve problems. Through collaboration, both small and large states may together establish a more stable and affluent global environment. For example, Singapore's impartiality and small size have established itself as a reliable and effective financial hub. This has facilitated the establishment of robust alliances with the United States and China, two of the globe's most influential countries. Costa Rica has established a reputation as a tranquil and democratic nation, which has led to the attraction of global investments and the development of robust alliances with other Latin American countries (Panda, 2020; Guo & Jie, 2013).

Bhutan, situated between the influential countries, China and India, has maintained an exceptional connection with India. Due to Bhutan's strategic location, it is an unavoidable focal point of India's foreign strategy. Although it is smaller in size, its location in a strategically important area makes it a crucial element in India's strategic and security calculations. India has consistently shown respect for the aspirations of its smaller neighbour, Bhutan and has provided help in cultivating its distinct identity in the international milieu. The analysis of Bhutan's emergence as a sovereign and independent country in the regional and global context necessitates a partnership with India. Conversely, Bhutan has consistently prioritised India's security concerns. This study examines the strategic approach that India has taken towards Bhutan throughout the Modi period, as well as the efforts made to strengthen their bilateral relations. The India-Bhutan relationship exemplifies mutually advantageous collaboration in South Asia. Bhutan's strategic position between China and India, along with its intricate Himalayan terrain, acts as a formidable obstacle that hinders China's convenient access to Bhutan. Ever since the era of British colonial rule in India, Bhutan has been regarded as a strategic buffer zone for India against China. This is mostly owing to the significance of the narrow Siliguri corridor, which serves as the only conduit connecting India's northeastern states with the rest of the country. The bilateral connection between Bhutan and independent India was established in 1949 by a Treaty of Friendship, which holds great importance for both states. In the 1970s, Bhutan underwent a process of rejuvenation and accomplished sovereignty, establishing its affiliation with the United Nations in 1971. This marked an important milestone in its foreign relations. In the past, Bhutan had a policy of isolationism. Over time, Bhutan has undergone a gradual process of opening up to the world. As

part of this process, in 2007, Bhutan and India conducted a re-evaluation of the Treaty of Friendship that was originally established in 1949 (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2007).

The study is based on a qualitative research approach. It is descriptive and analytical in nature. It has been developed on the basis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources encompass official government reports, comments, speeches, and data gathered from government websites. On the other hand, secondary sources include published materials, including books and articles available in digital and non-digital form.

Geo-Strategic Significance of Bhutan for India

Bhutan has consistently served as a crucial partner in safeguarding and advancing India's national interests. The rationale for this is the strategic positioning of Bhutan, which renders it militarily crucial for India. In addition, Beijing is attempting to surround India in order to alter the power equations in South Asia. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for India to foster relationships with its neighbouring countries in its vicinity. India is Bhutan's main trading partner in terms of economic relations. India is reaping benefits from its investments in the development of various hydropower projects in Bhutan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Bhutan, 2022). Indian territories, particularly Assam, bear significant resemblance to Bhutan. It plays a crucial role in the progress of landlocked northeastern states like Arunachal Pradesh and Assam by facilitating trade and business. In addition, India can gain valuable insights into sustainable development from Bhutan, which has introduced the idea of Gross National Happiness to the global community (World Economic Forum, 2021; Sebastian, 2015, pp. 70-71, 171-173; Phuntsho, 2013, pp. 595-599). Furthermore, it possesses significant historical and cultural connections with Bhutan, rendering its relationship distinct and facilitating the peaceful continuation of their alliance. India and Bhutan have a 699 km land boundary (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2023). Additionally, both countries have agreements that allow visa-free management and duty-free trade (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Bhutan, 2022b). Given Bhutan's non-coastal topographical identity, its economy is significantly dependent on India. In 1961, Bhutan initiated its first five-year plan, fully funded by India, intending to transform its economy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Bhutan, 2022a; Sebastian, 2015, pp. 182-187; Kharat, 2005, pp. 106-109). India has since offered economic aid to Bhutan, funding significant development projects that encompass several sectors such as hydropower and transportation infrastructure. Nevertheless, India's assistance to Bhutan has been strictly monitored to guarantee that Bhutan possesses the essential infrastructure to safeguard its borders from China. Bhutan possesses substantial hydroelectricity development prospects, with the majority of these initiatives being supported by India. The primary market for these projects is India (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Bhutan, 2022). Furthermore, these projects also ensure the development of the northeastern region of India. The emphasis on hydro-power collaboration has resulted in political ramifications and has bolstered Bhutan's status as one of India's most intimate allies.

Bhutan offers crucial security provisions to India amidst alarming and troubling circumstances in the northeastern state. Several insurgent factions assert their independence from Indian statehood, which presents a potential menace. The

formation of a treaty between India and Bhutan has guaranteed a significant degree of political stability in Bhutan. Nevertheless, this stability is susceptible to rebel factions originating from the northeastern region of India. As a reaction, the Indian army initiated a military campaign targeting the insurgent factions, namely the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). Inopportunely, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) managed to flee to Bhutan because of its close vicinity and its notoriety as a sanctuary for aggressive armed operations against the Indian army. In May 2003, the Indian government urged the Royal Government of Bhutan to take action against the extremists who were given refuge within their territory. Consequently, the Royal Government initiated a counter-insurgency campaign (Mazumdar, 2005, pp. 569, 572, 579-580; Kharat, 2005, pp. 84-89; Phuntsho, 2013, pp. 582-583). Moreover, the cultural bond between India and Bhutan is profound, and strong interpersonal relationships have played a crucial role in safeguarding Bhutan's distinct culture and customs. India has also rendered substantial assistance in the advancement of Bhutan's infrastructure and institutions. The alliance between India and Bhutan is established on a strong basis of close geographical proximity, mutual economic reliance, cultural affinities, and long-standing collaboration in development, which has persisted for several decades. The bilateral relationship between India and Bhutan is characterised by reciprocal benefits, with both nations collaborating to establish a robust and productive alliance.

Historical Context

The political interconnections among South Asian countries stem from the colonial agreements established by the British. Bhutan, a country that acts as a security barrier against China and shares a border with India, has a limited region where China's influence coincides with India's long-standing influence. India has consistently maintained a policy of cultivating amicable relations with Bhutan. Prior to gaining independence, the British forged diplomatic ties with Bhutan in order to fortify the longstanding frontiers in the northern region of India, since the threat from Russia loomed over the northern borders of British India at that time. Following the neutralisation of the Russian menace, Beijing emerged as the primary peril to British India. The Chinese claims over Bhutan, the insecurity dilemma, and the Chinese expansionist agenda led to interactions between British India and Bhutan. This resulted in a series of treaties being signed at different times, including the Treaty of Peace in 1774, the Treaty of Sinchula in 1865, and the Treaty of Punakha in 1910 (Kharat, 2005, pp. 18-21, 54-60; Labh, 1974, pp. 22-23, 25-26, 45 and Sebastian, 2015, pp. 174-178). Consequently, these treaties established the connection between British India and Bhutan (Joseph, 2007). The India-Bhutan relationship is characterised by a thoughtful and adaptable approach, which takes into account the evolving dynamics of the South Asian region. As circumstances change, the two countries reassess and redefine their partnership. Thus, after gaining independence, New Delhi signed a new treaty called "The India-Bhutan Treaty of Friendship" with Thimphu in 1949. This treaty aimed to establish a strong relationship between the two countries while considering the concerns and needs of Bhutan, its smaller neighbour. The treaty played a crucial role in shaping their post-independence relationship.

Hence, India's connections with Bhutan were established according to "The India-

Bhutan Treaty of Friendship, 1949” during India’s period of independence and sovereignty (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1949). India, as a formidable state, has consistently recognised Bhutan as a sovereign and autonomous state. Moreover, the Treaty of 1949 is the outcome of the same. Subsequently, the diplomatic ties between India and Bhutan have continued to be amicable. Despite numerous attempts, China has been unable to create a divide between India and Bhutan. In the midst of a shifting regional and international environment, New Delhi and Thimphu have effectively maintained and reinforced their partnership by sensibly handling numerous obstacles and crises. However, in 2007, there was a perceived necessity to modify the existing relationship between India and Bhutan. This was due to the fact that Bhutan was preparing to undergo a political transition from monarchy to democracy for the first time after the general election of 2008 (Sebastian, 2015, pp. 73-76 and Phuntsho, 2013, pp. 571-572). Consequently, a fresh Treaty of Friendship was endorsed between New Delhi and Thimphu on February 8, 2007 (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2007; Sebastian, 2015, pp. 176-178; Labh, 1974, p. 117). A new treaty has emerged that reflects the exclusive tie between India and Bhutan, as it upholds Thimphu’s “Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity Elements”.

India’s Foreign Policy Approach towards Bhutan under Modi Administration

Despite the current difficulties, Bhutan has consistently been India’s most dependable ally. The significance of this can be seen for India based on the visit that Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarked upon following his election in 2014 (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2021). New Delhi, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has implemented the “Neighbourhood First” policy to address the developing difficulties at regional and global levels, by taking into account its historical and traditional connections with neighbouring countries (Aryal and Bharti, 2023). New Delhi has made a prodigious effort to nurture the trust of its smaller bordering countries, while also seeking to dispel any apprehension of dominance from the minds of these states. India, as a power that seeks to maintain the existing state of affairs, consistently endeavours to preserve the status quo in the region by actively involving its smaller neighbouring countries to counterbalance the increasing influence of China in the region. Despite ongoing constraints and challenges at home, in the region, and on the world stage, Bhutan has consistently proven to be an unfailing partner among all of India’s bordering states. India, while being a major power, has consistently maintained its role as a crucial partner in the development and trade of Bhutan. The New Delhi-Thimphu relationship has significantly expanded over time. Under the Modi administration, there has been a noticeable increase in high-level meetings, trade and commercial ties, developmental cooperation, collaboration on hydropower projects, educational and cultural support, and people-to-people connections. Additionally, there has been a growth in new areas of cooperation, as well as India’s assistance to Bhutan during the COVID-19 pandemic (Embassy of India, Thimphu, Bhutan, 2023; Kharat, 2005, pp. 106-109).

India has consistently had a solid relationship with Bhutan, and the Modi administration has adopted a more assertive strategy in fostering a robust alliance with the Himalayan state. An important part of this approach has been the focus on

enhancing capability and developing infrastructure (Prime Minister of India, 2016; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2020) with the goal of strengthening Bhutan's economy and fostering sustainable development. India, under the leadership of the Modi government, has undertaken many initiatives to enhance Bhutan's infrastructure. These include the establishment of hydroelectric projects and the expansion of road and rail networks (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2020; Mattoo, 2023). These activities are anticipated to not only assist Bhutan but also bolster regional connections and stimulate economic growth in the area. An additional significant facet of India's strategy towards Bhutan during the Modi administration is the prioritisation of diversifying Bhutan's economy. India has long been offering developmental aid to Bhutan. However, the Modi government has acknowledged the significance of diminishing Bhutan's reliance on hydropower exports. Instead, they aim to prioritise sectors like space research, aviation, tourism, agriculture, and IT (The Indian Express, 2019). India's provision of support and assistance to Bhutan in various domains contributes to the promotion of sustainable development and the mitigation of Bhutan's susceptibility to external disruptions.

Alongside the development of infrastructure and the expansion of the economy, the Modi administration has prioritised the improvement of interpersonal connections between India and Bhutan. This has been accomplished through endeavours such as cultural projects, educational collaborations, and the development of tourism. These endeavours have facilitated the strengthening of the camaraderie between the two states and fostered reciprocal comprehension and collaboration (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2020; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2022). In general, India's proactive stance towards Bhutan under the Modi administration is focused on establishing a more robust alliance founded on mutual respect, cooperation, and common interests. India is assisting Bhutan in achieving its developmental objectives and fostering sustainable growth through a focus on capacity-building, infrastructural development, and economic diversification. Simultaneously, India is fortifying interpersonal connections to establish a durable and mutually advantageous alliance with Bhutan. India is concerned about the ongoing boundary dispute between Bhutan and China due to its implications for security.

The Chumbi Valley, located at the tri-junction of Bhutan, India, and China, is of immense strategic importance due to its proximity to the Siliguri Corridor. This corridor connects India to the northeast region and Nepal to Bhutan, spanning a distance of 500 km. The geographical proximity of the Chumbi Valley to Tibet and Sikkim is of great significance to China. The Doklam plateau, which falls within the Chumbi Valley, is strategically located and provides China with convenient access to both the Chumbi Valley and the Siliguri Corridor, giving them a significant advantage in the region. In 2017, India deployed its military personnel in the region to prevent China's construction of a road on the plateau, resulting in heightened tension between the two countries. The ongoing conflict in Bhutan serves as a central issue as India endeavours to resist Chinese encroachment in the area. India consistently aimed to maintain the trust of Thimphu amongst competing interests and the Doklam conflict. It adopted a defensive stance and adhered to the existing state of affairs in the South Asian area (Kumar, 2020, pp. 75, 82-83). It is crucial to assert that Bhutan has actively sought political, security, sociological, economic, and cultural shelter from

its significant neighbour, India. This has eventually benefited Thimphu in forging its distinct identity at both the regional and global levels. The shelter finally facilitated Bhutan's significant growth in the realms of politics, economics, culture, society, education, and military affairs. More precisely, Bhutan's political system and economy have experienced significant growth in recent years. In addition to India, numerous international institutions have assisted Bhutan in its development and maintenance within the regional and global context.

Undoubtedly, Bhutan has consistently been a top priority for India; yet, it was imperative for New Delhi to modify its foreign policy towards Bhutan. The establishment of the Modi Government at the centre has fulfilled the demand for a change in foreign policy towards small neighbours. The Modi-led government has prioritised both enhancing and cultivating its relationships with major powers, while also recognising the significance of smaller powers. Therefore, in the current dynamic regional and global context, no major power can afford to disregard any significant or small power in its vicinity. Consequently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India introduced the "neighbourhood first" plan. In 2014, he selected Bhutan as his initial diplomatic trip beyond the borders of India (Embassy of India, Thimphu, Bhutan, 2023). This decision was momentous as Bhutan was previously solely seen as a recipient of funding for regional objectives. Following Modi's visit, Bhutan gained significant importance as a high-priority state due to the ongoing insurgency in the northeastern region and the imperative to safeguard the Siliguri corridor, a vital link connecting the central part of India with the Northeast. The government led by Modi has demonstrated a noteworthy display of skilful diplomacy in its handling of the Doklam dispute involving China and Bhutan.

India has consistently prioritised Bhutan in its foreign policy, whereas Bhutan has consistently seen India's security interests as paramount. Due to this factor, Bhutan has not yet formed any official relations with Beijing. Throughout multiple rounds of border negotiations between Beijing and Thimphu, China has been unsuccessful in persuading Bhutan. Even throughout the Doklam crisis, the significance of a small state in upholding regional tranquillity and the existing state of affairs, while preventing conflict between two major powers, became evident. The position adopted by New Delhi towards Thimphu during the Doklam crisis highlighted the significance of Bhutan, a small state, for India, a major global force. The message conveyed was a warning against any attempts to alter the power dynamics in the South Asian region (Kharat, 2005, p. 139). It can be contended that the existing literature has consistently emphasised the significance of Bhutan in relation to India's security concerns. Thimphu's pursuit of security, political, economic, societal and cultural shelter from New Delhi has not received sufficient attention. The alliance shelter has enabled Bhutan to uphold its sovereign and autonomous status both regionally and globally. Moreover, a multitude of agreements concluded over the decades between India, preceding and following the independence, and Bhutan have influenced and established the fundamental principles of Thimphu's diplomatic strategy. The bilateral relations between India and Bhutan have been enhanced and encouraged by taking into account the historical legacy as well as practical political considerations.

Recently, there have been efforts to develop new narratives that explore Bhutan beyond its position between China and India, as well as its involvement in India's

security concerns. India has consistently upheld the sovereignty and independence of Bhutan. Nevertheless, the reality remains that it is extremely challenging for Bhutan, a landlocked state, to thrive and maintain its existence among conflicting and constantly shifting power dynamics among countries at both regional and global scales. Furthermore, foreign policy remains a crucial mechanism for establishing and enhancing relationships between states, in addition to advancing and safeguarding their national interests. Bhutan, a small country, has been developing its foreign policy to establish connections with other countries and assert its presence in the regional and global arena, similar to other major powers. The formulation of foreign policy is influenced by both domestic and external factors. Bhutan's foreign policy has been historically influenced by British India, and later by independent India. India's role cannot be disregarded when analysing and assessing the dynamics of Bhutan's evolving interactions with other countries.

India-Bhutan Relations: Contests and Collaborative Achievements

The relationship between India and Bhutan has encountered numerous fluctuations, although both states are capable of overcoming any obstacle due to their friendship rooted in mutual trust, comprehension, and historical connections. India's capabilities and ideology have been questioned multiple times due to events such as the China and India conflict in 1962, the merger of Sikkim into the Indian Union, (Kharat, 2005, pp. 15, 65-74; Phuntsho, 2013, pp. 572-573, 575) and the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971. These actions have raised doubts and concerns about India's abilities and beliefs. However, as times have changed, the knowledge gained from past experiences, together with the current political landscape, has gradually dispelled numerous misconceptions over the years. India and Bhutan's relationship has grown and become stronger at many levels due to the changing regional and international dynamics. In addition, Bhutan's desire to assert its sovereignty and independence motivated it to abandon its isolation and engage in direct interactions with numerous other states across the globe. India has consistently provided shelter (strategic, political, economic and societal) to Bhutan, supporting its pursuit of independence and sovereignty, in contrast to other influential states worldwide.

In 1962, India supported Thimphu's entry into the Colombo Plan. In 1968, India attended the session of the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development in New Delhi. Thimphu was admitted to the United Nations in 1971 and became one of the founding members of SAARC in 1985 (Kharat, 2005, p. 27; Sebastian, 2015, pp. 173-180; Phuntsho, 2013, p. 575 and Labh, 1974, pp. 63, 113-115). India has consistently allowed Bhutan to pursue an independent foreign policy, even when there have been disagreements between the two countries on global matters. India has consistently honoured the decisions of its esteemed ally, Bhutan, without any form of dilution. Since its accession to the United Nations, Bhutan has experienced increased openness to the global community, making it an appealing destination for China's economic and diplomatic endeavours. However, due to Bhutan's close proximity and strong ties with India, in terms of military, political, economic and societal alliances, India closely monitors China's activities in Bhutan with great vigilance. The diplomatic and economic ties between China and Bhutan have been a subject of political and financial deliberation. Historically, Bhutan maintained diplomatic relations with Tibet, and China's influence in Bhutan was recognised

through its connection with Lhasa. Nevertheless, following China's annexation of Tibet in 1950 and the subsequent quelling of the Tibetan rebellion in 1959 (Kharat, 2005, pp. 126-128), Bhutan was compelled to reassess its former policy of seclusion. The annexation of Tibet by China had a profound influence on Bhutan, leading the kingdom to become more closed off. China and Bhutan have been engaged in a persistent dispute over the middle, eastern, and western regions of Bhutan, despite their shared border. Beijing asserted its claim over 269 square kilometres of Bhutanese land (Stobdan, 2017; Kharat, 2005, pp. 134-143). In order to address this matter, China has attempted to build a dual-sided relationship with Bhutan. Bhutan and China have engaged in 24 rounds of discussions since 1984 (Lansang, 2017).

In 1998, at the 12th round of consultations, both countries signed an agreement called the "Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquilly in Bhutan-China Border Areas" to resolve their boundary dispute (Stobdan, 2017; Kharat, 2005, p. 139; Labh, 1974, p. 44). Due to their close geographical proximity and mutual affiliation with Tibetan Buddhism, China and Bhutan engage in continuous talks, despite the intricacies of their relationship. Although Bhutan and China are neighbouring countries, Bhutan is the sole nation in South Asia that does not have diplomatic ties with China. China's persistent encroachment on the disputed border between China and Bhutan has posed a long-standing threat to Bhutan's territorial integrity and national security. To address this matter, Bhutan and China have engaged in several dialogues. However, Bhutan is facing mounting pressure to establish diplomatic relations with China. India sees this as a menace to its region that has been historically influenced by its culture, and the potential diplomatic relationships between these states are facing strain. China's interest in Bhutan stems from their longstanding partnership, trading connections, and shared racial and ethnic characteristics with Tibet. Nevertheless, Bhutan has aligned itself with India due to geopolitical considerations, while China has intermittently employed pressure tactics to sever Bhutan's ties with India.

In addition, the construction of hydropower projects by India in Bhutan has been a significant cause of friction. Although these projects have significantly contributed to the growth of Bhutan's economy, however, the concerns are expressed by certain segments of Bhutanese society over their ecological consequences and the displacement of local populations (Ranjan, 2019). Another factor that has placed pressure on the India-Bhutan relationship is the matter of Bhutanese refugees residing in Nepal. Despite efforts being made to address the problem, progress towards resolving it has been slow (Sapan News Service, 2022 and UN News, 2007). In addition, since the implementation of the democratic system in Bhutan, there have been repeated calls from the younger generation of Bhutanese to establish a relationship with China (Shivamurthy, 2022). In general, despite encountering certain difficulties and annoyances, India and Bhutan have been actively collaborating to resolve them. They have been enhancing their collaboration by implementing activities such as fostering interpersonal connections, promoting economic diversification, and advancing infrastructure development. India and Bhutan are cultivating a durable relationship founded on common interests via collaborative efforts and mutual respect.

China-Bhutan Boundary Talks and Challenges for India

Historically, India has held a significant position in Bhutan's foreign policy. India

and Bhutan share a strong and strategic alliance, with India providing crucial support to Bhutan in safeguarding its autonomy and self-governance against external influences. Regarding the Bhutan-China diplomatic boundary negotiations, India has adopted a stance of endorsing Bhutan's position and advocating for a peaceful and negotiated resolution of the border dispute. India has emphasised the significance of upholding Bhutan's sovereignty and territorial integrity and has backed Bhutan's endeavours to uphold a tranquil and secure border with China. India has, moreover, aided Bhutan in enhancing its proficiency in diplomacy and negotiation, while likewise extending technical and financial support for the advancement of Bhutan's infrastructure and institutions. India has actively promoted Bhutan's participation in diplomatic discussions with other states, offering both diplomatic backing and guidance. Nevertheless, India's strategic involvement in the boundary talks between China and Bhutan is largely driven by its own geopolitical interests and security concerns in the region. The complex boundary negotiations, which involve intricate territorial claims and disputed areas, have significant implications for India's foreign policy and relations with its neighbours (The Hindu Editorial, 2023). India is currently engaged in a border dispute with China. If a resolution is reached over the China-Bhutan boundary issue, it might potentially impact India's security and territorial integrity. India is expected to closely observe the negotiations and ensure that any agreement aligns with its interests and concerns.

In general, India's strategy in the China-Bhutan boundary negotiations is expected to be influenced by a blend of endorsing Bhutan's stance, promoting a nonviolent resolution, and safeguarding its interests and concerns. India will persist in playing a significant role in maintaining regional stability and security, particularly in regard to Bhutan's diplomatic interactions with China. The enduring territorial disagreement between Bhutan and China has persisted since 1984. Despite engaging in 24 rounds of negotiations until 2016, the 25th round was postponed as a result of the Doklam Standoff involving the Indian and Chinese military forces in 2017 (The Wire, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the existing delay, causing it to be further delayed. The initial discussions on boundary delimitation took place in August 2023 (Haidar, 2023a). India is greatly apprehensive about the deal between Bhutan and China, considering its proximity to India's Siliguri corridor, sometimes referred to as the "chicken's neck". The Bhutanese Prime Minister, Tshering, asserts that the resolution of the Bhutan-China boundary is imminent, while emphasising that the matter of the tri-junction point with India will be addressed separately. He emphasised that deliberations regarding the tri-junction will commence solely once India and China have successfully settled their border disputes. It is worth mentioning that out of the 14 countries that have borders with China, only Bhutan and India have unresolved border disputes. India and Bhutan have built a distinctive bond marked by comprehension and reciprocal confidence. The King of Bhutan recently visited India, shortly after China and Bhutan conducted the 25th round of boundary negotiations in Beijing. During the negotiations, both parties entered into a cooperation agreement regarding the "Responsibilities and Functions of the Joint Technical Team (JTT) on the Delimitation and Demarcation of the Bhutan-China Boundary" (Haidar, 2023; Laskar, 2023).

Conclusion

Based on the preceding discussion, it can be contended that Bhutan, being a small

state, has consistently endeavoured to foster and enhance its diplomatic ties with other small states across the globe. India has consistently supported it by honouring its choices. India, under the Modi government, has shifted its policy to prioritise the smaller bordering states in the region, in addition to its close neighbours. Following the political transformation in Bhutan, the foreign relationships of the country have also expanded. The Modi government's exhibition of diplomatic strategies during the Doklam issue showcased India's will to maintain the existing state of affairs in the region while safeguarding its national interests. Following the democratic transition in Bhutan, there have been concerns raised about the exceedingly unequal relationship between New Delhi and Thimphu. This inequality is attributed to the comparison between Bhutan and the much larger country, India. In relative terms, Bhutan is a small country with little resources, technology, and minimal industrial growth than India. Consequently, discussions have arisen in post-monarchical Bhutan regarding the possibility of establishing trade relations with Beijing. Consequently, India has consistently taken into account Bhutan's concerns and fears and has reassessed and fostered its relationship with Bhutan at every level. The utmost importance lies in bolstering its confidence even further. Therefore, it is crucial to establish standardised and controlled diplomatic conduits to cater for the altering circumstances at both regional and global levels. Through an analysis of the connections between India and Bhutan, it may be contended that they share a mutually beneficial relationship. The significance of Bhutan for India's security interests is well acknowledged and expressed in the literature. It is crucial to assert that India maintains comparable significance for Bhutan, a small state, in terms of its sovereignty and independence. Thimphu has consistently received backing from New Delhi and has the potential to thrive and establish itself as an independent state by effectively seeking shelter from India. Bhutan has successfully established its distinct identity by promoting the notion of Gross National Happiness, while facing geographical limitations and different ethnic and political obstacles. Bhutan's emphasis on the well-being of its population rather than economic progress sets it apart as an outstanding example.

Bhutan often harbours suspicions due to numerous happenings in the region. However, through the dynamic nature of the times and the practical application of political strategies in real-life scenarios, India effectively dispelled the misunderstandings about New Delhi from the consciousness of Bhutan. Over time, Bhutan has acquired knowledge from both historical events and present circumstances, including regional and international concerns. India has long established itself as a dominant and influential country in the South Asian region. Therefore, it is only the responsibility of New Delhi to effectively alleviate all concerns over its perceived dominance over its smaller bordering states. In light of the evolving circumstances and China's increasing influence in South Asia, it is imperative for New Delhi to reassess its policies regarding its relations with the small state of Bhutan. Bhutan's significance as a crucial trade partner and its role in national security are not the only reasons for taking steps to build trust and meet the aspirations of young Bhutanese. Given the evolving regional and global dynamics, it will be a challenge for current and future governments to effectively sustain the existing state of affairs and foster a post-monarchical Bhutan in various domains such as politics, strategy, economy, culture, education, and society. Additionally, they must seek collaboration in new areas and safeguard national interests.

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