

CHANGING DYNAMICS OF INDO-BHUTAN RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Bhutan is a landlocked Himalayan Kingdom in the eastern part of South Asia. The People's Republic of China is on its north and the country is surrounded by India on its south east and west. In the early 20th century, Bhutan came into contact with the British rulers in India. After India's de-colonization, Bhutan retained strong bilateral relations with India. The country started shifting from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy through its elections in 2008. As the process of democratization takes root in Bhutan it has started to change Indo centric foreign policy. Existence of domestic pressure compelled Bhutan to establish limited economic ties with China. And in the recent Doklam Crisis Bhutan played a role of sovereign state and request both India and China withdraw army and bring back normalcy in the region.

KEY WORDS: Bhutan, India, Post Independent India, Establishment of Democrac, Foreign Policy, Doklam crisis.

POST-INDEPENDENT INDIA AND BHUTAN

The new phase of Indo-Bhutan relations began which continue currently under the Indo-Bhutan treaty of 1949. This treaty retained most of the sensitive provisions of the earlier treaty under the British, the most important being Article 2 which explicitly defined the domain of the two countries in respect of internal and foreign relations. Bhutan retained full internal autonomy but its external relations were to be guided by India. Though this provision still exists, the emergence of China and its occupation of Tibet brought about a radical change in this region with perceptions of Chinese threat and China's geographical claim of Bhutan's territory. (Srivastava, 2007, 207-208)

The spirit of the relationship grew from visits of the king to India and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's to Bhutan in 1958. Nehru, at the age of 69 years, accompanied by Indira Gandhi, undertook the strenuous journey, via the Chumby valley, riding on yaks and ponies, to reach Paro, in Bhutan, to a tumultuous welcome. It was in Paro that Nehru made his famous speech in which he said, "Some may think that since India is a great and powerful country and Bhutan a small one, the former may 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 own will". He added that "freedom of both Bhutan and India should be safeguarded so that none from outside can do harm to it." The king reciprocated when he visited Delhi and noted that "the ties that bind our two countries is a matter of history. Our

spiritual heritage, which we consider our greatest treasure, stems from the teachings of the great son of India, Lord Gautama Buddha. The bonds of understanding and friendship have been further consolidated as a result of the growing economic and technical cooperation between our two countries, and I am fully convinced that nothing can ever shake or destroy our friendship." (Mehta, 2007, 570-571)

The first real breakthrough in Bhutan's move away from its self-imposed isolationism, however, took place with India's decision in the early 1960s to encourage Bhutan in its ambition to establish contacts with the wider world. With India as sponsor Bhutan first appeared as an observer at the fourteenth meeting of the consultative committee of the Colombo Plan for cooperative economic development in South and South-east Asia in Melbourne (Australia) on 19th November, 1962. Again with India as sponsor, Bhutan joined the Universal Postal Union (UPU) on 13 March 1969. In Dec 1970 the government of India announced in the Rajya Sabha, the Upper House of the India's Parliament, that Bhutan would join the United Nations. (Ram, 1984, 66-67) In the same year, in view of the growing political, economic and cultural relations between Bhutan and India, the governments of the two countries decided to appoint a special officer of India at Thimphu, particularly to liaise between the two governments in all matters of mutual interest.

In 1979 Bhutan took a small step forward running an independent foreign policy at Havana non-aligned summit on the Cambodia issue. India wanted to keep the Kampuchean seat vacant, while Bhutan voted to allow it to be occupied by the ousted Pol Pot Government. It was contrary to Indian

state and important in the context of the India-Bhutan treaty of 1949. Bhutan enjoyed the excellent relations with India during Janata Government and Indira Gandhi regime. After desiring by Bhutan to hold bilateral talks with China, India allowed it. The first direct talks were held between the two at Beijing in 1984. Since then they are having border talks.

In 1980's while Bhutan and India shared common standings on Afghanistan issue against United States Policy Bhutan also followed independence in taking decisions related foreign Policy. Bhutan actively participated in South Asian Regional cooperation since its inception in 1981 on words. In 1983, it established diplomatic relations with Nepal and in 1985 with Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Netherlands and EEC. It was clear now that both Bhutan and India taking liberal interpretation of Article II of the 1947 Treaty(Roy 2006,106-107) In the 1990s Indo-Bhutan relations were characterized by a sort of give and take relationship. The king of Bhutan paid regular visits to India and praised Indian efforts for economic development of Bhutan. He appreciated the steady relationship which was based on mutual trust and equality in return the king expected a positive attitude from India. On the other hand, India's present attitude towards the ethnic problem in Bhutan was guided by its special relations with Bhutan. Indian policy makers were also cautious about the Chinese presence in the region. Lhotshampas a small community of Southern Bhutan has been in the news since 1980s in internal politics of Bhutan as well as in Indo-Bhutan bilateral relations. These people have been excluded from Bhutan after adopting citizenship Act 1985 by Royal Government of Bhutan. Henceforth most of them were forced to flee the country and take shelter first in border areas of India and then finally in the refugee camps of Morang and Jhapa districts in eastern Nepal.

India never intervenes in the internal affairs of Bhutan but the cool response of India has been criticizing by different sections of Nepal and Bhutan. But India's policy to help Bhutan enhancing rapidly in this critical situation. The largest Indo-Bhutan Project, the Rs.240-crore 336 MW Chukha Hydel Project moved closer towards completion and made satisfactory progress. The first two turbines are expected to be rotated in the first half of 1986 when Bhutan will benefit from the power generated and surplus power will begin to flow into India. India will purchase all power surpluses to Bhutan's requirements. The infrastructure to permit absorption of this power in India is nearly ready. India-Bhutan bilateral relations are characterized by close consultations, maturity, complete trust and mutual

understanding and are an example of good neighborly relations. The government of India has assured to extend full support and cooperation to the royal government of Bhutan for consolidation of democracy following the installation of the first democratically elected parliament and government in Bhutan in may 2008.

During the years 2007-08, Bhutan engaged in a carefully managed and apparently successful transition from absolute monarchy to form of parliamentary democracy conjoined with a constitutional monarchy, marked by the abdication of the modernizing fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, in favor of his partly India educated son Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk. The shift was undertaken at the instigation of monarchy and unfolded against the backdrop of nervousness by much of the population, which trusted the king but was not sure about politicians. Through the process, India kept its inner thoughts to itself, and publicly extolled the vision of the fourth king(Malone 2012,121-122).

In December 2005 the king announced that the first democratic elections at the national level would be held in 2008 and he would then abdicate in favor of his son, the crown prince. This public declaration marked the culmination of the modernization and transformation of Bhutan's political system to a democracy. In 2006 the Election Commission of Bhutan was inaugurated and it started to prepare for the general elections in 2008 through voter education, promotion of political awareness and organizing the conduct of the elections.

The elections to the National Assembly took place without incident on 24th March 2008. The DPT candidates won 45 of the 47 legislative seats and 67% of valid votes cast, with the PDP as the only other party contesting the ballot, winning the remaining two seats, despite almost universal expectation that representation might be rather evenly split. Of a total of 3, 18,465 registered voters, some 79.4% cast their votes, mostly using electronic voting machine. There were in addition some 17000 postal votes. Lyonpo Jigmi Yozzer Thinley was subsequently nominated as prime minister by the DPT and his premiership was endorsed by the king on April. The new council of Ministers was installed two days later and included key appointments for a number of former ministers, including the former Prime Ministers Khandu Wangchuk and Wangdi Norbu, who was appointed Minister of economic affairs and minister of finance, respectively(Shaw,2009,181). In this way Bhutan entered a profound moment in its history. The small landlocked country has elected a century old monarchist rule.

Before the establishment of democracy the nature of Indo – Bhutan relation has been changed by the treaty of 2007.

The updated Indo-Bhutan friendship Treaty was signed on 8th February 2007 between Pranab Mukherjee ,the then India's minister of external affairs and Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk ,the then Crown prince and now the king of Bhutan. The revised or updated article 2 of the India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty 2007 gives enough space for Bhutan to conduct her foreign relations independence of India's advice. Now technically Bhutan does not need to seek of the relationship and to meet the needs of 21st century political treaty.(Hussain, p44-53) Bhutan's first democratically elected Government led by Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) made a sudden shift in country's India centric foreign policy.Thimpu's opted for diversifying international contacts and as a result its diplomatic ties with other nations increased from 25 in 2011 to 53 by 2013.The DPT Government even bid for a non-permanent seat of the UNSC and opted for having missions of P-5 countries established in Thimpu(Stobdan,2014)

Indo-Bhutan relation came again into crossroad when the DPT led government enhancing its relation with China.Infact in the recent years a polarized view has surfaced with the current PDP led Government criticizing the previous regime for pursuing a China policy at the cost of India's interest...In the Rio summit 2012 the prime minister of Bhutan met his Chinese counterpart Wen Zia Bao.Bhutan buys 20 busses from China. And China offered Bhutan for its developmental activity. This process of deepening China-Bhutan relation irked New Delhi. The fundamentals of economic dependency including the hydro power projects are becoming subjects of debate, essentially to highlight the massive Indian influence in Bhutan. Many analysts have begun to view the decency relationship in the geo-political context of Indo- China zero sum rivalry and the manner of extent to which Bhutan has been sacrificing its interest. Even the Current PDP led Government criticizing the previous regime for pursuing a China policy at the cost of India's interest. Now the ruling PDP has pledged to tread cautiously on the international stage. DPT Government stronger ties with China needs understanding from a broader perspective. India cannot curb Bhutan to be close with China, because China has been able to expand its relation with South Asia, despite India's efforts to contain it.

Many believed that to punish the then prime Minister Jigme Thinley for getting comfortable with Beijing, New Delhi restored to withdrawal of petroleum subsidies days before the general election in July 2013.(Husain, 2014)

Many Bhutanese shocked and dismay it as carrot and stick policy.

The whole episode portrayed as India's worst foreign relations goof-ups in recent years, possibly alienating the one and only reliable and completely supporting neighbor it has. The BJP oppositions vociferously criticized the Government for what happened while the official statements spoke of, unfortunate timing and assured that this was an ordinary decision without any intention of influencing the electoral process and sending a message to Bhutan.(IPCS 2013)

Indian Government's assistance programme never stopped due to this strain relation. The level of trade is also an elevated plane as seen by the figure. During 2012, bilateral trade reached Rs.68.3 billion. Imports from India were Rs.41.7 billion accounting for 79 percent of Bhutan's total imports in 2012.Bhutan's exports to India amounted to Rs.26.6 billion (including electricity) and constituted 94 percent of its total exports. India is thus Bhutan's leading trade partner. ((Masood 2015) Bhutan earned Rs.975 Cores from selling power to India in 2012 that's nearly Rs.13.5 for every citizen of a country of .74 million people.(<http://www.nsb.gov.bt/publication/files/pub90t4338yv.pdf>,pp155-157) India's prime minister visited Bhutan on 15 and 16 June 2014.Before visit India's foreign secretary Sujata Singh said our relations with Bhutan are unique and especially warm. Our historical and cultural linkages make us natural friends and partners.(Laldin 2014) He tried to strengthen development cooperation and further enhance economic ties.

During Modi's tour ,both countries reaffirmed their commitments to extensive development cooperation and discussed ways to further enhance economic ties-Firstly, India and Bhutan reiterated their commitment to achieving the 10,000 MW target in hydropower.Secondly,Modi inaugurated the building of the supreme court of Bhutan and laid foundation stone of the 6000 MW Kholongchu Hydroelectric Project.Thirdly,Modi described Bhutan as a natural choice for the first visit abroad as the two countries shared a 'special relationship'.Fourthly,The fact that the Prime Minister chose Bhutan as his first foreign destination assumes significance since China has lately intensified efforts to woo it and establish full fledged diplomatic ties with Thimpu.(Times of India 16 Jun 2014) Modi has consciously decided to start his foreign visit to Bhutan, keeping in mind that one of the worst foreign policy decisions the UPA-2 Government was perceived to have taken came in 2013 when

it withdrew subsidy cooking gas and kerosene it supplied to Bhutan .It soured bilateral relations The PM's visit may help to bring these ties back to track. He declared expansion of bilateral ties or as he termed it 'Bharat to Bhutan relations.

DOKLAM CRISIS AND BEYOND

On June 2017 China started constructing vehicle road on the Doklam Plateau. This place is very important for India, Bhutan and China for strategic reason. If China able to make road then, they can enter Bhutan and easily can attack India. This place is only 27 km from Siliguri corridor. So it is very important for geo-strategic and other reason. Chinese influence Doklam could impact India in many ways. Firstly, China proximity to India's north east and Siliguri corridor which connects north eastern states to India and Nepal to Bhutan becomes closer. Secondly, it also gets closer to Bangladesh's periphery in the North as a narrow stretch of land divides Bangladesh from Bhutan.

India is concerned with recent actions of China in the Doklam area and has conveyed to the Chinese Government that the construction of the road in Doklam area would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implication for India. It also stated that India and China, in 2012 reached an agreement that the tri-junction boundary points between India, China and third countries will be finalized in consultation with the concerned countries. Any attempt therefore to unilaterally determine tri-junction points is in violation of this understanding.(Kuensel ,1st July,2017)

The Ministry of External Affairs India, decided to respond in a firm but polite manner. In the Indian statement issued on June 30, the actual situation and events leading up to the confrontation were stated, reminding the Chinese agreements they have violated, the threat to Indian security by actions that the Chinese have embarked upon in Doklam and India's commitment to Bhutan. The situation appears to be progressively deteriorating. The Chinese foreign ministry has now issued a map showing Doklam as Chinese territory. They have also issued photographs with nothing in Chinese stating Indian soldiers violated Chinese territory. This is for the first time in decades that soldiers of the two sides are standing eyeball to eyeball, though not with weapons pointing.(Roy 2017)

China's interest in Bhutan is quite evident in recent years. China is rapidly developing infrastructure opposite Chumby valley including plan to extend railway network

from Lhasa to Zangmu, and Shigatse to Yadong right at the tip of Chumby Valley, a vital tri-junction.

Bhutan's only hope to bring back normalcy in the South Asia. It may no longer be possible to curb Bhutan from diversifying its external economic contacts especially with important power house like China which has been able to expand its influence in South Asia despite India's efforts to contain it. India should take measures to instill confidence in India among Bhutanese bureaucrats intellectuals and others who are engaged in decision making .We have already burnt our fingers in Nepal and Srilanka We can't afford to lose Bhutan 's friendship.So it is the call of the day to rectify India's attitude to Bhutan.

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