

PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY

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Introduction

As a bridgehead between two economic, demographic and geo-political giants – India and China – has had great influence on our perception of security, which changes in response to internal and external circumstances. Issues of security occupy a great deal of attention of the state even in peacetime. It has become somewhat customary to assess issues from the point of view security because of the heightened and staunch sense of security in the country. This habit has had a constructive impact. Bhutan has been politically a stable country having been kept out of colonial domination, cold war and regional rivalries¹.

Different explanations apply to different periods of maintenance of our security, depending on the nature of threat and warfare. In the 17th and early 18th century, the security threat was mainly posed from Tibet. In the 19th century, it was threat from Imperial British Raj with whom Bhutan was embroiled over the Assam and Bengal Duars².

The Bhutanese foreign policy, since the 1950s, has been clearly focused on forging a close relationship with India while broadening Bhutan's links with the international community. The latter is inescapable consequence also of globalisation. There is no choice to be made between close ties with India and the growth of Bhutan's international relationships: each track contributes to the national security and progress in its own way. This tenet of foreign policy has contributed to stability and progress in the country.

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Contemporary security concerns are primarily two: the territorial incursions by United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and National Democratic Front for Bodoland (NDFB) cadres in southern Bhutanese jungles and the problem of southern dissidents. The southern problem is a by-product of immigrant's citizenship issue. The illicit intrusion of ULFA and NDFB cadres using Bhutanese jungles as sanctuaries is the result of internal conflict in Assam. Their intrusion points to the fact that the instabilities and unrest in the international border regions could spill over into Bhutan.

Two Historical Advantages: Flexible Force (*Pazap*) and Inaccessible Terrain

The newly formed Bhutanese state fended off persistent threats from Tibet for several decades in the 17th centuries. Both during and after the unification of Bhutan, frequent attacks were launched from Tibet. The unification of Bhutan by the Zhabdrung and consolidation of Gelugpa power in Tibet under the joint efforts of the Vth Dalai Lama and Gusri Khan, the Mongol leader from Kokonor region, were almost parallel processes which took place in the 17th century. The rule of Gelugpa sect (reformed sect), at whose head stood the Dalai Lama, over Tibet was forged mainly against the resistance of Princes of Tsang and Rinpung, just as the rule of the Zhabdrung over the whole of Bhutan was forged against the resistance of the lamas of western Bhutan and other provincial rulers.

By mid-1730s, threats from Tibet eased off, after relationship was normalized between Tibetan ruler Pholha Sonam Tobgay and Sherab Wangchuk (1697-1767), the 13th Druk Desi (reign 1774-63) ³. The period of reconciliation with Tibet was followed by the emergence of a new threat arising from the colonial expansion of the British Imperial rule spreading across northern India, adjacent to Bhutan. The state's attention was directed, although in an interrupted manner, toward frequent disputes with the British Government about the Duars⁴. It was not until 1865 when a treaty signed

between the British Government and Bhutan brought a resolution to the conflict and stabilized the relationship. The treaty led to the slicing off of the Duars of Assam and Bengal by the British Government against an annual payment of compensation, known as subsidy, to Bhutan that is still honoured. The treaty, with certain amendments, was later renewed with the government of independent India.

The military encounters with Tibet were more successful than with British India. It could have been due to similarity of the arsenal of fighting between the Tibetan and Bhutanese forces in the 17th century. Terrain and distance must have tipped the balance. The invading forces of Tibetans would have been at a disadvantage because of the depth of strike to reach places such as Paro, Punakha and Jakar. With the British in the 1864-65 war, Bhutanese militia faced ground troops armed in a superior way. Nevertheless, Bhutan remained one of the few uncolonized countries.

However, the military engagements with both Tibetans and the British demonstrated the value of a certain mode of warfare that must have resembled methods followed by guerrillas, waged by the Bhutanese militia in rugged terrain. Though not written in accounts of any battles, the form of war oral sources describe suggest unconventional warfare. The natural defence position of the terrain combined with its intimate knowledge was a significant shield against successful invasion in the past. Rugged terrain by itself did not deter others; it seems that it offered an advantage to militias who were able to cut off enemy communications between the tail and the forward troops, especially when the expeditions stretched over seasons.

Lack of written sources on military organization inhibits a clear inference about the extent of mobilization. But the *pazap*, a form of militia who could be called up for impromptu fighting, might have been as extensive as the swords, matchlock guns, steel helmets, shields, and other weapons

found in many households and *goenkhang* (house of protector deities) throughout Bhutan.

Statistics on the number of tax paying households that existed in 1747 when combined with heuristic assumptions of non-tax paying households give rise to a total of nearly 28,000 households⁵. If we assume that every second household kept a reserve *pazap*, eighteen thousand combatants would have been raised quickly at any point in time. This example gives a size of *pazap*-force much larger than standing army today. This is an implausible number unless one remembers that there is no cost attached to having a large *pazap*-force. *Pazaps* were a flexible-force who were disbanded and returned to civilian life in normal times. As far back as 1774, it was noted by a British mission, with regard to future military operations by the British against Bhutan, that "the Bhutanese have only six hundred men in pay as soldiers; but though their government is elective, they hold their lands by military service, and every man in their country is a soldier when called upon"⁶. There is no information that we know of such means of mobilization in neighbouring Himalayan countries. Though it is purely conjectural, the formation of a *pazap*-force might have been stimulated by repeated external threats and internal factional conflicts. At the same time, flexibility and cost-effectiveness of a *pazap*-force compared to maintenance of a standing army would have contributed to the security of the country by allowing a size of force disproportionate to the population to be raised, for short periods of time.

Guardian of Institutions – Protector Deities

The belief in the preservation of the state by special protector deities of the country is an important aspect of morale and psychological power. Gods are invoked in national defence and security even in unlikely places. Some years ago, an American leader while ordering the ground attack on Iraq, began so by saying "God Bless America".

Legends about protector deities mysteriously coming to protect its adherents abound in many countries. With a hierarchy of deities of varying statures, cascading down from the national to the natal areas, strong faith in the deities protecting their adherents exists in our country. This is apparent from the following excerpt from the letter of 27th December 1864 the Deb Raja of Bhutan sent to the commanding officer of the invading British forces: "...if you will take possession of my country, which is small, without fighting, and attach it to your country, which is large, I shall send the divine forces of twelve gods..."⁷. Moreover, the hands of a British military officer severed in the 1864-65 battle in Deothang and preserved in the sanctum sanctorum of Gangtey Gonpa is a reminder of how much of our psychological security has been vested in the hands of divinities.

In almost every valley in the Kingdom, people invest faith gods and Bodhisattva who are considered transcendent beings. But there are also numerous lesser known 'worldly' gods (*jigtenpai lha*) and protector deities (*sungma, zhidag, yulha, keylha* etc.), whose existences illustrate the polytheistic structure of Bhutanese belief system. Deities having regional stature, as examples, are *Phola* Masang Chungdue in Haa and Paro; Tsan Palnam Dorji, *Jowo* (brother) Drakey in Paro; Talo Gyalpo Pehar in Punakha; Dayphu and Gopola tsan in Mongar; *Geynyen* Jagpa Melen and Domtshangpa in Thimphu; Sang Sangrey Deva, and *Phola* Taktshang Gangpa, Naspo chenpo Gomo konchog, Lha Gyal Tongshog in Dagana; Gomo and Dragchen Phola in Gasa; Sha Radrakpa and Kaytshugpa in Wangdi Phodrang; Keybu Lungtsan and *Jowo Ludud* Drakpa Gyeltshen in Bumthang; Ode Gungyal in periphery Kheng; *Jowo* Dhurshing and *Mutsan* Dorji Drachom in Trongsa; *Terdag* Zora Rakay in Kurtoe; *Zhidag* Mongleng, Dangleng, Garap Wangchuk, and Tshongtshong in Trashigang; Aum Kanchim in Pasakha; Ama Jomo and her sisters in far eastern Bhutan; Dungpa Changlo and the Raja Brothers and Zangpo Brothers of Samdrup Jongkhar. There

are numerous other deities who are known only within the boundaries of small settlements.

There seems to be two main styles of deities' invocations. The first method consists of elaborate rituals conducted by priests or monks, and the other mode involves recital and dance-performances by *pawo* (man-shaman) and *nejom* (lady-shaman). In the case of complex rituals by monks and lay priests, dough images, *thrusel* (water purification), *saang* (incense), *serkem* (golden beverage because a king of Tibet put a few gold nuggets at the bottom of the cup), *thog buel* (first food harvested in the year) are offered, while in the invocations by *pawo* and *nejom*, even *marchoed* (non-vegetarian) offerings are made. There are predetermined calendars of deities' invocations throughout the country. The number of days and the amount of resources devoted to invocations of deities is quite significant.

The safeguards granted by deities of a particular place extend not only to the adherents but their properties, most importantly temple establishments. Pal Yeshey Gonpo are the guardian deities of Kargyud doctrines while Talo Pehar Gyalpo, Gaynyen Jagpa Melen and Gomo are the protector deities of the *Zhabdrung* incarnates. Gonpo Jangdue became the protector deities of *Ponlop* Jigme Namgyel and his descendants. By extension, the country these rulers governed became the domain of such deities. The first *Zhabdrung* invoked the help of his protector deities in his fight against the Tsang Desi. The death of Gusri Khan (Sokpo Tenzin Chogyal) in 1655 was supposedly caused by intervention of his protector deities. Gusri Khan, the Qoshot Mongol leader, who had helped the fifth Dalai Lama become the spiritual ruler of Tibet, had sent his troops to invade Bhutan in 1647. The deaths of several Tibetan personalities - *Desi* Tsangpa Phuntsho Namgyal and his wife in 1621 and Pagsam Wangpo in 1641 - who were ill disposed to the *Zhabdrung*, were attributed in Bhutanese sources to the *Zhabdrung's* magical power. Furthermore, it was claimed that Tibetan Regent Sonam Chopel died in 1658 due to the same cause. In equal

measure, Tibetan sources attributed the demise of several Bhutanese personalities to the magical powers of their deities. It is said that mutual hostilities were so bitter that the death of *Desi* Minjur Tenpa in 1680 was celebrated in Lhasa for three days.

There is strong conviction in the safeguards assured by the deities among the Bhutanese. This is apparent in the proceedings of the National Assembly of Bhutan, which attribute the stability and peace in the country to two sources: the leadership of His Majesty the King and the sentinel of the protector deities, who look after the institutions the ancestral rulers established. Mystical reprisal in various ways, including sickness, fell on those who went against the interests of the key institutions. The concept of biological warfare comes to mind. So long as such perceived threats are credible to the adversaries, internal or external, it is as good a deterrent as any other. Though we cannot fathom the true military value of such beliefs, one can safely say that it is a vital source of morale and psychological power that certainly magnifies the capability of the people.

Frontiers Defence in the 19th Century

Solving internal problems of succession and regularising administration probably went hand in hand with securing the northern frontiers. Tibetan and combined Tibetan and Mongol armies invaded Bhutan seven times (1618, 1634, 1639, 1644-46, 1649, 1656-57, 1675-79) in the 17th century.⁸ Battles were fought involving both military campaigns and ritual-magic on both sides.

The last Tibetan invasion in the 17th century took place in 1675-79; a treaty of peace was concluded in 1679. A Tibetan army invaded Bhutan again in 1730 and 1732 at the invitation of the chief of Paro valley, who declared Paro briefly independent during the civil war in Western Bhutan between 1729 and 1735. Though a Tibetan army defeated Bhutan for the first time, the two countries soon embarked on a process

of reconciliation through a multi-pronged diplomatic initiative taken by the marvellous 13th *Desi* of Bhutan, Sherab Wangchuk (1744-63) together with an equally farsighted Tibetan ruler, Pholanas. The 19-year rule of *Desi* Sherab Wangchuk was perhaps one of the most successful periods in the whole of medieval history. The rift between Bhutan and Tibet was not only healed, but there were many jointly implemented projects both in Bhutan and Tibet, symbolizing a new spirit of cooperation. The direction set by *Desi* Sherab Wangchuk to usher in peaceful and advantageous relationships with neighbours was lost, however, soon after he died in 1763. It is tempting to speculate how *Desi* Sherab Wangchuk's profound skills in leadership of enlightened self-interest would have matched those of Warren Hastings, had he lived longer. For soon, in 1773, the first British mission to Bhutan was sent to Thimphu.

The British began to express a motivated interest in Bhutan. The first British mission to Bhutan that took place in 1774 however speculated "as for keeping possession of any part of it if conquered, or forming a settlement there, I consider it impractical unless done with the consent of the Bhutanese, which I believe will never be obtained" ⁹. But over the next century, British interest transmuted from trading to security concerns, especially over the 18 Duars, an area measuring over 3000 sq miles, under Bhutan. A series of incidents occurred on the southern front, even though peace was finally secured on the northern frontiers. Britain took issue with the delinquencies of lower officials in the Duars, arrears in in-kind payment for the Duars and alleged raids conducted by Bhutanese. To understand the events in the south, we must briefly turn to an earlier period in the history of the Duars.

Besides fending off Tibetan-Mongol armies in the north, the Bhutanese theocracy continued to advance its borders in all directions and met with some success both in the 17th and 18th centuries. Conquest was directed not only toward the east but also toward south, in the direction of Assam and the Bengal Duars, which formed part of the Kingdom of Cooch

Behar. Campaigns were also conducted against the Lepchas of Sikkim, who lived to the west of Bhutan. Surely, the epithet *Pelden Drukpa Chogley Namgyal*, "victorious in all directions", rang true at that time. It is said that Ahom Raja ceded seven Assam Duars in Darrang and Kamrup to Bhutan against in-kind annual payments. Darrang and Kamrup were under the jurisdiction of the Trongsa *Ponlop*. In addition, Bhutan already had claims on eleven Bengal Duars from Tista to Manas, the tract which included the districts of Ambari, Falakata and Jalpesh in Bengal, again given by the Cooch Behari Rajas in consideration of some in-kind annual payment. The Bengal Duars came under the jurisdiction of the Paro *Ponlop*. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it appears that Bhutan had an interesting administrative system. The Duars were administered by far off *Ponlop*; officials were appointed in Duars with titles like *uzeers*, *kazis*, *kathams* and *subah*.

There was a brisk trade between the Duars and the interior of Bhutan. There is no reliable estimate of the revenue received from the Duars by the government through the two *Ponlop*. However, the British view that the Duars contributed several hundred thousands (lakhs) of Rupees of revenue to Bhutan and were fiscally and economically the most important part of Bhutan was probably correct. Hence the struggle to control the Duars might have been indeed based on crucial national economic interests.

The alleged interference of the Bhutanese authorities in the affairs of Cooch Behar, which began in the 16th century, intensified in the 19th. Bhutan struggled to retain the Bengal Duars, which were now threatened by competing British power. In 1770, *Desi Zhidarla's* (alias Sonam Lhundup) forces advanced against Cooch Behar, a buffer between Bhutan and the British; it alarmed the British. Cooch Behar became a British protectorate after the first Anglo-Bhutan War in 1772-73. The Assam Duars were annexed to British territory in 1841, leaving a festering grievance against the British among a succession of Trongsa *Ponlop*, from Ugyen Phuntsho and

Tshoki Dorji to Jigme Namgyel (1824-1881), who were not reconciled to the territorial loss. After three campaigns conducted against Bhutan from November 1864 to November 1865, British succeeded in extending their frontier to the foothills. Economic blockade was imposed by closing twelve passes. In the second campaign, Jigme Namgyel and his 5000-strong troop, including logistic support, routed the British column in Dewangiri, and drove them back. The repulsion of British positions, from Chamorchee to Dewangiri, along the southern borders was carried out around the same time. British held several posts along the foothills since the first campaign. Tongsa Ponlop conducted the attack on Dewangiri post on the early hours of 30 January 1865. On 25th January, Bhutanese forces attacked Bishensing, and the next day Buxa was attacked. On 27th January Chamorchee in Samchi and Balla Pass in Chhukha were threatened by the Bhutanese. Fighting along these positions became entrenched; British prestige, it was said, was tarnished at Dewangiri and Balla. Reinforcement of munitions and troops were assigned. The third and the last expedition against Bhutan conducted with more than two brigades, and the economic blockade which lasting more than half a year; combined with a grave military threat to march to Punakha if negotiations were not held, led to the Treaty of Sinchula, 1865. We might not be able to ascertain which vital goods, if any, the blockade stopped from their regular flow, but it certainly affected the caravan trade that many of the high officials plied privately. Bhutan was represented in the negotiations at Sinchula by Tongsa *Ponlop* Jigme Namgyel (*Ponlop* from 1843-1866) and *Debi Zimpon* Samdrup Dorji and *Zhung Donyere* Damchoe Rinchen. Bhutan lost more than betel nut harvests from the plains, but the war did convey a different impression of the Bhutanese to the British. The Bhutanese were described as brave but inexperienced hillmen ready to fight to the last. All the Duars were formally ceded to Britain in 1865, and a subsidy of Rs. 50,000 was paid annually in lieu of the annexation. The release of the annual subsidy became a significant leverage to nurture a friendly attitude toward the British. This was the last war Bhutan

fought. The Duar Wars of 1864-65 brought the Anglo-Bhutan relationship to a turning point. The Treaty of Sinchula established a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of Bhutan on the part of the British Raj.

The Duar Wars were fought in the midst of increasing fragmentation of the Bhutanese polity. The fragmentation process really gained speed in the late 1850s and, it is doubtful whether there was a concerted effort to face the external challenge, in spite of the British comment that they acted in unison to resist foreign invasion. There were outbreaks of internecine conflict (*hang khrug*) generated by unregulated vying among the contenders for high positions. On the other hand, it seems that the conflicts, except in 1860s and 1870s, have been exaggerated by later historians: only six Desi were assassinated in the whole of Buddhacratice-republican period ruled by some 54 Desi over a period of 245 years¹⁰. This is, by any standard, an index of stability.

Relationship with the Pre- and Post-Independent India in the 20th Century

For Bhutan, the 20th century commenced with a British proposal to open a route to Tibet up the Amochu and Dichu valleys, which reminds us of Bhutan's strategic role as one of the route control points. British government wanted to expand their relationship with Tibet, establish trade routes, negotiate a treaty that would secure British political influence in Tibet with respect to Tibet's third country relationship, and finalize the boundary between India and Tibet. One of initiatives in this direction was Young Husband expedition in which Ponlop Ugyen Wangchuk played a key role. In accordance with prophetic divination revealed to the 13th Dalai Lama, Tongsa Ponlop Ugyen Wangchuk was accepted by Tibetans to mediate between Tibet and British Government of India. The offer of his mediation services appealed equally to Col. Young Husband. In the first month of the Wood Dragon Year (1905), trusted servants of Ponlop Ugyen Wangchuk were selected to accompany him. Among the fifty

people, the principle officials were Kazi Ugyen, Wangdi Donyer Kunzang Domchung, and Tsongpon Darjay of Trashigang. A Bhutanese source¹¹ points to the crucial negotiation that Ponlop Ugyen Wangchuk played in saving Drepung monastery from the point of being destroyed by Col. Young Husband's troops. The role of Bhutan in the expedition of 1905 enhanced the prestige of both Tongsa Ponlop and the country. Therefore, the British, who considered him favourably disposed to British interests, also welcomed change in the position of Ponlop Ugyen Wangchuk into hereditary Kingship of Bhutan, which was offered by the Council and people of Bhutan in 1907. At the same time, Ponlop Ugyen Wangchuk was tipped prophetically by contemporary lamas like first Khyentse, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, and Kongtrul Yonten Jamtsho to become the King of Bhutan. The establishment of the institution of monarchy proved to be the most important factor in the stability and sovereignty of the country.

Besides having a stable buffer, the British Raj's main interest in Bhutan was to secure peace along the Indo-Bhutan frontiers (and expand trade through the Himalayas). Later, the doctrine evolved, with the Great Game, to control the influences of competing powers in northern and central Asia. Pre-Independant India was concerned about possible Tibetan and Chinese influence in Bhutan. A provision to minimise such direct influence formed a part of the bilateral treaty between Bhutan and pre-Independent India. In post-Independent India's relationship with Bhutan, too, this precautionary doctrine was inherited.

Likewise, the British Government in India, in the first two decades of the 20th century, sought a peaceful Tibetan status as a buffer between three powers: China, Russia and Britain. But its view of Tibet vacillated and shifted several times from one of recognizing special relationship between China and Tibet in 1906, autonomy in all respects in 1921, and back to suzerainty. British India initiated negotiations with the Tibetans and Chinese in an engagement to consolidate the

1500 miles long frontier between Tibet and British India. This led to the Tripartite Convention of 1914.¹²

The eastern boundary between Bhutan and Tibet, and between British India and Bhutan were defined, or more precisely redefined, in the first half of this century. For example, the questions about the Balipara Frontier Tract and about the eastern boundary of Bhutan, whether it was up to Deosham or Dhansiri rivers, cropped up frequently in the 1920s and 1930s. Deb Zimpon Raja Sonam Tobgay Dorji, the father of the Queen Mother of Bhutan, represented the country in the dealings. A clear demarcation of boundary between post-Independent India and Bhutan, it seems, was formally completed only in the early 1960s. The inevitable impression that is created from reading history is that in almost all border settlements in the 19th and 20th centuries, the territory of what was once considered Bhutan has contracted.

In 20th century, Bhutanese strategists, chiefly late His Majesty, realized the relative obsolescence of isolationism, as a defensive power, that was natural to a landlocked country. This is, however, not to say that impedance of indomitable terrain does not provide natural defences. It always does. But late His Majesty had to take several fundamentally new decisions in the late 1950s. In the light of new reality in the Himalayan region, the post-1960s Bhutan came to share a certain degree of strategic interest with India, in the nature of deterrence. This prospect of shared security arrangements generated a sense of assurance for its territorial security, as well as better prospects for rapid development. Bhutanese strategic thinking¹³, therefore, led to a measured acceptance of overall Indian security arrangements as a means to protecting and strengthening its sovereignty.

Prime Minister Nehru saw the Himalayas as natural barriers to enhancing the security of India¹⁴ and wanted to prevent the formation of a Sino-Bhutanese relationship in the image of Sino-Nepalese relationship that took place in the aftermath of

the visit of Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai to Kathmandu in 1957. The notion of a special relationship between India and Nepal was replaced by the Nepalese principle of equi-distance between China and India.

But what transpired from the meeting of Pandit Nehru and King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk in Paro was far more than friendly neighbourliness. There began a process of development with assistance from India directed first at building roads. The construction of roads began a year before the Indo-China war of 1962 and picked up steam afterwards. The conflict between these two giant neighbours also led to the modernization of the Royal Bhutan Army, with light infantry weapons and training provided by the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT) in 1963. This is often referred to as the moment when "Bhutan for the first time accepted India's concept of broad security perimeter" ¹⁵.

Described usually as a "special relationship" ¹⁶, India and Bhutan have established a pragmatic and responsive relationship that was begun by the first Indian Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and King Jigmi Dorji Wangchuk, with the former's July, 1958 visit to the Kingdom on horseback. In the same year, there was a dispute about the Sino-Bhutan boundary, after China occupied 300 sq km of Bhutanese enclaves ¹⁷. Sino-Indian relationships, which were already strained at that time, were soon to become hostile. Although there was already an overwhelming Chinese presence in Tibet, it was a period when Nehru advocated *Panch shila* ¹⁸, *in Asia* ¹⁹ and Non-alignment, a movement repudiated by Chairman Mao as "illusions about a third road" which did not fit with his theory of two camps ²⁰. Prime Minister Nehru articulated those same principles of pan-Asian idealism in his speech to the rural people of Paro, during his visit in 1958.

There is yet another geo-strategic dimension with respect to Indo-Bhutanese relationship. The creation of East Pakistan during the partition of India in 1947 and the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 left the mainland of India connected to its Northeast by a narrow 'choke-point', the Siliguri corridor, running between Bhutan and Bangladesh. The Northeast is hemmed in by Nepal, Burma, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The future scenario of development of the Northeast, as projected in the concept of a growth triangle, also depends on the participation of Bhutan²¹. In the same vein, Bhutan is landlocked and it is critically dependent on the seaport in Calcutta. Calcutta is closer to Bhutan than Guangzhou, a Chinese seaport nearest to Bhutan from the north. Thus, geography itself favours trade and transit ties with India.

Over the last four decades, Indian aid has diversified into every sphere. Simultaneously, some of the programmes that were considered implicitly preserves of Indian assistance in the initial five year plans have gradually been opened for other donors. Mutual trust and confidence has allowed for a genial and frank relationship to emerge, along with the change of donor-recipient attitudes to cooperation for mutual benefit. On the whole, India has come to concentrate increasingly on investment in the hydropower sector, in accordance with a mutually beneficial economic strategy. The export of energy to India is seen as the key to achievement of Bhutan's economic self-reliance. India's economic assistance to Bhutan continues to be in quantitative terms the highest among all the donors. This is done on the premise that the security of Bhutan itself, and as an ally of India - a factor also in the security of India - is best served by a rich and prosperous Bhutan. Referring to Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh, the former Prime Minister I. K. Gujral, a highly respected figure in the region, said that "We have vested interest in their economic development, not in their non-development" ²². Embracing post-cold war realism, he argued for non-reciprocal concessions to neighbours to promote greater economic and commercial cooperation. He was of the view that India should encourage improvement in the balance

of trade of these countries vis-à-vis itself. If the present overwhelming balance of trade in favour of India is allowed to continue, he said that "then in a way you are seeing that their economic development does not take place"²³. In 1999, Bhutan's export to India, excluding electricity, was Nu. 2.7 billion while its import from India was Nu 7.8 billion. Bhutan's export to India including electricity in the same year was Nu 4.7 billion. Thus, for Bhutan, revenue earning and balancing of trade is staked on hydro-power export to India. Hydropower has come to play an epic role in the Bhutanese economy. Certain Indian states will be critically dependent on Bhutan, with whom the Government of India has long term supply contracts, to meet their rising electrical energy demand. For both the buyer and the seller, this commodity is of strategic interest, which adds another layer of stake in the economic and strategic relationship between the two countries. The same economic security consideration applies to all the vital supplies, ranging from oil to rice, that come from India to Bhutan. In 1999, Bhutan imported 38 MT of rice, 17 MT of wheat, 33 million litres of diesel and 5 million litres of petrol; the volume of such strategic supplies are increasing rapidly to fuel high rate of growth of the Bhutanese economy.

China and Bhutan

The strategic interests of both China and India in South Asia, within which Bhutan is sensitively located, revolve around India and China's wish to mutually contain each other. China and India had ideological differences during the Cold War. India sponsored its non-aligned movement while Mao criticized the non-aligned movement. The attempt, by Nehru and other leaders, of the non-alignment movement to restructure international relations ended with closer Indo-US relations²⁴ after Sino-Indian war of 1962 and the Indo-USSR relations formalized in 1971²⁵. China's strategic view has been shaped by its fear of being encircled by its rivals – the US and USSR – and Indian allies and by its determination to reassert what it sees as its rightful dominant position in Asia.

Despite the century old Chinese-Russian rivalries, recent years have seen regular military exchanges between China and Russian since 1995. Beijing and Moscow have cooperation to foster multi-polarity and counter balance.

Though there was a general improvement in Sino-Indian relations after the end of the cold war, question on the Sino-Indian boundary remain to be resolved. A warming up of the relationship between China and India will produce a gradual change in the security perception in the region.

The influx of Tibetans refugees and their potential to aggravate Sino-Bhutan relations led Bhutan to close its border with China in 1960. Cross border trade was brought to a standstill and has not yet been reopened formally. In the 1962 war between China and India, both China and India were keen to maintain the neutrality of Bhutan²⁶. "China issued a statement professing peace and friendship with Bhutan and the latter refused to allow the use of her territories by the Indian soldiers"²⁷. A bilateral agreement to maintain peace and tranquillity along the Sino-Bhutanese boundary was signed, finally, in 1998. A similar Border Peace and Tranquillity Treaty was signed between China and India in 1993.

There is no formal diplomatic relationship with China. However, official contacts with Beijing have been growing through both direct and multilateral channels. Dialogues, particularly on the boundary, are conducted according to the five principles of co-existence. Protracted negotiations on the demarcation of the Sino-Bhutan border, initiated first in 1984, have reached the 14th round. The discussion is now close to final resolution. The Chinese approach on this matter with Bhutan is quite similar to the one it had taken earlier with Nepal, and as proposed once to India on the Sino-Indian boundary, with preference for a 'package deal' rather than a sector-by-sector settlement.

Illicit Sanctuary by ULFA and NDFB

In the early 1960s, the nature of Bhutanese army forces changed from a reserve militia-style pazap-force, accustomed more to mountain warfare, to a conventional army with light infantry weapons. Since its establishment along modern lines, the Royal Bhutanese Army has been concentrated mainly on the northern frontier with China. The Indo-Bhutan border was left open and porous. No military post was maintained along the southern border contiguous with India. Friendship precluded perceptions of threat from each other, and assistance provided by India was not allocated for defence against potential threats arising from any quarter within India. It adds to the irony that the security threat now facing Bhutan from ULFA and NDFB militant insurgents, against whom a large military does not necessarily enjoy superiority, came about from the unguarded southern frontier.

The ULFA and NDFB militants have illicitly set up camps in the extensive mountain-forests of southern Bhutan. Their first entry was undetected in unbroken canopies of jungles. The rise of the southern immigration problem in the early 1990s further deflected the attention of the Royal Government from the infiltration of militants. Throughout the 1990s discussion in the National Assembly was more or less monopolized by the threat posed by the southern immigration problem. The ULFA and NDFB militants exploited the national focus elsewhere to set up their camps in the jungles and conduct covert operations. Some observers believe that the train of militants entering Bhutanese forests could have started during 'Operation Bajrang' in 1990. Clear confirmation of the presence of make-shift camps came to the attention of the Royal Government as late as 1995, reportedly sighted by cattle-herders, whose annual migratory tracks take them through certain parts of terrain not frequented by anybody else, and whose knowledge of the landscape can barely be surpassed by professionals, military or otherwise. It was only as late as 1997 that the sanctuaries of ULFA and

NDFB militants in the country figured as a serious security threat in National Assembly discussions²⁸. The implications of their illicit presence were disseminated to the citizenry by the media and by word of mouth. Immediately, people were strictly forbidden from offering any form of assistance to the militants in order to isolate them and deprive them of logistic support and supplies. Cutting off supplies to the militant camps; legal action against anyone helping the militants; peaceful dialogue to persuade the militants to leave the country; and military actions if all other measures failed were the four-step process outlined by the Royal Government²⁹.

The real question remains what to do with the militants taking shelter in the forests. Knowledge does not necessarily lead to action if the means to act do not exist. Lack of outposts in the south was the main cause of 'unpreparedness'. A few bases for the Royal Bhutan Army have been recently opened in southern Bhutan. The suggestion to mount joint operations between Indian and Bhutanese troops, to make up for possible incapacity of doing it alone, do not have the same appeal to Bhutan as it does to India. Even with the deployment of new generations of weapons, effectiveness against guerrilla forces and small-scale insurgents are uncertain and fighting them is often protracted. For Bhutan, the freedom for its search for a peaceful dialogue with the militants at its own pace inspired further confidence in close relationship between Bhutan and India. The National Assembly of Bhutan has resolved firmly that the security of Bhutan must be defended by the Bhutanese. The results of joint operations can be inconclusive, as demonstrated by past military operations involving many Indian divisions. Partnership between the troops of the two nations could also provoke retaliation against Bhutanese civilians who transit everyday through Assam, where depredations by militants occur regularly. Thus the Royal Government has taken recourse to talks with the militant leaders, urging them to leave Bhutan. Exhortations for the militants to leave the country, in the two rounds of talks with ULFA and one round of talk with NDFB, have been

fruitless. The ULFA militants apparently insist on staying on until Assam attains independence, a chimera in the present circumstances. In the royal speeches that His Majesty the King delivered in late 2000 and early 2001 during the district tours, it seems that peaceful options are getting exhausted, and armed confrontation between the militants and the Royal Bhutan Army more likely. The dilemma between increased security threat if their continued stay is tolerated, and reprisals against Bhutan civilians travelling through Assam, if an armed conflict is unavoidable, is indeed acute. Meanwhile an optimistic solution have been worked by the Royal Government of Bhutan. In the 79th session of the National Assembly of Bhutan held in the summer of 2001, the Royal Government of Bhutan reported that an agreement had been struck between the ULFA and Bhutan. According to this agreement, which was ratified by the National Assembly, ULFA will vacate and close four out of nine camps.

Disturbance in the South

The porous border in the South has been a factor in the rise of another major security threat. Undefended borders facilitate illicit migrations and a weak administration cannot detect them. But if the local population, who were prior immigrants, themselves favour the immigrants or unregulated entry of immigrants, even a strong administration can be impaired. These two factors essentially contributed to the arrival of Nepalese immigrants, drawn by favourable prospects of land and livelihoods. No doubt the British encouraged Nepalese immigration at the turn of the century as they did in Sikkim as a counterpoise to northern influence (of Bhutanese, Tibetan and Chinese) seeping down. At the beginning of 20th century, some Bhutanese authorities encouraged Nepali settlement in certain parts of southern Bhutan to work in commercial logging and clearing land. But the medieval subjects of the Druk Desi in the southern Duars were Assamese and Bengalese rather than Nepalese who arrived in mass relatively recently. The absence of significant Nepali settlement in southern Bhutan, until their initial

sightings in last stages of the 19th century, is reported by several British missions³⁰. Bhutan could not have been spared the immigration when the immigrant Nepalese reached as far as India's North Eastern states of Mizoram, Manipur, Meghalaya and Assam. Between 1978-80, many agitation-groups calling for ouster of immigrant outsiders were formed throughout the North East. Thousands of immigrant-Nepalese were evicted in the late 1980s from various North Eastern states of India, and became the proximate cause of Gorkha National Liberation Front agitation demanding statehood, starting in 1985³¹. The Gorkhaland movement was a stimulus to the southern problem that unfolded in the early 1990s. In fact, Gorkha National Organization and its affiliate Nepali Rasha Samity, and Darjeeling Pranta Parishad pledged their support to the rebels in late 1990. The triumph of Nepali Congress in Kathmandu, which ushered in a period of rapidly changing governments composed of various coalitions, had a bandwagon effect on the movement by dissidents.

The competence of checking immigrants as well as the institutional capability to undertake demographic assessment and conduct a census grew quite late. The Citizenship Act of 1958 was amended and passed in the 46th session of the National Assembly in 1985 but its enforcement through census was delayed because of the resource constraint. The census of late 1988-90 reported an uncomfortably large illicit immigrant-population in the five southern districts. A demographic transformation was on the way if the census had not been carried out. The district of Samtse alone reported an illicit immigrant population of 13,000³². The people whose citizenships were in doubt fomented dissent. The census stirred political agitation. Cumbersome enumeration procedures, where an entire family had to report to the census field office several times heightened their sense of insecurity and anxiety during which people can find difficult to be rational and prudent. The controversy over *gho* and *kira*, dress for men and women respectively, and omission of Nepali as the third language in primary schools in

southern Bhutan in 1989 became opportunistic issues for dissidents to rally other *Lhotshampas*³³. Insurgency was launched to bring 'mob' and demographic pressures. The chronology of events spanning the critical years – 1988-93 – has been recorded³⁴. Several fractious and activist organizations like the Bhutan's People's Party, People's Forum for Human Rights, Bhutan Student's Union, and United Liberation Peoples Fronts were formed in camps in Nepal by dissidents who left Bhutan. From external bases, especially the tea estates where they camped, hotheads took up armed attacks and menaced Bhutanese villages close to the border. There were raids, extortion, destruction and even kidnaps and killings. Propaganda to join the dissidents flowed from various organizations including the Publicity Cell of People's Forum for Human Rights. There were scuffles at demonstrations in some southern towns in 1990³⁵.

A solution process has finally emerged from agreement announced between Bhutan and Nepal in late 2000. It is contended that there are close to 100,000 refugees, including those born in the camps, from Bhutan. According to the agreed verification procedure, those in the camps who are evicted Bhutanese citizens in accordance with the Citizenship Act will be taken back. But it is suspected that the refugee camps have people who claim that they are Bhutanese citizens irrespective of the Citizenship Act. One of the demands that the dissidents wanted to impose forcibly, at the height of their movement in 1990, was an amendment to the Citizenship Act.³⁶ There is a measure of contradiction in the dissidents' wish to define citizenship by repudiating the Citizenship Act. In the popular media in Nepal, there has been uni-focal focus on human rights, sidestepping the citizenship issue. This has led the Bhutanese readers to have a perception of the Nepalese media as a prejudicial factor in the international debate on refugee issue.

That illicit immigration did not take place at all after 1958, the legal cut-off date for Bhutanese citizenship, is one end in the spectrum of argument, while recognition of all those who are in the camps in Nepal as bona fide Bhutanese citizens is at the other end of the spectrum. Both governments have agreed on the four categories within which refugees will be classified, as well as on the criteria of verification. The verification process now agreed between Nepal and Bhutan will probe where the truth stands. The new millennium has begun with a major diplomatic advance between Bhutan and Nepal. Let us hope that a realistic solution emerges and realism prevails.

Concluding Remarks

Bhutan has seen that unless a small country is vitally important in the global balance of power, crises in small states usually do not get international media profile. Small states are left to cope on their own, with risks, threats and disasters, which are considered distant crises of no international significance. The interests of small states can be subordinated to contiguous powers, large corporations, big economies, and even external paramilitary outfits. The fact that Bhutan has steered away from such influences, and toward a development path of its own, is a tribute to the acumen of its leaders, in particular His Majesty the King, Jigmi Singye Wangchuck.

Security poses inordinate challenges for Bhutan, as its security establishments for deterrence capacity is minimal. This fact is considered to predispose its sovereignty and security to risk. The lack of pre-emptive capability for counter measures has been amply demonstrated against the destabilising spill over effects of militancy in Assam, and cross-border immigration into Bhutan spurred by poverty and natural disasters. Neither militancy nor poverty in the areas adjacent to Bhutan, which are the ultimate causes of the current security problems Bhutan faces, are unfortunately on decline.

On the other hand, Bhutan, like several small states, has been part of the globally important strategic countries that function as geo-strategic bases, as route control points, as buffer between large neighbours, and as rims in the defence of larger neighbours. It is a positional good that gives an inherent security strength to the country. Lacking technology and military strength, Bhutan has attempted to rely on non-military security alternatives such as national identity for cultural cohesion, and neutrality to renew its long-term security. The relevance and role of cultural cohesion, neutrality and other non-conventional factors in the maintenance of Bhutan's security and sovereignty in a region, where sharpening of military weapons systems and massification of troops has continued, unabated is subject to be investigated on its own.

Notes

¹ Notwithstanding its ancient sovereignty, there are belligerent and nebulous claims on it. For example in 1732 Tibetan ruler Lord Pholashnas conveyed the news to the Emperor of China that he had brought Nepal together with the Southern Drukpa state beneath the emperor's rule. This information, which occurs in the biography of the third Pachen Lama, has been brought to my notice by John Ardussi. This was the source of nebulous disinformation and claim China made on the kingdoms of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan in the 19th century.

² For a detailed and authoritative account of frontier relations between Bhutan and India See Deb Arabinda, *India and Bhutan A Study in Frontier Political Relations (1772-1865)*, Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd. 1976.

³ Ardussi John A, "The Rapprochement between Bhutan and Tibet under the Enlightened rule of sDe-srid XIII Shes-rab-dbang-phyug (r. 1744-63)", *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, Autumn vol. 1 No. 1 Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies, 1999, pp. 64-83.

⁴ For British account of the events leading to the Duar War See Rennie David Field, *Bhotan and the Story of Duar War*, first published 1866, New Delhi: Bibliotheca Himalayica Manjusri Publishing House, 1970.

⁵ Ardussi John and Karma Ura, "Population and Governance in the mid-18th Century Bhutan, as Revealed in the Enthronement Record of Thug-sprul 'Jigs med grags pa I (1725-1761)", *Journal of*

Bhutan Studies Vol. 2 Number 2. Winter 2000, Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2000, pp. 39-84.

⁶ Markham Clements R, *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa* 1st ed., 1876, Delhi: Reprinted by Asian Educational Services, 1999, p. 57. See pp. 62-63 for a brief description of soldiers in Bhutan.

⁷ See Rennie David Field, *Bhotan and the Story of Duar War*, first published 1866, New Delhi: Bibliotheca Himalayica Manjusri Publishing House, 1970.

⁸ Pema Tshewang, *History of Bhutan* ('brug gi rgyal rabs slob dpon padma tshe dbang gyis sbyar ba, 'brug gsal bai sgron me), 1st ed. Thimphu: National Library, 1994.

⁹ Markham Clements R, *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁰ For a clear list of the successive Desi, Ponlop, and Dzongpon and their tenures, See Nado, *Druk Karpo* (slob dpon gNag mDog, 'Brug dKarpo), Bhutan: Tharpaling Monastery, Bumthang, 1986, pp.143-147.

¹¹ I am grateful to Dasho Karma Gayleg for showing us the relevant portion of the History of Bhutan by Lama Gonpa Dasho Phuntsho Wangdi. This text, probably written in 1930s and 1940s have not yet been published nor available for research yet.

¹² See chapter 51 in Richardson Hugh, *High Peaks, Pure Earth: Collected Writings on Tibetan History and Culture*, Lodon: Serendia Publications, 1998. See also Geoff Child and Michael Walter, "Sino-Tibetan Relations and Tributary Ideology", *The Tibet Journal*, Vol XXV.No 1, Dharamsala, India, pp.51-62.

¹³ "...strategic doctrine must not become something theoretical or dogmatic. Its role is to define the likely dangers and how to deal with them, to project feasible goals and how to obtain them. It must furnish a mode of action for the circumstances it defines as "ordinary". See Kissinger Henry, "Power and Diplomacy", p.22. In Johnson E. A. J ed., *The Dimensions of Diplomacy*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1967.

¹⁴ On India's defence policy and Nehruvian security doctrine see Machanda Rita, "India", pp.28-74. In Banerjee Dipankar, ed., *Security in South Asia Comprehensive and Cooperative*. New Delhi: Manas Publications, 1999.

¹⁵ Lama Mahendra P, *Ibid.*, p. 153

¹⁶ This term is also used to denote the relationship between the USA and Britain, particularly to refer to their defence-related cooperation "concerning intelligence, nuclear affairs and military matters." See

The Economist February 10th 2001, p. 26. But this is not what is meant by special relationship between Bhutan and India.

¹⁷ Lama Mahendra P, "Nepal and Bhutan", p.153. In Banerjee Dipankar, ed., *Security in South Asia Comprehensive and Cooperative*. New Delhi: Manas Publications, 1999.

¹⁸ These are "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, noninterference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. See Tiwari Chitra K, *Security in South Asia Internal and External Dimensions*, p.236. London and New York: University Press of America.

¹⁹ Khilani Sunil, *The Idea of India*, Penguin, 1997, p. 39.

²⁰ Tiwari Chitra K. *Security in South Asia Internal and External Dimensions*, p.235. London and New York: University Press of America.

²¹ For comprehensive account see Verghese B. G, *India's Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, 2nd ed. New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1997.

²² Gujaral I. K, *India in a Changing World*, (Frontline Special Issue, August 1997) p. 13.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ This is alleged in Indian analyses but not widely accepted outside.

²⁵ Khilani Sunil, *Ibid*, p. 49.

²⁶ Nehru had assured Bhutan that India will protect it against external aggression. See Lama Mahendra P. *Ibid.*

²⁷ Lama Mahendra P, *Ibid.* p. 153.

²⁸ National Assembly Secretariat, *Proceedings and Resolutions of the 75th Session of the National Assembly held from the 20th June to 16th July, Vol. 11, 1997*, Thimphu.

²⁹ Briefing given by Foreign Minister of Bhutan, Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley to the 7th Round Table Meeting between Bhutan and the donors at Thimphu, 7-9 November, 2000.

³⁰ See Jigmi Y. Thinley, *A Kingdom Beseiged in Bhutan: A Traditional Order and The Forces of Change*, Thimphu: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1993, pp. 1-36.

³¹ Verghese B. G, *India's Northeast Resurgent Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development*, New Delhi: Konark Publishers, pp. 204-272.

³² Ura Karma, Untitled mimeograph on southern dissidents' movement, 1993.

³³ A term in Dzongkha literally meaning southerners.

³⁴ See Dorji Kinley, *A View from Thimphu in Bhutan: A Traditional Order and the Forces of Change*, Thimphu: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, pp.55-77.

³⁵ Ura Karma, *Ibid.* There were attempted intrusions en mass in Phuntsholing and marches into Samtse between 17-26 September 1990; marches in Tsirang on 4th October 1990; in Gaylegphug on 3rd December 1990.

³⁶ This was made known as one of the 13 collections of demands in Tsirang in September 1990. The original 13-point demands were: 1. unconditional release of prisoners, 2. change of absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, 3. reform in the judiciary, 4. amendment to the Citizenship Act, 5 right to culture, dress, language and script, 6. freedom of religion, 7. freedom of press, speech and expression, 8. freedom of formation of unions and political parties, 9. freedom of trade and occupation, 10. right to equitable distribtuion of wealth and funds, 11. right to equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state, 12. right to education, and 13. right against exploitation.