

India-Bhutan Relations: Waning Trustworthiness between two Neighboring Countries

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Abstract: India and Bhutan have been maintaining a trustworthy relationship since 1949. From the beginning year, Bhutan and India signed a friendship treaty that gave security to the two countries. Under this treaty, India helped Bhutan economically and technically. India also assisted Bhutan in becoming familiar with the external world. Some points between the two countries have been made deficit the trustworthiness. Concerning problems of tripartite are responsible for it. India focuses its priority on strategic security purposes with Bhutan and guides Bhutan in external relations. China's expansionist behavior intimate Bhutan in South Asia. China wants to establish formal diplomatic relations with Bhutan so that it can negotiate with Bhutan bilaterally. When tension escalates between India and China, Bhutan was silent. It proves that Bhutan wants to solve its border problem in its way as a sovereign country. However, Bhutan is fear of Indian coercive diplomacy. This paper will explain; why is trustworthiness waning reciprocally between India and Bhutan?

Keywords: Trustworthiness, Quad, Expansionist, Foreign Policy

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I. INTRODUCTION

Based on Britain's treaty in 1910, Bhutan and India signed a friendship agreement in 1949, which gave India some opportunity to guide Bhutan in external relations. India is also assisting Bhutan in implementing its five-year plans. It had already implemented the eleventh five-year plan by taking economic and technical support from India. As Bhutan is getting some economic and political support from India, Bhutan can give strategic support to India by securing its stance in border disputes with China. It can also support India by preventing the safe passages of Indian insurgents in Bhutanese territory. ²It shares 605 k. m. out of 1, 075-kilometer of its border with India, and the rest 470 km adheres to China. ³Sometimes, Indian initiatives were a concern for Bhutan, like rejecting the request of Bhutan in boundary agreement with China in 1960, annexing the Sikkim in 1975, shifting foreign policy ignoring the security of a small country like Bhutan, punishing for dealing with China for establishing diplomatic relations. ⁴All of these initiatives create discontent in mutual relations with India. At the time of the Doklam war between India and China, Bhutanese foreign policy and diplomacy have consistently sought to placate India with assurances of its friendship and take the fallout of the Indian trust deficit with a strategic silence. ⁵This strategy silences the position of Bhutan presages to deal with China internally. Furthermore, such kind of situation has been created over the 75 years.

Historical relations with India and China

British followed the idea of political boundaries rather than a defined boundary to limit British India. ⁶Under this concept, the British thought that the Russian and Chinese empires could come to the north part of British India, including Nepal and Bhutan. For this reason, Lord Curzon defined the political boundaries of British India and made sure there would not be any confusion about Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim situated in the

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² Choudhary, L. K. (2005.) Indo-Bhutan Relationship: A Unique Example of Bilateral Friendship in South Asia. *Indian Quarterly: A Journal of international affairs*, 61(2), 213-229.

³ Chandra, Subhash. (2020) India-Bhutan Relations: Geo-Strategic Dimensions. *Research Reinforcement* 7(2).

⁴ Mitra, Subrata K and Thakiyakkattil, Srikanth. (2018). Bhutan and Sino-Indian Rivalry The Price of Proximity. *Asian Survey*, (58) 2

⁵ Kaul, Nitasha. (2021). Beyond India and China: Bhutan as a Small State in International Relations. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 10(1), 1-41

⁶ HERPA, Sherpem S. (2013). Bhutan: Between Two Giants: *World policy journal*, 30(4): 41-44.

Indian frontier and be allowed any other to temper with them.⁷ Sir Charles Bell reinforced British India's treaty with Bhutan in 1910; according to him, the treaty's first advantage is to secure 250 miles along the borders of Bengal and Assam from the Chinese intervention and Chinese colonization in Bhutan.⁸ By signing a treaty in 1910, the British got the opportunity to guide its foreign affairs and defense. This treaty also assured that the British would not interfere in the internal affairs of Bhutan. Followed by British India, India felt the geostrategic position of Bhutan is crucial for Indian security. So India and Bhutan signed a friendship treaty in 1949, assessing that no one would not interfere in the internal affairs of each other. Though there was a provision that gave an advantage to India, it was also crucial for the security of Bhutan from Chinese expansion. Bhutan agreed to be guided by the advice of the Government of India regarding its external relations.⁹ After annexing Tibet in 1959, China wanted to negotiate a boundary settlement with Bhutan because China thought some points between the two countries were not demarked. Bhutan had a friendship agreement with India that did not allow it to negotiate with China, avoiding India's presence. Nevertheless, China was not agreed to negotiate the border through India.

The tension between India and China about boundary settlement arose in 1961. Despite the eagerness of Bhutan to sit in the negotiation, India did not allow Bhutan regarding its northern boundary.¹⁰

From the first quarter of the 1970s, Bhutan started to raise its international profile with the support of India. In 1971 Bhutan joined to United Nations as 132 members and, in 1978, became a member of the World Bank, which opened scope for it to get the loan and other benefits. Although India interfered in this stage not to establish diplomatic relations with any permanent member of the United Nations security council, It was an excellent transition for Bhutan since its independence. India just allowed Bhutan economic relations with the external world because Bhutan's diplomatic relations with other countries might reduce India's control.¹¹

Bhutan fell into a problem with Nepalese ethnic and expelled ethnic Nepalese (Lhotshampas) to maintain its ethnic identity and prevent any future partition on ethnic lines from 1990 to 1993.¹² The expulsion of Nepalese ethnic was considered a violation of human rights by some international organizations. But, Bhutan did not pay any attention to it with the silent consent of India. To pay the Indian support in Bhutan's ethnic problem, it took military action against insurgent groups from India's north-eastern parts who had illegally set up bases in Bhutanese territory and successfully drove them out in 2003. Within 2006 India and Bhutan finalized their demarcation.

In 2007 Bhutan came from a 1949 friendship treaty with a new treaty which amended some clause of the 1949 treaty. The central part of this treaty remarked that Bhutan should seek India's advice in its foreign relations was removed. Moreover, a new clause said, "The Government of the Kingdom of Bhutan and the Republic of India shall cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests."¹³ Thus Bhutan can now make friends without the concern of India, and it was a sign of a democratic country that was implemented in Bhutan. The first democratically elected prime minister of Bhutan, Jigme Yoser Thinley, reiterated establishing diplomatic relations with the external world. He was successful by establishing diplomatic relations with 53 countries. on June 21, 2012, on the sideline of the Rio Summit of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, the Chinese and Bhutanese prime minister called a meeting about diplomatic relations. There has been a positive response from the Bhutanese prime minister. Bhutan also took a project to brand Bhutan, which will help it make a more demanding position from absorbing from India and China. For the punishment of Bhutan India, in July 2013, in the middle of Bhutan's second democratic election, India withdrew its subsidy of kerosene and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) supplies to Bhutan. India's withdrawal of subsidies from Bhutan and the Indian rupee crisis in 2012 affected the general public.¹⁴

Bhutan thinks that Doklam is part of it. China also claims the part of Doklam, and it reinforces China to make a road in this area to control. India thinks that it has a crucial role in the negotiation between China and

⁷ "India's Chinese Border: Lord Curzon's View," Manchester Guardian, January 16, 1912.

⁸ Agradoot, "Sino-Indian Border Clear Definition Vital," Times of India, May 31, 1959.

⁹ Ministry of External Affairs of India, "Treaty between India and Bhutan," September 22, 1949, , accessed July 5, 2017

¹⁰ "Bhutan's Border with China: India Requested to Negotiate," Times of India, February 16, 1961.

¹¹ Karan, Pradyumna Prasad and William M. Jenkins.(1963) *The Himalayan Kingdoms: Bhutan, Sikkim, and Nepal* (New York): Van Nostrand, 1963), 53.

¹² Erika Schultz, "Bhutanese Refugee Crisis: A Brief History," *Seattle Times*, October 15, 2016, , accessed May 24, 2017.

¹³ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty," February 8, 2007, , accessed July 2, 2017

¹⁴ Mitra ,Subrata K and Thakiyakkattil, Srikanth.(2018). Bhutan and Sino-Indian Rivalry The Price of Proximity. *Asian Survey*, (58) 2

Bhutan. So in response to the construction road in Doklam escalate the war situation between the two countries. In this war-like situation, Bhutan was silent to take any part directly.

Changes of Indian recent foreign policy

After the independence, India focused on formulating its foreign policy. Though India was a weak postcolonial state, India had a strong desire to prevent other powers from limiting its own room for maneuver.¹⁵ In the first stage of independence, it opted for the path of economic development in every stage. It mainly extended its vision to enable India to assert its presence in the international sphere. Thus India emphasized its enlightened self-interest policy, which forced it to form a Non-alignment policy. End of the war in 1962, India followed peaceful co-existence principles in its foreign policy. It is said that the peaceful co-existence policy was the best policy for India, which Jawaharlal Nehru introduced.

The non-alignment policy was mainly taken to formulate independent foreign policy during the cold war period. But, in the post-cold war period, India adopted strategic autonomy to give maximum options to the foreign policymakers.¹⁶ Thus, India focused on institutionalized and multilateralism at the global level¹⁷ when it enhanced its capacity to pursue its interest to other major powers at the regional level.¹⁸ Ascending the head of the Indian government, Narendra Modi, has changed the Indian foreign policy to some extent while bearing down on fundamental principles in Indian foreign policy. In 21 century, the international system is unipolar in regards to military power, but it is multipolar in economic power.¹⁹ From the beginning of the Indian independence, its main priority was economic development; nevertheless, the Modi government tried its utmost to go forward with military power to secure smooth economic development. Because of this, under the Modi government, India inserts Acting East policy, revisioning the title look east policy.²⁰ This phase is also characterized by an extended definition of East expanding from Australia to China. He not brought India closer to the USA but also operated many joint military actions in the South China Sea. Modi thinks cooperation with the USA will be an excellent benefit for India to deter China from controlling small countries of South Asia and prevent China from making a String of pearls in the Indian ocean, which is a direct threat to Indian security.²¹ On the part of this, India now joined Quad, which, the presence of the USA, Japan, and Australia, is considered South Asian NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) to deter China in the indo-pacific region. To penchant in western countries and Acting East policy Indian presence in south Asian countries is being blurred. China is gradually taking the former position of India in the South Asian region that is also a threat to India's security in the West to East. However, the established trustworthiness among the south Asian countries is being lessened with the presence of China. So the government of India should take some steps to return with trustworthiness to the relations among its neighboring countries, prioritizing an integrated neighborhood in Indian foreign policy.

Changing foreign policy of Bhutan

Getting the membership of the UN, Bhutan got a touch of internationalism with the help of India as they signed a friendship treaty in 1949, asserting to be guided by India in external relations. Bhutan was necessary for the security of the North-Eastern provinces. India gave economic and technical assistance to Bhutan, implementing its 1 to 11th five-year plan under the friendship treaty.²² This treaty was revised in 2007 to pliable clause two of the 1949 treaty, which allowed India to guide Bhutanese external policy. With the democratization of the Bhutanese government, in 2008, it got elected Prime Minister to maneuver the external relations. Ignoring the Indian coercive economic diplomacy, the first democratically elected prime minister of Bhutan, Jigme Yoser Thinley, tried to raise the Bhutanese international profile. He had grown diplomatic

¹⁵ Mohan, C. Raja. (2008). 'India's Great Power Burdens', Seminar (January).

¹⁶ Monsonis, Guillem. (2010). 'India's Strategic Autonomy and Rapprochement with the US', *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 611–624.

¹⁷ Narlikar, Amrita. (2013). 'India's Rise: Responsible to Whom?' *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 3, pp. 595–614.

¹⁸ Hall, Ian. (2016). Multialignment and Indian Foreign Policy under Narendra Modi. *The Round Table*, vol. 105, no. 3, pp. 271–286.

¹⁹ Nye, Joseph S. (2015). *Is the American Century Over?* Cambridge: Polity Press

²⁰ Saikia, Bapukan. (2017). A Brief Study of the Changing Nature of Indian Foreign Policy. *International Journal of Advance Research, Ideas and Innovations in Technology*, (3) 6

²¹ Jawli, Nandini. (2016). South China Sea and India's Geopolitical Interests. *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, 29(1/2), pp. 85-100

²² Mitra, Subrata K and Thakiyakkattil, Srikanth. (2018). Bhutan and Sino-Indian Rivalry The Price of Proximity. *Asian Survey*, (58) 2

relations with 22 to 53 countries from 2008 to 2013.²³ Under this policy, he negotiated with China at the Rio summit in 2012, and he had a positive response introducing diplomatic relations with China.²⁴ Observing this meeting, India countermanded the subsidy on Kerosin and LPG in Bhutan. It was a great distress to the people of Bhutan. It is clear that as a sovereign country, Bhutan wants to formulate independent foreign policy.

Responsible factors for lessening trustworthiness

China's annexation of Tibet in 1959 was a direct threat to Bhutan because China thought some part of Bhutan was part of the concerned area. Bhutan consulted with India at that time, but India was no visible initiative to protect Bhutan.²⁵ As an independent and sovereign country, Bhutanese prime minister Jigme Dorji articulated in 1959 that Bhutan was not bound to accept all of India's advice in its conduct of foreign relations, and it could have direct negotiations with China if it desired.²⁶ In this way, Bhutan tried to secure its territory from the annexation of China.

Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai came to India to negotiate about the border problem in April 1960. The Bhutanese prime minister requested to involve Bhutan in boundary talks with China, but the Indian prime minister rejected his request.²⁷ Bhutan took a middle position at the time of the India and Chinese war in 1962. Bhutan thought taking part on the Indian side was an imminent threat from China. The Prime minister of Bhutan was also quite confident that China would not attack Bhutan.²⁸ Fearing about the Chinese retaliation, Bhutan protested India's soldiers staying in Bhutan.²⁹ It asserted that Bhutan took a non-alignment position in wartime to secure China, but it had a friendship treaty with India. Staying Indian soldiers in its land were considered a threat, and it was a sign of a lack of trust in India. The annexation of Sikkim by India was intimidation for Bhutan and Nepal. Anyhow, India assured Bhutan that such kind of annexation would not have happened to it. India followed multilateral foreign policy in the post-cold war period, which made it insecure to its neighboring countries. From then, China started to provoke Indian trusted friends with economic and military support.

To become a non-permanent member of the UN security council, Bhutan started lobbying with China on the sideline of the Rio summit in 2012 and wishes to forge formal diplomatic ties with China as soon as possible.³⁰ Bhutanese prime minister also discussed cooperatively settling border issues, enhancing economic and trade cooperation, and developing close communication and coordination in international and regional affairs.³¹ Bhutan is trying to brand itself in the external world by inducing Gross National Happiness. By observing the relations with China and international profile, India stopped subsidy on kerosene, and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) supplies to Bhutan.³² Bhutanese economic dependency on India brought distress to the general people. The government of Bhutan is observing the Indian policy towards Bhutan when it wants to induce independent foreign policy. Bhutan cannot depend on China about its necessary goods and other economic factors shortly. If there is an option to get these facilities from others, it is difficult for India to maintain extraordinary closed relations. In 2015 Nepal showed China card to the relations between India and Nepal. Though India imposed an unofficial blockade on the border, Nepal managed in any way. At the time of Bhutan, India allures Bhutan not to follow the path of Nepal.

In the Doklam area, there have yet been demarked the boundary line between Bhutan and China. Though the Doklam area had a status quo from 1959, China constructed roads violating the status quo. China and India involve in war about the Chinese construction of the road in this area. All three countries have the intention to Doklam area. China is mainly alluring Bhutan to establish formal diplomatic ties³³ to get the path of

²³ Tenzing Lamsang, "The Impact of Bhutan's Foreign Policy from 2008–2013 on Foreign Aid," The Bhutanese, May 21, 2013, accessed July 22, 2017

²⁴ Mitra, Subrata K and Thakiyakkattil, Srikanth.(2018). Bhutan and Sino-Indian Rivalry The Price of Proximity. *Asian Survey*, (58) 2

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ "Bhutan," Times of India, February 3, 1961

²⁷ Prem Bhatia, "Prospect and Retrospect: And Now Bhutan," Times of India, June 7, 1960

²⁸ "Dispute over McMahon Line Explained," Times of India, October 2, 1959

²⁹ Olin Legum, "Russia Seeks Neutral Aid to End India War: Khrushchev Afraid of Being Drawn In," The Observer, November 4, 1962

³⁰ Mitra, Subrata K and Thakiyakkattil, Srikanth.(2018). Bhutan and Sino-Indian Rivalry The Price of Proximity. *Asian Survey* (58) 2

³¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, "Wen Jiabao Meets with His Bhutanese Counterpart Jigmi Y. Thinley," June 22, 2012, accessed July 7, 2017.

³² Mitra, Subrata K and Thakiyakkattil, Srikanth.(2018). Bhutan and Sino-Indian Rivalry The Price of Proximity. *Asian Survey* (58) 2

³³ Ibid

Siliguri to help Indian insurgents to liberate from India. Bhutan just told about the status quo issue of the Doklam area, but it did not support India at the time of the India and China war in 2017.

Bhutan has been discontented with the coercive diplomacy of India from 1962 to 2017, whereas India has given much more economical and technical support for the Bhutanese economic development. This discontent of Bhutan and alluring proposal from China declining the trustworthiness between India and Bhutan.

II. CONCLUSION

India and Bhutan have not only a common border but also common culture to some extent. Because of these similarities, both signed a friendship treaty in 1949 to secure everyone's borders from the annexation of China. It was revised in 2007 to give Bhutan some opportunity to deal with other countries. Before signing this last treaty, Bhutan became a member of the UN and world bank with the help of India. After formulating a democratic government in Bhutan, it established diplomatic relations with 53 countries but China. But, Bhutan has a solid eagerness to tie with China with formal diplomatic relations. At this point, India does not support dealing with China diplomatically. India is concern about its boundary problem with China. If Bhutan formulates diplomatic relations with China and gives the desired territory to China, it will be a direct threat to India's integrated land. So India is cautious about securing its territory from the expansionist behavior of China. When Bhutan-China is at the table for border talks, India is not directly involved with it. But, any solution to the border problem will have critical security implications for India. Hence, India is always concerned about negotiations. If Bhutan discusses the western part of its border, it has to consult with India.³⁴

For this reason, India gives economic and technical assistance to Bhutan for completing its five-year plan. Some issues create a trust deficit between the two countries. On the one hand, Bhutan thinks that being a sovereign country, Bhutan has to depend on India to deal with neighboring countries. It also emphasizes Indian coercive diplomacy that makes fear it. On the other hand, India always felt that the silent stance of Bhutan is unfriendly relations when two rival power in war.³⁵ In the 1962 and 2017 Sino-Indian wars, the Bhutanese stance was strategically silent. An example of the Doklam war: In November 2020, reports again surfaced about the Chinese building a village a few kilometers inside Bhutanese borders. Bhutan's ambassador to India denied these reports, but Indian media and Indian commentators insisted that this had happened³⁶. There has another issue: Bhutan always supports China in the international forum. It can happen for fear of China. In this situation, India can work with Bhutan to remove the fear of China. However, India should solve the internal discontent with Bhutan to secure the Chicken Neck for security in the North-Eastern provinces.

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³⁴ Kumar,Pranav (2011).Sino-Bhutanese Relations: Under the Shadow of India–Bhutan Friendship. *China Report*,46 (3), page(s): 243-252

³⁵ Mitra ,Subrata K and Thakiyakkattil, Srikanth.(2018). Bhutan and Sino–Indian Rivalry The Price of Proximity. *Asian Survey* (58) 2

³⁶ Nitasha Kaul(2021) Beyond India and China: Bhutan as a Small State in International Relations *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific Volume 00, (2021) 1–41*