

The Doklam Standoff and Importance of Strategic Border Infrastructures: A Critical Analysis from the National Security Perspective of India, China, and Bhutan

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Abstract

Bhutan is a small landlocked and even in the 21st century self-isolated country located between the world's most populous neighbors i.e. India and China. Though it has long association and affinities with Tibet's history, culture, and way of living, Bhutan has no formal diplomatic relations with its vicinity neighbor People's Republic of China. But interestingly it adheres to the One China Policy. This paper is trying to gain a deeper understanding about Bhutan's relations with China and what exactly the border problem it has with China. In a similar vein, it also looks at why India actively engages in Sino-Bhutan border disputes without a formal request from Bhutan. Based on the available resources and various constraints for getting sufficient information, hermeneutic methodology has been applied. The paper also highlighted the strategic importance of the Doklam for trio countries and why strategic border infrastructures are remained priority which caused tussles in the relations of neighborhood relations.

Keywords: Bhutan, Doklam, India, China, Nepal, diplomatic relations, security and geo-strategic location, critical border infrastructures

Introduction

Nepal and Bhutan have coupled of similarities, we both are sufferers of landlockedness psyche. Both are surrounded by two big countries China and India. As Nepal has been facing border disputes with her two neighbors, I have a stroke about Bhutan's situation. The 2017 Doklam standoff was also reflected in my consideration and why not go through the study of Bhutan's situation with its neighbors and border disputes? The topic was chosen to study this particular Bhutanese context. This has focused on especially political, border, and strategic aspects of Bhutan's relations with her immediate neighbors as well as a case analysis of the Doklam standoff and why it has become geostrategic important for all three countries.

From December 2023, Bhutan has graduated from the United Nations Least Developed Country (LDC) status and now it is middle-income country category. It has developed its own development

indicator of the Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI). Besides these landmark achievements, the unresolved border has still remained a perennial issue of tense relations between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Bhutan where India has also been there knowingly or unknowingly (FMPRC, 2024).

Bhutan as a Self-isolated Country

Since the emergence of a nation-state, it remained isolated for centuries and followed a policy of isolationism (Naidu, 1986: p. 534). Bhutan fought a war with the British where it lost some 2750 square miles of territory. It was forced to sign the Treaty of Sinchula on 11 November 1865. Similarly, there was the treaty of Punakha between Bhutan and British which was signed on 8 January 1910 (Kaul, 2022).

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As per this treaty the British Government is ready to not interfere in the internal affairs of Bhutan but Bhutan's external relations should be guided by the advice of the British Government. The Indo-Bhutanese treaty of 1949 was just the continuation of the British legacy which is still continued. Which is the reason behind its very limited diplomatic presence both in and out of Bhutan though currently it has diplomatic relations with 54 countries, including the European Union (MFA, Bhutan). There are just three diplomatic missions stationed in Thimpu and one India consulate in Phuentsholing, outside Thimpu. India, Bangladesh, and Kuwait have their diplomatic missions in Thimpu (MFA, Bhutan). Whereas Bhutan has just eleven diplomatic missions abroad including embassies, permanent missions, and consulates altogether. From the international relations perspectives, Bhutan is still in India-centric cocoon and isolated from the outside world.

Bhutan has diverse topography it extends from the lowest 100 m above sea level to rises to the high Himalayan watershed, the highest point now being the peak of Gangkar Punsum at 7578 m. According to the latest official figures, a total of 72.5 percent of the country's area is under forest cover and 51.44 percent is declared to be maintained as protected areas, including national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and ecological corridors.

The most significant demographic development in the southern lowlands occurred with the arrival of migrant laborers from Nepal sometime around the turn of the twentieth century. Although referred to as Nepalis due to their common origin, these immigrants came from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. Some belonged to the strict Hindu-Indian castes and subcastes, including Bahun and Chhetri, equated with Brahmins and Kshatriyas, others were Rai and Limbu, who are considered to be the indigenous peoples of eastern Nepal, and yet others were Sherpa and Tamang, who considered themselves Tibetan stock and followed Buddhism. The Nepali settlers cleared huge areas of forests to make farmland and became the most dominant people in southern Bhutan. A century on, their common tongue, Nepali, an Indo-European language, is spoken across Bhutan and most of

their descendants are citizens of Bhutan. Today, in spite of a bitter ethnic conflict around 1990, the people of Nepali origin make up about 25 percent of Bhutan's population, and a more politically correct term Lhotshampa or 'Southerner' is used to refer to them as a whole. The settlement of Lhotshampas in subtropical lowlands transformed the demography of the area.

Bhutan and India Relations

The foreign policy of Bhutan, by and large, encircles its engagement with India. As per the treaty of peace and friendship signed in 1949 between Bhutan and India, Bhutan is a protégée of India, special on its security and foreign policy matters. They had established diplomatic relations in January 1968. India is Bhutan's largest development and most important trading partner. As a landlocked country, India is the sole gateway for the third-country trade. If we go to history, it has a very close tie with Tibet but after the annexation of Tibet in the People's Republic of China, this historical cultural and traditional contact, communication, and engagement had drastically diminished or went to cut-off situation. Even the name of Bhutan itself comes from the Tibetan language.

About 50,000 Indian citizens are working in Bhutan, mainly in the construction sector, education, and technical consultants involved in infrastructure projects. Some Indian daily workers also enter and exit Bhutan every day in the border towns (MEA, 2023).

The Relations between Bhutan and the People's Republic of China

Bhutan and China don't have formal diplomatic relations yet. They are not only neighbors but also share long borders with each other. Due to India's influences on its foreign and security policy, India's own interests, Bhutan yet was not able to establish diplomatic relations with immediate neighbors. Surprisingly it has diplomatic relations with around 54 countries including the European Union but has not yet established formal diplomatic relations with its adjacent neighbor People's Republic of China. One can easily assume that the question of Bhutan;

is really an independent or India India-dependent country. Why it surrenders with India in the twenty-first century. India has its military based in Bhutan and a huge number of India workers are working in Bhutan in various India-funded projects. India has massive investment in Bhutanese hydropower sectors which is a major source of foreign currency. Historically, Bhutan did not have engagement with China but was largely influenced by Tibetan culture-Drukpa also came from Tibet. There were frequent exchanges of visits of spiritual religious leaders from Bhutan and Tibet. Buddhist Guru travelled to each other holy shrines (Karma Phuntsho, 2013: p.34).

By the end of the 16th Century, the Tibetan Lamas established a complete sway over Bhutan and ultimately Bhutanese came to look upon Lhasa as their spiritual headquarters (Naidu, 1986: p.534).

The Doklam issue and Its Geostrategic Importance

It is the tri-junction point between India, Bhutan, and China. There are four disputed areas between Bhutan and China whereas Doklam is about 89 sq km areas. It is also known as Zhoglam. Geographically it is situated near the Yadong area of the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the Haa Valley of Bhutan (Beena, 2019). Doklam has been declared a disputed area by both Bhutan and China. India has strategic interests in this particular area due to being this area lying on the essential Siliguri Corridor. A series of negotiations took place between Bhutan and China in 1984. Over 25 boundary discussions have been held between the two countries. The Chinese are asserting authority on the basis of tax receipts given to graziers who paid a "herders" tax to the government in Lhasa until 1960. However, in 2002 when Bhutan and China signed a standstill accord on border disagreements, they both agreed to place the dispute in cold storage (Beena, 2019).

On 8 August 1949, Bhutan and India signed a Treaty of Friendship calling for peace between the two nations and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. According to the treaty, Bhutan agreed to let India guide its foreign policy over border sovereignty and discuss matters of foreign and

defense affairs. In 2007, Bhutan and India signed another treaty advancing the 1949 accord, stating that both countries stood for close friendship and cooperation with each other on matters concerning their national interests. Since Bhutan's sovereignty is sacrosanct for India, on 18 June 2017 the Indian military entered the disputed area between Bhutan and China to stop the illegal construction of the road, leading to the longest stalemate between New Delhi and Beijing since 1962 (Beena, 2019).

The boundary between China and Bhutan has not been formally demarcated. Since 1984, China and Bhutan have held boundary talks alternately in Beijing and Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan. In 1998, the two countries signed the Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Bhutan on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility in the China-Bhutan Border Areas during the 12th round of Boundary Talks. This is the first intergovernmental agreement between the two countries and is of great significance for maintaining stability in the border areas between the two countries. In 2021, China and Bhutan signed the Memorandum of Understanding on the "Three-Step Road Map" for accelerating China-Bhutan Boundary Negotiations in Beijing and Thimphu via video link, which is of great significance for accelerating the negotiations on boundary demarcation and advancing the process of establishing China-Bhutan diplomatic relations.

As of May 2023, the two sides had held 24 rounds of boundary talks and 12 Expert Group Meetings on the Boundary Question. Both sides are committed to an early settlement of the boundary question (FMPRC, 2024). In the year 2023, there has been active engagement between the two countries. The following meetings and engagements have been done in the single year 2023:

1. Han Zheng Meets with Foreign Minister of Bhutan Dr. Tandi Dorji (2023-10-24).
2. Director-General of the Department of Asian Affairs of the Foreign Ministry Liu Jinsong Meets with Foreign Secretary of Bhutan Pema Choden (2023-10-25).

3. Joint Press Release on the 25th Round of Boundary Talks between China and Bhutan (2023-10-24).
4. Wang Yi Meets with Foreign Minister of Bhutan Dr. Tandi Dorji (2023-10-23).
5. Assistant Foreign Minister Nong Rong Meets with Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources of Bhutan Karma Tshering (2023-10-05).
6. Joint Press Release of the 13th Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on the China-Bhutan Boundary Issues (2023-08-24).
7. Joint Press Release on the 12th Expert Group Meeting on the China-Bhutan Boundary Issues (2023-05-26).

Why is the Doklam so importance for Bhutan, China, and India:

On 8 August 1949, India and Bhutan signed a Treaty of Friendship. As per the treaty provision, Bhutan agreed to let India conduct its foreign and defense affairs. So, India stood to protect Bhutan's sovereignty as per the treaty and to show its faithfulness on 18 June 2017 the Indian military entered the disputed area between Bhutan and China to stop the illegal construction of the road. Which caused the longest stalemate between New Delhi and Beijing since 1962. "Chicken neck" Siliguri corridor, the corridor joins the state of West Bengal and the rest of India to the northeastern parts of the country. Therefore, the construction of the road is another way to force India's hand on the tri-junction, by forcing it further south. That is why it is strategically important for India. In reality, India has its own interest in Doklam not purely for the protection of Bhutan's sovereignty; it is more than that. Another, of course, India considers Bhutan as its suzerain state. It thought that the opportune moment as protector of Bhutan could be the Doklam. It sent troops without Bhutan's request because of its larger strategic importance is there in Doklam.

On the other hand, China well understood the strategic importance of the location which it could

not want to easily abandon. It has well proven since imperial China that the area belongs to China. No country is ready to give its own land; land always becomes a big political issue which is also equally applied to the case of the People's Republic of China.

Importance of Strategic Border Infrastructures:

Robert Frost in his poem Mending Wall mentioned that "good fences make good neighbours". Indeed, for trouble free relations between bordering countries, borders should be well demarcated and regulated so that there will be no misunderstanding and misperception. Benefitting from economic and trade growth, border infrastructures have become pivotal. To create peace and seamless cross-border movement, the strategic investment in the border infrastructures and people are foremost crucial. Bordering people are the real protectors of borders as saying they are the armies without weapons, bearing in mind of their faithfulness to statehood, it is crucial to invest in overall development of bordering area so that it could reduce illegal activities which support informal economy. In our own experiences both side borders with our neighbors, we have very dilapidated and poor infrastructures. We need to give special priority and state attention to this important aspect which ultimately affects our national security and national interests. People compare their life and development with the people of other side of borders. Without improving their basic standards of life and basic development, it could not be strong belongingness, ownership and proud-feeling to own statehood.

The competition between India and China in establishment of infrastructures in their respective borders is not unfamiliar with us. Simply we have noticed that even during the COVID-19 Pandemic, the India inaugurated the road in May 2020; the road certain portion lies in dispute borders between Nepal and India (PIB, 2020). Powerful countries give special attention on strategic presence in those areas having long term importance. Whereas the issue of Doklam does not remain aloof from this fact of the strategic important for both big powers.

Conclusion and Further Discussion

The problems of a small nation bordering with big neighbors are unique and if in case of being landlockedness in between big neighbors, it has been a perennial headache of balancing relations with neighbors. Time and cost have to be spent for the strategy of survival. Not only Bhutanese context, it is also equally applied to Nepalese contexts and plight. Kalapani border dispute case between Nepal and India is another case example where as being weak and small compared to India, Nepal's plight is similar to what Bhutan's in Doklam. India by forced capturing Nepal's own territory in Kalapani. At the cost of big neighbor and landlockedness, Nepal's compulsion has to maintain this issue in least priority. This issue can be further discussion and comparative studies between the Bhutanese and Nepalese contexts. It would be the best-case scenario for how small nations state situations in between big neighbors facing hegemonic behaviors and their perennial headache for keeping good relations with those big neighbors for the sake of survival, national security, and sovereignty.

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