
Asia's Other Dragon: Bhutan's Role in Eastern Himalayan Security Affairs

Introduction

In 2020, the clashes between Chinese and Indian security forces in the Galwan Valley and subsequent inter-State tensions between China and India came to dominate international headlines as Beijing and New Delhi accused one another of a change of the territorial status quo in the Western Himalayas. The series of incidents culminated in an increased military build-up on both sides of the border and India imposing tariffs on Chinese goods and services, with the bilateral ties now being at their lowest point since the 1962 Indo-Sino war (Thakker, 2020). The continued border disputes between two nuclear powers, India's opposition to China's close ties with Pakistan and the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through parts of the contested Jammu & Kashmir region, in combination with a growing maritime rivalry in the Indian Ocean, renders the Indo-Sino border regions in the Eastern and Western Himalayas a hotbed for potential conflict. The continued existence of territorial disputes concurrently illustrates the often contested and undemarcated nature of national borders in South and Southeast Asia, revealing how contemporary strife is frequently rooted in Asia's colonial pasts and partially differing interpretations of historical treaties as well as national sovereignty and territoriality (Mishra, 2016).

A strategically important yet often underappreciated role in the contemporary development of Indo-Sino relations and the more general spatial and geopolitical dynamics in the region rests with the Kingdom of Bhutan. Home to almost 770,000 people as of 2019 (World Bank data), Bhutan is landlocked in the Eastern Himalayas between China and India and remains one of the few countries in Asia to never have undergone colonization. *Inter alia* due to its geographical location in the Himalayas, Bhutan, also known as Druk Yul ('Dragon Kingdom') in the local Dzongkha language, has historically maintained a policy of self-isolation that has limited the influx as well as the outflow of goods, ideas and people. Vajrayana Buddhism continues to serve an important function in Bhutan's partly self-chosen, partly geographically imposed isolation, with the regnant Wangchuck dynasty, which has reigned Bhutan since 1907, placing much emphasis on preserving Bhutan's historically distinct culture and autonomy.

Despite this insulating ambition, Bhutan has not remained excluded from the larger geopolitical developments in the Himalayan region. Owing to its location, economic developments within Bhutan continue to be heavily connected to its bilateral relations with India in particular. Bhutan's national security and foreign policy has been tied to that of India following the partition of British India in 1947, with Bhutan ceding control over its foreign policy to India via the 1949 Friendship Treaty. The Friendship Treaty was revised in 2007 and, in line with Bhutan's 2008 transition from a total monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, granted Bhutan enhanced sovereignty in its foreign affairs. India nevertheless continues to

exercise significant influence over the foreign policy of the government in Bhutan's capital of Thimphu, and India's interests in Bhutan connect to both cultural-historical ties, centered around the legacy of Buddhism on the Indian subcontinent, as well as Bhutan's existence as a physical buffer space between China and India. China has historically claimed parts of Bhutan's territory, contributing to close Bhutanese-Indo relations that share a general opposition to China's territorial designs for the Eastern Himalayas.

Although Bhutan's role in regional security affairs has received increased coverage in recent years, especially following the 2017 confrontation between Chinese and Indian troops on Bhutan's Doklam Plateau, relatively little has been written about the country's interior trajectory in the literature on regional foreign policy dynamics. For apparent reasons, most coverage (see for instance Chang, 2020; Hadano, 2020) situates Bhutan's geopolitical existence in the context of the contemporary relations between China and India. Whilst Bhutan's foreign policy dynamics are undoubtedly decisively shaped by its geographical location and its geopolitical function, it is also important to account for domestic developments within Bhutan and dimensions of historical and contemporary political agency and how this agency shapes Bhutan's behavior vis-à-vis China and India. This article seeks to fill this gap by elaborating on both Bhutan's unique political culture and history as well as its role as a geopolitically pivotal space that takes a central stage in Himalayan inter-State relations. To contextualize Bhutan's role in questions of regional power, this article first elaborates on Bhutan's political development in the 20th and 21st century and Thimphu's relations to India and China respectively before discussing Bhutan's geopolitical significance for both parties. A main component of recent geopolitical discussions in the region has been the Doklam Plateau, which is located closely to India's Siliguri Corridor, commonly known as the '*Chicken's Neck*' connecting India proper to its Northeastern Region (NER). As tensions between New Delhi and Beijing rise in both the continental and maritime domain, Bhutan's role will remain an important one to monitor in the years and decades to come.

Bhutan: A Space in Transition

Owing to its limited connectivity, both an outcome of its geography as well as a political aim in itself, Bhutan is arguably South Asia's most understudied country despite being the site of a rich cultural heritage that is closely connected to that of Tibet. In popular coverage, Bhutan is perhaps best known for introducing the Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI) in the 1970s, which prioritizes spiritual contentment and personal happiness over economic development as indicators for a country's successful development (Schultz, 2017). Bhutan has also attained carbon neutrality, indicating that more common, industry-focused forms of economic growth and development have remained comparatively weak in the Kingdom's economic policy (Tutton & Scott, 2018). Besides this, Bhutan has managed to largely isolate itself from the outside world due to its geography: situated deep in the Himalayas, Bhutan borders China's Tibetan Autonomous Region but is concurrently separated from Tibet by the inhospitable Himalayan mountain range that stretches over the almost 500km long Bhutanese-Sino border, with some peaks of the border reaching heights of more than 7000 meters. Topologically, Bhutan's Southern regions, located in the Lesser Himalayas and

bordering the Indian states of Assam and Sikkim respectively, is flatter, a fact that has facilitated historically close ties in the realms of religion, practices and norms, most notably with Sikkim. At the same time, the shared Buddhist heritage in the Himalayas connects Bhutan to Tibet, making Bhutan geographically isolated but religiously and culturally connected to its political surroundings.

Although home to an ethnically diverse population, Buddhism remains the key component around which Bhutan's political culture and identity is organized, partially at the detriment of other religious communities. 75% of Bhutan's populace practices some form of Buddhism whilst the remainder of the population adheres to renditions of Hinduism, with small Christian and Muslim minorities also living in the country (US Department of State, 2019). Although religious freedom is theoretically given, the Bhutanese government has defined Buddhism as constituting the "*spiritual heritage*" of the country, *de-facto* making it the State religion (ibid). In the past, this exclusionary and narrow understanding of citizenship and identity has had detrimental humanitarian implications for religious minorities: the Buddhism-centered and ethnically and linguistically homogenizing '*One Nation, One People*' policy, announced in 1989, resulted in the expulsion of around 100,000 mainly Nepali-speaking Hindus of the Lhotshampa ethnic group, most of whom settled in Nepal and the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal (Hutt, 2005). The expulsion of the Lhotshampas, most of whom have not been able to return to Bhutan, has been described by some commentators as a process of ethnic cleansing (*Al Jazeera*, 2014), juxtaposing the popularized narrative that Buddhism is an inherently peaceful religion. Another exemplification of the intent to maintain the '*purity*' of Bhutan's distinct heritage is the country's detachment from modern communication technologies such as the internet and TV, both introduced as late as 1999. In the past, Buddhism has thus also been employed as a justification for authoritarian practices and styles of governance, highlighting how religion plays a defining role in both the governance structure of Bhutan as well as its political culture.

In a partial detachment from this historical *modus operandi*, Bhutan has undergone significant political reforms in the past twenty years, transitioning from a total monarchy to a constitutional monarchy and liberalizing foreign access to the country. Unlike popularized movements that evoked social change elsewhere, this transformative process was structured in a top-down manner and was initiated by the Bhutanese royal family. The process was completed in 2008 when King Jigme Singye Wangchuck validated the enactment of the Bhutanese constitution and the holding of the first national elections. 2008 also saw Bhutan's prince, Jigme Khesar Namgyel, 28 years old at the time, being crowned King and given the corresponding royal title Druk Gyalpo ('Dragon King'). Educated at the University of Oxford, Jigme Khesar continued the trend of political liberalization, advocating for a more open policy towards foreigners by seeking to stimulate tourism and foreign investment in the country (Trade Forum Editorial, 2011). The new King also sought to deepen Bhutan's involvement in regional political forums and bodies, most notably the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which Bhutan had helped to found in 1985, and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), joined by Bhutan in 2004. Bhutan's increased integration into regional organizations signifies the growing multilateralization of its foreign and trade policy, with improved ties to countries such as

Bangladesh, enhancing and diversifying Bhutan's access to the maritime markets and ports of the Bay of Bengal (Ray Chaudhury & Rai, 2020). Structurally speaking, Bhutan has appeared eager to mediate a middle way between greater material prosperity and maintaining the unique cultural structures that lay at the foundation of its (Buddhist) national identity.

Relations with India

Bhutan has enjoyed close ties with India due to cultural-historical, geographical and strategic factors. Albeit the country was never colonized, Bhutan was integrated into the British Raj as a princely state from 1910 onwards, a status that allowed the Bhutanese monarchy to retain significant autonomy over its internal affairs whilst the Raj "guided" Bhutan's foreign policy and provided political protection, most notably against a potential invasion by China's Qing dynasty, and, following the demise of the Qing in 1912, the Chinese Republic. Following the partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947, Bhutan entered into a similar arrangement with India, formalized via the 1949 Friendship Treaty between New Delhi and Thimphu. The Friendship Treaty stipulated that, "*The Government of India undertakes to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan. On its part, the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in its external relations*" (quoted in Kharat & Bhutia, 2019). Bhutan was to retain its internal autonomy, with India managing its foreign affairs. The 1949 signing of the treaty must hereby be contextualized with the victory of Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) against the nationalists in the Chinese civil war that same year. From a Bhutanese perspective, the CCP was perceived as a danger to its autonomy as well as its cultural identity as the CCP fundamentally opposed the nexus of feudalism, theocracy and monarchy that was regnant in Bhutan and partially also Tibet. Considering this, Bhutan's initial political alignment with India can be conceptualized as being the result of both historical traditions of political alignment, produced by the legacy of British colonialism, as well as a reaction to the changing political realities in the region given the rise of communism in China.

For Bhutan and India, the agreement was a strategic win-win situation: Bhutan gained a security insurance for its sovereignty and territoriality vis-à-vis China whilst India generated a buffer space between itself and a potentially hostile China. The lack of an autonomous foreign policy was, from the Bhutanese point of view, a small price to pay for this strategic gain. Theoretically, such a behavior in security affairs can be conceptualized as bandwagoning, referring to a tactic in which "*the lesser actors give up a substantial degree of autonomy for action internationally in exchange for protection by the powerful*" although the lack of autonomy may ultimately be at the expense of the national interest of the lesser (read: weaker) State (Ian, 2003). For a country as small as Bhutan, a balancing act towards not just one but two major regional powers was not a viable option, and the cultural ties to India as well as political considerations regarding the CCP and its potential intentions can be considered as decisive in explaining Bhutan's decision for India and against China. For India, strategic incentives were at play as well as the cooperation with Bhutan ensured the creation of a Himalayan buffer zone between India and China that would slow down a potential attack by China due to the geography of the Himalayas and the diplomatic costs associated with

attacking a sovereign country (Ramachandran et al., 2018). As it does now, the mountain range thus played a key role in shaping political and strategic considerations.

Bhutan relies on the permeability of the Indian border for access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean more generally. In recent years, though, Bhutan has sought to deepen its multilateral political integration, and has established its own diplomatic ties with some other countries. Although Bhutan's diplomatic independence has grown since then, the country does lean on India as a political and diplomatic mediator. Very few countries have embassies in Bhutan and Bhutan itself only has embassies and diplomatic missions in Thailand, Belgium (for dealings with the European Union), Bangladesh, Geneva (for dealings with the United Nations), Kuwait and India (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan 2). Bhutan joined the UN in 1971 but has thus far not established formal diplomatic ties with any of the permanent UN Security Council members, including China. It has recognized diplomatic relations with only 53 countries, including the EU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan 1). Most of Bhutan's diplomatic dealings continue to be conducted via the globally present networks of Indian diplomatic representations, signifying how the foreign representation of Bhutan (as well as its political conduct in international affairs) remains interlinked with that of India.

This special nature of the bilateral relationship has meant that relations and cooperative efforts between Bhutan and India over the past decades have remained largely positive. In the 1990s, separatists from the Indian state of Assam started to utilize Bhutan's sparsely populated Southern regions as a base for anti-Indian activities. Following diplomatic pressure from India, the Bhutanese military conducted a series of military operations against the separatist outfits in 2003 and 2004, ultimately expelling the insurgents from Bhutanese territory (Sharma & Sharma, 2016). In 2007, Bhutan and India announced that they would renegotiate some of the clauses of the 1949 Friendship Treaty, providing Bhutan with more autonomy in regional affairs as New Delhi would no longer "*guide*" Bhutan's foreign policy. Importantly, the agreement also stipulated that the two countries would not let their territory be utilized for activities that were a threat to the national security or national interests of the other party (Indian Ministry of External Affairs) - a formulation that maintained a vast legal space for cooperation in different realms. Economic ties have remained strong: India is Bhutan's most significant trading and investment partner, accounting for 72% of Bhutan's exports and 84% of Bhutan's imports (Bhonsale, 2020). In line with his '*neighborhood first*' policy, Bhutan was also the first country Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited in an official capacity following his election in 2014, symbolically consolidating the deep bilateral ties between both countries.

Despite following a predominantly positive trajectory, as with any bilateral relationship Bhutanese-Indo relations have not been totally bereft of complications. An increase in domestic inequality in Bhutan and a rising trade deficit with India are issues that will in due course need to be addressed. Bhutan's economic growth and its relatively high level of per capita income, in South Asian terms, have over the decades been driven by the production of hydroelectricity through plants funded by India, with India importing the bulk of the electricity produced to meet the spiraling requirements of its own expanding economy. Bhutan's huge

hydroelectricity potential would have remained unexploited had it not been for the huge market that India presented right at Bhutan's doorsteps. The remote geographical positioning of Bhutan, the inhospitable terrain over much of its northern territory, and the very sparse population across its northern border, meant that had it not been for an energy-thirsty India in Bhutan's south, an external market for any energy produced by Bhutan would have been literally non-existent. India too has benefitted from the abundant and cheap electricity that it has accessed from Bhutan for close to half a century now. The price at which India buys the electricity from Bhutan has been questioned by a section of the youth in Bhutan. Some Bhutanese youth would also like their own government to exercise more control over the country's security and foreign policy. Overall, however, India – Bhutan ties continue to remain positive.

Relations with China

Thimphu's relations with its other large neighbor, the People's Republic of China (PRC), have historically been significantly less cordial. As mentioned afore, the 1949 victory of the CCP in the Chinese civil war marked an existential shift in the threat-perception of the Bhutanese monarchy, incentivizing alignment with India. Shared cultural-religious ties, which operate as a decisive variable informing political decision-making in Bhutan, are, despite the heritage shared with Tibet, less pronounced between Bhutan and the Han-dominated China, especially following Tibet's integration into China. Neither culture nor strategic gains have thus incentivized alignment with China, at least until now.

The political importance of shared cultural heritage in Bhutan's political process is particularly discernible when Bhutan's stance on Chinese-Tibetan relations is considered. Unlike Bhutan, Tibet was integrated into the Chinese Empire of the Qing Dynasty over the course of the 17th and 18th century and remained tied to the decisions of the Dynasty until its demise in 1912, when the Xinhai revolution abolished China's dynastic system and declared the Republic of China. In the following decades of civil unrest, the Japanese invasion of China and the lack of a central government resulted in Tibet remaining largely autonomous until the 1950 invasion of Tibet by the CCP, the subsequent flight of the Dalai Lama to India and Tibet's integration into communist China as Tibet Autonomous Region. In the decades since, China has been routinely accused of seeking to amend Tibet's demographic structure by targeting the Buddhist heritage in the region, advocating the use of Mandarin instead of Tibetan dialects and incentivizing migration of Han Chinese to Tibet in what has sometimes been referred to as a "cultural genocide" (Fischer, 2008). The CCP's approach to Tibet, as Abanti Bhattacharya (2013), Associate Professor at the University of Delhi, points out, must be contextualized with historical Chinese threat perceptions that precede the rise of the CCP and are focused on securing the country's remote borders: "*China's Tibet policy is essentially driven by strategic considerations [...] The focus on the periphery had been a perennial security concern [prior to the victory of the CCP]*" (p. 1). At the same time, the communist-nationalist orientation of the CCP made the streamlining of differing ethnic and religious identities into one central Chinese identity a key component of the domestic projects of nation-building (Bhattacharya, 2013). As such, the CCP's policy towards Tibet derives from both strategic security concerns as well

as domestic regime-legitimacy considerations in political core-periphery relations. Similar factors are at play now in China's policy towards Xinjiang: securing the periphery against real or imagined threats equals securing the core, its economic survival and ultimately the rule of the CCP (Skidmore, 2020). These concerns, as well as historical claims of political suzerainty, have engendered a situation in which Tibet's Buddhist identity and heritage has become threatened.

The *de-facto* annexation of Tibet by the CCP and the treatment of Buddhists by the communists appeared to confirm the grave concerns Bhutan had about the intentions and methods of the CCP. Ultimately, China went on to launch incursions into parts of Bhutanese-administered Tibetan enclaves, a violation of sovereignty that further incentivized alignment with India, with which Bhutan not only shared cultural ties but also a heightened mistrust towards China. Bhutan saw the anxieties pertaining to its territoriality confirmed in 1954 when the CCP published a map that displayed significant sections of Bhutanese territory as part of China (Mukherjee, 2014). India's role as Bhutan's net security provider was further formalized when both countries established the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT) in Bhutan, which is until this day responsible for the training of the Bhutanese security forces. A year later, Thimphu permitted India to move troops through its territory towards the Bhutanese-Tibetan border in the 1962 Indo-Sino war, a decision that further alienated China (Jha, 2017). Bhutan's behavior in this context, namely its bandwagoning with India, must also be contextualized with China's approach towards Tibet.

Owing to the generational character of memory, however, historical perceptions of friend and foe have transformed to the benefit of Beijing. In the wake of its multilateralization policy in the 1970s and 1980s, Bhutan went on to support the People's Republic 'One China' policy, which advocates for the PRC as the sole legitimate representative of the Chinese people on the international stage, rendering Taiwan a rogue breakaway province that does not represent China and its people (Gill, 2000). For younger and partially more secular generations in Bhutan, China no longer constitutes the cultural and political threat it used to be - rather, China embodies for many what commentators have described as the "*Asian century*", referring to the increasingly dominant role Asia is projected to play in the global politics of the 21st century (Romei & Reed, 2019). This, in conjunction with what some have dubbed China's '*rise*' (Ikenberry, 2008), has stimulated new narratives that advocate for enhanced cooperation with China and a generally higher level of autonomy vis-à-vis India (Mishra, 2019). Comparable to its efforts in Nepal, where China is now paying teachers' annual wages in return for Mandarin being taught in Nepalese schools (Ghimire, 2019), China has increased its soft power investment in Bhutan, intensifying its trade relations with Thimphu whilst enhancing people-to-people exchanges, for instance in the form of tourism programs and student scholarships (Agence France-Presse, 2018). Although Bhutan's historical relation with China has been one of distrust and deterrence, this has shown signs of transformation over time, a trend that could continue in the coming years and decades.

Bhutan and the Geopolitics of Borders

The wedging of Bhutan between two of the world's biggest geopolitical players has severe implications for the country, particularly in regard to its territorial sovereignty and its strategic autonomy. As discussed above, Bhutan's close relations with India have been tied to India ensuring Bhutan's territoriality. Bhutan has a set of ongoing territorial disputes with China as Beijing claims the areas of Jakarlung and Pasamlung in Bhutan's North (also known as the central sector disputes) as well as the Doklam Plateau in Bhutan's Western sector. China bases its claim on the territorial agreement established between the British Empire and the Qing Dynasty at the 1890 Convention of Calcutta, which demarcated the border between British India and China as lying between Sikkim and Tibet, with Bhutan constituting the North-eastern part of the border. Although such claims may be debatable under international law, they are not recognized by either Bhutan or India: in their eyes, the signatories of the 1890 agreement, namely British India and the Qing Dynasty, no longer exist, rendering the agreement void (ibid). Moreover, the *de-facto* strategic Bhutanese-Indo position has benefited from the inhospitality and rugged terrain of the Himalayas, undermining China's ability to act on its territorial claims.

Bhutan began autonomously engaging with China in negotiations over these territorial disputes from 1970 onwards – prior to that, India had overseen the management of Thimphu's territorial negotiations in line with the 1949 treaty (Sharma & Sharma, 2016). Although more than twenty meetings between Bhutan and China concerning such territorial matters have taken place until now, the two countries have thus far failed to bilaterally resolve the disputes. In 1990, China offered Bhutan what has been commonly referred to as a territorial '*package deal*': Beijing would cede its claims over Jakarlung and Pasamlung (which accumulate to a size of 495 square km) in return for control over the Doklam Plateau (269 square km) (Kharat & Bhutia, 2019). The Bhutanese negotiators have continuously rejected such an agreement, resulting in the dispute not being settled.

China made new territorial claims in Bhutan in an emerging Eastern sector surrounding the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (with a total size of around 650 square km) in July 2020 following the escalation of Indo-Sino border tensions in the Western Himalayas in May/June 2020. A spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs contended that "*The boundary between China and Bhutan is yet to be demarcated, and the middle, eastern and western sections of the border are disputed*" (quoted in Ramachandran, 2020). Furthermore, the representative suggested, Sakteng had been on the agenda of the Bhutan-China talks, a contention that was refuted by Bhutan, representatives of which called Sakteng "*an integral and sovereign territory of Bhutan*" that was discussed "*at no point during the boundary discussions*" and has not "*featured as a disputed area*" (ibid). In consideration of the temporal dimension of Indo-Sino border disputes and their escalation in 2020, the manifestation of new territorial claims by China could be discerned as a punitive measure against the Kingdom, punishing Bhutan for its continued alliance with India and its opposition to China's geopolitical ambitions in the Himalayas.

The 2017 standoff between Chinese and Indian forces on the Doklam Plateau exemplified Bhutan's strategic location in larger regional security issues and the geopolitical importance

of some of the areas disputed by China. In June 2017, Chinese forces started to expand a road into Bhutan's Doklam area, resulting in a confrontation with 270 Indian soldiers that were stationed on the plateau. The standoff lasted from June 18 to August 28, epitomizing both Beijing's strategic eagerness to gain control over Doklam as well as India's readiness to aggressively counteract such Chinese advances. Considering this incident, the Doklam Standoff and the skirmishes in the Galwan Valley must be considered in their historical continuity: aggression from one side results in an aggressive counter reaction from the other party, legitimizing and reinforcing the threat-perceptions on either side and thus incentivizing increased military build-up on both sides of the border. Some Indian commentators (Dutta, 2017; Pant, 2020) have alleged that China is pursuing a tactic of '*salami slicing*', referring to a strategy in which "*minor actions without provoking any reaction from others over a period of time lead to a strategic shift in the ground realities in its favour*". According to this narrative, China's actions serve an offensive purpose to establish control over certain geographical sectors that are beneficial for telecommunications and the construction of road and railway networks. India's aggressive reaction to China's behavior seems to indicate that this analysis is shared by Indian policymakers.

Minute aggression on the Indo-Sino border could serve a symbolic function exemplifying China's military might whilst forcing India to focus its resources and military funding on its continental borders, resulting in a negligible naval investment by India and thus maintaining the absence of a net security provider in the Indian Ocean. It constitutes a byproduct of Chinese behavior that benefits Beijing's ambitions elsewhere. Either way, the strategies chosen by China must be assessed in consideration of the physical environment of the Himalayas: the slopes of the mountains and the mountains as such inhibit unlimited communication lines and movement whilst also constraining the ability to monitor the opponent's movements. Gaining control over certain strategic spaces and specifically elevated areas such as plateaus and mountain tops consequently emerges as a specific imperative for either side in the context of potential troop movement in the area.

Considering these geographical factors and relative strategic gains forged by controlling certain kinds of territory helps to contextualize China's behavior on the Doklam Plateau. From a non-strategic perspective, the aforementioned territorial package deal would have yielded some territorial gains for Bhutan as the territory recognized as Bhutan's (495 square km) would have been spatially greater than the territory gained by China (269 square km). As such, only a recognition of Doklam's strategic role makes Bhutan's refusal to accept the 1990 Chinese territorial propositions cognizable. The Himalayas and Bhutan as a sovereign State function as a buffer zone that physically shields India from potential Chinese aggression, raising China's logistical (in terms of conducting and maintaining military and civil operations in the region) as well as political-diplomatic (in terms of attacking a sovereign country) costs. The sustenance of this physical buffer zone, especially following Tibet's annexation, is decisive for India to limit the quick regional movement of Chinese machinery and personnel, creating an insurance for India that would allow India to bide its time if military conflict was to erupt. Simultaneously, China has both defensive and offensive posture interests in the region: defensively, China must seek to avoid a situation in which India exploits the anti-China sentiments in Tibet to undermine the CCP's regional legitimacy, already imperiled by popular

opposition to the Han Chinese. A strategic option for China in this context is enhancing the CCP's control over the region and militarizing the border without necessarily seeking to make additional territorial gains. Military build-up subsequently does not necessarily imply an intent to attack although it is likely to be interpreted as such.

At the same time, greater regional military presence benefits China's forward posture as control over Doklam would allow China greater oversight over the movements in the Siliguri Corridor, located in the trijunction between Bhutan, China and Sikkim (see Figure 1 below). The Siliguri Corridor, also known as India's 'Chicken's Neck', connects India's Northeastern states to the remainder of the country and has a width of only 22km at its narrowest point. A rapid military incursion by a continental force would be able to 'wring' India's chicken head, disconnecting India from its Northeastern states and disabling India from moving personnel in the region (Singh, 2019). If China was to gain control over Doklam, this would radically enhance China's potential capacity to perform such an attack. The build-up of China's military capacities on the border is likely to be interpreted as serving an offensive intent by India, and Indian anxieties concerning such a plan have indeed been exacerbated by the growing Chinese military deployments around the border in recent years (ibid). From New Delhi's perspective, and especially that of a more assertive Modi administration, it is the potential of such an attack that vindicates India's further militarization in the region. In this process, Bhutan is not left with much agency as it can neither accept China's territorial offers nor ask India to operate in a less defensive manner. As Indo-Sino tensions rise, then, Bhutan's ability to enact its own agency is reduced.



Figure 1: The Doklam Plateau and the Siliguri Corridor; Source: Yellinek (2017)

Conclusion

Although the confrontation on the Doklam Plateau and the new territorial claims made by China, in conjunction with the Galwan Valley clashes, have resulted in growing interest in Bhutan, most analyses of its significance exhibit a perspective that reduces Bhutan's significance to a strategic bystander, thereby insufficiently accounting for Bhutan's political processes, historical concerns and traditions. As Bhutan's and Nepal's shifting relations with India indicate, the internal developments of relatively small South Asian States do have important implications in terms of how these countries position themselves politically, economically and strategically. Realignments can have pivotal political implications for the region, with India seeing its relative dominance challenged by an increasingly regionally expansionist China. Bhutan exemplifies this trend: although Bhutan's position is heavily shaped by India, the government does possess some agency in determining its own behavior in foreign affairs. As such, India must guard against Chinese efforts to push Bhutan further towards its orbit. China has proven apt at introducing its culture and interests into the domestic politics of regional actors. Therefore, in Bhutan, India would do well to capitalize on the head-start that it has in terms of soft power and economic influence, and squeeze in modifications where apt.

Maintaining and expanding its alliance with Bhutan is going to be of paramount importance for India as New Delhi will remain keen to prevent further Chinese incursions into Doklam and Bhutan more generally. India's partially aggressive posturing in the Himalayas in recent years has been further diplomatically buttressed by its deepening security ties with the United States, particularly under the administration of President Donald Trump. It remains to be seen how the election of Joe Biden as President is going to impact Indo-US relations. However, an understanding of China as a political opponent throughout the Indo-Pacific has appeared to have grown into a bipartisan phenomenon in the US, meaning that the India-US ties could undergo further deepening under the Biden administration.

In these larger geopolitical developments, the interests and ambitions of smaller regional actors such as Bhutan should not be overlooked as they, too, have a role to play in regional security dynamics and are implicated in regional power politics. For India, retaining an understanding of the domestic political processes in the adjacent Himalayan countries will be of key relevance in shaping the further political developments of the region in the future. In turn, Bhutan might face growing coercive behavior at the hands of China. This situation, in combination with the growing tensions and pressures in the region, will pose new and distinct challenges to Bhutan's unique cultural heritage.

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