

Subalternizing Geopolitics: Bhutan as a Small Himalayan State

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What would it mean to study great power politics in a world where the existence, agency, strategy, and the priorities of small states were acknowledged and taken seriously?¹

Geopolitics, in its conventional sense, has always focused on the perspectives of major powers, which has led to the accepted narratives of zero-sum games and national honor-based clashes. In such narratives, small states at the periphery of large powers are seen merely as placeholders—as real estate, buffers or transit routes, as sites of power play. This thinking perpetuates border disputes, significant restrictions on connectivity and relationality, and have implications for all entities concerned. I invite you to instead think about what I have previously called "subalternizing geopolitics." To consider the center from the periphery in any context is vital because the margin is a revealing place; the common-sensical assumptions and self-reinforcing truisms of the dominant status quo narrative are not obvious there. Effectively, looking at geopolitics from Delhi in India or Beijing in China provides a different perspective on the underpinnings of international ties as opposed to looking at it from Thimphu in Bhutan. To understand the workings of great power, and to be able to anticipate socio-political dynamics and their influence upon the classical tropes of territory, conflict, alliances, and so on, it is essential to pay much greater attention to the disaggregations that comprise of sub-regional shifts, including

¹ This has been a consistent theme in my work especially in relation to Himalayan small states in Asia, and more specifically for the purposes of this article, Bhutan. I have worked on various aspects of Bhutan's history, politics, policy, and geopolitics for the last two decades, and draw upon the sources below. See especially Nitasha Kaul, "'Where Is Bhutan?' The Production of Bhutan's Asymmetrical Inbetweenness in Geopolitics," *Journal of Asian Studies* 80:2 (2021), 317–36; "Representing Bhutan: A Critical Analysis of the Politics of Knowledge Production," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 49:4 (2021), 629–57; "Friendship and International Relations in the Himalayas: Bhutan, Britain and the 1910 Treaty of Punakha", *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46:3 (2022) 417-438; "Beyond India and China: Bhutan as a Small State in International Relations," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 22:2 (2022), 297–337. See also "Small State, Big Example: Covid Pandemic Management in Bhutan", *Critical Studies on Security*, 9:1 (2021), 58-62; "Bhutan and Northeast India: Subnational Diplomacy Possibilities" (with Dechen Rabgyal), *South Asian Voices*, Stimson Center, Washington DC, 15 September 2021; "Small state relations: Bhutan and Bangladesh" (with Sangay Khandu), *Asia Dialogue*, Asia Research Institute, 30 March 2020 and "Bhutan-India relations in the 21st century", *9 Dash Line*, 6 April 2020; "Bhutan's foreign policy balancing act", *East Asia Forum*, 26 November 2022.

in public discourse, human movement, and economic and climate vulnerabilities.

As the literature on small states informs us, small does not always equal weak. While small states may lack economic or military power in many cases, they compensate for it through focused goals pursued through better coordination and more effective results-oriented multilateral diplomacy. Small states are generally in support of a rules-based global order and often act as norm entrepreneurs. This is certainly the case for Bhutan, a country that has pioneered the idea of Gross National Happiness (GNH), a concept that posits a normative corrective to the idea of growth measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as an end in itself. Over the years, GNH has had its adherents and its detractors, but its significance as a metric of public policy and its traction in public diplomacy cannot be ignored. In what follows, I first answer why in a world hungry for kinetic showdowns and one-upmanship, we must pay attention to a small peaceful Himalayan state? Bhutan rarely makes the news, and when it does, it is often exoticized or seen simply as a passive placeholder in between India and China. I outline the typical way in which it features in Asian affairs, that is, as the site of a border dispute between the two rising powers India and China. Then, I highlight a few salient factors related to the material and ideological underpinnings of public discourse in Bhutan that are crucial for understanding the future trajectory of Himalayan geopolitics in this region.

Knowledge making on Bhutan has historically been linked to the histories of imperial power in the region. The politics of outsider knowledge production on Bhutan is riven with the role of systematicity, selectivity, and positionality in terms of whose views were heard and reproduced over time. Today, Bhutan's location on a map as "in-between India and China" is an exhaustive framing that constructs the country's image as timeless, obscure, and remote. A Bhutan that is "naturally" oriented southwards in its relationship with India elicits a kind of "asymmetric in-betweenness" that is historically unconvincing in light of its many cultural ties with Tibet. Moreover, in its geopolitical implications, it engenders an assumption of innately friendly and frictionless ties with India, and an equally ingrained perpetual threat from China. To any careful observer of Bhutan's own agency, it will be manifestly clear that the country is clear-eyed about a variety of threats ranging from territorial to ecological, demographic to economic, and while acknowledging its significant and long-standing relationship with India, it does not perceive China as only a hostile enemy. While India has often resorted to sensible economic diplomacy,² and only sometimes to coercion, it has not always been duly cognizant of the cultural and historical complexity of Bhutan as a state that was not ever formerly colonized but inherited a lasting status anxiety from its encounters with multiple imperial powers in the colonial and post-colonial era. For its part, Bhutan has long held to the discourse of enduring "friendship" with India. This vocabulary of friendship has played an important role in sustaining relations between two countries that are very different from each other in multiple ways.

² In the latest Union budget presented on February 1, 2023, India announced an increase in aid allocation for Bhutan. The budget allocated Rupees 2,400 crore as aid (1,632.24 crore as grant and remaining 768.34 as loan) to Bhutan, a slight increase compared to Rupees 2,266 crore last year. See *Business Bhutan*, February 4, 2023, <https://businessbhutan.bt/india-increases-funds-for-bhutan/>

Bhutan has undergone massive changes in recent decades.³ In the twenty-first century alone the country has seen the revision of an old friendship treaty (dating back over a century in its various iterations) with India to remove a clause that required it to seek India's guidance in the conduct of its external relations, and has held fully democratic elections with an unconventional monarchy-led transition to democracy at a time when a referendum on the desirability of such a transition would have failed.⁴ In the three elections held so far (in 2008, 2013, 2018), a new political party has come to power each time.⁵ These successive governments have overseen a continual clarification of the division of powers, frictions over the freedom of speech and public accountability, and the enactment of progressive legislation such as the decriminalization of homosexuality. The country has also improved its rankings in various indicators, comparing favorably to its bigger and smaller neighbors, and does exceptionally well in the Global Peace Index as the only Asian country to be ranked in the top 20. In the conduct of its foreign policy, Bhutan as a small state has sought to use multilateralism by emphasizing its particular vulnerabilities in order to act as a norm entrepreneur on the global stage and place issues such as climate change and happiness on the agenda. The country has internationalized incrementally and cautiously, witnessing various phases of accelerated diplomatic ties interspersed by periods in which no new diplomatic ties were established.⁶ While the country's two major conventional resources are hydropower and tourism, neither of which are easily reconciled with its strong pro-environment focus, Bhutan's Constitution mandates that 60 percent of the country remain under forest cover in perpetuity.⁷ As a result, Bhutan is one of the three Carbon-negative countries on the planet.⁸

3 Especially in view of the fact of TV and internet arriving in Bhutan only in 1999. For more on these changes preceding the democratic transition in 2007-2008, see Nitasha Kaul "Transition from Absolute Monarchy in Bhutan," *Monarchies in Transition Workshop Memo*, Centre on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL), Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI), Stanford University, June 2008. https://www.academia.edu/36179517/Kaul_N_2008_Transition_from_Absolute_Monarchy_in_Bhutan_Memo_%20on_Bhutan_Monarchies_in_Transition_Workshop_Centre_on_Democracy_Development_and_the_Rule_of_La%20w_CDDRL_Freeman_Spogli_Institute_for_International_Studies_FSI_Stanford_University

4 See "Power to the People", *The CSD Bulletin* 15, no. 2 (Summer Issue): 1-2 & 20, ISSN 1461-4510. https://www.nitashakaul.com/uploads/NK_CSD_article.pdf

5 The DPT (Druk Phuensum Tshogpa) in 2008, the PDP (People's Democratic Party) in 2013, and the DNT (Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa) in 2018. The next general elections are in 2023/2024, with two new political parties already registered in the fray.

6 Between 1992 and 2002 and between 2013 and late 2020, the country did not establish new diplomatic relations. For more, see Nitasha Kaul, "Beyond India and China: Bhutan as a Small State in International Relations," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 22, no. 2 (2022): 323.

7 Another interesting clause concerns the retirement age of monarchs (constitutionally fixed at 65). The country's constitution is a very short document (unlike, say, the immensely detailed constitution in India) however, its creation was preceded by years of deliberation, and a very detailed clause-by-clause history and interpretation is provided by the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye in his book, *The Constitution of Bhutan: Principles and Philosophies* (Thimphu: Judiciary, 2015).

8 It was the first country to achieve this recognition beyond net-zero carbon neutrality to being carbon negative.

Notwithstanding the above, the standard (and often the only) way in which Bhutan is referenced in global politics is in regard to the conflict between India and China. Bhutan's two large, resource-hungry, and populous neighbors—India and China—share a long border that has seen various confrontations in both the eastern and northern sectors, including a full-scale war in 1962 (during which Bhutan officially remained neutral). Bhutan's own southern border with India was finally demarcated in 2006, and aspects of its northern border with the Tibetan region in China continues to be a regional flash point in spite of negotiations that began in 1984 (with the preliminary talks beginning in 1981). In the eastern Himalayas too, in the vicinity of Bhutan, India and China clashed over Arunachal Pradesh. Bhutan's border resolution with China is still pending in spite of a peace agreement in 1998 whereby the Chinese acknowledged Bhutanese sovereignty ("China fully respects the territorial integrity and independence of Bhutan") and other proposed settlements (including the offer of a territorial swap) made by China. This inability to find a resolution to the Bhutan-China border dispute lies in the region of Doklam, which is perceived by India as its own strategic area. In 2017, Indian and Chinese armies faced off for several weeks at Doklam, which is situated at Bhutan's trijunction point. The biggest threat at this time was for Bhutan, yet its careful diplomacy, including the strategic use of silence, was crucial in keeping the situation from escalating into a full-blown war between two nuclear-armed neighbors. Bhutan made its stance clear to China but refused to send its soldiers to join the Indian forces; it also chose to neither confirm nor deny that it had invited Indian troops into Doklam.

Throughout this episode,⁹ Bhutan barely featured in the media or in the scholarly analyses even though it was Bhutan's sovereignty and security that was most at stake. An overwhelming amount of reportage focused on the priorities in a possible full-blown war between India and China, without concern for the consequences to Bhutan.¹⁰ The idea of a demarcated and secure border between Bhutan and China is a superlatively rational move for the region and for the world since any large-scale conflict in this fragile and high-altitude ecosystem would also have disastrous effects down the ecological ladder. Yet, without anchoring the rationale in empirical detail or demonstrability, conventional geopolitics proceeds from the assumption that negotiations involving anything beyond the perceived priorities of great powers would be irrational, infeasible, or undesirable.

On the other hand, the endeavor to subalternize geopolitics is also about questioning the seductions of a particular idea of rationality that does not serve any states, large or small. For more reasons than one, Bhutan's existential need to reach a resolution on its northern border must be a central focus when looking at the region. First, while Bhutan has no policy animus towards China (for instance, in its stance on Tibet or

9 This is discussed in detail in Nitasha Kaul, "Beyond India and China: Bhutan as a Small State in International Relations," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 22, no. 2 (2022): 297–337. Please also see the sources therein.

10 One article (mentioned in Kaul, "Beyond India and China") referred exclusively to the offensive realism of China and defensive realism of India, making 223 mentions of India, 155 of China, and 12 of Bhutan (almost all exclusively in one single paragraph), incorrectly calling it a protectorate. Bhutan is sovereign and has been a member state in the UN since 1972.

Taiwan), it is not unaware of the potential demographic, economic, or military threats from China. Bhutan has indicated its desire to reach a resolution on the border dispute in order to increase its security, which is at stake every time there are real or purported encroachments by China.¹¹ Yet, these encroachments are often amplified in Indian and Western media without due attention to details or context, projecting an exact overlap of Indian and Bhutanese insecurities and interests in the matter.¹² This point needs to be labored a fair bit because commentary ignoring these basic facts (often explicitly) projects a patronizing understanding of a "tiny Bhutan" and "Chinese dragon."¹³ In addition, the news grist continually feeds into an escalation of hostile perceptions and entrenched status quos via designating any move forward by Bhutan on the Bhutan-China border resolution as a gesture of disloyalty on the part of Bhutan, or as a sign of weakening Indian grip over its smaller neighbor.

Second, the idea of resolving this border situation is not infeasible or a far-fetched possibility. In October 2021, Bhutan and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for a three-step roadmap to expedite the boundary negotiation talks. Further, in 2023, after the 11th Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on the Bhutan-China Boundary Issues held in Kunming, China, both sides put out a joint press release¹⁴ announcing that a "positive consensus" had been reached to "simultaneously push forward the implementation of all steps" of the roadmap. A sensible way forward in this ecologically sensitive and politically volatile region would be to demarcate and agree on the boundary, the absence of which puts Bhutan's territory at stake.¹⁵ Even so, a disappointingly large number of commentaries have framed these moves through the typical lens of

11 In the last few years, repeated news stories have surfaced in the Indian media about Chinese construction of villages inside Bhutan, however, Bhutanese ambassador to India Major General V. Namgyel categorically denied any such claims. The Chinese response is at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202011/1207785.shtml>

12 For more, see Nitasha Kaul, "Bhutan's foreign policy balancing act", *East Asia Forum*, November 26, 2022.

13 The patronizing framing adopted towards small Himalayan state shas a long history. The standard orientalist stereotypes and the language of the 'little brother' has often been used by the large Asian countries for countries such as Nepal and Bhutan. Within theoretical frameworks such as constructivist international relations, representations are not removed from the analysis of what constitutes 'real IR'. Moreover, examples of headlines like "Tiny Bhutan takes fight to 'dragon' China" (*Deccan Chronicle* newspaper in India, 2017) are especially inopportune since Bhutan's own name in Dzongkha (the national language) is 'Druk Yul' or the land of the thunder dragon, and the dragon is a most auspicious creature in Bhutan, featuring even on its national flag.

14 See text at <https://www.mfa.gov.bt/joint-press-release-of-the-11th-expert-group-meeting-egm-on-the-bhutan-%20china-boundary-issues/> and at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202301/t20230113_11006950.html. It is crucial to note the headline of this same news in *Tibetan Review* since histories continue to live on in human memory even when they are not acknowledged by contemporary cartographic conventions: "Bhutan and China agree to expedite occupied-Tibet border talks" <https://www.tibetanreview.net/bhutan-and-china-agree-to-%20expedite-occupied-tibet-border-talks/>

15 Previously, there was a boundary realignment between Bhutan and China in 2007; Bhutan revised its total area from 47000 sq kms to 38394 sq kms. Without a demarcation and settlement by Bhutan and China of the Tibetan/Bhutanese boundary, Bhutan faces a continued threat, not from China per se, but from an undemarcated border with China.

neighborly jealousy.¹⁶

Third, the public discourse within Bhutan has changed remarkably in the last several years with the arrival of democracy, media debates and global exposure, greater levels of higher education, and a significant and growing diaspora. A large number of the small population of Bhutanese have gone abroad to study or work in Australia, and now more than 30,000 Bhutanese live in Australia.¹⁷ So much so that in popular humour the Bhutanese claim Australia as their 21st province!¹⁸ Many young, educated Bhutanese who are aware of global politics and international relations wonder why their country may not conduct its foreign policy as it sees fit. At a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) seminar recently, a Bhutanese explicitly asked why, if India and China can have independent diplomatic relations and keep increasing the trade volumes among themselves, should Bhutan be unable to act in its own perceived interests?

There are significant ongoing changes in Bhutan that will have repercussions for the country's future trajectory. For instance, over the last several years, the civil service, traditionally an important influence in the country, has been reformed to streamline its personnel and improve the efficiency of public service delivery.¹⁹ This shakeup has meant that many bureaucrats, and also teachers, have moved on from the traditionally assured stability of a government job and often gone abroad, in particular to Australia. This large, educated diaspora of a small country continues to be important in shaping public opinion, and this influence will only increase in the years to come. Equally, there is a concerted move within Bhutan to shift towards a greater Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) focus in the country's education systems²⁰ and

16 For instance, see the following: headline in Indian newspaper *Deccan Herald* on January 22, 2023, "Bhutan, China cannot agree on anything without India's OK" (the write-up ended on the note that "Bhutan should put on hold all border talks till the issue of Tibet is settled. In any case, Bhutan should not do anything that will bring China to India's doorstep in the Himalayas"); headline in Indian magazine *The Week* on January 19, 2023, "Indian apprehensions soar as Bhutan, China talk border" (the write-up carries an image of Jammu & Kashmir, and begins thus "That India is uneasy of Bhutan-China ties is, to say the least"); the headline on *ABP live news* outlet on January 22, 2023, "Neighborhood Watch: Will China Be Able To Steer Bhutan The Nepal Way?" (note how Bhutan's own agency and initiative is entirely erased). There are many more extreme examples referring to the "drifting away" of Bhutan and the "alarm bells" in India (far too numerous to recount here).

17 In Bhutanese imagination, Australia is a land of opportunity but also migrant hardship. For a discussion, see Yedzin Tobgay, *The Paradox of Bhutan's Australian Dream*, *The Diplomat*, October 19, 2022. The Bhutanese government has supported this migration where possible, see this writeup in the *Kuensel*, Bhutan's national newspaper, on October 22, 2022: <https://kuenselonline.com/govt-exploring-ways-to-help-bhutanese-go-to-%20australia/>

18 Bhutan has 20 provinces (called "dzongkhags").

19 This has also been accompanied by a reorganization and renaming of certain government ministries. See *The Bhutanese*, December 11, 2022, <https://thebhutanese.bt/national-assembly-adopts-the-civil-service-reform-bill-%202022/>

20 See *The Bhutanese*, August 13, 2022, <https://thebhutanese.bt/national-assembly-adopts-the-civil-service-%20reform-bill-2022/>

in its citizen-oriented service delivery.²¹ At the university level, this transition is most palpable in the nature of the shift away from arts and humanities subjects.

In policy terms, there is a growing discourse that closely analyzes the economic growth and environmental preservation trade-off, as well as economic growth and foreign policy linkages. Thus, while Bhutan has for decades been a leader in climate governance,²² this laudable sustainability has not always managed to deliver results in terms of economic returns—youth unemployment in the country in 2021 was at 20.9 percent.²³ Bhutan's economy was also badly affected across sectors by the pandemic when the long period of closed borders drastically affected the tourism industry, a main earner of foreign exchange.²⁴ Voices within the country have questioned whether its forest cover could be sustainably managed better.²⁵ Moreover, notwithstanding this focus on environmental care, the Himalayan ecosystem remains vulnerable to natural disasters such as glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) that can be triggered at high altitudes in its northern region.²⁶ Similarly, the melting glaciers, irregular rains, floods and droughts in the wider region pose potential difficulties for agriculture and forestry in the country.²⁷

In spite of these economic pressures and environmental constraints, the country has managed to sidestep the sort of reactionary nationalism seen in many other Asian

21 The country has most recently developed a National Digital ID system to preserve data privacy and improve service delivery in public and private sectors. The crown prince of Bhutan onboarded the system and became the first digital citizen of Bhutan in February 2023, as part of an initiative that will be extended to all Bhutanese. See *Kuensel*, February 25, 2023, <https://kuenselonline.com/hrh-the-gyalsey-becomes-first-digital-citizen/>

22 Bhutan's carbon negative status means that it offsets its own emissions and acts as a carbon sink for others, but this imposes an economic cost in turn. See Shelby Tzung, "Carbon Negativity In Bhutan: An Inverse free rider problem," *Harvard International Review*, September 12, 2022, <https://hir.harvard.edu/carbon-negativity-%20in-bhutan-an-inverse-free-rider-problem/>

23 National Statistics Bureau (NSB), Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB), https://www.nsb.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2022/04/2021-LFS-Press-Release-1.pdf

24 See *The Bhutanese*, January 1, 2022, <https://thebhutanese.bt/how-covid-19-affected-the-economy-in-2021/>. See also the Bhutanese cross-sectoral discussions on the pandemic effects and resilience pathways that were part of a project on "Biodemocracy and Resilience in Bhutan." Reports are at <https://bhutanbiodemocracy.com> and <https://www.facebook.com/BhutanBiodemocracy>

25 See "The politics of forest cover and forest conservation in Bhutan" by the Bhutanese forester Phuntsho Namgyel in Bhutan's national newspaper *Kuensel*, August 21, 2021, <https://kuenselonline.com/the-politics-of-%20forest-cover-and-forest-conservation-in-bhutan/>. See also <https://www.southasiamonitor.org/bhutan/bhutan-%20must-urgently-undertake-forest-thinning-programme-dr-phuntsho-namgyel-forestry-and> <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/rethinking-conservation-narrative-one-worlds-only-carbon-negative-countries>.

26 See "Living in constant fear of glacial lake outburst flood," *UNDP Bhutan*, January 24, 2022, <https://undp-bhutan.exposure.co/living-in-constant-fear-of-glacial-lake-outburst-flood>.

27 See "Water shortage in water abundant Bhutan?," *Kuensel*, June 18, 2018, <https://kuenselonline.com/water-%20shortage-in-water-abundant-bhutan/>. See also "Bhutan fights back against water crisis," *Deutsche Welle*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/bhutan-fights-back-against-water-crisis/a-62219959>.

countries.²⁸ This is attributable to the emphasis on a harmonious discourse in public and policymaking domains, but also results from the diligence of the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) as a constitutional body in enforcing very strict rules and criteria for the registration and campaigning for any political party in the elections. However, outside of electoral politics, every aspect of Bhutanese decision-making is deliberated with wide-ranging views, and this includes the costs and benefits of Bhutan's policies toward India and China. Especially since the Doklam stand-off, there is a greater emphasis on the need to have demarcated and secure borders. Subalternizing geopolitics entails recognizing these concerns and priorities.

Globally, we seem to be moving towards an era of renewed focus on the standard geopolitical scripts of great power competition and territorial wars, perhaps even with Cold War echoes. Against this backdrop, paying greater attention to the endogenous drivers of agency and existential priorities of a small Himalayan democracy that has consistently moved towards more liberal values in the twenty-first century, would not only be a sensible but also a strategic thing to do for the world community. A theoretical position of subalternizing geopolitics advocates exactly that—to critically examine the Asian major power narratives for their historical blind spots, ingrained paternalist tropes, and reflexive insecurities. Paying attention to the sub regional dynamics in Asia will enable better solutions to various transborder challenges that include not just territorial conflict and border disputes, but also increasingly, their intertwining with public discourse, human movement, and economic and climate vulnerabilities. Subalternizing geopolitics offers a way to assess and mitigate these challenges' potentially complex political impacts.

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28 For instance, see Apichai W. Shipper, "Reactionary Nationalism and Democratic Development in Myanmar and Japan", Policy Forum, *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* 6 (2020): 28-35, <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/1059395>.