

Security of Bhutan: Walking Between the Giants*

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Introduction

'Vulnerability' best sums up the plight of small states in any discourse on security. Many size factors interplay to entangle most small states in a network of insecurities, and smallness has seldom been beautiful. Small states have often been the 'objects of conquest' in the big powers' scramble for dominion during the colonial and cold war periods. They have been conquered, cornered, exploited and reduced to mere buffer states or pawns in war-games, sometimes changing many hands, since their military – the traditional guarantor of security – was weak.

A normative shift in the concept of security today brought about by uni-polar world and the process of globalization does no good either, despite existing international law and post-Kuwait, -cold war norms. The new security threat is more subtle, dangerous and difficult to contain. While the old military threat still looms large, new forces working across borders are beyond their control, and this complicates the security situation further. How will small states fare under this new world order? There are both opportunities and challenges arising from both the realist and idealist world orders and the process of globalization.

Bhutan is a small Buddhist kingdom with an area of 40,076 square kilometers landlocked between India and China. These two Asian giants have asymmetric geography, demography, economy, military, natural resource endowments and

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civilizations vis-à-vis Bhutan.¹ But these two regional powers have been competitors, not partners in the regions, thus creating a difficult atmosphere for its small neighbours. Like Nepal, Bhutan is like ‘a yam between two boulders’² and this geo-strategic location makes Bhutan so important in big neighbours’ perception of security.

Bhutan has never been colonized and as a result Bhutanese society has traditionally been sensitive to the issues of security, and preserving its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity has historically been a constant challenge.³ The two great world wars and cold war have spared Bhutan unlike its neighbours. However, it was the focus of big powers politics – Tibetans and Mongols from north, and the British India from the south. Today they are replaced by China and India. Bhutan fought seven wars in the north and three in the south to protect its territorial sovereignty.

Its long history and tradition of political independence, UN membership, political leaderships and successful bilateral and multilateral politics have indeed played a big part in avoiding the fates of its neighbours – integration of Tibet with China (1959) and Sikkim to India (1976). Bhutan closed its old historical ties with Tibet (China) due to various political and historical reasons. The geography, moreover, favoured India, for Himalaya barred an easy access to the north. Today, Bhutan’s relation with China remains frozen like Himalayan ice itself, while Bhutan-India relation burns like heat of Indian tropics. But the global shift in the regional and

¹ Bhutan lost about 3000 square kilometers of its land to the British India during the Duar War, 1864-65, and a few hundred square kilometers to China in process of settling border disputes.

² Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1778, then the Raja of Gorkha, used this metaphor to compare Nepal’s plight between India and China.

³ Tashi Choden and Dorji Penjore (2004). *Economic and Political Between Bhutan and Neighbouring Countries*, Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies

international relations mostly brought about by forces of globalization is changing this *status quo*.

This paper discusses three broad crosscutting security issues facing Bhutan today – a) Sino-Bhutan border conflict, its security implications, and how resolution of border problem will further complicate its security; b) possible changes in the Indo-Bhutan relation due to other forces such as India's north-east insurgents, improving Sino-Bhutan relation and its implication on India's security concern; and c) the dark side of globalization – the impacts of Bhutan joining World Trade Organization (WTO), and the introduction of satellite TV and information technology which are changing the very fabrics on which Bhutan's national identity is writ large.

Besides other problems, the above three issues are going to have major impacts on the security of Bhutan in the next few decades.

Bringing History into Perspective

An understanding of Bhutan's political history is a prerequisite for getting full pictures of the above issues.

Bhutan has a long history of Buddhist civilization beginning Eighth century AD. However, it was unified as a nation between 1616 and 1652. Historically, Bhutan - the land of peaceful dragon - has never been at peace; Bhutan was a victor⁴ as much as it has been a vanquished.⁵ Throughout its history, its big neighbours and imperialists had posed great security threats - Tibet in the 17th and 18th centuries, followed by the British India in the 19th century.⁶ However, it was never colonized, thus making the issue of security,

⁴ Bhutan invaded the kingdoms of Cooch Behar and Sikkim

⁵ Lost all three wars fought with the British, and ceded one-third of its southern territories.

⁶ Karma Ura, "Perception of Security," in *South Asian Security: Future*, Dipankar Banerjee (eds.) (Colombo: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies)

sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity very sensitive today.

Tibet seriously challenged Bhutan's statehood because it supposedly stood in its way of consolidating the entire Himalayan Buddhist regions into a Gelugpa domain. The process of founding of Bhutan and Tibet as nations, Bhutan under First Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651?) and Tibet under V Dalia Lama Ngawang Losang Gyatso (1617-1682), were almost parallel events.⁷ Tibetans and combined Tibetan-Mongol forces unsuccessfully invaded Bhutan seven times in the 17th century.⁸ But the event of 1730 was to haunt the country. During the internal strife of 1729-1735 in western Bhutan, Paro Penlop declared independence and invited the Tibetan forces for assistance. Joint military forces of Paro Penlop and Tibetan defeated the Bhutanese government troops for the first time. The Tibetan ruler Pholanas informed the Chinese emperor that he had brought Bhutan under the emperor's rule, and the Chinese vague suzerainty claim over Bhutan was based on this little piece of misinformation.⁹

Historically, Bhutan had a cordial relation with the British India before it expanded its border to the north. The whole stretch of plains measuring 3000 square miles along the present India's borders called Duars was under Bhutanese sovereignty.¹⁰ Bhutan became a rightful kingmaker in Cooch Behar kingdom, and even stationed a small force. Relation became rocky after the interests of the British and Bhutan

⁷ V Dalai Lama consolidated Gelugpa School by persecuting other schools, Drukpa Kagyu being one.

⁸ In 1618, 1634, 1639, 1644-46, 1649, 1656-57, 1675-79)

⁹ Karma Ura, pp 136. Chinese claim was based on the work of Chinese historian Tieh-tsung where he wrote that China assumed suzerainty over Bhutan beginning 1831.

¹⁰ There were a total of 18 Duars under Bhutanese rule - 7 Assam Duars in Darrang and Kamrup, and 11 Bengal Duars from river Testa to Manas, including districts of Ambari Falakata and Jalpesh.

clashed in Cooch Behar, resulting into the first Anglo-Bhutan War in 1772. This was the beginning of the British interests in Bhutan as a gateway to British trade with Tibet. Many missions were consequently sent to extend and 'explore frontiers of knowledge' and open trade route to Central Asia.

Duar War and the Treaty of Sinchula, 1965

The British annexation of Assam in 1829 brought Bhutan into a direct contact with the British, leading to hostility (1837-64) with the East India Company and later with the British Empire. Over the next century, the British interests in Bhutan changed from trade to security following the Great Game between Russia, China and the British powers over the control of Central Asia. Bhutan too was then a political power to be reckoned with. While mighty Himalaya barred Bhutan's northern expansion, its southern regions provided incentives, thus leading to interference in affairs of Cooch Behar and Sikkim, and the final invasions.

The Duars was a single most important part of Bhutanese territory, fiscally and economically.¹¹ The British annexation of Assam Duars in 1841 resulted to the Duar War of 1864-65. Its direct result was a humiliating Treaty of Sinchula, 1865 which annexed all Bengal Duars and extended borders to foothills, in return for a monetary compensation. The British took over Bhutan's role in Sikkim and Cooch Behar¹² in return for non-interference in its internal matters.¹³ This treaty institutionalized the relation between the two countries

¹¹ Karma Ura, *ibid*

¹² Bhutan exercised its force in Sikkim, Cooch Behar kingdom and principality of Vijapur, and this factor brought Bhutan in direct contact with the British interests.

¹³ The Article 2 "agreed that the whole of the tract known as the Eighteen Doars ... is ceded by the Bhootan Government to the British Government forever," and Article 4 provides that "In consideration of the cession by the Bhootan Government of the territories specified in Article 2 of this Treaty...the British Government agreed to make an annual allowance to the Government of Bhootan of a sum not exceeding fifty-thousand rupees..."

for the first time, and provided basis for future relation. The terms of the treaty curtailed Bhutan's expansion in the south and west – the areas British contested.

Manchu Claim and the Treaty of Punakha, 1910

45 years later the Treaty of Punakha, 1910 was signed in response to geopolitical changes in the north. There was a strong China's presence in Tibet and the British became concerned with the China's forward policy in Tibet and other Himalayan states. China had also claimed all Himalayan states as its suzerains and the British wanted to stop the Chinese expansion by keeping Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim as buffer states.

The new treaty's provisions increased annual compensation for the forced occupation of Bhutanese territory, and guaranteed non-interference in Bhutan's internal affairs in return for the British guidance on its external matters. Bhutan was an independent country, and thus it only became a kind of loose British dependency for practical and political purpose. It was a balanced treaty despite enhancing the British role from arbitrator to an advisor on external matters.¹⁴

However, China suzerainty claim on Bhutan intensified in 1949 when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was born, and an acrimonious relation with the new China began.

Sino-Bhutan Relation

Bhutan is the only China's neighbour with whom it does not have a diplomatic relation despite sharing a common border. Incursion by People Liberation Army (PLA) into undefined border areas has been a threat to its territorial integrity and national security during the last few decades. Bhutan is under increasing pressure to start a diplomatic relation with China, and diplomatic relation was made an indirect

¹⁴ Tashi and Dorji, *ibid*

precondition for a resolving border dispute. What implications will this bilateral relation have on Bhutan-India relation and the two countries' national security? Historically, Bhutan was closer to Tibet than India, but geo-political and historical factors have frozen the relation in 1960. China's claim on Bhutan tilted the balance completely.

What interest did old China have in Bhutan? As most historians point out, it was no more than bringing Bhutan under its area of influence and stopping the British expansion. One big but vague tool China used, as elsewhere, was its concept of 'middle kingdom' suzerainty. But it backfired, especially in Bhutan's case. There is no historical record of two countries having any contact until the Ching dynasty maintained its residents in Lhasa around 1720s.¹⁵ China made concerted efforts to exercise 'historic' rights over Bhutan between 1865 when the Treaty of Sinchula was signed and the signing of the Treaty of Punakha in 1910. The new Republic of China slowly let the claim die down, only to surface later.

China watched Bhutan become an Indian area of influence after signing the Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty of 1949. As far as 1930, Chairman Mao "declared that the correct boundaries of China would include Burma, Bhutan, Nepal..."¹⁶ But later editions deleted the claim after PRC began to form a 'Himalayan federation" comprising of Tibet, Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) of India to extend its influence in southern Himalayas. Later PRC used its suzerainty tool much aggressively. In 1954 PRC published *A Brief History of China* where a considerable portion of Bhutan was included as a

¹⁵ Chinese claim was based on the work of Chinese historian Tieh-tsung where he wrote that China assumed suzerainty over Bhutan beginning 1731, after the Tibet's ruler Polhanas misinformed the Tibet's overlord of Ching dynasty that Bhutan was under him.

¹⁶ In the original version of *The Chinese Revolution and the Communist Party* openly

pre-historical realm of China.¹⁷ In 1958, another map claimed a large tract of Bhutanese lands, and later occupied about 300 square miles of Bhutanese territory in the north and north-eastern Bhutan. The Chinese claim surfaced again in 1960 when it openly declared that Bhutanese, Sikkimese and Ladakhis form a united family in Tibet, that they have always been subject to Tibet and to the great motherland of China, and that they must once again be united and taught the communist doctrine.

Bhutan's Southward Policy

For centuries Tibet has been a spiritual heartland of Mahayana Buddhist in Himalayan regions, and the loss of its neighbour had a great security implication for Bhutan. Tensions following Tibet's integration subsided after the Sino-Tibetan Treaty of 1951 promised Tibet's autonomy, and the 1952 Agreement with India allowed New Delhi to maintain a consul-general in Lhasa. The five principles of peaceful co-existence (*panchshila*) of 1954 demonstrated a benign Chinese attitude to its neighbours. Bhutan's mission in Lhasa functioned as before, and the trade continued. But the relation worsened after the brutal crushing of anti-Chinese revolts, first in eastern Tibet (1954-1955) and later in central Tibet (1958). The Tibetan uprising in 1959, the Dalai Lama's flight to India, and reports of Chinese troops along the ill-defined frontier posed a security threat.

After Tibet's integration, China resorted to carrots and sticks policy – carrots in form of economic assistance and assurance of independence, and sticks in the form of continuous claims. In 1959 the PLA occupied eight Bhutanese enclaves in

¹⁷ The other countries included were Soviet Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Nepal, Sikkim, Assam, Burma, Malaya, Thailand, North and South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Sulu Island of Indonesia, Taiwan, Korea and a large part of the Soviet Far east

western Tibet,¹⁸ and that same year, Chinese Premier Chou En-Lai expressed China's desire for a direct bilateral border talk with Bhutan. Bhutan was forced to close its northern border and withdrew its representatives in Lhasa and officers in western Tibet in 1960, thus putting an end to a thousand year old relations with Tibet. With its traditional northern trade route closed, Bhutan turned south.

Beginning of Border Problem

Sino-Bhutan border dispute is not so much a contest over territory as it is of China's desire to punish Bhutan for allying with its regional rival India. Territorial conflict is only a tip of an iceberg.

A 470-kilometer long un-demarcated Bhutan-Tibet border did not trouble the peoples of both countries until the Chinese takeover of Tibet. China has warned that that boundary dispute was a source of conflicts in the world, and it would take just a small incident to conflagrate the situation into a difficult diplomatic or a military confrontation. Tibetan herders, even PLA, stray into what Bhutan considers as its territory, while Bhutanese herders too stray into what China considers as theirs. The herdsmen of both countries have been exercising their rights to traditional pasturelands, thus leading to claims and counterclaims in un-demarcated borders.

The border problem posed a serious security threat after September 1979 incursion into Bhutanese territory. When Bhutan protested, China expressed its desire to solve the problem bilaterally. That same year, the National Assembly deliberated on normalizing relation with China and initiating

¹⁸ The eight enclaves, Khangri, Tarcheng, Checkar, Jangtong, Tussu, Janghi, Dirafoo, Chakop and Kachan were given to Bhutan by a Ladakhi king Singye Namgyal in the 17th century. Bhutan exercised administrative jurisdiction and they were never subject to Tibetan law, nor did they pay any Tibetan taxes.

a direct talk to resolve the problem. The subsequent events led to a direct China-Bhutan border talk. Until then Bhutan's border issues has been incorporated with the Sino-Indian border discussion.

While the preliminary talks began in 1981, the first formal meeting took place in Beijing in 1984. The talks began to be held every year alternatively in Thimphu and Beijing since then. China has always maintained that Indo-Bhutan Treaty of 1949 is an 'unequal' treaty – a symbol of India's hegemony in the region, and Chinese Premier in his message on the 1984 National Day of Bhutan conveyed that China attached great importance to developing friendly and neighbourly relations with Bhutan.

The progress has been slow because of the political and technical nature of the problem. However, a lot of differences were narrowed, and agreement was reached on basic guiding principle on boundary settlement.

Swapping Border Resolution for Diplomatic Relation

It became evident from the very first that China was more interested in developing direct relation with Bhutan than resolving border issues. During the second round in 1985, China talked of expanding contact, saying that it has diplomatic relations with all SAARC states, but not with Bhutan.

In 1996, Bhutan discovered the Chinese logging and road construction activities in the disputed territory, and when the issue was brought up in the 11th round, China proposed for the signing of an interim agreement for maintenance of peace and tranquility along the borders. This agreement was signed on 8 December 1998 in the 12th round. This interim agreement is very significant because it is the first legal document that has been signed by the two countries, and until that time there was no evidence of China recognizing

Bhutan's sovereignty, except that it has claimed Bhutan as a part of China.

Chinese approach in resolving the border as in Nepal was through a 'package deal' rather than a 'sector-by-sector' settlement. During the 11th round held in Beijing, China proposed to exchange 495 square kilometers area¹⁹ with an area of 269 square kilometers in the north-west Bhutan.²⁰ Sinchulumba shares border with Sikkim and is very close to Chumbi valley, and this particular territorial swapping would seriously undermine India's security by shifting the Bhutan-China border to the south. However, both sides agreed to discuss at technical level, and then decide on the Chinese and Bhutanese territories on maps. The 18th round was held in Thimphu in 2004.

Are Two Countries Heading for a Diplomatic Relation?

Besides yearly border consultations, contacts at various levels have increased in recent decades, beginning the 1974 Coronation. The sports, religious and cultural visits have been followed by participation in regional and international meetings on security, hydropower development, tourism and health. Bhutan has always maintained one-China policy by voting for restoring China's United Nations' seat in 1971, and as 55th UN General Assembly's Vice-chairman, Bhutan rejected Taiwan's participation motions in UN and WHO. Bhutan also opposed Taiwan's bid to host 2002 Asian Games. The Chinese ambassador to India has been visiting Bhutan on regular basis since 1994, and Bhutanese ambassador visited China in 2000. These visits have opened up new channels of interaction and contacts for exchanging opinions on different issues, besides boundary talks

Unresolved northern border is a serious concern for Bhutan's national security and territorial sovereignty and it has to be

¹⁹ Pasamlung and Jarkarlung valleys in the northern borders

²⁰ Sinchulumba, Dramana and Shakhtoe

solved soon. But if diplomatic relation is a precondition for resolving border problem, how will it affect Indo-Bhutan relation.

Indo-Bhutan Relation: A Relation Stronger than ever before

Bhutan and India is bound together by a 'special relation'. This special relation has slowly evolved from a donor-recipient to equal partner relationship, the best example being development of Bhutan's water resource for hydropower generation. While India is helping Bhutan harness the water resource through aid, grant, and loan, energy-deficient India could benefit from energy import from Bhutan. In 2001 about 94.1 % of Bhutan's export went to India, while imports from India constitute 77.7%.²¹

The friendship is deeply rooted in religion, culture, history and economic ties, encompassing a wide range of areas and issues of common interests like security, politics, trade and economy. It proved that a small state with a stable government and right leadership could be an equal partner of a giant state with asymmetric economic, political, military, demographic and geographic powers. But will it ever remain the same? Some new developments in regional and international relations, and the process of globalization are testing the validity and relevance of both the treaty and the 'special' relation.

As old order changed, yielding place to the new after the British withdrawal from India, Bhutan felt the need to negotiate a new relation with India. The Treaty of Punakha 1910 did not define Bhutan's status, technically or legally since it was only designed to stop any Chinese threat to British India's northern frontier. The British did not realize the necessity for Bhutan's external relation as long as the country remained isolated and inward-looking.

²¹ Does this figure translate into economic vulnerability? Or putting all eggs into one basket?

The Indo-Bhutan Treaty of 1949

While negotiating a fresh treaty, both countries were clear in their objectives – Bhutan to get the new India's recognition of its independence like the British and to get back 32 square kilometers Dewangiri (now Dewathang) ceded by the Treaty of Sinchula, 1865; and India to restore Dewathang, so as to remove any fear of India's alleged imperialistic design, and prevent Bhutan from looking north.

The Article 2 of the treaty reads, “The Government of India undertakes to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan. On its part the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations.” Does this treaty reduce Bhutan - one of Asia's oldest and un-colonized nations into a mere Indian protectorate?

There were discrepancies between English and Bhutanese (Dzongkha) texts of the treaty, and the treaty did not specify which version was authoritative. New Delhi insisted Bhutan was obligated to be guided by India's advice while Bhutan maintained it will merely seek and consider India's advice. Decades of disagreement led to New Delhi's acceptance of Thimphu's version and interpretation in mid-1980s.²² A new interpretation of the article came up in 1974 following the Bhutanese foreign minister's comment that India's advice and guidance on foreign policy matters was optional.

Agreement or disagreement over its interpretation is not important here; what is important is the true existing reality, for the treaty has never stood in way of Bhutan conducting its international affairs. The leaders of both countries believed that the continuity and sanctity of the 1949 treaty depends ultimately on the faith and trust which the signatories

²² John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*, (2001, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London) p.176

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reposed in each other. Almost half a century on, the treaty is vibrant and dynamic as both countries co-operate for common interest. Bhutan has always stood by India, for "a strong India means a strong friend of Bhutan." The Indo-Bhutan friendship qualifies as a good example of bilateral relation in the region, not only because of the relations between the two countries and governments, but equally because of the individuals and organizations in both the countries, which have fostered closeness and interdependence on their own.

Asked whether it is time to renew the treaty of 1949 given the excellent Indo-Bhutan relations and the global changes in international relations, Bhutan's foreign minister Jigmi Y Thinley had said the treaty has never been a constraint in conducting Bhutan's foreign relations, establishing diplomatic relations, engaging in various international forums, and in pursuing the paths with respect to its aspiration.²³ In the words of former Indian Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit, the letters of the treaty do not really prevail in terms of determining the relations between Bhutan and India, but rather it is more of spirit of goodwill and understanding and friendship that prevails in conducting their separate relations with other countries. The relation demonstrates how the tremendous goodwill and friendships between the two countries can transcend legal instruments, and the words printed on paper.

Integration of Tibet, PLA's incursion into delimited border, a vague Chinese claim and other events shattered Bhutan's isolation policy since isolation was detrimental to sovereignty, and Tibet was a good example. The country was forced to re-evaluate its traditional isolation policy, and the need to develop its lines of communications with India became an urgent necessity. It was in this respect that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Bhutan on a horseback in

²³ Transcription of talk given to the students of Sherubtse College, Kanglung, on 24 February 1999

September 1958 to convince Bhutan end its isolation policy and accept India's economic assistance. India feared that any direct foreign contact would pull Bhutan into big power politics and might seriously affect its social and economic stability, which could in fact destabilize a strip of land connecting north-east to the rest of India.

Bhutan: the Most Vulnerable Sector in the Indian Security System

From India's perspective, Bhutan is one of the most vulnerable sectors in the Indian security system, as it "stood out as a wide vacuum on a frontier of vital strategic importance." Stability in entire Himalayan neighborhood became important for India's security. Thus, India unilaterally included Bhutan within India's northern security system. India inherited the British doctrine of preventing the areas within India's strategic interest from falling under the foreign powers, and India is always sensitive about keeping an exclusive influence in the southern Himalaya. For India, a weak Bhutan means weak buffer state or "extended frontier" with China, and it is only in this connection that India has played a major role in bringing an end of Bhutan's isolation policy, started socio-economic development and promoted Bhutan's international stature through UN membership and other multilateral organizations. India's assistance is indirectly tied to Bhutan's refusal of China's assistance.

Problem in Southern Borders

No country has threatened Bhutan's territorial integrity militarily since the Duar War of 1864-65. Bhutan's greatest threat came from its northern borders – be it suzerainty claims, cartographic invasion, territorial intrusion, enclaves occupation etc. While its limited security forces were guarding northern borders, all was quiet on its southern front because an excellent Indo-Bhutan friendship was thought to have guaranteed it. There was not a single security post along the southern border.

It turned out to be ironic that the major security threat in recent years came from its unguarded southern border. India may be a good friend and neighbour, but its northeast insurgents are not. These non-state actors from Assam and West Bengal who were fighting for independence from Indian Federation have the potential to undermine the friendship not only between two countries, but also between peoples of both countries living along the borders. The insurgents had been using Bhutanese soil as hideouts and training ground to carry out hit and run activities against vital infrastructure and security forces of India. The presence of these militants, United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and Kamtapur Liberation Army (KLA) have been a great concern to Bhutan for nearly a decade until they were flushed out in December 2003.

India's northeastern corner and the neighbouring countries embody some of the major demographic and environmental time bombs in the subcontinent.²⁴ There are insurgent movements from about 50 groups rooted in history, language and ethnicity, tribal rivalry, migration, local resource control, drugs, centre and state government negligence and foreign powers involvement. Bhutan's proximity to the region makes it very susceptible to any ethnic tensions in the northeast. The presence of militants in Bhutan was known only in 1996. Bhutan understood the potential danger, and beginning 1997 the issue dominated the National Assembly discussions.

Bhutan was caught up in a situation whereby it has a little or no human and materials to finance military operation, and acquiescing to India's unilateral operation would have been a violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bhutan. Moreover, any military action would incite the local Assamese population against the Bhutanese population. Bhutan uses Indian highways to travel from west to east and vice versa,

²⁴ Mandavi Mehta, "India's Turbulent Northeast," *The South Asia Monitor*, Number 35, July 5, 2001

putting Bhutanese travelers at risk, should there be any military action. The militants were adamant on staying on in the country until they get independence from India, thus justifying their long-term presence.

For the first time in its modern history, Bhutan is considering creation of a large militia or reserve force to defend national borders, which was largely prompted by these non-state actors. The idea to train students completing universities or high schools for guarding the borders permanently have been directly prompted by security threat posed by militants. Located between two military giants, Bhutan has never militarized itself, and its standing army numbering a couple of thousands were used to guard the northern frontier. Today, the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA), Royal Body Guard (RBG), and Royal Bhutan Police (RBP) together employ 14,209 personnel,²⁵ and this increase was promoted by the recent crisis with the militants. The security of its southern border is being strengthened through regular patrolling and surveillance of high-risk areas. Now military camps have been established and troops deployed along the entire border areas between Sibsoo and Daifam (farthest eastern and western border towns).²⁶

Globalization

It would be absurd to try to stop the wind of globalization sweeping the world, but if navigated skillfully, steering a steady course and avoid reef, can reach you to haven safe and sound.²⁷ There is no denying the fact that technological progress of recent years has transformed our lives, especially in field of communications and access to knowledge. The drastic changes witnessed in the last few years have widened

²⁵ “Strengthening national security” at www.kuenselonline.com, July 25, 2004

²⁶ “Need to strengthen Indo-Bhutan border security” at www.kuenselonline.com, July 25, 2004

²⁷ Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*; Barbara Bray (Trans.) (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000)

the gap across many generations in many aspects of life. Bhutan is aware that globalization is irreversible and inevitable, that in the end the benefits will outweigh the cost, and that it is a necessity, not a choice.²⁸ Amin Maalouf argues that the present mass media revolution – ‘the multiplication of the means of expression and the diversification of opinion’ – is also leading to intellectual impoverishment since outpouring of ideas on global scale leads to conformism which is the ‘lowest form of intellectual denominator’ – that is reading same book, listening to same music, watching same films, and swallowing same sound, images and beliefs. TV give access to an infinite variety of opinions, the powerful media mogul only amplify the prevailing opinions, rejecting others point of view, and a flood of words and images discourages criticism.

Cultural Identity to Fight Cultural Homogenization

As remote, cocooned and isolated Bhutan may be until recent years, the process of globalization is transforming structures of society, economy and polity. While there are many advantages of globalization, its negative impacts are not few. Wedged between two billion Chinese and Indians, Bhutan (population 700,000) has long pursued the preservation and promotion of its unique culture as its national identity. The country has neither military nor economic might, and its age-old culture and tradition have been promoted to fight off the global cultural homogenization. Much time and resources have been committed to prevent its culture from going to museum. Globalization is changing the both mental and physical contours of Bhutan where 85% of the population are farmers. How can Bhutan overcome dark side of globalization? Until early 1960s Bhutan was a mediaeval country in strict western sense of the term, but the recent

²⁸ Tashi Wangyel, “Rhetoric and Reality: An Assessment of the Impact of WTO on Bhutan” in *Spider an the Piglet* – proceedings of the First International Seminar on Bhutan Studies, Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2004

changes are dramatically transforming its economics, politics, and society as never before.

Beginning of an Aerial Invasion

Bhutan became the last nation in the world to introduce television in 1999, and a few years later a crime waves of murder, homicide, shop-lifting, burglary, theft, fraud, drunk driving followed, together with students indiscipline, substance abuse, disrespect for values, mental problem. Marihuana growing wild along the road was once used as feeds for pigs, and now children are beginning to smoke it. These social ills are mostly attributed to TV.

The onslaught of satellite TV and information technology is eroding the badge of national identity and sovereignty, which Bhutan has prided and prided upon. Cable TV may have opened people's eyes to outside world, but it is blurring its inner eyes to see oneself. It is fast homogenizing the tradition to modernity, and adaptation is impossible given the speed, rapidity, volume and glamour of the TV culture. At no time in history is the country going through a rapid social and cultural transformation. At the end of the day, we will have a weakened social solidarity, diluted culture, weak family values, a sterile spiritual plane, and not god-fearing, but god-fighting men and women.

The logic for opening up to TV and Internet was an assumption that Bhutanese are educated enough to sieve the good from the worst, a belief that a culture as rich and vibrant as Bhutanese could prevail over trash TV culture, and the people are capable of selecting good from rubbish; but a few year experiences is proving the opposite. TV is striking at the heart of what Bhutan has been trying to promote and preserve as its national identity. "(T)his is a country that has reached modernity at such breakneck speed that the god of wisdom Jambayang is finding it virtually impossible to compete with the new icons," and TV is "persuading a nation

of novice Buddhist consumers to become preoccupied with themselves, rather than searching for their self.”²⁹

WTO: Economic Entanglement or Enlightenment?

Bhutan’s commitment to open itself to the globalization can be better understood from its application to World Trade Organization (WTO) membership. It is a signatory regional free trade regimes such as SAARC Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), and Bay of Bengal Trade and Economic Cooperation (BB-TEC). Bhutan is not tempted to accept or reject globalization but chose to take a path at its own strength and speed. But membership follows liberalization, economic reforms, re-legislation, new institutions and harmonization of national laws, regulations and procedures to conform to the WTO agreements. Can Bhutan fulfill and afford these changes? Is Bhutan prepared to compete and benefit from enhanced market access? The dilemma here is Bhutan’s ability to reconcile incongruity between perceived benefits and its limited capacity to reap benefits in the ‘level playing field’.³⁰ Bhutan faces lots of disadvantage from its poor natural resources, lack of labour, capital and technology, problems related to size, structural and geographic location.³¹

Conclusion

Sino-Bhutan relation has been growing since the beginning of the first annual border talk in 1984. From 1959 to the present day, China’s consistent goals has been to draw Bhutan away from its special relations with India, and it used various tools to this end - refusal to discuss about Bhutan

²⁹ Adrian Levy & Cathy Scott-Clark “Fast forward into trouble”, *The Guardian*, Saturday, June 14, 2003

³⁰ Tashi Wangyal, *ibid*

³¹ Land transportation in a landlocked countries whose products need to cross borders is costly. The median landlocked country pays up to 50 percent more in transportation costs than the median coastal nation (see Ricardo Hausmann, “Prisoner of Geography – landlocked countries economies” *Foreign Policy*, January 2001)

during Sino-Indian border talks, providing incentives to Bhutan for having a direct relation with Beijing and linking Sino-Bhutan relation as a condition for softening Sino-Indian rapprochement. China has still refuse to accept what it calls as 'unequal' Indo-Bhutan relation. While Chinese allegation that the 1949 treaty was an 'unequal treaty' symbolizing India's expansionism and hegemony appeals to Bhutanese nationalism, China has negotiated in early 1980s to recognize Bhutan as an Indian protectorate in return for India's ban on Tibetan refugees' anti-China activities from Indian soil.³² Among other factors, history still haunts Bhutan – series of claims China made on Bhutan – despite the interim agreement signed between the two countries recognizing each other's independence. Is the interim agreement a ploy – a Chinese Trojan Horse - to deceive Bhutan into believing China's good, neighbourly and benign intentions and to woe Bhutan, only to be a monster later?

China has been pressing for establishing a diplomatic relation before signing final border agreement. If that is the rigid Chinese criterion, then it will not be solved at all until there is thaw in Sino-Bhutan relation. India has played a big role in Bhutan's development. India's assistance was tied to Bhutan's support on India's security need – meaning no third power presence in Bhutanese soil. India has showed a tremendous good will by enhancing Bhutan's independence by supporting Bhutan's United Nations membership, and acceptance of Thimphu's interpretation of Article 2 of the 1949 Treaty.

Unlike Nepal and Sikkim (before merger), Bhutan has never played its China card against India. Bhutan saw what India could do to Nepal during 1988-89 embargo and integration of Sikkim to India in 1974, if it is provoked or if its neighbours are insensitive to its security concerns. Bhutan has always felt comfortable with the existing bilateral relation, and chose to be a pragmatic. India holds the same geographic trump

³² John W. Garver, *ibid*

card it has with Nepal, and any disruption of communication through Indian territory will cripple the Bhutan's economy. During the 1988 embargo on Nepal, Bhutan saw China's inability to become India's substitute. Bhutan's economy is strongly depended upon India. Hydro-power project built through Indian grant is the main revenue earner, and the coming mega-hydro projects dependent on Indian energy market is going to the backbone of Bhutan's economy. There is a great risk in any change in relation with India.

Any improvement in Sino-India relation has been accompanied by diminished Chinese interests in Bhutan³³ and until such times when Sino-India relation has improved, there is no possibility for any resolution of border problem, nor diplomatic relation with China. So Sino-Bhutan border dispute will continue to be a serious security threat to Bhutan.

The northeast insurgents have been flushed out now, but it is not a permanent solution as long as the problems continue in India. There is no adequate infrastructure and manpower to guard 266 kilometer Bhutan-Assam border. The 2003 military actions against the militants have incensed the local population, and the Bhutanese travelers will continue to be a target of future retaliations. Bhutan has to be on guard as long as the insurgency problem is not solved in India, and the present situation depicts gloom pictures. India's determination to crush any insurgency for independence, and the insurgents' will to fight for independence are the two ends of spectrum.

Socio-economic development plans are fast transforming Bhutan into a modern state. Various development indicators are above the regional average. But development has come at a cost – cost of environment despite 73% forest coverage, erosion of culture and tradition, dilution of people's faith,

³³ J, Mohan Malik, "South Asia in China's Foreign ", *Pacifica Review*, Volume 13, Number 1, February 2001

weakened communal and social solidarity and widening gap between the rich and poor. The opening of this Arcadian country to the forces of globalization, which comes in various sizes and forms, is increasing the country's vulnerabilities in aspects of economy, society, environment, culture, religion and polity. All these changes have lots of bearing on the country's security since the security paradigm has changed from its traditional (military) concept to include non-traditional aspects. But this is not to suggest that Bhutan has to close its eyes to globalization. As Amin Maalouf argues, globalization, if navigated carefully, will reach the country to a safe shore of prosperity and security.

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