

# IS THE INDIA-BHUTAN RELATIONSHIP INTACT?

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Bhutan

To enjoy additional benefits

CONNECT WITH US

April 07, 2023 12:15 am | Updated 12:39 am IST

COMMENTS

SHARE

READ LATER

Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck with Prime Minister Narendra Modi during their meeting in New Delhi. | Photo Credit: AFP

During Bhutan King [Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck's visit to New Delhi](#) this month, India announced a number of measures to support its neighbour's development plans. However, the unspoken part of the visit was [Bhutan's boundary talks with China](#). Before the King's visit to India, Bhutanese Prime Minister [Lotay Tshering had said](#) in an interview that Bhutan and China have made considerable progress on demarcating border lines. In a discussion moderated by **Sahasini Haidar, Pavan K. Varma** and **Phunchok Stobdan** take stock of the India-Bhutan relationship. Edited excerpts:

What has made the India-Bhutan relationship “exemplary” and unique?

**Pavan K. Varma:** Bhutan is not just a neighbour, but a very important and strategic one. Its border with India is over 600 km long, and it plays the role of a buffer between China and India. The relationship has been strengthened from the time of our independence. What is important is that we didn't allow the ‘Big Brother’ syndrome to apply to Bhutan — from 1958 when Jawaharlal Nehru trekked across the Himalayas to Bhutan and assured it of independence and sovereignty to the present time where the interests of Bhutan are linked to the interests of India, and vice versa, by an institutional and economic framework. India is Bhutan's biggest development partner. India is the largest source of imports for Bhutan. We have managed to create this bond not only through rhetoric, but by harnessing hydroelectricity for which the rivers in Bhutan, which come down from the Himalayas to India, have been used. There are joint agreements whereby India buys power generated in Bhutan. Hydroelectricity has become one of the biggest revenue earners of Bhutan, which makes Bhutan the country with the highest per capita income in South Asia today.

Editorial | [Substance and subtext: On India-Bhutan ties](#)

**Phunchok Stobdan:** I will go a little bit beyond the transactional, developmental orientation of the relationship that we have built. I think its very basis is not India, but China, and a desire since the 17th century to identify Bhutan as distinct from Tibet. In the 17th century, when the Shabdrung Rinpoche broke away from Tibet, it is to India and not Tibet that Bhutan looked. In a sense, independent India continued a relationship that the British had built. Bhutan is a Buddhist theocracy, a monarchy, and a modern state. So, it is special for us from a historical context to a theological context, from a strategic context to an economic one.

What was the context of the visit by the Bhutan King to Delhi this week, given speculation around a possible breakthrough on boundary talks with China that Mr. Tshering had alluded to in an interview?

**Pavan K. Varma:** I do not think that is the context of the visit. Traditionally, a significant feature of this relationship has been the regularity of high-level visits. Even when the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) government came to power, the first country which Prime Minister (Narendra Modi) visited was Bhutan. The visit of the King of Bhutan was planned far in advance.

Interview | [Bhutan-China ties won't harm India's interests: Bhutan Foreign Minister](#)

Even so, would a breakthrough with China be a concern for India?

**Pavan K. Varma:** It's a concern that underpins the manner in which the relationship with Bhutan has been structured. China has been seeking a toehold in Bhutan for decades. Where Bhutan decides its boundary with China (to the west) is of exceptional relevance to India because that is a trijunction of the three countries. Bhutan is fully conscious of India's strategic needs. As per their 2007 Treaty of Friendship, India and Bhutan consult at a high level in order to be able to maximise or reinforce their mutual strategic interests. Bhutan has been having talks with China on the boundary question for years, and there has been no decision yet. Similarly, India and China have frequently had boundary talks without any agreement being reached. So, Mr. Tshering was not saying anything new when he said that three countries are involved there. This is not only a bilateral matter between Bhutan and China; India's interests are also involved.

**Phunchok Stobdan:** I don't believe that the Government of India was unaware about what was discussed between China and Bhutan. But the Foreign Secretary made one thing clear in his statement: India will not talk about Bhutan-China negotiations publicly; however, when it comes to India's national security, there will be no compromise. The language was tough, and there seems to be a change in tone from our side. I think India is not concerned about a breakthrough on [talks on] territory to Bhutan's north with China, but when it comes to the west, to the area near India, the Foreign Secretary's statement made it clear that we are concerned about it.

After the Doklam standoff between India and China in 2017, has there been a change in Bhutan's willingness to discuss the boundary?

**Pavan K. Varma:** I don't believe so. China has been offering major concessions on the north in order to obtain a much smaller territory, which is in Doklam, for years. Bhutan has resisted this offer consistently because it understands India's security concerns and will not decide its border with China without taking into account India's interests. Of course, Bhutan is aware that China is a menacing power, that China's build-up in that disputed area is considerable, and there is also some incremental encroachment beyond the boundary dispute into Bhutanese territory. The Bhutanese monitor this very carefully and, to the best of my knowledge, keep the Indian government informed. India is absolutely within its rights to stress that this is a matter of strategic importance to us, because the Doklam plateau overlooks the Chumbi Valley, which overlooks the chicken's neck (Siliguri corridor). India says this not because Bhutan is threatening its cooperation with India on this front, but to send a message to China that we will draw a line here in conformity with our national interest.

Also read | [Former Bhutan king warned India about China: R&AW ex-chief A.S. Dulat](#)

**Phunchok Stobdan:** I think India has been briefed by Bhutanese diplomats at every stage about the developments on the border talks. What I heard is that in the last couple of years, Bhutan and China have adopted a process of using a modern methodology to draw the

boundary lines on the ground, not peak to peak. And there may be some adjustment of territory as a result of that. However, we must pay more attention to the mood inside Bhutan changing in a way that may not be in our favour. Bhutanese youth are travelling outside to study. Now you have new perceptions in Bhutan, where every action of India may not be seen in a positive manner. Yes, I think Doklam has played some role in that, given the feelings of nationalism that were expressed by India, and the worries inside Bhutan that they [Bhutan] were being squeezed in the rivalry between India and China. I think we need more diplomacy, more diplomats who understand Bhutanese sentiments in this regard.

What is the way forward in terms of building trust between the two countries?

**Pavan K. Varma:** There is now a new generation in Bhutan. And I believe that the umbilical cord of educational connectivity between India and Bhutan is slightly frayed. But I don't believe this should add insecurity to a relationship. Even the youth know that Bhutan and India's development partnership is the key to Bhutan's continued prosperity.

Also read | [China builds ropeway, roads near tri-junction](#)

**Phunchok Stobdan:** It is true that people in Bhutan, especially above the age of 35, are conscious about the importance of the India relationship. But younger Bhutanese need to be reached out to. These days much of the negative sentiments, wrong information about India, are on social media in Bhutan. Some in Bhutan feel that Indians are using security issues as an excuse to keep Bhutan under India's control. These kinds of things were not discussed, say, five years ago. Let's remember that the Bhutan-India relationship has survived mainly because it was built on mutual trust, which means Bhutan has equally driven the relationship. India has to keep up this relationship not just economically, or through a transactional relationship, but by reaching out to the new generation.

Would you say, then, that the India-Bhutan relationship is intact?

**Phunchok Stobdan:** Yes. Our ties are built on spiritual underpinnings, and those are not going to go away. Besides, the imperatives of geography, economy, connectivity all strengthen that. The challenges are there, of course. My own sense is that China is employing all kinds of tools, instruments, methodology to attract the Bhutanese — through trade, their modern cities, scholarships. That's the fear, and we have to meet the challenge.

**Pavan K. Varma:** I think the relationship is not only intact, but will strengthen in the years to come. The India-Bhutan relationship has crystallised over the decades into such a mammoth edifice of mutually beneficial interaction that it is difficult to dismantle. The key to strengthening it for the future is for India not to show any insecurity about this relationship, or in any way attempt to stifle differing voices, whether on social media or otherwise, but to pursue this relationship with trust and complete faith.

***Pavan K. Varma is a writer, former diplomat and MP. He served as India's Ambassador to Bhutan from 2009 to 2012; Phunchok Stobdan, an academic and a former diplomat, is the author of The Great Game in the Buddhist Himalayas***

COMMENTS

SHARE

[Bhutan](#) / [India](#) / [diplomacy](#) / [China](#)

BACK TO TOP

Comments have to be in English, and in full sentences. They cannot be abusive or personal. Please abide by our [community guidelines](#) for posting your comments.

We have migrated to a new commenting platform. If you are already a registered user of The Hindu and logged in, you may continue to engage with our articles. If you do not have an account please register and login to post comments. Users can access their older comments by logging into their accounts on Vuukle.

**END**

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

CrackIAS.com