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CHINA-BHUTAN ENGAGEMENT *Worries for India?*

*Why has Bhutan, a tiny South Asian country in the Himalayas, risen in importance for both India and China? Its geo-strategic location, as **PARAMA SINHA PALIT** argues, has pushed both Asian juggernauts to fight for space and influence in the country. Bhutan is struggling to manage relations with both powers as India and China try to engage the landlocked kingdom.*



A modern-looking taxi in Thimphu. A metaphor, perhaps, for the unexpected inroads a foreign power like China might make into a still highly traditional and remote nation? *Photo by Ugyen Tenzin on Unsplash.*

The past few months have witnessed a flurry of high-level visits from India to the Kingdom of Bhutan, a tiny landlocked country north of India. The Indian foreign minister's call in April 2022, followed by the army chief's visit to Bhutan in July, indicate the Himalayan country's growing prominence in India's foreign policy and security paradigm. Apart from South Asia, Bhutan's critical location in the Indo-Pacific — a new

frontier in the China-US competition for heightened power and influence, and a region where India, too, has emerged a key player — has made engagement equally imperative for China.

Given its geo-strategic significance, both India and China are committed to building strong relationships with Bhutan, although the country has been fraught with challenges as it resists and engages with both neighbours, which are not only adversaries but strong powers to reckon with in the region.

Bhutan at Crossroads

India has been particularly wary of China since the India-China stand-off in 2017, when New Delhi detected Beijing building a road in the Doklam plateau — critically [located at the tri-junction between India, Bhutan, and China](#), which is a disputed territory between China and Bhutan as well. Surrounded by Tibet's Chumbi Valley, Bhutan's Ha Valley, and India's Sikkim state, Doklam is close to the Siliguri Corridor — known alternately as the "[chicken's neck](#)" — which connects India's north-eastern states to the rest of the country and is therefore crucial to New Delhi from a security perspective. Other than highlighting China's territorial ambitions, a Chinese-built road network not only further entrenches China in the region, but in addition allows it to access a key ridge overlooking the Siliguri Corridor, making India even more vulnerable.

From a great power perspective — considering Bhutan's crucial location — the Chinese authorities have been engaging with the kingdom, which has included [negotiating the border dispute](#). The Chinese media not only extols the [resurgence of Buddhism](#) in China as benefitting Bhutan but also highlights China as being "by far the [largest contributor to Bhutan's tourism](#) industry" vis-à-vis India, the citizens of which do not require visas to enter Bhutan. Calling India a hegemon which unduly interferes and has attempted to exert "[influence on every detail of the China-Bhutan border negotiations](#)" — the Chinese dailies go on to accuse India of [bullying](#) its small neighbour. By highlighting India's not-so-soft virtues in the neighbourhood, China aims to prepare the ground for cementing its presence in the region. This Chinese strategy is a deliberate ploy to win over Bhutan, which had distanced itself from its northern neighbour after China annexed Tibet in 1951. The subsequent uprising in Tibet forced Bhutan to close its northern border with China in 1960.

China, Hamstrung by Bhutan's Reluctance to Host P5 Embassies

Unlike India, which has had formal diplomatic relations with Bhutan since 1968, China, being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, has no formal ties with Bhutan. Bhutan is [reluctant to allow any of the P5 states](#) or Germany to set up an embassy in Thimphu, which could open doors for the major powers to entrench themselves in the region. However, Bhutan's continual rebuff of China's efforts to establish formal ties is viewed by the Chinese authorities as a policy posture reflecting India's game plan to keep China at bay. According to China, India's "[long-term comprehensive control and influence](#)" on Bhutan, aside from [controlling Bhutanese expression and politics](#), not only prevents Bhutan from forging closer ties with China but also restricts its external engagement with the rest of the world.

Recognising India as the [biggest and strongest power in South Asia](#), Beijing is eager to rewrite the rules of engagement and partnerships with countries it considers crucial for its rise, and onto which it can project its virtues. With Bhutan receiving relatively less attention in regional and global relations, China perhaps perceives that its engagement with Bhutan will raise fewer eyebrows, particularly averting those of the United States, while establishing itself firmly in South Asia. Strong ties with Bhutan would not only enable China to test waters in South Asia but permit it to better handle India militarily, thus entrenching itself as a strong military force in Asia while counterbalancing the United States — deemed an extra-regional power by China in its sphere of influence.

Beijing Hones Virtues and Military Strength

Projecting its military superiority beyond its borders, Beijing has not hesitated to develop an alternative benign narrative of its resurgence, emphasising its commitment to “good neighbourliness” and increasing security through greater diplomatic and economic interactions. This has become more conspicuous after Covid-19 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, as China deals with an external environment of mounting hostility. The perpetuation of anti-China narratives portraying it as a revisionist power and an aggressor, and Washington’s renewed interest in Asia, have disconcerted Beijing. In the meantime, India’s significant role in the US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad, viewed as “[Asian NATO](#)”, has equally flustered China.

Determined to project itself as a responsible power and keen to step up efforts to [build a community envisioning a shared future for mankind](#), the Chinese leadership has deepened its already close engagement with neighbours, including Bhutan. Launching the “pandemic diplomacy” and focusing on exporting medical supplies, China appears to be revisiting its intent to cultivate a positive image in the region. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, China has [provided anti-pandemic materials](#) and vaccine assistance to help Bhutan effectively prevent and control the pandemic, while emphasising its willingness to promote cooperation in human resource development. What is fascinating is the coexistence of China’s virtuousness with its hard power in the larger Asian region — the latter abundantly highlighted in its [response](#) to Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August 2022.

China Challenges India and America in Asia

In an attempt to portray the United States as a faltering, declining, and unstable power, thereby undermining international confidence in Washington as a provider of regional and global stability, China is increasingly projecting its military muscle, which also targets India, the [net provider of security](#) in the Indian Ocean region. China’s new strategic framework launched early in 2022, the Global Security Initiative (GSI), is another attempt at [dictating the rules of engagement](#). Putatively placing China in a domineering position in the region, given its size and power, the GSI targets both the United States and India. By trying to unilaterally change the status quo, it challenges India regionally while trying to push back against the United States, keeping in mind China’s own larger and long-term strategic objectives.

The GSI has a more immediate Chinese security angle, too. Opposed to “[small cliques](#)” like the Quad and AUKUS (the trilateral security pact between Australia, the

United Kingdom, and the United States), which it perceives as Western attempts to thwart its rise as a major global power, Beijing continues to explore and forge new partnerships under the larger framework of the GSI. Engaging Thimphu augurs well for Beijing's designs and long-term ambitions.

Again, this results in concerns for India. A set of new satellite images indicates the construction of a [Chinese village](#), presently fully inhabited, east of Doklam on the Bhutanese side. This is of even greater worry, taking into account the rise of a "[new generation of Bhutanese](#) with nationalist leanings ... for whom the annexation of Tibet by China is no longer a seminal political memory". Bhutan's strategic engagement raises yet another pertinent [question](#): Would Bhutan be willing to risk a conflict with China because of its special relationship with India, its primary ally and benefactor?

[India's growing religious intolerance](#) — reported by the Pew survey conducted between 2019 and 2020 — is also giving rise to concerns in Bhutan. Findings show that Indians value both religious tolerance and coexistence, on the one hand, and religious exclusivity and segregation, on the other, leaving Bhutan uncomfortable. Its Constitution recognises Buddhism as the state's "spiritual heritage" and also provides religious freedom for its citizens. With India's religious space being constricted and shrinking, it could distance both countries from each other and place China in an advantageous position in South Asia.

Parama Sinha PALIT is Adjunct Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. She may be contacted at psinhapalit@gmail.com.