

How small can be beautiful: Bhutan's journey of self-evolution

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Abstract

The article is a qualitative study on Bhutan's political evolution over the years, conducted through secondary sources including various official reports, documents and articles. This first section of the article captures the idea of how a small nation through its experiences and cautious decision-making can evolve into an independent nation with sovereign status. The decisions it had taken, has made all the difference for Bhutan to create its own identity at the international platform. The next section investigates Bhutan's relations with its neighbours. It has never involved into the classical strategy of playing off one neighbour against another. The loyalty in nurturing the relations with its neighbours, and the focus on turning weaknesses into strengths has proved that how a small country with incredibly beautiful values has evolved at the international platforms with recognition and a future for itself in the times to come.

Keywords: Evolution, Decision-making, Sovereign, Classical Strategy, Identity

Introduction

Bhutan, 'the land of Dragon', is a small, peaceful landlocked nation in South Asia. It lies between two giant nations, India and China, and this strategic geographical position influences its political, economic and foreign affairs. It is a land of rich biodiversity, spiritual and religious values; a Buddhist kingdom and a spiritual heartland of Mahayana Buddhism in Himalayan regions. In 2016, it ranked first in Economic Freedom, Ease of Doing Business and peace and was the least corrupt nation in the region. Also, the nation that gave the world a new dimension worth measuring, the concept of National Happiness. The Swiss-based International Union for Conservation of Nature while applauding the nation's efforts to keep its

environment intact, said that Bhutan is viewed as a model for proactive conservation initiatives. It has a negative net green-house gas emission. The country gets most of its energy from hydroelectric power and the export of it also brings revenues for the nation.

Approach and Methodology

This is a qualitative paper that involves a mixed approach of reviewing the data from secondary sources and analysing it. First identifying the existing literature and broad canvassing of available materials related to the topic was done. Then it was analysed. After that, review of empirical literature on Bhutan's geography, historical-political-social-cultural developments and its foreign policies was prepared and analysed. Lastly, the various areas were sorted into categories and organized as per the requirement of the article. that seemed reasonable for present purposes.

Struggle for self-assertion

Although Bhutan has never been colonized directly, but it has seen the consequences of colonization in great closeness. It was always very cautious about securing its territory and had fought seven wars in the northern region and three in the southern region to protect its territorial sovereignty.

During the Colonial time-period in the South Asian region, Bhutan followed a policy of isolation, just like Tibet. It preferred a policy of withdrawal from international politics to preserve its independence and distinct identity. In 1949, by signing a treaty with Independent India, Bhutan agreed to be guided by the advice of Indian Government in external matters, with the condition that India will not interfere in the internal administration of the country. These diplomatic-ties ensured Bhutan a strong friendship with India and its non-interference within the territory.

This treaty was later-on criticised not by Bhutan, but by other nations on the ground that India is dictating Bhutan's external affairs. But one thing that was totally ignored was that India got its hard-earned independence recently after paying prices too high, so it will obviously be in a defence mode vis-A-vis China on the

Himalayan frontier. It will turn every stone to avoid re-colonization by another nation over its territory and is sensitive about keeping an exclusive influence on the Himalayan states south of Tibet. It always respected the nation's autonomy and decisions and remained supportive.

Certain events like China's occupation of Tibet in 1950 and the way it suppressed the Tibetan revolt in 1959 made Bhutan come closer to India in security issues. These situations forced the nation to open-up and leave behind the age-old policy of isolation. What happened with Tibet made Bhutan realize the importance of relations with neighbourhood and international community. In this direction, it entered the United Nations in 1971 and the Non-Alignment Movement and soon became a full member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and also a member of BIMSTEC. These global associations provided Bhutan a new platform for realizing its equal identity among others. In the 1980's Bhutan had diplomatic relations with Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, Kuwait, Japan, Singapore, and some other nations. It was a member of several U.N. agencies (FAO, IDA, IMF) in 1981. Currently Bhutan maintains diplomatic relations with 52 countries including European union.

The process of modernization started since the 1960s and one thing worth noticing was that its modernization was not copy-pasted from other nations' developmental models. It was not Mac-donalization or westernization, it was simple modernization for its own growth and development, to update itself with the ongoing times. To achieve this goal, it moved toward accepting assistance from India, a friendly neighbour willing to aid Bhutan before the latter sought it. The first Prime Minister of independent India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru visited Bhutan in 1958 and persuaded the king to accept India's assistance. India fully financed Bhutan's first (1961-66) and second (1966-71) Five-Year Plans.

From the Third Five-Year Plan (1971-76), the aid began to decline and by the Sixth Plan (1987-92) it was around 42% of the total outlay. By then, Bhutan was able to generate local resources for itself and also had started receiving aid from other countries. This decrease in the aid with time was due to the belief that the motive behind helping someone should not be to make the receiver

dependent on the giver, but rather to help in learning the techniques that make the recipient self-independent. This is the difference between the aid from China and aid from India. China's aid comes with the cheque-book policy, first it put the receiver in debt and then in-lieu of relieving from debt, shares the equity of the asset and at last captures it. Pakistan and some small island nations are the recent victim of this policy. But Bhutan has followed a very cautious engagement with respect to China.

Another major event that tested the nature of Bhutan was the time of 1962 Sino-Indian war. Initially, it followed a strategy pursued by Nepal, of equal friendship with both the nations. But eventually, Bhutan rejected the Nepal model and followed an approach carefully accommodating India's regional and security interests and simultaneously expanding its own relations with the outside world. (Leo E. Rose, *The Politics of Bhutan* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 81-83).

The 1949 treaty remained a guiding star in the relationship of both the nations. It was revised in 2007 that called for close friendship and cooperation between both the nations on the issues of national interest, and neither government to allow the use of their territory for activities harmful to the national security and interest. It also reaffirmed respect for each-other's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Bhutan's actions might have been influenced by the advices from other friendly nations, but it never was a puppet in the hands of big nations. It was evident when Bhutan veered away from its traditional policy behaviour. For instance, once at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) conference in Havana, Bhutan departed from India on the issue of the admission of the People's Republic of China in the U.N. India favoured leaving the seat vacant, while Bhutan supported the claims of the ousted Pol Pot regime and so did China. It also differed on the issue of the rights of landlocked countries at the Manila Meeting of the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development. And while it usually abstained from U.N. votes on the Afghanistan issue, Bhutan once voted against the presence of Soviet troops in that country. These instances stand as evidences for the quality of politics that Bhutan was

evolving with and its confidence in standing for what it believes at the international platforms.

Bhutan's recognition of Bangladesh in 1971 was another important milestone in its direction toward self-assertion. Bhutan was the second nation, after India to give recognition to Bangladesh. Moreover, in 1984 both nations signed a protocol on the expansion and regulation of trade and reached to an Agreement on Economic and Cultural Cooperation during King Jigme Singye Wangchuck's visit to Bangladesh. Their relations were complementary to the growth of each other over the years.

Challenges

The nation is facing many challenges in addition to the negative impacts of the India-China tussle for power over the region. Joining hands with India, the nation in order to preserve its territorial unity and integrity for the security of north-eastern region, makes New Delhi very watchful of the Himalayan state because a tiny strip of Indian territory of only 150 miles from Tibet makes India vulnerable to Chinese attack. Chinese control of these 16 miles would cut the Northeast India off from the rest of the country.

Bhutan also faces insurgent problems from the Indo-Bhutan border areas. India may be a good friend and neighbour, but its northeast insurgents are not. These non-state actors include the people from Assam and West Bengal, who fight for their independence from Indian Federation and has the potential to undermine the friendship between both nations.

With respect to China, Bhutan remains vigilant on their activities. In the early 1930s, Chairman Mao, "declared that the correct boundaries of China would include Burma, Bhutan, Nepal...". But later editions deleted the claim after PRC began to form a 'Himalayan Federation' comprising Tibet, Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) of India to extend its influence in southern Himalayas (In the original version of The Chinese Revolution and the Communist Party openly).

In 1958, another map claimed a large part of Bhutanese lands, and later occupied about 300 square miles of Bhutanese territory in the north and north-eastern Bhutan. The Chinese claim surfaced again in 1960 when it openly declared that Bhutanese, Sikkimese and Ladakhis form a united family in Tibet. The border problem posed a serious security threat after China's September 1979 incursion into Bhutanese territory (Dorji Penjore, Security of Bhutan: Walking Between the Giants, Journal of Bhutan Studies, page115).



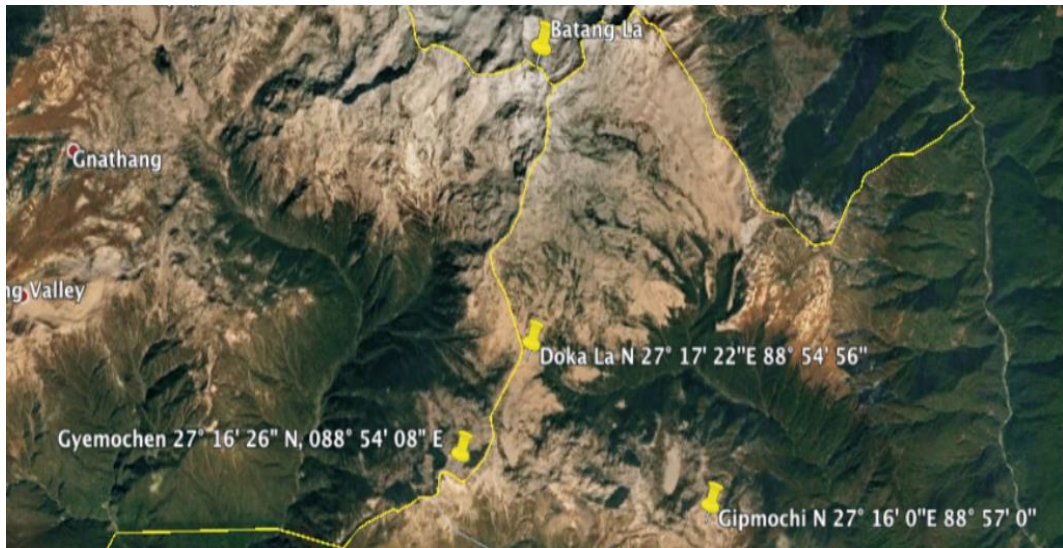
Map. 1 Chinese map clearly showing the claims in the west and the north. / Source: weibo

When Bhutan objected this move, China expressed its desire to solve the problem bilaterally through talks. But for years, the talks never yielded any fruitful results. During the seventh round of talks in 1990, the Chinese had offered the Bhutanese a “package proposal” for the Pasamlung and Jakarlung valleys, with a total area of 495 sq km in the north, if Bhutan conceded their western claims. This proposal was rejected by the National Assembly of Bhutan. The Bhutanese position hardened after this. On the 11th round of talks in November 1996, “Bhutan revised its claims in the south and asserted a claim to larger territory than before, leading the talks to break down.” In 2006, China constructed three roads that were

crossing the border itself. Between 2006 and 2009, talks were resumed and the Chinese actions further escalated near the border area. In total, China and Bhutan have had 24 rounds of border talks, without reaching any settlement. Overall, border problems continue to be the main area of contestation between the relations of both nations.

Comparatively, Bhutan is well aware of China's inability to become India's substitute. China may become a friend, maybe a good friend, but never a substitute of what India has been for Bhutan. There is a value-difference in the nature and functioning of the two nations. With regard to Nepal, the refugee problem and the insurgency, places serious stress on Bhutan's relations with Nepal. India is not directly involved, but as Bhutan does not border directly on Nepal, the Nepali insurgents use Indian territory as hideouts and launching stations for unleashing violence in the peaceful Bhutan.

Doklam issue and Bhutan



Map. 2 The Chinese claim Gipmochi as the tri-junction, but the Geo Names database shows it as 5 km east of where they place it along with Gyemochen. / Source: GeoNames database

The typical expansionist nature of China, forced it to start claiming regions in the Doklam region. This time, India hardened its stand on this issue, and a stand-off started between both nations. The Bhutanese Ambassador Major Gen. (retd.) V Namgyel, said in New Delhi, “Bhutan has conveyed that the road construction by the PLA is not in keeping with the agreements between China and Bhutan. We have asked them to stop and refrain from changing the status quo.”

The Bhutanese government issued a press release on June 29, reaffirming Namgyel’s remarks. It provided a backdrop to the events: “On 16th June 2017, the Chinese Army started constructing a motorable road from Dokola in the Doklam area towards the Bhutan Army camp at Zompelri... Bhutan has conveyed to the Chinese side, both on the ground and through the diplomatic channel, that the construction of the road inside Bhutanese territory is a direct violation of the agreements [on maintaining the status quo pending a settlement] and affects the process of demarcating the boundary between our two countries. Bhutan hopes that the status quo in the Doklam area will be maintained as before 16 June 2017 (<http://www.mfa.gov.bt/press-releases/press-release-272.html>).

The crisis has proved that today and in near future, any resolution of Bhutan’s boundary issue must be embedded in the bigger picture of a Sino-Indian border settlement. Another thing to point out is that both India and Bhutan are involved with China in bilateral talks to resolve the border issues, but no settlement is reached, so there is a need to speed-up the process, and to come to a realistic resolution through multilateral talks including all three nations for once and for all. That only can assure peace for a longer term.

Conclusion

Geography locates Bhutan on a sensitive part of the Himalayan belt. Although the giant neighbours always had brought challenges for the nation Bhutan had followed a straight path of development. It has been a loyal friend of India, one of the few nations to recognize Bangladesh as a nation in the initial phase, and also was open to maintain a diplomatic relation with China without involving itself into the classical strategy of playing off one neighbour against another. Bhutan has

always stood by India, for "a strong India means a strong friend of Bhutan". Instead of fearing from its big size, as most other nations in the region do, it accepted India as a part of its strength. This shows that Bhutan is not insecure anymore with regard to India. It's governance has proved that a small country with stable government and right leadership could become an equal partner of giant nations despite asymmetric economic, political, military, demographic and geographic powers.

The possessor of a rich biodiversity, who places happiness as a parameter in the human development, who chooses human values above materialistic benefits, such nation should be acknowledged as a leader for many developing nations. Its achievements should be applauded at bigger platforms, and set as an example of what a nation can achieve in limited resources, limited paths open for development.

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