

# Beyond India and China: Bhutan as a Small State in International Relations

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## Abstract

This article makes a novel contribution to the literature on Bhutan's International Relations (IR) by shifting the focus away from an exclusively India–China framing. First, it points out how small states are increasingly salient but under-studied in IR and how non-European non-island states like Bhutan are even more so, and why we gain by addressing this. Second, it shows how the conventional study of Bhutan has solely focused on its friendship with India and the threat to it/this from China, and why it is important that these conventional narratives be critically examined. In doing so, we perceive the endogenous drivers of Bhutan's foreign policies, for instance via Bhutan's stance on the Doklam issue. Third, going beyond the three typical determinants (economic factors, bilateral relations with India, and threats from China), the article provides two additional axes of understanding Bhutan's foreign policies – bridging of attributional distances and learning from experience.

*Keywords:* Bhutan; India; China; Doklam; foreign policy; diplomacy; friendship; small states; international relations

## 1 Introduction

A small non-western developing country like Bhutan does not receive much attention in International Relations (IR). As a rare landlocked<sup>1</sup> country between two rising powers in Asia, it is likely the only strategic geopolitical location about which the scholarly IR literature is so sparse. This article makes the case for attending more rigorously to the trajectory of Bhutan's international relations as a way of understanding the geopolitical developments in the Himalayan region and their implications for the role of small states in regions of significant rivalry among larger entities (in this case, India and China).

It is understudied for many reasons, especially because focus on it is generally framed through the interests and perspectives of the more prominent larger powers like China and India. This is partly the result of big power geopolitics inherited from an imperial era that sees such small states in rivalrous terms merely as arenas of contest and influence. It is also a consequence of the producers of scholarship on Bhutan who have historically been those working within state institutions in the larger countries (especially India, which became heir to the role of British India in the region and fostered a close relationship with Bhutan) and generate strategic work from narrow national interest perspectives. The lack of focus on a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of Bhutan's foreign policy (that does not attribute its actions to external actors only) was further exacerbated by the unique circumstances in the country through most of the 20th century.<sup>2</sup>

Both historical accounts of the country and strategic analyses of its behavior have often relied upon repeating a narrow set of sources and the repetition of tired tropes. Predictably, this results in the perpetuation of Orientalist clichés in some disciplines, but in IR, the crucial

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1 Among the subset of landlocked countries over the globe, Bhutan and Nepal lying geographically between India and China, and Mongolia lying geographically between Russia and China, are distinctive in being landlocked with only two neighbours, both of whom are 'rising powers'. The UN has urged viewing landlocked countries anywhere, however, as 'landlinked' so that they can be seen as bridges to possible connexions (see UN 2014).

2 Although undergraduate colleges and centres for the study of language, culture, and traditional medicine had existed since the 1960s, the first university was established in Bhutan in the 21st century (the Royal University of Bhutan in 2003, and the study of political science as a subject came only recently).

impact is the way in which the behavior of this small state is seen as entirely exogenously directed. This results in accounts that only look to entities like India and China in explaining the regional security equilibria or shocks to it. By contrast, this article will provide a contextual ‘thick description’ (to borrow a well-known term coined by Geertz) of Bhutan’s behavior and its role in the evolving dynamics of the region.

Work on Bhutan internationally has been along the following lines – Bhutan’s historic interactions with British India until the start of the 20th century; emphatic assertions of Bhutan’s strong friendship with post-colonial India from 1947 onwards; Bhutan’s ‘southern problem’<sup>3</sup> when its ethnic Nepalese (Lhotsampa) population from southern areas fled or were expelled during internal turmoil; and more recently, a few accounts of the democratic transition completed in Bhutan in 2008. These areas of work (which I cite later in this article) often tend to proceed along parallel lines with little interconnect, with British and Indian history scholars traditionally choosing selective years of focus, amplifying narratives from specific official perspectives, and selectively drawing upon sources (for details and critique of this, see [Kaul, 2021b](#)). In the manner of pre-PRC controlled Tibet, Bhutan has sometimes been projected as a Shangri La by western travellers; it has also been perceived in exotic terms by Indians.

In contemporary work too, Bhutan has been geopolitically constructed as ‘asymmetrically inbetween’ India and China ([Kaul, 2021a](#)) so that it does not have formal diplomatic relations with its northern neighbor China, while its contemporary southern regions – its historic fertile southern regions were resettled with various Nepalese populations for cultivation and some parts were annexed to India in the 19th century – have been bequeathed a complexity in ethnic and civic terms. The work on the ‘southern problem’ that peaked in the late 1980s and

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3 This was triggered in the late 1980s and early 1990s by a mix of ethnic strife, state securitization, and sovereignty preservation impulses. The Royal Government of Bhutan perspective is quite clearly outlined in [MHA \(1993\)](#). [Banki \(2013, 125\)](#) writes: ‘The circumstances that generated the exile of tens of thousands of Bhutan’s southern-residing, mostly Hindu-practising, ethnically Nepali population have been covered in detail elsewhere... In sum, a suite of social, political and ethno-cultural pressures force the Nepali Bhutanese – also called ‘Lhotshampa’ – to depart Bhutan between 1989 to 1992’. For further elaboration, see [Hutt \(2003, 2013\)](#); [Iyer \(2019\)](#). For details complicating the narrative, see [Rattan \(1989\)](#); [Bray \(1993\)](#); [Ahsan and Chakma \(1993\)](#); [Sharma \(1994, 34–35\)](#); [Mathou \(1999, 613–614\)](#); [Mehta \(2002, 95\)](#). See also [Kaul \(2008b\)](#).

early 1990s has also included the later studies by human rights activists and scholars on the Lhotsampa refugee camps in Nepal and the subsequent resettlement of Bhutanese refugees to several Western countries. These latter scholars are based in various places, especially institutions in Nepal and in the countries where the refugees were resettled. Some are also part of exiled Bhutanese political networks and their views on Bhutanese monarchy and democracy are condemnatory.<sup>4</sup> This is in stark contrast to the legitimacy and reverence of monarchy in Bhutan, not just for its titular, but also for its role in welfarist terms (for instance, the Kings are a direct source of welfare ‘kidus’ in Bhutan to help the general population at any time of distress) and from a sovereignty-preservation perspective.<sup>5</sup>

The above is evidently a very zoomed-out overview but it is vital to set out the broader terrain of work about a country whose internal or external politics many scholars (even in the Asian region) may not be familiar with. Studies on the political dynamics within contemporary Bhutan are rare, and Bhutan is still seen through the polarizing perspectives of the ‘Shangri La’ and ‘Southern Problem’. In contradistinction to this, the present article is cognizant of Bhutan’s contemporary dynamics and political transformations in the 21st century; it further argues for greater attention to this country’s endogenous drivers of foreign policy and IR on its own terms – moving beyond the exclusively India/China national interest framing, and also moving beyond the polarizing Shangri-La/Southern Problem framing that views the country’s dynamics, rather emotively, as either perfect or wretched.

Bhutan has undergone tremendous political changes in the 21st century that deserve reference, ranging from renegotiating its treaty with India to remove a clause that potentially restricted its foreign relations; to an elite-led transition to democracy that was widely seen as undesirable within the country; to three general elections (in 2008, 2013, and 2018) bringing three different political parties to power; to internal contestations around the potential influence of India or China in Bhutan’s own internal political sphere; to gradual design and evolution

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4 See Rizal (2004)

5 Bhutan’s survival as a sovereign nation was far from certain through much of the 20th century when bordering Tibet was annexed to China and neighbouring kingdom of Sikkim became part of India following demographic alteration and political machinations (see Datta-Ray, 1984).

of democratic mechanisms that clarify division of powers, growing awareness and practice of freedom of speech, demand for public accountability of officials even in high profile cases involving ministers or the judiciary, to defining nationality in more internally inclusivist terms, to enacting progressive legislation such as the recent decriminalization of homosexuality. While Bhutan continues to be restricted in its maneuverability vis a vis China on full and formal diplomatic relations or to settle a border dispute in an area that India considers as strategic, and is economically closely intertwined with India through trade, it is nonetheless on a carefully calibrated pathway to democratic consolidation and incremental internationalization.

It is also factually correct that Bhutan has gradually expanded its degrees of freedom and steadily risen in regional rankings on a range of economic, social, and political indicators, both in absolute terms and relative to other South Asian countries. While no rankings can ever provide a complete picture, this landscape indicates the overall trajectory. Currently, Bhutan is the only South Asian country in the top 20 in the *Global Peace Index*, at 19 (India is at 139, Nepal at 73, China at 104, Bangladesh at 97, Sri Lanka at 77, Pakistan at 152); it stands at 65 in the *Press Freedom Index* (India is at 142, Nepal at 106, China at 177, Bangladesh at 152, Sri Lanka at 127, Pakistan at 145); it ranks at 24 on the *Corruption Perceptions Index* (India is at 86, Nepal at 33, China at 78, Bangladesh at 26, Sri Lanka at 94, Pakistan at 124); it ranks at 129 in the *Human Development Index* (India is at 131, Nepal at 142, China at 85, Bangladesh at 133, Sri Lanka at 72, Pakistan at 154). In the *Freedom House rankings for democracy*, all these South Asian countries rank as 'Partly Free' (except China that is 'Not Free' at 9, and Indian- and Pakistani- administered parts of Kashmir 'Not Free' at 27 and 28 respectively). Here, Bhutan ranks at 61 (compared with India at 67, Nepal at 56, Bangladesh at 39, Sri Lanka at 56).

Against this background, this article makes an innovative contribution in pulling together several threads of work that have constrained cross-cutting scholarship on Bhutan and enmeshes this within broader contemporary IR frameworks. It proceeds from the empirical observation that Bhutan has been understudied in IR, and while this is not unpredictable given conventional IR focus, it must be attended to. Also, Bhutan has been seen in specific ways and through certain tropes, which are not exhaustive, nor should they be restrictive in ways

that force all future scholarship to not move beyond these goalposts. This article provides an understanding of Bhutan's IR, highlighting the perspectives and motivations that are endogenous in order to allow a complexity that is often missed in the political literature that is tied to strategic interests of specific larger states or emanates from a single-issue prism. The finding of rational pursuit of survival for a small state may not be in itself groundbreaking, but detailing the specific contours of this finding and how this survival was made operable in the case of Bhutan is an important contribution to this literature. Quite vitally, this article pioneers work that refuses to take for granted starting from the Indian–Chinese perspectives as the only valid framework for the study of Bhutan.

The three main moves in the structure are as follows. First, I point out how small states are increasingly salient but under-studied in IR and how non-European non-island states like Bhutan are even more so, and why we gain by addressing this. Second, I shows how the conventional study of Bhutan has solely focused on its friendship with India and the threat to it/this from China, and why it is important that these conventional narratives be critically examined. In doing so, I show how the endogenous drivers of Bhutan's foreign policies have not received the attention they deserve, and specifically, Bhutan's stance on the Doklam issue illustrates the importance of how we can perceive this. Third, I suggest two additional axes of explaining Bhutan's foreign policies: multidimensional idea of distance and learning from experience. I show empirically how Bhutan's internationalization over time can be understood through a process of bridging various kinds of attributional distances (as opposed to the purely geographical focus in standard framing), and how Bhutan's learning from the experience of other countries is salient.

## 2 Small states, IR, and Bhutan

Across disciplines, a body of work has addressed questions pertaining to small states, for instance, the nature of smallness and debates over classification, methodologies for categorization, economic problems, processes of overcoming vulnerabilities, selection of multilateral strategies, diplomacies and so on (Srinivasan, 1986; Sutton and Payne, 1993;

Sutton, 1999; Crowards, 2002; Cooper and Shaw, 2009; Lee, 2016). Bhutan is not part of any of these studies.

IR has come a long way from early doubts about the analytical usefulness of the concept of small states (Baehr, 1975; Amstrup, 1976). Veenendaal and Corbett (2014) provide a methodological rationale for why small states matter and counter the typical reasons that are often offered for not attending to them.<sup>6</sup> Small states empirically exist, they are ‘not just large states writ small’ (Jesse and Dreyer, 2016, xiii). Likewise, Baldacchino (2018) is an unapologetically powerful defense of undertaking the study and analysis of small states and territories beyond exceptionalism and exoticism, as significant in itself and on its own merits.

In modern times, not only has the number of small states increased, but it has become increasingly evident that as sovereign actors, their disadvantages in terms of absolute power are able to be offset by the advantages available to them through the ability internally to manage domestic politics and bureaucracy in a more directed manner, and externally to pursue influence in, and through, multilateral organizations by projecting themselves as norm entrepreneurs in specific issue areas. Corbett, Xu and Weller (2019, 656–657) suggest that this norm entrepreneurship is linked to the competent performance of vulnerability by small states through rhetorical action, collaboration, and active participation in international organizations.<sup>7</sup> Ó Súilleabháin (2014) discusses the role of small states at the UN, noting that small states often excel in multilateral diplomacy and prioritize international rule of law. Their diplomacy is agile, priority-based, develops niche areas (for instance on mitigating arms trade or climate change), emphasizes regional ties, and is broadly cooperative on the basis of substantive or thematic alliances. Thorhallsson and Bailes (2016, 301) identify the ways in which small state diplomacy in international negotiations can be accentuated. The scale of threats and the vulnerabilities of small states might be great, but equally, with the complex threats, for instance such as those caused by the coronavirus pandemic (which are not just biological or public

6 The reasons usually given for not taking small state dynamics seriously are as follows: their insignificant population size; them not being ‘real’ states; being excluded by others; the absence of data; the perceived need to compare similar systems.

7 For an overview tabulation of various small state groupings in international organisations, see Corbett, Xu and Weller (2019, 649–650).

health-related in any simplistic way, but also deeply political and politicizing), several small states have performed surprisingly well precisely because of their coherent responses. The nature of the traditional and non-traditional security environments in the 21st century does not straightforwardly indicate an equation of small with weak.

How small states make foreign policy decisions and the variety of diplomatic means that they employ is a question that does not lend itself to an easy generalization. They deserve the empirical depth of specific country case studies just as much as the more widely prevalent numerical or statistical analyses that group small countries together usually by way of continents, even when this may not always yield the most valuable insights. It is the conceptual axes of geopolitical location vis a vis land and/or sea, the relevant colonial or other larger power being in proximity or distant, and the nature of conflicts over economic resources or transboundary ideological overlaps, that are arguably much more germane in understanding the types of interlinked foreign-policy objectives and diplomatic strategies that are more likely to be adopted by a particular small state (and replicated by perhaps another on a different continent).

Traditional IR expects small states to align with larger neighbors or powers, typically in offensive or defensive alliances, for balancing and/or with bandwagoning.<sup>8</sup> But, equally, to quote [Keohane \(1969, 300, italics original\)](#), ‘the imprecision of international relations terminology is nowhere more obvious or painful than in discussions of *alliances*’. Critiquing the traditional alliance theory for its insufficiently developed conceptualizations of small-scale behavior, [Bailes, Thayer and Thorhallsson \(2016\)](#) put forward an approach of ‘alliance shelter’ to reflect the complex motivations and conduct of small states (moving beyond the usual emphasis on the experience of European small states, they use the examples of Armenia, Cuba, and Singapore).

International IR literature on the study of small states has hardly ever included any work on Bhutan.<sup>9</sup> What work exists in Asian IR/area studies has focused on three neorealist structural axes: economic

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8 Not specific to small states, [Jackson \(2014\)](#) argues that hedging, as opposed to not balancing or bandwagoning, is the rational/central tendency in Asian international relations, not due to power transition uncertainty between US and China, or mistrust under a multipolar system, but due to the complexity of a regional network marked by sensitivity, fluidity, and heterarchy (i.e. multiple hierarchies governing security, economic, and cultural relations).



conditions, bilateral relationship with India, and threats from or engagements with China. Even specific studies of small states' foreign policy behavior (such as [Hey, 2003](#)) do not contain analyses on Bhutan. Moreover, among those who challenge the neo/realist views about the generalizability of theories on small state behavior, the diversification of strategies used by small states is seen in binomial terms, so that affluent Western small states are understood as norm creators, while small and impoverished non-Western states are understood to be focused on regime survival-type concerns.

The case of Bhutan adds complexity to this typology, with it being an impoverished small state that is low on resources but high on normative power through norm advocacy and by setting an example. Note that Bhutan has not only actively advocated for Gross National Happiness or GNH as a criterion of development,<sup>10</sup> it constitutionally mandates that 60% of its territory remain under forest cover in perpetuity (this provides an international positive externality in a fragile high-altitude Himalayan ecosystem), it is a rare carbon-negative country, and a functioning Asian welfare state. Owing to the success of its developmental and social indicators, it will also have the distinction of graduating, by 2023, up from being a least developed country (LDC) to a lower middle-income country, even though it would not have met the economic vulnerability criteria ([Dorji, 2018](#)).<sup>11</sup> In 2020–21, Bhutan managed to combat the coronavirus pandemic with only one life lost, in a strikingly different manner to the tragedies that unfolded in the states surrounding it, in Asia and beyond (see [Kaul, 2021c](#)).

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9 [Misra \(2004\)](#) is one article on small states' foreign policy that mentions Bhutan in its title (along with Maldives and Nepal; Bhutan is referred to least number of times). The article even problematically compares it to North Korea, and draws on Weber to ask whether these places are 'backward and failed states'. Other (non-IR related) work looks at tourism policy or sustainable development.

10 [Theys and Rieteg \(2020\)](#) illustrate the ability of small states to influence global governance by using the case of Bhutan's successful challenge to the fundamental ideas about what constitutes development through its placing of happiness on the global agenda.

11 The Kuensel newspaper report ([Dorji 2018](#)) explains that the assessment as low-income countries is based on three criteria – gross national income (GNI) per capita, human assets index (HAI) and economic vulnerability index (EVI). 'A country becomes eligible for graduation if it meets the threshold levels for graduation for at least two of the three criteria during two triennial reviews ... While Bhutan easily meets two of the three criteria, economic vulnerability index remains a challenge'.

A large corpus of texts on the country's international relations are about its bilateral relationship or 'friendship' ties with India. These tend to be written by Indian scholars and journalists from the perspective of India's foreign policy priorities, and thus focus on Indian security vulnerabilities, long-standing extension of friendship by India to Bhutan, and Indian fear of Bhutan–China relations.<sup>12</sup> They emphasize Bhutan's friendship and loyalty to India: 'While Nepal tried to play China against India and vice-versa, Bhutan remained steadfastly with India' (Joseph, 2012, 2), but rarely include critical analysis of Indian representations of Bhutan. The reactions to Bhutan–China engagements (including talks over the border since 1984) can range the gamut from 'this is the time to put a firm foot over the kingdom' (Avtar, 1986, 199) to 'India should be watchful' (Bisht, 2010, 353). It is unusual to find mention of Bhutanese concerns in discussions of Sino-Bhutan border talks, but there are occasional acknowledgements: 'For Bhutan, the border problem is its biggest security challenge and is critical to its future as a nation-state. Hence, Bhutan regards border solution as an end in itself, and wants a speedy settlement' (Kumar, 2010, 248).

Even in recent work in specifically relevant areas, Bhutan is mentioned peripherally. For instance, Bhatnagar and Ahmed (2020, 4) in discussing the geopolitics of landlocked states in South Asia,<sup>13</sup> explain it away in a sparing reference or two:

While it has retained its territorial independence, it remains firmly under India's sphere of influence (Ethirajan, 2018). Guided by the Bhutan-India Treaty of 1949, it is the largest recipient of Indian aid, although there is an attempt to reduce its dependence on India (D'Ambrogio, 2019). While Sikkim and Bhutan succumbed to Indian influence, Nepal has continued to resist.

12 This denial of any Bhutan–China connexion goes back in time. See Dutt (1981) for an unravelling of some of these complexities. In general, a fairly large number of publications about the country's foreign relations, typically by outsider scholars, are derivative and/or rather tediously focused on establishing how it has an ancient Hindu/Indian history or are exclusively concerned with the threat posed to it by China. For instance, Kharat (2004, 11) prefaces the discussion on 'Background and basic determinants of Bhutan's foreign policy' by referring to Indological assertions that Bhutan was originally a Hindu kingdom.

13 Mongolia and Nepal are the other two, and on which there is a much larger body of work.

The treaty of 1949 mentioned here was updated in 2007 and yet Bhutan has often been depicted as a protectorate of India, due to a mix of Indian territorial enthusiasm and wider global ignorance. The sources listed for the country in the academic article extract presented above are not scholarly, but media reports about the ‘shangri la caught between the super powers’.

The conventional and mainstream narrative goes thus – Bhutan was in self-imposed isolation until 1960s, when under the threat of Chinese aggression, it aligned with India. This confirmed predictions made by the IR theories of small state behavior. India–Bhutan friendship is the sole axis of Bhutanese foreign policy, and this was cemented through the visit of Indian PM Nehru to Bhutan in 1958. Bhutan has since then loyally sided with India and has had to fend off constant threat of Chinese aggression and territorial encroachment. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bhutan enacted a ‘one nation, one people’ policy and expelled some of its ethnically Nepalese population from its southern regions. India has helped Bhutan develop, initiated it to join the UN, and kindly agreed to update the 1949 treaty in 2007, allowing Bhutan a free rein in its foreign policy, which Bhutan did not really need, as all its interests have always been served by India as an ally. The first elected government in Bhutan, after its transition to democracy in 2007–08, made overtures toward China, however, it was voted out of power at the next elections. Indian and Bhutanese interests are one and the same, Indian largesse allows Bhutan to flourish, and Bhutan must repay these favors by demonstrating its continued loyalty to India, a key component of which is to keep China at bay. The vocabulary of friendship has indeed been pivotal in Bhutan–India relations but the uses of friendship discourse between nations here deserves a closer scrutiny. In the next section, I re-constellate a genealogy to illustrate how this narrative is selective in terms of what it spotlights and omits.

### **3 Bhutan’s international relations: friendship and beyond**

Why examine the uses of the vocabulary of ‘friendship’ between nations? Pannier (2019) points to the significance of bilateral relations which can range from enmity to friendship and from limited diplomatic contact to specialness; they have been at the core of diplomacy

in historical, strategic, and also numerical terms. [Hutchison and Bleiker's \(2014\)](#) survey of the literature that links emotions and international relations finds that major political phenomena ranging from war to fear are veined with emotions. 'Emotions are thus an intrinsic part of how politics is conducted, perceived, and evaluated' (ibid: 496). As scholars like [Doty \(1997\)](#) have argued, the role of representations is important to understand in order to grasp the productive (via cognition, action, and policy-generation) ways in which they function.

Affect clearly plays a role in all relations, including those between states. The vocabulary of friendship captures this role of affect in politics (see [Oelsner and Koschut, 2014, 17](#)). Talking of friendship between states makes it possible for the study of international relations in more horizontal, relational, and reciprocal terms (see [Devere and Smith, 2010](#); [Nordin and Smith, 2018](#)). International Friendship may be defined as 'a bilateral relationship developing within the multimember security community – it is akin to a "special relationship"' ([Oelsner and Koschut, 2014, 15](#)). The conditions that will obtain such a category of relationship are – symbolic interaction, affective attachment, self-disclosure, mutual commitment (ibid: 20–21). It is likely that for a relationship to be identified as such there would be social bonds, institutionalized cooperation, trust building through partnerships, shared symbols and practices, consultation mechanisms, integrated regionalism, solidarity and reciprocal commitment, and so on. [Devere, Mark and Verbitsky \(2011\)](#) analyze the language of friendship in international treaties (Bhutan's Treaty with India is not considered)<sup>14</sup> indicating that it can be modelled as a diplomatic method of goodwill and peace-building, and also, as a manipulative, utilitarian, and superficial use of the signifier 'friendship' as a tool for economic and commercial interests of larger powers.

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14 The 1949 Indo-Bhutan Treaty, signed shortly after Indian independence, refers to the 'friendship' aspect of the bilateral relationship most prominently by historical comparison with previous versions of Bhutan's treaties with Britain. The clauses within it mark the friendship as existing and continuing; it is widely referred to as the 'Indo-Bhutan Treaty of Friendship'. This 1949 treaty was based upon the 1910 treaty of Punakha between Bhutan and Britain, which is the focus of my forthcoming work. Throughout the second part of the 20th century, until being updated in 2007, the Friendship Treaty retained the clause about Bhutan seeking India's guidance in external relations. From the 1960s onwards, the economic collaboration – beginning first with a five year plans in 1961, and then with the hydropower projects – meant a close tying of the Bhutanese economy with the Indian one.

The friendship between Bhutan and India is generally projected back in time to the theme of shared cultural connexion via Buddhism,<sup>15</sup> and then following on from the 1949 Friendship Treaty with India, the visit of Indian Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru to Bhutan is seen as a defining moment. His meeting with the modernizing third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck is a deeply ingrained trope of rehearsing the history of the friendship.<sup>16</sup> Nehru's 1958 visit to Bhutan was indeed meant to be a diplomatically engineered spectacle worthy of the legacy it created (see [Mehta, 2002](#)). The image of Nehru traveling on the back of the yak for days to reach remote Bhutan was the result of a well thought out diplomatic endeavor on the part of the Indian Political Officer (formerly, an important official post in the Himalayan region) who had a key role in choreographing the visit.

The studies of friendships in international relations tend to focus either exclusively on Western state actors or situations where at least one entity in an important bilateral relationship is Western; in contradistinction to this, Bhutan provides a good case where from the second half of the 20th century onwards, this relationship inherited an imperial legacy that had to be negotiated and navigated by two non-Western states that were marked by a power asymmetry that is significant for postcolonial securitization. What the friendship foregrounds for the two countries can be apparent in choice of emphases.

Referring to India's fear that Bhutan's northern relations (with China) would jeopardize the territory connecting mainland to north east India, the so-called 'chicken's neck', a Bhutanese scholar writes, 'Nehru visited Bhutan on a horseback in September 1958 to convince Bhutan end its isolation policy and accept India's economic assistance' ([Penjore, 2004](#), 121–122). Another Bhutanese author, [Wangdi \(2014\)](#), perceives the friendship as encompassing not just Nehru and the economic ties, but the sacrifice of Indian teachers and construction

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15 Notwithstanding the official insistence upon shared cultures, and based upon my long-standing experience in both these countries, I concur with [Rose \(1974, 208\)](#) that there are basic differences between the culture and value systems of the two countries (Bhutan and India). The enduring ties have been not, because of, but in spite of, these differences.

16 Despite the wilful and multifaceted depreciation of Nehru and his legacy after the post-2014 Modi-led BJP government assumed power in India, the official Indian image of Nehru in Bhutan continues to be unassailable.

laborers in Bhutan (to build the education system and the roads; most migrant workers in Bhutan are from India), the centrality of Buddhist ethos in Bhutan,<sup>17</sup> and the significance of Indian intellectuals such as Ambedkar (noted constitutionalist and luminary of the Dalit movement) in having avowed Buddhism. An Indian commentator, by contrast, notes, ‘After the arduous journey he [Nehru] *gifted* Bhutan its first road’ (Rattan, 1989, 134, emphasis mine).

A solely external focus misses crucial aspects of the motives and implications of Bhutan’s behavior, in terms of institutional setup, domestic factors, and the role of elites (factors salient in analyses such as Elman 1995, 173–175 and Gvalia et al. 2013). The domestic situation is linked to the international scenario in ways that are not adequately captured by the state-centric theories relying upon the unitary understanding of national interest. Recovering oft-neglected monitors of the region such as Rose (1974), we can discern that the indigenous drivers of Bhutanese policy were evident even between 1949 and 1970s. For instance, following Nehru’s visit, Bhutan’s immediate response was ‘non-committal’, and even as the situation in Lhasa rapidly deteriorated in 1959, the government ‘was initially vacillating’ (195). Although Bhutan eventually decided to accept Indian aid, in 1960, it imposed a total ban on trade with Tibet in its north even at the cost of the blow to its own economy. This was a unilateral Bhutanese decision. As Rose writes, ‘Indeed, Bhutan occasionally moved slightly ahead of India on certain aspects of its China policy’ (ibid., 196).

The guidance in external relations clause in the 1949 treaty was interpreted by India as meaning that ‘Bhutan could not have direct relations with a third power except with India’s concurrence’, while Bhutan contended that ‘it must consult with New Delhi on external relations but need not accept the advice received’ (197). The 1960s in Bhutan was a decade marked by conspiracy, assassinations, and recalibrations.<sup>18</sup> However, even so, the Bhutanese ‘were determined to

17 The historical centrality of Buddhist ethos to Bhutanese politics is explained by Long (2021).

18 There are varying explanations for the assassination of the Bhutanese PM Jigme Dorji, the abortive assassination attempt on the third King in July 1965, and the fleeing to Nepal of the younger brother of the Prime Minister who was appointed in his place (Lhendup Dorji), having alleged Indian involvement in assassination and conspiracy. The third King visited India in May 1966 to reassure New Delhi; in the same year, the political officer was transferred. It was agreed by both sides that no successor would be appointed. See Rose

prevent India's economic aid programs from becoming instruments for India's intervention in Bhutanese decision-making' (201). During the 1960s, when India attempted to pressure Bhutan by suspending aid for a month amid rumors of increasing Chinese influence in Bhutan, the Bhutanese assembly passed a unanimous motion declaring that 'it was better to have no aid at all than aid which was interrupted in this way' (Mitra and Thaliyakkattil, 2018, 246). This awareness of aid as an instrument of manipulation has been a continued factor in Bhutan's very cautious acceptance of aid from other powers over time, and in its regulation of foreign investment, including from the Indian commercial sector.

Many endogenous drivers of Bhutanese policy are often forgotten. The National Assembly (a 20th-century precursor to the later fully democratic institution with the same name) took up strong nationalist positions<sup>19</sup> and voted for Bhutan's participation in the United Nations,<sup>20</sup> which eventually came about in 1971 after detailed Bhutanese negotiations to achieve Indian support. Similarly, Bhutan's international recognition of Bangladesh (Bhutan being the first country in the world to do so) was undertaken at its own initiative (Rose, 1974, 204); apart from a diplomatic success, it was also a sound practical move toward a newly sovereign nearer small state with alternative market access and transit potential. When we look at the drive in Bhutan toward identity-consolidation from late 1970s onwards, for instance, the 'Bhutanisation' of government offices (encouraging replacement of foreign with indigenous expertise), the enforcement of a uniform cultural code called the Driglam Namzha, the enactment of new citizenship laws, or the unconventional democratization at the behest of the fourth King (Jigme Singye Wangchuck), the interlinkages of domestic and international factors are salient (cf. Putnam, 1988). In order to understand the perceptions at play, it is important to note that in 1989,

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(1974, *passim*). The Indian advisor (Nari Rustomji), appointed in 1963, also wrote a parallel account of events.

- 19 Since 2008, Bhutan has a monarchy combined with Westminster variant of parliamentary democracy. The co-existence of monarchy with parliamentary democracy in Bhutan, and the increase in support for both these institutions concurrently, challenges Huntington's 'King's Dilemma' (on this latter point, see Corbett, Veenendaal and Ugyel 2017).
- 20 The indigenous Bhutanese initiative in this at least is acknowledged by authors who would otherwise take no cognisance of it in Bhutan's foreign policy. For instance, see Menon and Kanisetti (2018).

the fourth King of Bhutan explained to an Indian journalist ‘None of our decisions is anti-India..All that we are doing is to see and ensure that Bhutan remains Bhutan’ (Rattan, 1989, 137).

Ahsan and Chakma (1993, 1046) describe Bhutan’s assertion of autonomy in relations with India in late 1970s: in 1978, the diplomatic mission in New Delhi was renamed the Royal Bhutan Embassy; Bhutan did not agree with India’s position at the Nonaligned Movement (NAM) conference in Havana on the issue of admission of People’s Republic of Kampuchea to the UN, and on the issue of the rights of landlocked countries at the Manila Meeting of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD V); and while usually abstaining from UN votes on the Afghanistan issue, Bhutan also voted with the South Asian states other than India against the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. At a press conference in Bombay in September 1979, the fourth King (Jigme Singye Wangchuck) stated that the Indo-Bhutanese treaty of 1949 needed to be updated in the interest of both countries so that nothing was left to ‘open interpretation’ (in *ibid.*). In 1959, Bhutanese Prime Minister Jigme Dorji ‘hinted that Bhutan was not bound to accept *all* of India’s advice in its conduct of foreign relations ... he was also quite confident that China would not attack Bhutan’ (Mitra and Thaliyakkattil, 2018, 245–246).

In 1960, the National Assembly sent a letter to the Indian government asking for Bhutan’s boundary with India to be regarded as an international border and marked as such on official maps. ‘Bhutan’s king also asserted that Bhutan is an independent and sovereign country and that if it desires, it can have direct negotiations with China (*ibid.*, 245). Patterson (1962, 199) refers to Bhutan’s PM Jigme Dorji confirming China’s approach to the Bhutanese ‘just over a year ago...with an offer to negotiate a border agreement; also to recognise Bhutan’s sovereignty, to extend diplomatic recognition and to provide technical aid’. During the 1962 Sino-Indian border war, Bhutanese Prime Minister Jigme Dorji protested Indian soldiers straying into Bhutan. When Indira Gandhi was in the opposition, in a speech in October 1979, she rhetorically asked the Indian audience, ‘Can you believe that a great country like India has to take it lying down from a tiny country like Bhutan?’ (247, see also Ram 1980, 32–34).

Back then, like now, the Indian and Bhutanese perception of the Chinese threat has systematically varied in terms of national interest,



content, and significance.<sup>21</sup> An important threat for Bhutan lies in the forests of its southern border with India where various Indian insurgent militant groups operate (United Liberation Front of Assam, ULFA; National Democratic Front of Bodoland, NDFB; Kamtapur Liberation Army KLA).<sup>22</sup> Another key threat for Bhutan comprises of the precarity of its economic relationship with India, which makes it possible for events in India to affect Bhutanese economy. This is true at a regional border level where Indian labor unrest and militant operations can pose a threat to Bhutanese trade and commerce, but also for larger economic events in India such as demonetization or rupee crisis, because the chaos is transferred and amplified in Bhutan.

Bhutan has not taken sides on the India–China border dispute. The fourth King (Jigme Singye Wangchuck) invited a Chinese representative to his coronation, and in his public statements expressed a desire for friendly relations with China. China and Bhutan engagements have proceeded since the coronation of the fourth King in 1974, with ambassadorial visits since 1994. [Penjore \(2004, 118\)](#) points out that Bhutan has maintained a one-China policy by voting for restoring China's United Nations' seat in 1971; Bhutan rejected Taiwan's participation motions in UN and WHO (World Health Organization) as Vice Chair at the 55th UN General Assembly and opposed Taiwan's bid to host 2002 Asian Games.

The developments in the 1950s in relation to Bhutan and China are recounted in [Penjore \(2004\)](#), [Kumar \(2010\)](#), and [Bisht \(2012\)](#). In almost all these texts, Chinese policy is described as 'carrots and sticks', the carrots being assurance of independence and economic assistance, and the sticks being border claims or encroachments. Following a border incursion by China in September 1979, Bhutan and China border talks commenced in 1984 (the preliminary talks began in 1981) and a peace agreement was signed between the two sides in 1998 (after

21 A snapshot of Bhutan's 'buffer status' in late 1950s is provided in [Levi \(1959\)](#). [Mathou \(2000, 2005\)](#) provides periodic overviews of regional dynamics concerning the Sino-Indian relations in relation to Bhutan and the Himalayas.

22 [Ahsan and Chakma \(1993, 1049–1054\)](#) detail the activities of the Nepali militants organized into entities with complex ideological and strategic incentives, that were a significant threat to Bhutan and had bases in Indian territory. It is also worth noting that while the use of Bhutanese territory by Indian insurgents received much attention in the 1990s, the use of Indian territory by such groups, as well as the nature of passage for Lhotsampas from Bhutan to Nepal via India, received considerably less attention.

Chinese activities in the disputed areas in 1996) that contained a Chinese acknowledgement of Bhutanese sovereignty with the text that ‘China fully respects the territorial integrity and independence of Bhutan’. There was also an agreement to maintain peace and tranquility in the border areas, and pending final settlement, to maintain a status-quo on the boundary as before March 1959.

All commentators note that China prefers a ‘package deal’ rather than a ‘sector-by-sector’ settlement. In the 1990s, China offered to exchange 495 square kilometers area with an area of 269 square kilometers in north-west Bhutan.<sup>23</sup> However, the north western area (Doklam/Gipmochi/Gyemochen) is perceived to be strategically relevant for India, and this is the crux of the Doklam situation as it has unfolded in recent years. Menon and Kanisetti (2018, italics original) write, ‘Yet the Indo-Bhutan friendship cannot, indeed *must not*, be taken for granted . . . Bhutan’s own silence on China’s occupation of Doklam can be explained by the fact that it has perceived Doklam as not being of vital interest to itself. . . Bhutan appears to now be striking out and dealing with China on its own’. The trust deficit can be glaring on such occasions, when there are fuming reports in the Indian media about any possible overtures or contacts between Bhutan and China, which serve a useful purpose for domestic political mobilization in India and further entrench strategies concerning China (cf. Christensen, 1996).

As a small state, the use of ‘friendship’ discourse does stabilize and address the security dilemma, but equally, it requires on the part of Bhutan, a kind of diplomacy such as over the Doklam conflict, that merits more attention. The discourse of friendship has been useful for India in its own security calculations where Bhutan is often taken for granted as the net provider of border security; for Bhutan a demonstration of this was the 2003 military operation conducted by Bhutan to eliminate anti-Indian insurgents from its own southern territories. This was led at the highest level of the state (King Jigme Singye Wangchuck led the Royal Bhutan Army initiative to banish anti-Indian guerillas from Bhutan). However, when India’s attempt to influence the

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23 Referring to the series of meetings on border demarcation between Bhutan and China, Bray (1993, 214) mentioned ‘in recent years the potential threat from the north appears to have diminished. . . The two sides find it convenient to meet regularly without going so far as to exchange ambassadors’.

2013 elections in Bhutan by signaling the withdrawal of fuel subsidy was reported,<sup>24</sup> it was again the longstanding understanding of friendship specifically that both caused alarm in Bhutan and allowed for the relations to be smoothed over eventually.<sup>25</sup>

The central dynamic that has lingered since the days of the great game imperial rivalries, is the question of China's intentions (and perceptions of them) by India. The growing economic relationship between India and China has continued in parallel with an Indian consensus (evident in policy and popular discourse) about the undesirability of Bhutan's own diplomatic relations with China. Because the Bhutan–China dynamic continues to be a significant issue in the way in which trust and friendship is interpreted on the Indian side in their bilateral relationship with Bhutan, there have been repeated instances whereby the unresolved India–China border dispute has created an imbroglio for Bhutan. This was most evident during the extended stand-off at Doklam in 2017, when Indian and Chinese forces faced off each other at Bhutan's trijunction point.

During the Doklam dispute, Bhutan made a strategic use of silence to avert confrontation with either power, and as a result of its responsible stance, *between* them. A Bhutanese media commentator [Lamsang \(2017a\)](#) provides an overview of the Doklam incident. According to the press release of the RGoB (Royal Government of Bhutan) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) issued on 29 June 2017, road construction by the Chinese PLA from Dokala in the Doklam area toward the Bhutan army camp in Zompelri on 16 June was a violation of the 1988 and 1998 written agreements between the two countries to maintain peace and tranquility and the status quo pending a final settlement on the boundary question. Bhutan's Ambassador to India, Major General V. Namgyel, had issued a formal *démarche* to the Chinese Embassy in

24 For details of these events sourced from media news reports, see [Malik and Sheikh \(2016\)](#).

25 The first democratically elected government – led by DPT (Druk Phuensum Tshogpa) party – that came to power in 2008 under the leadership of Jigme Y. Thinley as PM lost power in 2013 elections when the announcement of a subsidy withdrawal by India was seen as a signal indicating a preference for rival PDP (People's Democratic Party). This was understood in the light of Indian displeasure over Bhutan's potentially warmer relations with China, specifically a handshake between Bhutanese PM and Chinese Premier on 21 June 2012 at the sidelines of the Rio summit of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development. The 2018 elections, bringing a new party (Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa or DNT) to power, witnessed no allegations or reports of interference.

Delhi on 20 June asking the Chinese side to stop the road construction. The GoI (Government of India) Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) issued a press release on 30 June referring to this and stating that such construction would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India. In the subsequent two months, Indian and Chinese armies were locked in a tense standoff at Bhutan's border that made global headlines.

In the context of Sino-Indian rivalry presentation over the Doklam issue, China has practical administrative control of the region. India has not been able to demonstrate the credibility of support toward Bhutan on Bhutan's preferred choice of policy, which would enhance its real and perceived security. Simply put, China controls and administers the area, Bhutan has a historic claim on it, but China and Bhutan cannot settle their differences without Indian agreement since the area is viewed as strategic for Indian security. Bhutan's border with India was finally demarcated in 2006. Bhutan's close links with India are longstanding and open to economic coercion and diplomatic manipulation, but while exacerbating an entrenched Indo-China rivalry at Bhutan's borders increases Bhutanese insecurity, it is also both directly counterproductive for India per se, and indirectly counterproductive for the perception of India in Bhutan.

Mitra and Thaliyakkattil (2018, 241–243) present the different narratives of the three states suggesting that the Indian version appears to be 'the least supported by concrete evidence' since 'the official Indian version concedes the Chinese allegations that the Indian troops crossed the delineated boundary agreed upon by the two countries'. During the Doklam standoff, while India and China both impinged on the sovereignty of the small state, it is by no means obvious that the specific territorial claim is especially close to Bhutan's perception of its national interest. Bhutanese public sentiment is not appreciative of continued bracketing into a prolonged unresolved matter, the resolution of which would promote regional stability.

To achieve peace through accommodation (Morgenthau, 1948) calls for intelligent diplomacy; techniques of persuasion and negotiation may be as effective as pressure. Sartori (2005) counters perspectives in IR that superficially judge diplomacy to be important, but at the same time view it as superfluous for powerful states and ineffective for weaker ones. If 'diplomacy is the use of language and other signals by

one state in an attempt to convey information to another', then as a form of communication, even though it may technically be 'cheap talk', it is nonetheless powerful and can be effective, both for weak and strong states (ibid.: 3). When the standoff was resolved in 2017, India and China were the main actors in focus, however as [Lamsang \(2017b\)](#), emphases added) points out, it was Bhutanese diplomacy that averted Sino-Indian war:

At the beginning of the standoff one assumption ... was that of Bhutan being almost an Indian 'protectorate' and that it *would do whatever India wanted*. The assumption on the other side was that Bhutan *would be intimidated by China*...By the end of the standoff both assumptions were turned on its head by Bhutan with its public statements, as well as behind the scenes diplomacy with both countries, helping them to not only achieve the disengagement, but also drawing red lines for both sides.

Bhutan made its stand clear to China but refused to send its soldiers to join the Indian soldiers to face the Chinese army.<sup>26</sup> Bhutan also chose to neither confirm nor deny that it had invited Indian troops into Doklam; a strategic decision with 'face-saving' implications for India as well as China. The role of Chinese and Indian media (see [Lamsang, 2017c](#); [Bhatia, 2018](#); [Gupta, 2019](#)) came to the fore during the standoff that lasted two months. The Bhutanese public were vexed with this dangerous brinkmanship at their border, pointing out that they too could resort to hyper-nationalism in a pre-election year (Bhutan's third general elections were held in 2018), but they were choosing to adopt a stance that would avert war ([Lamsang, 2017c](#)). At the disengagement, Bhutan's MFA issued a precise statement on 29 August stating 'We hope this contributes to the maintenance of peace and tranquility and status quo along borders of Bhutan, China and India in keeping with the existing agreements between respective countries' ([MFA, 2017](#)).

A narrative such as the one provided here is rare but it highlights the often unremarked role of the small state in preserving regional peace.

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26 During the 1962 Sino-Indian war as well, Bhutan had refused to let its territory be used by Indian forces. Moreover, as Patterson (1962, 200) noted at the time, 'In the jealous guarding of its sovereignty, Bhutan even refuses to have retired Indian officers to help train its troops, despite the threat from the north'.

On the other hand, a large amount of literature focuses exclusively on actions and perceptions of India and China, even in a dispute that directly involves Bhutan. For instance, [Ahlawat and Hughes \(2018\)](#) discuss the India–China stand-off in Doklam by referring exclusively to the offensive realism of China and defensive realism of India, making reference to Bhutan in one sole paragraph, where it is referred to as a protectorate; that article on Doklam stand-off makes 223 mentions of India, 155 of China, and 12 of Bhutan (almost all exclusively in one single paragraph). In November 2020, reports again surfaced about the Chinese having built a village a few kilometers inside Bhutanese borders. Bhutan’s ambassador to India denied these reports, but Indian media and Indian commentators insisted that this had actually happened.

As a state with a status anxiety, key anchors that pin Bhutanese policymaking are as follows – sovereignty preservation, maintenance of peace, pioneering environmentalism, increasing diversification, gradual internationalization, fostering a harmonious political culture with increasing recognition of a wider range of rights, promotion of self-reliance across a range of sectors, and employment generating economic growth. While India sees China as the biggest challenge in Bhutan, for Bhutan, Indian influence and its implications for their security is no less a challenge. The rivalrous and open outrightly hostile dynamic between India and China is the biggest security threat to Bhutan, and therefore Bhutanese foreign policy and diplomacy has consistently sought to placate India with assurances of its friendship and take the fallout of Indian trust deficit with a strategic silence. Bhutan’s relationship with China is not hostile but amicable and it is rooted in the understanding of its long term and multidimensional orientation toward India. Bhutan’s main aim has been to keep its own domestic politics coherent with its national interest and avoid the splintering of its political sphere into pro-India and pro-China voices. A final point needs mentioning here; as no theorist of international relations can fail to observe, sovereignty is a vexed concept.<sup>27</sup> An idea of

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27 There was a boundary realignment between Bhutan and China in 2007; Bhutan revised its total area from 47000 sq kms to 38394 sq kms (see [Phuntsho, 2013](#)). This does not conform with observations drawn from post-Soviet landlocked states where ceding territory in order to maintain cooperative relationships with *transit states* is an exceptional feature of the foreign policy of such states (see [Idan and Shaffer, 2011](#)), since China is not a transit state for Bhutan.

state sovereignty can be used to substantiate claims and counter claims causing significant insecurity and continued hardship to those for whom it is irrelevant; such sovereignty is almost irrelevant in terms of lived experience for human communities in the sparsely populated high altitude mountainous terrain, such as that at the Sino-Bhutan border.

## 4 Bhutanese international relations

As a small state in the vicinity of two rising powers, Bhutan is geopolitically strategic. The two powers – India and China – have opposing self-ascribed identities as democratic and communist, so that their power competition draws in a wide range of other neighboring countries, and is also of significant interest to important global (Euro-American/Western) actors. The antagonistic relationship between India and China is marked by a high mutual threat perception, frequent hostilities along the range of their long-shared border across the Himalayas and a demonstrable ineffectiveness of big power diplomacy in bringing about conciliatory understandings in spite of increasing volumes of trade between them.

This last section of the article makes an intervention into the IR and small states literature by foregrounding the *Bhutanese* aspects of this small state's foreign policy. In other words, it suggests that Bhutan's foreign policy trajectory is important in both descriptive and analytical terms to better grasp the Indian and Chinese interests as they are negotiated by the Bhutanese, as opposed to accounts where Bhutan is constructed as a passive placeholder with hardly any attention to its indigenous initiative. Both international and domestic factors are interconnected in the intermestic explanation of Bhutan's foreign policy trajectory.

Though never colonized, Bhutan has inherited a legacy of status anxiety due to its treatment during the imperial British era and the overwhelming asymmetry of size and resources in the postcolonial period;<sup>28</sup> the basis of this anxiety included both territorial claims and also formal treaty provisions that were in force until the start of the

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28 On power asymmetry as an explanans for the diversity of the foreign policy behaviour of small states, see Long (2017a, b). In terms of that framework, I would argue that for Bhutan, hydropower resources can be seen as the basis for a particular-intrinsic power. Its multifaceted relationship with India over a long period of time can be seen as a source of

21st-century. Therefore, Bhutan has keenly valued and asserted its sovereignty at every possible juncture, being significantly assisted by the foresight of its monarchic leadership with stable successions (four direct ones in the century between 1907 and 2007) and the careful deliberations of its people's representatives (first in the National Assembly from 1950s onwards, and then through conventionally elected legislators after the monarch-led and widely resisted transition to democracy from 2007 onwards, see [Mathou, 1999](#); [Sinpeng, 2007](#); [Kaul, 2008a,b](#); [Gallenkamp, 2012](#); [Kinga, 2020](#)).

In the second half of the 20th century, as a result of the changing regional environment (status of Tibet, Sino-Indian war, differences in points of view between the domestic elite, status of Sikkim), perforce, a modernizing Bhutan had to establish and increase close bilateral links with its transit state India, with whom its economy has been integrated over time; these were strengthened over time through the discourse of enduring friendship. It chose to gradually internationalize in several successive waves, and has sought to be a norm entrepreneur state through its pioneering of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and its leading by example on environmental conservation. Bhutan is stable and resilient, militarily weak but diplomatically capable; it has not provoked any enmity with India and treads a cautious path with opposing issues that are central to China (Tibet, Taiwan). It has not followed an entirely elite-serving multi-vector foreign policy,<sup>29</sup> but enmeshed<sup>30</sup> wherever possible including with other small states. This small and strategic, democratizing, carbon negative, GNH-professing, Asian welfare state has been so far unable to resolve its northern boundary with China because a resolution acceptable to them both is not perceived by Bhutan's main economic partner India to be in its interests. However, its use of careful diplomacy (such as illustrated in the Doklam

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derivative power. And finally, its efforts to internationalise can be seen as an attempt to leverage collective power.

- 29 Originally named as such by Kazakhstan, versions of a multi-vector approach to foreign policy are found in other Central Asian states to different degrees. [Kurç \(2018, 317\)](#) provides a summary, 'multi-vector foreign policy is about developing relations that are based on non-ideological and pragmatic foundations, which are shaped by the interplay of external and domestic dynamics, to foster short- or long-term benefits'.
- 30 In her investigation of Southeast Asian regional security strategies, [Goh \(2007, 121\)](#) outlines the idea of an enmeshment as something on a spectrum between an engagement on the one hand and a security community on the other.



incident) has contributed to averting full-blown war between the two hegemons, and in this sense it continues to be a net regional stability provider.

Those who have written about the international relations of Bhutan until now have focused mainly on the following descriptive factors: economic conditions, bilateral relationship with India, and the engagements with or threats from China (for instance [Ahsan and Chakma, 1993](#); [Kumar, 2010](#); [Bisht, 2012](#); [Mitra and Thaliyakkattil, 2018](#)).<sup>31</sup> These are to be expected in terms of the structural factors seen as salient in neorealist IR. A departure from such conventional accounts is found in a paper by a Bhutanese scholar [Galay \(2004\)](#) that explicitly considers the international politics of Bhutan in relation to small state behavior theories in international relations, and predictably, finds insufficient explanatory value in them. He makes two important observations: the importance of the multi-perspectival understanding of security, and India's dependence on Bhutan (*ibid.*, 93–95).

The first underscores [Keohane and Nye's \(1977\)](#) point about growing issue-interdependence so that security decisions are embedded with economic and socio-cultural considerations. Beyond the constructivist correctives to neorealism, I speculate that the framework of National Role Conceptions or NRCs<sup>32</sup> in foreign policy analysis (see [Gigleux, 2016](#)) can be useful to grasp the Bhutanese view of culture and environment as security problems, to understand how the ideational factors and self-understandings drive foreign policy behavior. The second point that rather few scholars have ever emphasized is the way in which India is dependent on Bhutan. While it is easy to see the dependence of the small state upon its larger transit state, it is also vital to note the ways in which the regional sub-state economies of Indian areas bordering Bhutan depend on it for electricity, trade, and employment.<sup>33</sup>

31 The 'southern problem' is factored into these discussions, and international links are briefly raised but without drawing upon them in any analytical manner. Bhutan and Bangladesh relations are rarely mentioned, except by [Ahsan and Chakma \(1993\)](#).

32 NRCs are 'policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to that state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system' ([Gigleux, 2016, 28](#)).

33 A recent demonstration of this was when Bhutan prepared to supply oxygen to India during the devastation of the Covid crisis in India in summer 2021. See [Kuensel \(2021\)](#).

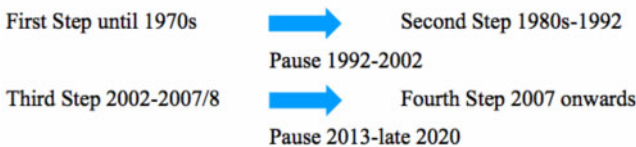
Bhutanese foreign policy provides a clear and sustained evidence of using diplomatic ties in a diversified and sequential manner. In spite of its first diplomatic ties with India in 1968, a careful look at the pattern of its internationalization evinces a diversified portfolio in terms of geographical spread, ideology, level of economic resources and size. Now, I suggest two additional axes through which we might explain the trajectory of Bhutan's foreign policy – a different notion of distance (not simply in geographical terms) and a learning from experience. I explain each of these in turn.

First, it is important to disaggregate the ways in which we might understand distance as playing a role in international politics. Critical IR requires a recognition of the ways in which geography is neither a straightforward matter, nor is it destiny. The very choice of descriptors influences the nature of representations and constructs potential framings. For instance, as [Pain \(1996\)](#) argues, the development discourse frames Bhutan as 'mountainous' in ways that connote the negative attributes of 'isolated' and 'inaccessible'; by comparison, analogous framing of the country in terms of its 'smallness' is conspicuously absent. While there is no empirical dispute about the fact that the country is both mountainous and small, the disproportionate emphasis on it being mountainous, means a focus on the mountain specificities, described in terms of inaccessibility, fragility, marginality, diversity or heterogeneity; none of these characteristics are problematic per se, and many are useful attributes (for example, remoteness is a 'positional good' monetized by Bhutan's tourism policy, and diversity and variability of micro-habitats contributes to risk avoidance and pest and disease control at the farm level). The framing matters, so that mountains do not constrain on development in any simplistic manner, and smallness can, in fact, be correlated positively with excellence in both scale and attitudes (*ibid.*: 66-76).

As in the case of being 'mountainous' or 'small', the framing of distance, and the terms through which distance is understood in foreign policy is important. There is, of course, a fairly straightforward understanding of distance in physical terms, but if we factor in the role of representations and historicity in order to understand foreign policy as the policy of 'making foreign', then we are required to comprehend the productivity of practices through which relationality between entities comes into being (see [Leira, 2019](#)). [Henrikson \(2002\)](#) outlines a

political geography approach to theorize the multiple ways in which ‘diplomacy depends on distances’ (462). Aspects of foreign policy are shaped by different notions of distance, each of which has its own distinctive logic. He advocates paying attention to three kinds of distances – gravitational, topological, and attributional (*ibid.*, 445–462). Gravitational distance, like gravity, refers to power cores, composites around which there are generally assumed to be ‘spheres of influence’ of political power. Topological distance concerns the configuration of political spaces; countries that exist between two places, whatever the actual distances that may separate them. Attributional distance refers to inherent qualities, or similarities along regime characteristics, that are shared by different countries.

The explanatory value in the multiple ideas of distance explained here is relevant for Bhutan. While Bhutan’s relations with India very clearly fall into the category of gravitational power-core, a look at the list of countries that it has expanded relationships with over time indicates a foreign policy overwhelmingly based on the idea of developing links and bridges in terms of attributional distance, specifically along the lines of similarity along one or more of the following attributes – smallness, monarchy, Buddhist ethos, and commitment to environmental values. I empirically demonstrate this below using data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) website. I anchor the phases of Bhutan’s internationalization as below:



As noted in the previous sections, Bhutan’s first step in internationalization was the establishment of its diplomatic relationship with India and Bangladesh until the 1970s. The second step was Bhutan’s internationalization during the 1980s and until 1992; the expansion of relations included Kuwait, Nepal, Maldives, The Netherlands, European Union, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, Japan, Finland, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Pakistan, Austria, Thailand, Bahrain. The economic system, ideology, party affiliation is not overwhelmingly relevant, but a

combination of smallness and/or monarchy and/or Buddhism is present (Kuwait, Nepal, Maldives, The Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland, Japan, Sri Lanka, Austria, Thailand, Bahrain). Environmental values, along with a mix of developmental partnerships in Bhutan, are visible in cases such as Sweden, The Netherlands, European Union, Switzerland. The relationship with South Korea in September 1987 and Pakistan in December 1988 came into being after significant changes in those two countries.<sup>34</sup>

From 1992 to 2002, there was a pause. Bhutan established no new bilateral diplomatic relations, although it did join several multilateral bodies relating not just to environment and transport, but also telecommunications (this must be viewed from the perspective of Bhutan being opened up to television and Internet in 1999). In the period preceding the transition to democracy in 2007–08, a third step toward internationalization was taken when three new bilateral diplomatic relations came into being during 2002–03, with Australia, Singapore, Canada. Here, the economic factors appear preponderant. In fact, as of 2020, the distance in terms of mental maps between Bhutan and Australia continues to steadily reduce as a significant number of Bhutanese (especially teachers and civil servants) now go overseas to Australia for training and employment. As a result, the Bhutanese diaspora in Australia may become an important voice in Bhutan.<sup>35</sup>

The fourth step was taken after the transition to democracy in 2007, and during the term of the first government (DPT) that lasted until 2013. During this period, Bhutan established bilateral diplomatic relations with a large number of countries. Starting in 2009, and until March 2013, bilateral diplomatic relations were established with Belgium, Brazil, Afghanistan, Spain, Cuba, Fiji, Morocco, Luxembourg, Czech Republic, Serbia, Indonesia, Mongolia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Argentina, Costa Rica, Andorra, Mauritius, Eswatini, United Arab Emirates, Slovenia, Slovakia, Armenia, Turkey, Egypt,

34 The June democracy movement in South Korea and the end of General Zia's dictatorship in Pakistan with Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party winning the elections in November 1988.

35 Here, I refer to the largely educated and better off diaspora group of emigrant Bhutanese citizens that may have a voice in Bhutan's politics. There is also the Bhutanese exile diaspora and resettled refugees in multiple countries who have advocacy/activist groups and political organizations, however, this diaspora political experience (see [Banki, 2013](#)) is not accompanied by a significant voice in internal Bhutanese politics.

Kazakhstan, Poland, Colombia, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Oman. During this fourth step, the relations included countries in Africa and South America; they exhibit no discernible ideological tilt (relations with Turkey and Armenia were actually established on the same day in September 2012). In this phase, there is no specific set of attributes relating to monarchy, Buddhist ethos, or economic power-core. There is the presence of rising powers like Brazil in 2009, or an expected turning point in Afghanistan in 2010, and a clear resonance on environmental commitments with a country like Costa Rica, but unlike the earlier steps of internationalization, this fourth step of internationalization exhibits no cluster of cases to indicate the bridging of gravitational or attributional distance. It rather indicates Bhutan's own efforts to place its values on the global center stage to promote its idea of happiness; norm entrepreneurship through niche diplomacy.<sup>36</sup> The period from 2013 to November 2020 was again a pause (akin to 1992–2002) that saw no new bilateral diplomatic relations; Bhutan also joined no new multilateral bodies. This 'pause' covers the entire term of the second elected government, where the party (PDP) came to power against a background of rumored Indian interference in the elections.<sup>37</sup>

In November 2020, two years into the term of the third elected government (a new party, Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa, DNT) that began in 2018, diplomatic relations were established with Germany, clearly an economic powerhouse and a center of gravity in Europe, especially at a time when the United Kingdom is disentangling through Brexit. Shortly afterwards, in December 2020, formal relations were established with Israel. These changes are indicative of a fifth step in internationalization (likely similar to the third step where economic factors

36 On 1 October 2012, Bhutan's then PM Thinley also participated in the inaugural Forum of Small States (FOSS) Conference in New York. For a report of this conference, see [UN \(2012\)](#). FOSS, with over a hundred states as members now, was initiated by Singapore in 1992 as 'an informal and non-ideological grouping of small states. . . that meet a few times a year to discuss issues of concern to small states' (MFA, Singapore at <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/SINGAPORES-FOREIGN-POLICY/International-Issues/Small-States>, see also [Corbett, Xu and Weller, 2019](#), 666).

37 However, in this period too, several of Bhutan's foreign relations were underscored with high profile events. For instance, in 2016, Bhutan hosted royal visits from UK, Sweden, Saudi Arabia, and also the ambassador of the People's Republic of China to India (see [Kuensel, 2017](#)).

predominate). Bhutan does not have formal diplomatic relations with the UK, USA, Russia, or China as of the time of this writing.

The first ‘pause’ in internationalization in the 1990s after what I have termed as the ‘second step’, could be explained to an extent by the fallout of the ‘Southern problem’, which led to multiple media framings of Bhutan as a country that had expelled refugees and carried out ethnic cleansing (see footnote 3 above). The period from 2003 to 2008 was marked by significant domestic legal, institutional, and organizational architecture that was put in place to transition to a democracy. The second ‘pause’ after the ‘fourth step’ from 2013 onwards can best be understood in terms of domestic factors, specifically the internal polarization that was created in Bhutan after the election campaign of 2013. The incumbent DPT that lost the 2013 elections came to be seen as the ‘morally injured’ party that had to pay a price for antagonizing India by asserting Bhutan’s international personality (as a probable prelude to opening up relations with China, the latter being a specter of intense fear in India) by its supporters, and as a party of ‘anti-nationals’ by its opponents, including the supporters of the winning party PDP, because the DPT leadership was alleged to have been present at an infamous post-election meeting where anti-monarchist slogans were reportedly chanted (see Kinga, 2020). The veracity – for or against – of these details is hard to prove, but the polarizing term of the ‘anti-nationals’ echoed back to the same term (‘ngolop’ in national language Dzongkha) that was used for those opposed to the government during the ‘southern problem’. There is no discernible overlap between these real or imagined anti-nationals during the different eras (the DPT being a staunchly traditional party that did not have a particular power base in the south of the country), but the polarization affected the population to a significant extent, and thereby, resulted in a domestic consensus about the undesirability of accelerated internationalization. In contrast to many theoretical predictions that domestic factors are salient only for larger states’ foreign policy, there is an important role of the domestic factors on the direction of foreign policy of this small state.

The overall idea of distance in all its multiple interpretations is helps to understand the trajectory of Bhutan’s international relations and its connexions to value domain, role conceptions, and domestic politics. While an overwhelming attention is paid to its bilateral relationship

with India – and even that the analysis is often exclusively from the Indian point of view – its gravitational distance to India notwithstanding, countries which may be seen as ‘close’ for Bhutan will include Japan, Thailand, Switzerland, Kuwait – which are not ‘near’ in terms of physical distance. Bhutanese diplomacy has facilitated this along with managing its long-standing friendship with India.

Second, a more accurate understanding of Bhutan’s trajectory can be had by paying attention to learning from experience. Nepal and Bhutan are both landlocked small states in Asia, but their policies have followed very different trajectories. The traditional explanation for this is that Nepal has chosen balancing between India and China, whereas Bhutan has chosen to bandwagon with India. However, as I have argued in this article, if we take a more careful look at Bhutan’s foreign policy, it becomes apparent that there is no unambiguous way of supporting the assertion of bandwagoning, and multiple initiatives undertaken by Bhutan reveal its independence in foreign policy and the role of its careful diplomacy. As a small state with a distinctive trajectory of incrementalist and cautious internationalization, supported by an extraordinarily stable set of domestic institutions with gradual decentralization of power, Bhutan has benefited from the examples of other countries in the region that existed in the past, came into being later, or survive into the present (*viz.*, Sikkim, Nepal, Tibet, Bangladesh).

The experiences of each of these entities played an important role in the learning that was incorporated into the thinking behind Bhutanese foreign policy and its instruments of diplomacy. For instance, Chinese control over Tibet from 1951 and the Sino-Indian war in 1962, precipitated accelerating modernization in Bhutan through its decision to enact developmental planning. The mingling of religion and politics in the fate of Tibet is in sharp contrast to the clearly delineated demarcation between religious and secular realms in Bhutan; so much so that even after the transition to democracy in 2007, the clergy do not have a vote in Bhutan. The Indian takeover of Sikkim in 1975 was another important lesson for Bhutan, preceded as it was by demographic and cultural transformation of the Himalayan state. When Bangladesh was established as the new sovereign country in 1971, Bhutan was the first

country in the world to recognize it;<sup>38</sup> the diplomatic relations between Bhutan and Bangladesh were established in 1973, and have continued to be strong since (Kaul and Khandu, 2020). Unlike the bloodshed and intrigue (the palace massacre in 2001) that eventually resulted in the demise of the over two centuries old monarchy in Nepal in 2008, Bhutanese monarchy consolidated its credibility over the same period by growing its international reputation by devolving power.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Bhutan's Kings have personally played an important role in creating diplomatic space for Bhutan in South Asia and beyond through a range of symbolic, commemorative, and sympathetic gestures over time.<sup>40</sup>

Even at a crucial turning point such as the aftermath of the 1962 war between India and China, when it might have been tempting to emulate the Nepalese strategy of balancing between India and China, Bhutan rejected the Nepalese model as inappropriate, and opted to gradually expand its relations with the outside world without undermining the regional and security interests of its friend India by using a different approach to achieve what Rose (1974, 199) called 'equally positive, if less dramatic results'; nearly half a century ago, writing in the context of Bhutan's China policy, he observed: 'To the Royal Government, Nepal is as much an example of how *not* to manage a country's external relations as it is an object for emulation' (ibid., 205). Furthermore, 'observing Nepal's relationship with India, which included blockades in 1960, 1969, 1989-1990, and 2015-2016, the Bhutanese judged that by antagonizing India and playing the China card, Nepal managed only to

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38 This is in contrast to Kinne (2014, 251–252) whereby unilateral moves that resist transitive influences (for instance, a country formally recognising the independence of others) are understood as being “largely a luxury of the powerful”.

39 It is important to note that unlike many other countries, Bhutan's monarchy is not divine right nor rooted in religious inheritance; it was instituted in 1907, with a measure of popular support. Reforms carried out by the third King had included the ability of the National Assembly to register a vote of no-confidence in the King, and Bhutan's current Constitution, initiated by the fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck at the time of his voluntary abdication in favour of his son (the fifth King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck), contains provisions that requires monarchs to retire at the age of 65 years (on various aspects over time, see Rose, 1977; Mathou, 1999, 624–626; Iyer, 2019; Kaul, 2008a, 2021a).

40 These gestures have ranged, for instance, from the fifth King (and Queen Jetsun Pema) attending the state funeral of Singapore's founding PM Lee Kuan Yew in 2015 (and flying Bhutan's flags at half-mast as gesture toward the ASEAN country) to holding a prayer ceremony for the demise of former Indian President in 2020 (see Kuensel, 2015, 2020).



destabilise the country's internal politics and retard its economic development' (Mitra and Thaliyakkattil, 2018, 256).

Traditionally, the bilateral relationship with India is the mainstay of Bhutan's foreign policy, around which a growing internationalization in discrete waves over successive decades, has built an additional layer of security through a constrained enmeshment. The axis of Bhutan's linkage with India is a positive line back to long-term friendship diplomacy and cooperation; this dynamic is offset against India's 'fear/threat of China'. Bhutan's linkage with other global actors is its positive national role conception via pursuit of GNH and environmental values; this is offset against the legacy of the 'southern problem'. As of 2020, the positive links to India and other global actors are durable for Bhutan, the southern problem of ethnic violence flare up in late 1980s and early 1990s has been effectively addressed with the combination of third country resettlement of Bhutanese refugees from the camps in Nepal, and the rehabilitation into citizenship through the granting of 'citizenship kidus' (welfare grants of citizenship by the current fifth King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck) for over 10,000 southern Bhutanese people in Bhutan who were directly or indirectly affected by the civil strife and state securitization.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the transition to parliamentary democracy and the consolidation of its democratic trajectory and institutions ensures domestic stability within the country.

## 5 Conclusion

Nuanced studies of the political dynamics of the Himalayan region are imperative to challenge the simplistic pictures of great power agency and strategy, which can benefit from novel insights into the role of small states, beyond the ideas of buffers. This article provides an original account to show precisely how Bhutan – as a peaceful sovereign small Himalayan state, a consolidating democracy,<sup>42</sup> and a norm

41 Shaw (2015: 17) provides an account of the political role of Kidu and refers to the grant of 8,374 citizenships in 2014. These citizenships ceremonies are held for a few hundred people at a time. Kuensel (2019) reports the ceremony granting citizenship to 356 people in March 2019, by which time 10,200 citizenships had been granted.

42 I use consolidation here in the classical sense of Schedler (1998, 104–105) about avoiding democratic erosion and expectations of regime continuity, but also to indicate a democratic deepening, whereby: 'It [democracy] is a moving target, an open-ended, developmental kind of thing—and so is democratic deepening'.

entrepreneur in the area of environmental conservation – has used a diversity of strategies in its domestic and foreign policy to ensure the survival and well-being of its people, and the sustained pursuit of its national interest, especially when it comes to a direct trajectory of sovereignty preservation and enhancement. It further shows how the trajectory of Bhutanese international relations is vital beyond the trope of India as the only friend and China as the only threat.<sup>43</sup> Though the main threat to the Himalayan region in contemporary times is posed by India–China hostility and the Doklam incident very nearly escalated into a war, Bhutan’s careful diplomatic navigation of the standoff was a crucial contribution to averting it, thereby illustrating that small states can play a role in war not being a *fait accompli* on a volatile frontier. Overlaying an understanding of Bhutanese foreign policy within contemporary IR literature, this article encourages additional work on the role of small states in the larger political dynamics in Asia. In doing so, it further advances the claim that the political dynamics of individual polities fundamentally matter in our ability to holistically conceptualise the variegated workings of power.

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## Declaration

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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43 Although Bhutan’s friendship with India is both complex and credibly demonstrated over time, Bhutan has not borne the negative externalities of its close friendship through India’s foes becoming its own foes too. On a popular social media site for enquiry in South Asia (‘Quora’), a user asked the question – ‘Who is Bhutan’s enemy?’. It was answered by more than one Indian identifying individual as ‘China’, but the only Bhutanese to answer it responded with the two words ‘climate change’. In 2017, a former US ambassador to the Asian Development Bank noted, ‘Large countries will seek in the years ahead to apply economic or military pressure to shape their smaller neighbors’ behaviors and policies – no different than today. Asia and the Pacific, however, will be better off if all nations adopt some modern-day, “small state ideas” offered up by Bhutan, Timor-Leste and Singapore – namely the embrace of a greener, more representative and more transparent future for all their citizens’ (Chin, 2017).

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