



# **CENTRE FOR A NEW SOUTH ASIA**

## **MULTIPLE LAYERS OF DIPLOMACY IN SOUTH ASIA**

### **INDIA-BHUTAN: THE TALE OF CULTURAL CONVERGENCE AND DEEP-ROOTED TRUST-BASED PARTNERSHIP**

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# India-Bhutan: The Tale of Cultural Convergence and Deep-Rooted Trust-based Partnership

- *Sanchaly Bhattacharya*

## INTRODUCTION

In November 2023, the visit of Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk to New Delhi marked another remarkable height for Indo-Bhutan relations. The visit comes in the context of some reports about Bhutan's willingness to settle the disputed boundary with China. PM Modi's reiteration of the 'continued and full support to the socio-economic development in Bhutan' and to boost connectivity will give India leverage over China (Indian News Network, 2023). Besides the finalization of the location of the cross-border road link between Assam's Kokrajhar district and Bhutan's Gelephu region, both sides also decided to establish the railway connectivity between Banarhat region of West Bengal and Bhutan's Samtse region (Laskar, 2023b). Apart from state-to-state relations, India and Bhutan have a long history, intermingled with convergences in their embedded culture, geography, spirituality, and society. This article will examine the building blocks of India-Bhutan relations, especially in the context of growing Chinese pressure on Bhutan.

## CULTURAL CONVERGENCE

India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy broadly governed relations with Bhutan. PM Modi chose Bhutan for his first foreign visit and referred to it as a 'natural choice'. Buddhism is one of the firm grounds for India-Bhutan relations. From the Buddhist lens, the cultural and spiritual link between India and Bhutan dates back to the 8th century, when Swami Padmasambhava travelled to Bhutan to introduce Buddhism (Sharma, 2020). This has transformed the lives of the Bhutanese people. Successive governments in India have referred to Indo-Bhutan relations as 'unique' but 'special'. The basic framework of India-Bhutan is based on the 'Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship' signed in 1949 to establish formal relations between the two (MEA, 1949). However, the formal diplomatic connections were established only in 1968. India's support started with investment in hydropower projects to ensure its smooth transition to democracy. India eventually became Bhutan's largest trade and development partner (Laskar, 2023). Interestingly, India-Bhutan's relations' main essence is an 'equal and mutually beneficial partnership'. The paradigm in India's foreign policy started to primarily emphasize promoting India's soft power to build deeper relations, which, in turn, also strengthened further relations with Bhutan. India's centrality to Buddhist elementary thought manifests even in international organizations. For instance, PM Modi, in his UNGA speech, gave the aphorism "'Buddh' can bring Asia's century, not 'Yuddh'", which has explicitly drawn the cultural convergence between Indian-Bhutanese culture and spiritual links (Sharma, 2020).

## THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF BHUTAN

Bhutan, located in the Himalayas, is sandwiched between two Asian giants, India and China. However, Bhutan consistently lauds India's support for its economy and society and for restoring its cultural heritage. The geographical proximity of Bhutan to India has given New Delhi leverage over Beijing. While all of India's neighbouring countries became part of China's ambitious project Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Bhutan, despite Beijing's several attempts, opted not to join the project (Nedopil, 2023). This may be a relief time for India, but considering the impetus of China's pressure, Bhutan has started to consider resolving the boundary issues. China has only two boundary issues in South Asia: one with India and another with Bhutan.

Interestingly, Thimphu and Beijing have no diplomatic ties (Ghiasy, 2021). China has a significant interest in bringing Bhutan under its influence. In 2018, officials from Beijing made several visits to Bhutan to negotiate for the BRI project. However, considering Thimphu's close ties with New Delhi, China's attempt proved largely unsuccessful. Additionally, Bhutan and China have territorial disputes, particularly over the strategic Doklam plateau, located at the tri-junction point of India, Bhutan, and China. (Ethirajan, 2023). China claims the territory, but India supports Bhutan's stance. Supporting Bhutan's position is to protect India's security interests. Analysts pointed out that the Doklam region is of great security importance to India, given that Chinese dominance could hinder India's ability to reach Northeast through the Siliguri corridor.

## WAY FORWARD

The current issue of Bhutan-China boundary dispute resolution has once again brought India-Bhutan's historical relations into the limelight. The broader perception in light of India-Bhutan's deep-rooted relations is that Bhutan will struggle to reach any conclusion without having New Delhi's backing. In 1996, China and Bhutan were close to reaching a final agreement, but it did not happen. New Delhi perceives that boundary resolution is essential and positive but is concerned about Beijing's attitude towards Bhutan in pressuring it into an undesirable agreement. Considering the interlinkages between the border issues involving China, Bhutan, and India, New Delhi cannot leave the matter unresolved. While India's trust-based friendship needs to be broadened further, New Delhi needs to keep a close eye on the border developments between China and Bhutan.

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