



CHINA AND ITS PERIPHERIES **LIMITED OBJECTIVES IN BHUTAN**



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Of all the nations that border China, its comparison with Bhutan would appear to be a paradox. In comprehensive power terms, Bhutan is almost a nonentity to China. Bhutan's biggest disadvantage is its geography that limits its connectivity to India in South and China in north with no access to sea or any other third country without using either Indian or Chinese land or airspace. Nevertheless, in the geopolitical context of today's South Asia, Bhutan's geography has strategic ramifications for both India and China.

This provides Bhutan with more diplomatic maneuverability than ever before. As Jane Shi (2011) wrote, "Though it has no direct access to major waterways or ports, Bhutan is positioned at a strategic location between India and China, controlling several important Himalayan mountain passes." For China, it is Bhutan's location just north of India's only road link

to its relatively unstable northeastern states – the Siliguri Corridor – that could provide it with a rare political and military opportunity in South Asia generally but specifically against India in the long term.

China's objectives in Bhutan remains limited in the short term which partly explains its comparatively aggressive stance towards Bhutan till the 1960s. Of late, however, Beijing has displayed relative patient farsightedness in considering Bhutan as a small but important element of its South Asia policy framework. Like Nepal, Beijing has employed a mix of persuasion and coercion with Bhutan as well reminding the repercussions of siding with India. With Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and even Bangladesh offering Beijing more leverage in South Asia against India than ever before, Bhutan could play a critical role for China: firstly in furthering its strategic depth against India's northeastern periphery; second in restraining its Tibetan dilemma from spilling over into Bhutan; and lastly, in stopping Bhutan from being guided by Indian concerns alone.

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Views expressed are author's own.



Given the importance of the historical context in explaining the China-Bhutan dynamics, the first section deals with the historical-contemporary trajectory. The second section focuses on the contemporary geopolitical aims and objectives of China in particular in South Asia vis-a-vis India and the missing links that Bhutan could fill. Tibet's and India's inevitable influence both political and cultural on the China-Bhutan relationships will be part of the entire discussion.

I CHINA AND BHUTAN: HISTORICAL & CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

China's embrace of its external periphery states was historically influenced by what is now construed as the Chinese notion of international system, that is, the tributary system (Zhang and Buzan 2012: 3).

The Tibetan plateau probably with the exception of its Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) when Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo unified Tibet and forced the Chinese Emperor Taizong to enter into a marriage alliance gave birth only to what could be termed limited states. Whatever influence China ever had over Tibet or Tibet had over Bhutan and Nepal had an important logistical determinant. The communication and connectivity concerns required that even if Tibet was some form of a tributary state, the Chinese required Tibetans to be in charge of most of their affairs including even foreign affairs, occasionally letting them get away with near independence level of autonomy (Xinhua, 29 April 2013).

Since the Opium Wars until 1951 when Tibet finally went under the physical control of China after armed intervention by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), Bhutan and even Tibet had little to worry about China, as the British were the most powerful constant in the entire zone and China was being ravaged by wars both civil and foreign.

Only during the Qing Empire, China tried exerting relatively direct authority over Tibet. With Bhutan, the direct contact though was established in the 1720s, but it remained only informal (Library of Congress 1991) probably for two reasons: to secure their interests from the British and satisfy their urge of what B. R. Deepak calls "Manchu expansionism." A Centre for Bhutan Studies report (2004) captures this entire episode till its culmination in following words:

China was involved in Tibetan affairs since the time that Chinese Ambans (residents) were stationed in Lhasa in the 1720s under the Ching dynasty... The Bhutanese delegation to the Dalai Lama came into contact with the Chinese representatives in Lhasa although there was no evidence of any tributary relation with Beijing whatsoever. Relations with Tibet itself, was never better but it was severely strained after Bhutan supported the British during the 1904 Younghusband Expedition. The only contact with China was the occasional, informal meeting of a Bhutanese representative in Lhasa with the Chinese officials. Unlike Nepal, Bhutan never sent tributary missions to China... China made several efforts to exercise what it called 'historic' rights over Bhutan between 1865 when the Treaty of Sinchula was signed, and the signing of the Treaty of Punakha in 1910 - a direct outcome of the claim the Manchu Government of China made on Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan after its invasion of Tibet in 1910-12. China continued to make feudatory claim on Bhutan even after the 1910 Treaty of Punakha. It made a vague suzerainty claim over Bhutan during years just before the Chinese Revolution of 1911 to secure its southeastern border against increasing foreign aggression. The new Republic of China slowly let the claim die down, only for it to resurface later time and again.

Bhutan recognised China as a significant threat for the first time after the joint Chinese/Tibetan invasion of Nepal in 1792-1793 (Dutt 1981: 58-62). Since the Opium

Wars until 1951 when Tibet finally went under the physical control of China after armed intervention by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), Bhutan and even Tibet had little to worry about China, as the British were the most powerful constant in the entire zone and China was being ravaged by wars both civil and foreign. China's tone changed from claim over Bhutan as the Manchu government did in 1910 to accepting Bhutan as a sovereign state after the 1960s. Nonetheless, the geostrategic balance that had prevailed in this region for decades stood altered forever after the British left.

Whatever the Chinese political claims to Bhutan are, it owes them to the largely cultural-religious Tibetan influence there for centuries. Indeed, the Tibetan claims had political and even military overtones as reflected in 8th century invasion of Tibet over Bhutan and subsequent strives that followed. However, the conflict was always of a regional texture preceded and followed by the arrival of another set of Tibetan lamas who preached Buddhism even as they started settling themselves and encouraging fellow Tibetans to follow them mainly in the Southern Valleys of Bhutan. In any case, even when there were clashes, it presented no existential threat to Bhutanese culture and way of life and the ground polity (Mathou 2004: 389-391). Certainly, these wars served no grand geopolitical big game that spread far beyond the Bhutanese soils.

The Indian engagement in Bhutan was limited to religion and culture till the British developed interest in Tibet and then in Bhutan around mid-eighteenth century. Historically, Bhutan's political and economic interaction was with Tibet and Sikkim alone (Kumar 2010: 243-245). The shift towards India began with the British engagement in Bhutan.

Bhutan completely alienated from its new northern neighbour China when the Dalai Lama escaped to India and the Tibetan revolt was ruthlessly suppressed in 1959.

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The fact that the most "dominant political and cultural element" in Bhutanese population comprises of the numerically prominent Ngalop – the people of Tibetan origin who migrated around the ninth century and introduced Tibetan culture and Buddhism to Bhutan – made them only more likely to realise the Tibetan crisis (Library of Congress 1991). Repeated claims regarding Bhutan by the communist government in China and Chinese leaders further pushed the Bhutanese government into a long period of self-imposed isolation from China even as the People's Republic officially denied any intention to subdue Bhutanese sovereignty.

After her independence, Chinese state laid its claim over Bhutan in 1954 itself by publishing a map in "A Brief History of China" thus beginning a long period of border conflict. The map depicted "a considerable portion of Bhutan...as a pre-historical realm of China." Four years later, in 1958, China not only published another map claiming large tracts of Bhutanese land but also occupied about 300 square miles of Bhutanese territory. An anxious Bhutan took resort to the less than a decade old British legacy India-Bhutan Treaty of 1949 Article 2 of which stipulated that (Ahsan and Chakma 1993: 1043): "On its part the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations."

1960 marked another provocative declaration from a Chinese leader which

gave Bhutan every reason to be cautious about Chinese intentions (Centre for Bhutan Studies 2004: 75): "Bhutanese, Sikkimese and Ladakhis form a united family in Tibet. They have always been subject to Tibet and to the great motherland of China. They must once again be united and taught the communist doctrine." The only silver lining in those initial years for Bhutan was that the Chinese did not attack

II CHINA'S STRATEGIES TOWARDS BHUTAN AND THE COMPLEXITIES INVOLVED

The Chinese aims and objectives in Bhutan over last five decades point out towards a host of conflicting yet complementing interests that envelop issues pertaining to Tibet, India, and South Asia. More specifically, Bhutan could hold the key to China's legitimacy claims regarding Tibet and act as the last milestone in discrediting and demoralising India in its own backyard. Indeed China's continued motivation in engaging Bhutan relates to the strategic benefits its geography can deliver. However, China's Bhutan policy is certainly of a more comprehensive and subtle nature as Beijing is least inclined to align or link either its Tibetan concerns or its urgency to improve ties with India to factors which can be relied less upon or simply ignored. Thus the Chinese engagement with Bhutan seeks engaging Bhutan, getting its objectives fulfilled but without giving much due to Bhutan as it achieves them by enhancing cooperation where its own

strength lies. Therefore, China looks for more of economic and tourism cooperation, hydroelectricity and infrastructure related cooperation and resource exploitation – areas where it has a decisive edge. Beijing probably believes that with the rise in economic and related interaction involving financial stakes, other benefits will simply accrue. China might not be wrong in having these expectations as obvious from the case of Nepal in particular. When stakes are high, Beijing has shown no hesitation in mounting military pressure along the border. That puts severe restrictions on buffer states like Bhutan whose greatest foreign policy success lies in not being taken as either granted or completely unreliable by India or China.

China's strategy towards Bhutan can be divided into the following three major aspects: border, economy and geopolitics.

A. Border: Military Intimidation, Diplomatic Seduction, Border Talks and Incursions, and Siliguri Corridor

Military intimidation followed by diplomatic seduction has formed an important part of China's policy towards Bhutan. After the closing of the border, trade and all diplomatic contacts in 1960, China resorted to significant military posturing against Bhutan at least twice – in 1966 and in 1979 along the border which remains the prime reason of dispute. In 1966, on the tri-junction of Bhutan, Chumbi Valley and Sikkim, the Tibetan grazers accompanied by Chinese troops entered Doklam pastures. China later "formally extended claim to about 300 sq. miles of northeastern Bhutan and also substantial areas north of Punakha, the former capital of Bhutan." When Bhutan requested New Delhi to raise this matter with Beijing, China rejected talking to India saying that the issues concerned China and Bhutan alone and "the Indian government has no right whatsoever to intervene in it (Singh 2000: 1109-1127)."

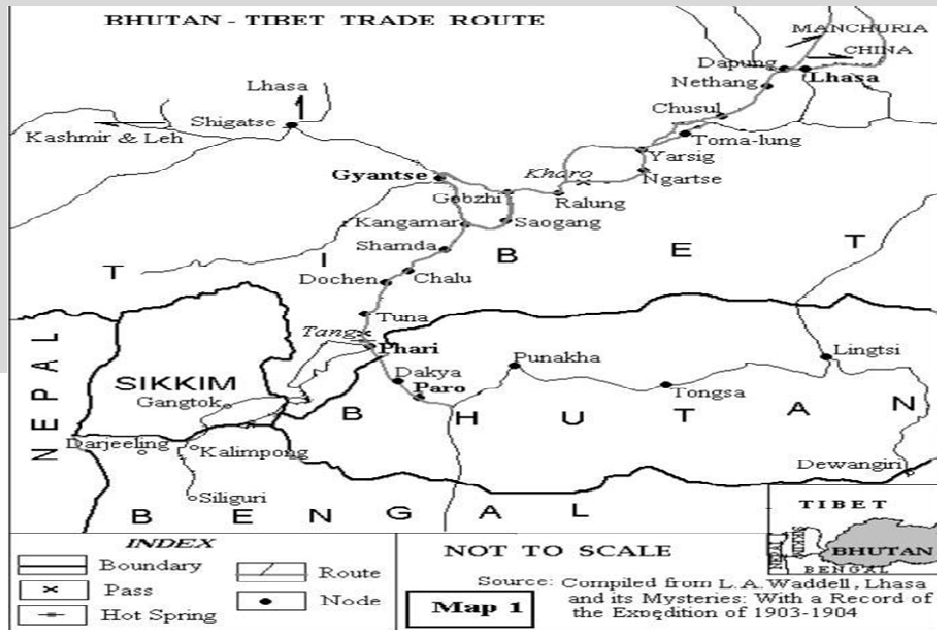
China followed up this incident by voting

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in favour of Bhutan's membership at the United Nations (UN) in 1971 which implied its recognition of Bhutan. However, Bhutan's strong support to India in the UN over Bangladesh issue the same year irked China dissuading them from building further momentum (Ibid).

The coronation of the new King of Bhutan in 1974 where China sent a high-level delegation and Bhutan's vote in the UN in 1977 favouring the Chinese position against India's on who should represent Cambodia marked opening up of other vistas of cooperation. For Bhutan, the Janata government in New Delhi made the task easier as its policy of "beneficial bilateralism" signaled normalisation of India-China relations (Gulati 2000: 79). China wanted the border talks to begin but with Bhutan still unprepared, it ensured large-scale intrusions in 1979. The negotiations finally began in 1984. In 1998, they agreed on Four Guiding Principles for further talks which included maintaining peace along the border, something China often violated to create pressure. After nineteen rounds of talks by January 2010, the two sides are said to have nearly finalised boundary demarcation (Bhutan Research 2012) and almost prepared to establish diplomatic ties with China (Sina.com, 13 April 2012). China also offered a sweet package deal to Bhutan that Bhutan has been reluctant to conclude. Medha Bisht (2010) wrote about the complexities involved in such a deal:

The protracted nature of Sino-Bhutan boundary talks and the continuous Chinese intrusions into Bhutanese territory reveals the strategic element embedded in the package deal. In November 2007, Chinese forces dismantled several unmanned posts near the Chumbi valley. This, analysts put it, has 'distorted the Sino-Bhutanese border near Sikkim,' with Chinese forces only a few kilometers away from the Siliguri corridor. Chumbi Valley, a vital tri-junction between



Source: Binyon 2013

Bhutan, India and China border, is significant as it is 500 km from Siliguri corridor—the chicken neck which connects India to North East India and Nepal to Bhutan. Meanwhile Chumbi Valley is of geostrategic importance to China because of its shared borders with Tibet and Sikkim. The North-Western areas of Bhutan which China wants in exchange for the Central areas lie next to the Chumbi Valley tri-junction.

Economy: Inclusion of Tibet, Historic-Contemporary Trade, Rail Connectivity and Long Term Economic Considerations

China and Bhutan trade totaled a pathetic USD 1 million in 2002. The situation has not changed much since. This could entail that for China, Bhutan is economically irrelevant. However, even with a small economy, Bhutan would be crucial to Tibet and Tibetans. Bhutan would also be beneficial for China's "Western development strategy", that could allow Tibet to regain a central position in the Himalayan region (Mathou 2004: 389-391). It will also serve the 2000 Communist Party of China resolution which called for "Prosperous Borders; Wealthy Minorities program." Certainly, it would provide China with more leverage in Bhutan.

Today more than three fourth of Bhutan's trade is with India unlike till the 1960s when Bhutan had a flourishing trade with Tibet. The closing of Bhutan's Tibet trade and diversification of modern trade into new areas of commerce like tourism, industry and technology – areas where Bhutan lagged behind – has made Bhutan today an economically backward country. This is in complete contrast to the period even during the British domination when Bhutan served as a major trade point.

Sarkar and Ray (2005: 56) wrote: "According to an eighteenth century document, her (Bhutan's) annual trade was worth of Rs 200 thousand with Bengal and Rs 150 thousand with Tibet, including China." Françoise Pommaret (1999: 385-386) also writes that: "Bhutan carried out a substantial trade with her southern neighbours – Bengal (Cooch Bihar) and Assam (Kamrup) – at least from the 17th century, if not earlier." Sarkar and Ray point out in the same article that Bhutan and Lhasa – the prime centres of trade and commerce in the Himalayan belt for centuries – were linked by four alternative routes facilitating round the year trade even in case of a political turmoil. They originated from Paro, Punakha, Bumthang and Trashigang in Bhutan to Lhasa in Tibet. Bhutan offered one of the shortest routes to Tibetan trade with Bengal (Trashigang) and Assam (Paro). This

provides more reason for China to believe that Bhutan could again emerge as an economic hotspot in this region.

China's oft declared intentions to deepen economic cooperation with India's Northeast, Bangladesh and Bhutan point towards reviving above prospects and create many more. The mega rail projects that China is building up with significant investment along its entire Himalayan borders with India includes Yadong near the mouth of the Chumbi valley and Nyingchi near Arunachal Pradesh (Krishnan, 18 January 2012). These rail routes have been planned to enhance connectivity of Tibet and link its markets with the Himalayan fringe-lands like Bhutan. Of course, it has military dimensions as well which has compelled India to improve connectivity of these neglected lands and listen to its smaller neighbours. Even bigger opportunities could be created via Bhutan when the proposed Silk Rail Route's southern corridor from Europe to Southeast Asia, via Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, Burma and Thailand reaches this region (Binyon 2013). However, concerns remain. Mathou writes that Gangtok is a better location than Thimphu or Paro to become a trans-Himalayan trade hub. Binyon also underlines the implausibility of the re-emergence of the old Bhutan-Tibet trade pattern as a whole new Bhutanese trade pattern has emerged with India as a supplier and a market since 1960.

China's Proposed Rail Lines along the Himalayan Border

Source: <http://www.china-mor.gov.cn/>



However, even with economic issues having the potential to remain the priority in the long run, Bhutan is too strategically positioned to be considered an economic priority alone. Economic ties are actually a real and probably genuine nevertheless shrewd pretext to keep Bhutan hooked up to the Chinese Caravan. A hub or not, China stands to benefit both economically and

politically from engaging Thimpu.

C. Geopolitics: Chinese Foreign Policy, Dalai Lama and Bhutan and India in South Asia

Concerning the Tibetan issue, the focus on Bhutan appears to be even more fundamental. Though Chinese policies inside Tibet have displayed little concern for Tibetan aspirations, it is entirely possible that by having Bhutan in good faith – a country that shares ethnic, religious, cultural and historic ties with Tibet – Beijing plans to assuage Tibetans' ill will against China. That Bhutan never invited the current Dalai Lama nor was his Gelugpa sect ever allowed to build any monastic institutions due to hierarchical feelings which subordinated Bhutan's Drukpa sect in Tibet only suits communist ideology to an extent (Mathou 2004: 390-397).

Nevertheless, the most important geopolitical consideration for China in keeping Bhutan tagged remains India. The approach of Beijing over last five decades has been to minimise the role and importance of India in Bhutan. By consistently refusing to accept any Indian advocacy for Bhutan coupled with the "pressure tactics of border incursions," the Chinese have brought Bhutan to the negotiation table even though they been unsuccessful in making deep inroads in Bhutan (Malik 2001: 77).

China realises its limited leverage in Bhutan given critical Indian centrality in Bhutanese affairs and South Asia as well due to sheer geographic advantage that India enjoys. All that China wants from Bhutan is for it to follow an 'independent' policy which essentially means that Bhutan do away with its traditional policy tilt towards India. China blames India of dominating Bhutan unfairly in the name of 'hegemony' – calling it the Indian version of Monroe Doctrine. Thus, Beijing wants Bhutan to confer on Beijing a diplomatic status equal to that of New Delhi and accept a Chinese Ambassador (Ibid).

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CONCLUSION

China's pragmatic foreign policy in contemporary times with the smaller South Asian countries – for example the studied non-interfering role it played when the Sri Lankan Tamil crisis required an Indian Peace Keeping Force – indicates that China fully takes into account the existing geographical and economic limitations of Bhutan. China realises the extent to which Bhutan can go against India, and definitely does not expect a lean to China's side. However, it aims at neutralising Bhutan in the wake of any political or military conflict with India and use it as a base to further trade and commerce in Tibet and rest of South Asia. On a hopeful note, it might expect Bhutan to look up to China as an effective and reliable counterbalance to contain the inevitable Indian domination, something like Nepal. Bhutan has asserted its acceptance of China's core foreign policy concern i.e. One China Policy (Firstpost.com, 14 August 2012). Bhutan's transition from monarchy to parliamentary democracy saw the revision of the 1949 treaty with India in 2007 to one on a "more equal footing with both sides agreeing to 'cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests (Jacob 2012)'." The next in line could be Indian military presence there. As recent developments suggest, it could be a matter of time that Bhutan moves to balance its tilt towards India. In a world under growing Chinese domination and reducing geographical barriers, one can

always expect an upward revision of Chinese strategies and objectives.

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