

Bhutan's Border Security Challenges with China

Sanshrima Basumatary

Research Scholar
Sikkim University

ABSTRACT:

Bhutan being a buffer state between its two giant neighbours, India and the People's Republic of China, has been facing security challenges since the beginning. In comparison to China, the relations between India and Bhutan have been a friendly one, since 1947, after the former got independence from British rule. Although Bhutan did not share boundaries with China in the beginning, it came into direct contact with the People's Republic of China, when the latter took over Tibet in the 1950's. China had been aiming towards Bhutan since the beginning, even before it occupied Tibet. The occupation of Tibet by China made it more relevant for the latter to have an easy claim on Bhutan as it is now sharing its boundary directly with Bhutan. The frequent intrusion by the Chinese Liberation Army into Bhutanese border areas has brought insecurities for Bhutan. This paper discusses how Bhutan being a small state is facing problems towards its borders with China due to its geographical features.

KEYWORDS: Bhutan, China, India, boundary dispute.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Bhutan is a landlocked country located in South Asia. It is situated in the Eastern Himalayas, bordered by the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China in the north, the Chumbi Valley¹ and the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal in the west, and the Indian states of Assam, West Bengal and Arunachal Pradesh in the south and east. Bhutan is a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy, and a buffer state, landlocked between two giant neighbours, India and China. Bhutan is different from several other buffer states due to its size and strength (Mehdi 1988: 72). Bhutan shares borders only with India and China, due to which the geostrategic situation of Bhutan is fragile and its options are limited (Sharma 1994: 30). Bhutan has good relations with its southern neighbour India, compared to its other northern neighbour, China. Bhutan is also of economic value to India as it provides a market for Indian commodities and a destination for Indian investment. India also sees Bhutan as a rich source of hydropower (Ramachandran, et.al 2018). The security challenges which Bhutan has are mainly with China due to its border issues. Due to which Bhutan is not in a position to decide its foreign relations with China directly on matters of its border securities.

II. METHODS

The method used in this study is descriptive, and secondary sources are being used.

Historical Perspective

The British Government during its colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent, made the smaller kingdoms of the Himalayas as its protectorates from the Persian Gulf to South-east Asia against other European powers. In return, the British Government provided them with financial assistance and military security. Among these small protectorate kingdoms, Bhutan was one of them (Mohan 2012). Bhutan had been in isolation as it didn't want to get involved in the turmoil prevalent in earlier times in Tibet and India. Also the rulers of Bhutan wanted to isolate their subjects from outside influences. But the Bhutanese were not successful in remaining in total isolation and had to agree on stationing a representative in Lhasa. In the late 19th Century, the Bhutanese came into contact with the British and after a period of conflict, got involved in protecting Britain's interests in India. In return, their sovereignty was supported by the British and they could go back into isolationism without

¹ Chumbi Valley is a valley in the Himalayas that projects southwards from the Tibetan plateau, intervening between Sikkim and Bhutan. It is intersecting with the administrative unit Yadong County in the Tibet region of China.

external interference which led to internal stability through the emergence of the hereditary monarchy (Sharma 1994: 36).

After signing the Treaty of Sinchula in 1865² Bhutan came under the British sphere of influence. The British were interested in keeping a dominating influence on Tibet. The Younghusband expedition to Lhasa in 1903-1904, headed by Colonel Francis Younghusband was in support of the strategic interest of British India in keeping Bhutan as a buffer. The success of the British strategy became successful mostly due to Penlop of Tongsa who managed to unify Bhutan under one authority. While in return, the Penlop of Tongsa was made the Druk Gyalpo (King) of Bhutan (Mehta 1958: 85). On 17th December, 1907, Ugyen Wangchuck became the first hereditary monarch (Maharaja) of the Kingdom of Bhutan. Under the agreement based on the Treaty of Punakha on 8th January, 1910, the government of Bhutan signed an agreement with the British Government, which permitted Bhutan's relations to be controlled by the British government in exchange for a British guarantee of Bhutan's independence. The British government also agreed to provide 100,000 rupees in economic assistance to the government of Bhutan³

Boundary Disputes after the emergence of People's Republic of China

The Convention of 1890⁴ in which the British Indian Government and the Qing dynasty of China signed an agreement, is also the base of the boundary dispute between People's Republic of China and Bhutan (Panda 2017). According to the 1890 agreement, the boundary of Sikkim and Tibet was decided as the crest of the mountain range separating the waters flowing into the Sikkim Teesta and its tributary stream from the waters flowing into the Tibetan Mochu and northwards into other Rivers of Tibet. The line commences at Mount Gipmochi on the Bhutan frontier, and follows the above-mentioned water-parting to the point where it meets the territory of Nepal (Menon & Kanisetti 2018).

Prior to the emergence of the People's Republic of China, and the integration of Tibet into it in the 1950s, there was no direct contact between China and Bhutan as the latter never sent tributary missions to the former. It was during the Manchu dynasty, the Chinese made claims on Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan after its invasion of Tibet in 1910-1912. (Jha 2013: 2). In 1910, the Treaty of Punakha⁵ was signed with the British Indian Government which formally secured Bhutanese sovereignty in exchange for their guidance in external affairs (Gallenkamp 2010: 1). While in 1911, for a brief period, during the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, the physical presence of the Chinese in Tibet came to a hold and Lhasa emerged as a semi-dependency of the British and had to accommodate itself to British hegemony throughout the Himalayan area (Rose 1974: 192).

There had been no formal diplomatic relations between Bhutan and China, but they maintained contacts through periodic visits by officials. Bhutan had been following the isolationist policy until it realised the dangers when the People's Republic of China came into power in 1949 (Karan 1963: 209). Since the past years, China had always considered the three Himalayan nations Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan as its parts which had been lost to British imperialism. After the People's Republic of China came to power, they started to build roads along the Bhutanese borders (Economic and Political Weekly 1971: 13). As the People's Republic of China occupied Tibet in the 1950s, Bhutan came under direct threat from the Chinese. This forced the Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck to accept the friendship which India had offered to Bhutan in order to defend its Northern frontiers (Sharma 1994: 29).

China in 1954 first published a map which claimed some of the Bhutanese territories and again in 1958 along with another map, claimed larger areas of Bhutan. In 1959, the Chinese occupied eight Bhutanese enclaves; Khangri, Tarchen, Tsekhon, Diraphu, Dzong Tuphu, Jangche, Chakip and Kocha. The Bhutanese Assembly pointed out to the Indian Government about the latest maps in which China had shown territories in north and east Bhutan as part of Tibet. The Government of India in response in its notes of 19th and 20th August, 1959, requested the Chinese Government to restore the rightful authority of the Bhutanese Government over the

² Treaty of Sinchula – 1865, on the 11th of November, 1865,

<https://bangaloregorkha.wordpress.com/documents/treaty-sinchula/>.

³<https://uca.edu/politicalscience/dadm-project/asiapacific-region/60-bhutan-1907-present/>.

⁴ Convention between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet (1890) [382], <http://www.tibetjustice.org/materials/treaties/treaties9.html>.

⁵ Treaty between Great Britain and Bhutan, signed at Punaka, Bhutha, on the 8th January 1910, ratified at Calcutta on the 24th March 1910, www.archieve.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/1910TreatybetweenGreatBritainandBhutan.pdf.

eight enclaves and also protested against the publication and circulation of erroneous maps (Economic and Political Weekly 1971: 13).

The Chumbi Valley which is like an arrow is a part of southern Tibet, separating Bhutan from the Indian state of Sikkim. Since it is a tri-junction for China, India and Bhutan, the valley is of strategic importance in the whole of Eastern Himalayas. The Chumbi Valley is very near to the Siliguri corridor⁶ and if the Chinese push down towards the Chumbi valley and control the Siliguri corridor, then the whole of North-eastern states of India will be cut-off from its mainland. Since the Chumbi valley is extremely narrow with only 30 miles wide, it becomes difficult for military activities. So, the Chinese Government has been trying to expand the Chumbi valley by incorporating the neighbouring Doklam plateau of Bhutan into it. (Mukherjee 2014).

Due to its security reasons, Bhutan receives India's assistance in training and equipping the Royal Bhutan Army. Since the Royal Bhutan Army is not strong enough to handle the People's Liberation Army, the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT) trains the army personnel and the Bhutanese army cadets are sent to the National Defence Academy (NDA) in Pune, and the Indian Military Academy (IMA) in Dehradun, India. Also the headquarters of the IMTRAT is located in the Haa District of Bhutan, which is adjacent to Tibet's Chumbi valley. The project DANTAK in Bhutan is also another important construction of extensive roads by India's Border Roads Organization (Bandyopadhyay 2009: 7).

After India got defeated in the 1962 war, Bhutan felt more insecure regarding its position and isolation due to which moves were made towards normalising its relationship with China while friendship with India continued (Menon & Kanisetti 2018). In 2007, India and Bhutan signed the Friendship Treaty which was almost similar to the 1949 Treaty except for the clause where it said, 'Bhutan will be guided by India in its external relations', was removed and replaced by 'cooperating closely on issues relating to national interest, including neither country allowing use of territory harmful to national security and interests of the other'⁷.

The intrusion by Chinese soldiers and the Tibetan herders in the disputed territories of Bhutan created a concern for the Bhutanese Government. The Bhutanese Government had claimed that those territories were historically part of Bhutan and that they had never paid taxes to the Tibetan Government for those territories in the past. But the Chinese troops continue to intrude into these territories (Sarkar 2012: 351). When the Tibetan graziers intruded from the Chumbi Valley into the Sombre Dzong region of western Bhutan in September 1979, Bhutan asked the Indian Government to determine its frontiers with China. India sent a protest note to Beijing on this issue to which China did not reply, and the Chinese embassy in New Delhi dismissed the complaint as a fabricated story (Choudhury 1981: 480).

Direct border talks were held in 1984 between Bhutan and China and a Bhutanese delegation visited China and held talks at Beijing on the question of the settlement of their boundary dispute. Prior to that, the border talks between China and Bhutan used to be conducted through India. Another round of talks was held in Bhutan in 1985 (Kohli 1986: 151). The People's Liberation Army of China had intruded into Bhutanese territory in 1959, 1966, 1967 and 1970. China began administering over the Chumbi valley again in 1988. This led to a series of discussions between Bhutan and China without formal diplomatic relations. Since 1984 over 24 boundary discussions have been held and accords were signed in 1988 and 1998 to maintain the status quo in the disputed area and also agreed to prohibit the use of force and to use only peaceful means for negotiations (Beena 2019: 61).

The Donglang region which is also known as the Dokhlam region is another area of dispute between China and Bhutan. China had been offering a package deal to Bhutan since the 1990s, by making bigger territorial concessions to Bhutan in return for the smaller Doklam area. But Bhutan has been declining the offer repeatedly. In 1996, China and Bhutan held border talks in Beijing in which the former offered to exchange 495 sq km area of Pasamlung and Jakarlung valleys in Bhutan's north for Sinchulumpa, Dramana and Shakhtoe with total area of 269 sq km, in the western Bhutan. (Mahajan 2018). In 2012, then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and his Bhutanese counterpart Jigmi Y Thinley met on the sidelines of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development at Rio de Janeiro and had discussions on the matter of their boundary disputes. They discussed the willingness to establish diplomatic relations between China and Bhutan and to speed up efforts in order to resolve their border dispute along with bilateral ties (The Indian Express 2016).

On 10th of August 2012, both China and Bhutan met for the 20th round of border talks in which the main content was to build bridges of friendship and cooperation. According to the Bhutanese News Service, since May 2013, there was a presence of three PLA camps inside Bhutanese territory. The 21st round of the boundary talks were held between the government of Bhutan and People's Republic of China in Bhutan's

⁶ Siliguri Corridor is also known as the Chicken's Neck due to its long and narrow shape, which is India's only gateway to its north eastern part, of about 22 kilometres of narrow land located in the Indian state of West Bengal. It connects India's north-eastern states to the rest of India, Nepal and Bangladesh lies on either side of the corridor.

⁷ India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty, www.mea.gov.in/Images/pdf/india-bhutan-treaty-07.pdf

capital Thimphu on 22nd of August 2013. Bhutan and China reaffirmed their commitment to resolve the boundary issue at the earliest through mutual consultation, understanding and accommodation (Bisht 2014: 5). China and Bhutan had 24 rounds of talks over their boundary disputes as the former hopes to work with Bhutan for early establishment of diplomatic relations and solution to boundary issues (The Indian Express 2016).

Dokhlam Standoff 2017

The Dokhlam region is located in the western part of Bhutan, which is close to the Sikkim-China-Bhutan tri-junction. China claims around 89 square kilometers of the region as the region is of strategic importance for China as it can access through the Silliguri Corridor if the Dokhlam region comes under their control. The incident on 16th of June in which the Chinese troops entered the Doklam region in order to build roads, created turmoil between the Chinese troops and the Royal Bhutanese Army. The Royal Bhutanese Army called in the Indian armed forces for assistance to push back the Chinese as it was against the agreements of 1988 and 1998 which was signed by upon both China and Bhutan to maintain peace and tranquillity until a final settlement is reached on the boundary (Balachandran & Pullanoor 2017). According to Bhutan, the construction of road in the disputed Dokhlam region might be a part of its One Belt One Road project and that, China has also violated the border accords of 1988 and 1998 by attempting to build a road in the disputed Doklam (Mohammed Badrul Beena 2019: 61).

The Indian Army stepped in on 18th of June 2017 in response to the call of the Royal Bhutanese Army. This led to a stand-off in the region. China was against the interference of India in the matters of Bhutan and demanded Indian troops to be withdrawn from the region. The Ministry of External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj rejected China's demand to withdraw its troops, as both sides need to pull their troops out from the region first in order for a dialogue to be held for resolving the standoff (Telangana Today 2017). According to Yao Yunzhu, a retired Major General, Chinese People's Liberation Army, on June 16th, 2017, the Indian troops crossed the established border and forcefully stopped the infrastructure construction on the Chinese side, which led to the standoff. It has been mentioned that the standoff location is at least 2 kilometres away from the tri-junction, a geographic point where the three countries' borders intersect. China would consider the Indian intrusion as an attempt to expand disputes into uncontested areas, which could only make the whole border issue more difficult to solve (Yunzhu 2017).

In the post Dokhlam Stand-off, the Indian ministry of External Affairs clarified on 27th October 2017 that there has been no new development in Doklam since the standoff. The Doklam dispute in a third country was a larger competition for regional and global influence and the standoff gave positive results in the end as China decided to refrain from executing its road building project (D Souza & Mantraya 2017). When the Chinese ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui, visited Bhutan for the first time after the standoff, an offer was made to the Bhutanese Government, in which Beijing would give up its claim on about 495 square kilometre of areas at Bayul Pasanglung in northern Bhutan, if Thimphu agrees to allow China to establish its embassy in the capital of the kingdom. Also, Beijing is not ready to give up its claim on about 269 square kilometre areas in Doklam, Charithang, Sinchulimpa and Dramana in western Bhutan (Bhaumik 2018).

China has a new territorial claim on Bhutan after the Dokhlam standoff, which is the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary, resting at the eastern end of Bhutan. The Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary is 750 square kilometers which spreads out across a densely forested area of the Himalayan Mountains rich in flora and fauna. China considers the Sanctuary to be a disputed territory (Chang 2020). This claim regarding the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary was made by China in June 2020, when Bhutan made a request to develop the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in the eastern sector's Trashigang district during a virtual meeting of the US-based Global Environment Facility (GEF). According to the Chinese foreign ministry, the China-Bhutan boundary had never been delimited and that there had been disputes over the eastern, central and western sections for a long time (Patranobis 2020). China's new claimed area had never been a part of negotiations during the 24 rounds of Beijing-Thimphu boundary talks held from 1984 to 2016. But China raised objections to a grant request made by Bhutan for the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary on grounds that it was a disputed territory. The Bhutanese representative said that the Sanctuary is an integral and sovereign territory of Bhutan and the boundary discussions between Bhutan and China has never featured as a disputed area (Nair 2020).

Another new development of boundary dispute between China and Bhutan has been the village of Pangda, which the Indian media as well as Australian and US-based think tanks claimed that the Chinese had constructed on the west bank of the Torsa River, is 2.5km (1.5 miles) inside the Bhutanese border. This issue was created through satellite images which showed China developing a village near Doklam. In the meantime, the Bhutanese ambassador to India Vetsop Namgyel denied the existence of the Chinese village inside Bhutan (Zhen and Purohit: 2020). In 1996, when the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck while addressing the Bhutanese National Assembly, reported about the 10th round of China-Bhutan talks, in which he mentioned that, while the Northern areas had more or less been resolved, there were only three areas in the western sector which are still under negotiation. These were the 89 square kilometres in Doklam, 42 square kilometres in

Sinchulumpa, and 138 square kilometres in Shakhatoe, a total of 269 square kilometres (Haidar 2020). The boundary dispute has been an age-old conflict between Bhutan and Tibet in the beginning and directly with the People's Republic of China after the takeover of the former by the latter. The future prospects of the boundary disputes might be up to its Foreign Policy decisions taken by both the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Bhutan.

III. CONCLUSION

Bhutan had always been insecure about its borders with Tibet before its occupation by the People's Republic of China and afterwards directly with China itself. Due to the border insecurities, Bhutan had shifted its foreign policy towards its southern neighbour India. China is interested in Bhutan's territories due to its geostrategic significance. Having access to those territories would help China get full access towards the south by cutting through the Chicken Neck Corridor of India. Due to which India is very much serious about stopping China from intruding into the Bhutanese territories for its own safety reasons. Bhutan has been used as a buffer since the British Colonial times and it is being continued till the recent time by its two giant neighbours China and India which are competing against each other in the region. Bhutan's security depends on how it executes its foreign policies towards China and India. Also, as per the Friendship Agreement signed between India and Bhutan, the latter is always seeking out for the former's help in terms of security when it comes to the threat from its northern borders. India in turn, has to help out its smaller neighbours in the region, when it comes to the question of threat from its Asian competitor China. Bhutan's boundary dispute has always led to the involvement of its two giant neighbours, which has made Bhutan insecure about its position from the threat caused by its two neighbouring countries, vis-a-vis China and India.

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