



Fostering India-Bhutan Relations

This editorial is based on [“Bhutan’s imperatives and India’s dilemmas”](#) which was published in the Hindu on 06/04/2023. It examines the history of Bhutan's border disputes with China, the current state of negotiations, and the impact of India-China competition on the region.

For Prelims: Bhutan Location, Renewable Energy, Forest Conservation, Sustainable Tourism, Trade Deficit

For Mains: Challenges in India-Bhutan Relations, Chinese challenge in the Region

India and Bhutan share a **unique and special relationship that is based on a long history of cultural, economic, and political ties**. Despite its small size, Bhutan occupies a strategically important position in South Asia and has been a key partner for India in regional cooperation efforts.

Bhutan's border disputes with China and its relationship with India have been in the spotlight recently, with concerns over the possibility of the country moving away from its traditional ally, India. While **Bhutan has been engaging in negotiations with China over its territorial disputes**, recent developments suggest that continuity still looms large in Bhutan-India relations.

How Recent Developments in China Bhutan Relations Concerning India?

▪ Border Disputes:

- Bhutan and China have **had a long-standing border dispute, with China claiming a large part of Bhutanese territory** in the western region.
- This area is **also strategically important as it is close to India's Siliguri Corridor**, which connects mainland India to its northeastern states.
- If China were to make any advances in this region, it could potentially threaten India's security.
 - **China disputes the following territories with Bhutan:** In the north, Pasamlung and Jakarlung valleys, both of which are culturally vital for Bhutan and in the west, Doklam, Dramana, and Shakhatoe, Yak Chu and Charithang Chu, and Sinchulungpa and Langmarpo valleys.
 - The Doklam trijunction is crucial for India as it lies precariously close to the Siliguri Corridor.
 - Recently, **China has also claimed the [Sakteng sanctuary](#)**, which is on Bhutan's east and does not border China.

▪ Influence in the Region:

- Bhutan is **one of India's closest allies in the region**, and India has long provided economic and military support to Bhutan. **However, in recent years, China has been increasing its economic and diplomatic ties with Bhutan**, which could potentially

weaken India's influence in the region.

▪ **China's Assertiveness:**

- China has **become increasingly assertive in its foreign policy**, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.
- This has led to tensions with several countries, including India.
- If China were to use its increasing influence in Bhutan to further its strategic goals, it could potentially pose a challenge to India's regional security.

What is the Importance of Bhutan for India?

▪ **Strategic Importance:**

- Bhutan **shares its borders with India and China**, and its strategic location makes it an important buffer state for India's security interests.
- India has **provided Bhutan with assistance in areas** such as defense, infrastructure, and communication, which has helped to maintain Bhutan's sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- India has **helped Bhutan build and maintain its border infrastructure**, such as roads and bridges, to strengthen its defense capabilities and ensure its territorial integrity.
 - In 2017, during the Doklam standoff between India and China, **Bhutan played a crucial role in allowing Indian troops to enter its territory** to resist Chinese incursions.

▪ **Economic Importance:**

- India is **Bhutan's largest trading partner, and Bhutan's major export destination**.
- Bhutan's hydropower potential is a significant source of revenue for the country, and India has been instrumental in assisting Bhutan in developing its hydropower projects.
- India also provides Bhutan with financial assistance for its development projects.

▪ **Cultural Importance:**

- **Bhutan and India share strong cultural ties**, as both countries are predominantly Buddhist.
- India has **provided assistance to Bhutan in preserving its cultural heritage**, and many Bhutanese students come to India for higher education.

▪ **Environmental Importance:**

- Bhutan is **one of the few countries in the world that has pledged to remain carbon-neutral**, and India has been a key partner in helping Bhutan achieve this goal.
- **India has provided assistance to Bhutan in areas** such as [renewable energy](#), [forest conservation](#), and [sustainable tourism](#).

What are the Challenges in the India-Bhutan Relations?

▪ **China's Growing Influence:**

- China's **increasing presence in Bhutan, particularly along the disputed border between Bhutan and China**, has raised concerns in India. India has been Bhutan's closest ally and has played a key role in protecting Bhutan's sovereignty and security. However, China's growing economic and military influence in the region poses a challenge to India's strategic interests in Bhutan.

▪ **Border Disputes:**

- India and Bhutan **share a 699 km long border**, which has been largely peaceful.
- However, there have been some incidents of border incursions by Chinese forces in recent years.
 - The [Doklam standoff in 2017](#) was a major flashpoint in the India-China-Bhutan tri-junction. Any escalation of such disputes could strain India-Bhutan relations.

▪ **Hydropower Projects:**

- Bhutan's **hydropower sector is a key pillar of its economy**, and India has been a major partner in its development.
 - However, there have been concerns in Bhutan over the terms of some of the hydropower projects, which have been seen as too favorable to India.
 - This has led to some public opposition in Bhutan to Indian involvement in the sector.

▪ **Trade Issues:**

- India is Bhutan's largest trading partner, **accounting for over 80% of Bhutan's total imports and exports**. However, there **have been some concerns in Bhutan over the trade imbalance**, with Bhutan importing more from India than it exports.
 - Bhutan has been seeking greater access to the Indian market for its products, which could help to reduce the [trade deficit](#).

What Should be the Way Forward?

▪ Economic Cooperation:

- India can **help Bhutan to boost its economy by investing in infrastructure development**, tourism, and other sectors. This will not only help Bhutan to become self-reliant but also create employment opportunities for its people.
 - **Recent decision to set up the first Integrated Check Post (ICP) along the border near Jaigaon and Phuntsholing**, the busiest trading point between the countries will help in boosting trade between the two countries.
 - The decision to expedite the **operationalisation of the third international internet gateway** for Bhutan is also a great step in the direction.

▪ Cultural Exchange:

- India and Bhutan can **promote cultural exchange programs to foster greater understanding** and appreciation of each other's culture, art, music, and literature.
 - A **visa-free movement of peoples from both countries** can strengthen sub-regional cooperation.

▪ Strategic Cooperation:

- India and Bhutan can **strengthen their strategic cooperation to address shared security concerns**. They can work together to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and other transnational crimes.

▪ Renewable Energy:

- Bhutan has **enormous potential for generating hydropower**, and India can help Bhutan to harness its hydropower resources by investing in renewable energy projects.

▪ Education and Skill Development:

- India can **help Bhutan in the areas of education and skill development** by providing scholarships to Bhutanese students and training programs to enhance the skills of Bhutanese professionals.
 - According to [All India Surveys of Higher Education \(AISHE\)](#), the **number of Bhutanese students receiving tertiary education in India declined from 2,468 in 2012-13 to 1,827 in 2020-21**, accounting for just 3.8% of all international students from 7% a decade ago.

Drishti Mains Question

What is the current state of Bhutan-India relations and how have they evolved over time in terms of political, economic, and cultural ties?