

China's Territorial Claims and Infringement in Bhutan: Concerns for India

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Summary

China's growing territorial claims in the South Asian Himalayan states have increased Sino-Indian tensions. Now, it is setting its eyes on Bhutanese territories, which it considers un-demarcated and where differences still exist between Beijing and Thimphu. These claims by China have grave security concerns for India. This paper examines China's behavioural pattern in the Himalayan region, with a particular focus on Bhutan, and its implications on India's security.

Introduction

In November 2020, China sparked a new boundary controversy in Bhutan. It started when Chinese journalist Shen Shiwei tweeted pictures of a newly constructed village called Pangda.¹ He added that it was located 35 kilometres from Yadong county, a part of China's Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The pictures showed the village well-equipped with about 28 houses, public health facilities, a shopping complex and other community services.² However, the tweet was shortly deleted after it invited scepticism regarding the exact location of the village. Maxar Technologies, a technology company based in Colorado, released satellite images of Pangda village.³ The pictures showed the village's location inside the Bhutanese territory near Doklam, the tri-junction between India, China and Bhutan, which was also the scene for the 2017 skirmish between Indian and Chinese troops.⁴ Several security analysts also corroborated these reports. Nathan Ruser, an Australian satellite imagery expert, tweeted that the village was 2.5 kilometres inside Bhutan and that China now "baselessly claims about 12%" of Bhutan's territory.⁵ However, Bhutan has officially denied the reports of the construction of the Chinese village inside its territory. Bhutan's Ambassador to India, Major General Vetsip Namgyel, said that there was no Chinese village

¹ "No Chinese Village Within Territory", Says Bhutan After China Journalist Tweets, Deletes Claim', *The Wire*, 20 November 2020, <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/china-bhutan-village-cgtn-pangda-new-delhi>. Accessed on 20 December 2020.

² Ibid.

³ James Griffiths and Manveena Suri, 'Satellite images appear to show China developing area along disputed border with India and Bhutan', *CNN*, 25 November 2020, <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/china-bhutan-village-cgtn-pangda-new-delhi>. Accessed on 20 December 2020.

⁴ "No Chinese Village Within Territory", Says Bhutan After China Journalist Tweets, Deletes Claim', op. cit.

⁵ Nathan Ruser, 'Here's a CGTN news producer openly [admitting] that China has occupied and now populated part of a sovereign country. This Pangda village has been constructed (as shown by the included map) ~2.5km beyond Bhutan's international border. China now baselessly claims about 12% of Bhutan', 19 November 2020, *Twitter*, <https://twitter.com/nrg8000/status/1329414446633009152?lang=en>. Accessed on 20 December 2020.

inside Bhutan.⁶ Senior Bhutanese journalist, Tenzing Lamsang, also said that the reports were based on open-source information like Google Maps, which are not reliable, and that Beijing and Thimphu are still in the process of resolving their boundary-related differences and disputes through negotiations.⁷

History of the China-Bhutan Boundary Disputes

China and Bhutan share a border estimated around 470 kilometres. Historically, Bhutan and independent Tibet were neighbours. In 1951, after Tibet became a part of China, which many see as an “annexation” by the latter, Bhutan inadvertently became China’s neighbour. With this, boundary-related issues between the erstwhile Tibet kingdom and Bhutan came to the forefront, which remains unresolved till date.⁸ China now lays claim to several Bhutanese territories – Jakarlung and Pasamlung in Central Bhutan and Doklam, Sinchulung, Dramana and Shakhatoe in Western Bhutan.⁹ To support its claims, China released its own map in the 1950s, in which it identified the Bhutanese territories mentioned above under its sovereignty.¹⁰ However, Bhutan, denies China’s claims, defending that these territories have always been under its administration.¹¹ The absence of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries means that they have to communicate through the Chinese embassy in New Delhi, which has further complicated the negotiation process.

To address their territorial differences, Bhutan did consider direct negotiations with China in 1979.¹² However, it took five years for the two countries to come to the negotiation table. The first boundary talks took place in 1984, and till 2016, they have held a total of 24 rounds of negotiations.¹³ In 1997, China also put forward a controversial package deal with Bhutan where it agreed to give up claims on areas in Central Bhutan (Pasamlung and Jakarlung valleys) in return for Western Bhutan (Doklam, Sinchulung, Dramana, and Shakhatoe).¹⁴ They even came close to sealing the deal in 2001 but Bhutan backed off after India’s conviction, citing security reasons. However, China has kept the deal open in case Bhutan ever wants to reconsider. Additionally, in 1998, Bhutan and China signed an agreement for the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity in border areas where they agreed to work on the principles of mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs and peaceful co-existence to maintain peace along its borders.¹⁵ However, the boundary talks, which

⁶ ‘Bhutan denies Chinese village in its territory’, *The Hindu*, 20 November 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bhutan-denies-chinese-village-in-its-territory/article33144172.ece>. Accessed on 21 December 2020.

⁷ ‘No Chinese Village Within Territory,’ Says Bhutan After China Journalist Tweets, Deletes Claim’, op cit.

⁸ Sudha Ramachandran, “China’s Bhutan Gambit”, *The Diplomat*, 23 July 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/chinas-bhutan-gambit/>. Accessed on 25 December 2020.

⁹ Amit Ranjan, ‘China’s New Claim in Eastern Bhutan: Pressure Tactic or Message to India?’, Insights No. 629, Institute of South Asian Studies, 20 July 2020, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/chinas-new-claim-in-eastern-bhutan-pressure-tactic-or-message-to-india/>. Accessed on 25 December 2020.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

continued till 2016, came to a halt in 2017 when China started road construction near the Doklam plateau.

In 2017, Bhutan accused China of unilaterally attempting to change the status quo in Doklam by constructing a road near the disputed territory.¹⁶ Bhutan referred to the 1988 and 1998 agreements signed between the two countries, which state that the two sides will maintain peace in their border areas until they settle the boundaries.¹⁷ However, this condemnation could not stop the Chinese from carrying out their work near the India-Bhutan-China trijunction in Doklam. Subsequently, the road works led to tensions between the countries, followed by a military standoff between the Indian Army and China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops. The standoff continued for 73 days when finally, in August 2017, both sides agreed to disengage mutually.¹⁸ Post this, the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou visited Bhutan in 2018, where he met then Bhutanese Foreign Minister Lyonpo Damcho Dorji.¹⁹ They discussed ways to revive boundary negotiations and maintain peace in the border areas. However, the boundary talk could not take place in 2018 due to the general elections in Bhutan. In 2019, the meeting was called off due to the unavailability of schedules on both sides. Then, the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak put the talks on an indefinite hiatus.²⁰

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, another development took place during the virtual meeting of the Global Environment Facility in June 2020.²¹ During the meeting, the group proposed the funding of the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in Trashigang district in eastern Bhutan. China opposed this proposal claiming that Trashigang, where the sanctuary is located, is a disputed territory between China and Bhutan.²² This claim came as a shock to Thimphu as it never considered the eastern sector as a point of contention with Beijing. Despite China's objection, the funding was cleared by a majority of the council members. Following China's claims, Bhutan also issued a demarche to the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi, denouncing its claims in the eastern sector and affirming that Trashigang has always been Bhutan's territory.²³ In response to this, China's foreign ministry issued a statement a month later in July 2020, claiming that the boundary in question was yet to be demarcated.²⁴

¹⁶ Raj Chengappa and Ananth Krishnan, 'India-China standoff: All you need to know about Doklam dispute', *India Today*, 07 July 2017, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20170717-india-china-bhutan-border-dispute-doklam-beijing-siliguri-corridor-1022690-2017-07-07>. Accessed on 4 January 2021.

¹⁷ 'Bhutan issues scathing statement against China, claims Beijing violated border agreements of 1988, 1998', *Firstpost*, 30 July 2017, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/bhutan-issues-scathing-statement-against-china-claims-beijing-violated-border-agreements-of-1988-1998-3760587.html>. Accessed on 24 February 2021.

¹⁸ Amit Ranjan, op. cit.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ 'After India, China Lays Claim on Bhutan Territory, Calls Trashigang District Border 'Disputed Area'', *India.com*, 30 June 2020, <https://www.india.com/news/india/after-india-china-lays-claim-on-bhutan-territory-calls-trashigang-district-border-disputed-area-4071780/>. Accessed on 4 January 2021.

²² Suhasini Haider, 'China doubles down on claims on eastern Bhutan boundary', *The Hindu*, 6 July 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/days-after-demarche-china-doubles-down-on-claims-on-eastern-bhutan-boundary/article31993470.ece>. Accessed on 6 January 2021.

²³ Amit Ranjan, op. cit.

²⁴ Ibid.

While the confusion over Trashigang remained unresolved, the Pangda village issue evolved within a span of five months. This series of events and China's consistent attempts to unilaterally alter the status quo in Bhutan's border areas and the Himalayas at large signifies China's hardening position in the region.

The Chinese Pattern in the Himalayas

China's territorial behavioural pattern in the Himalayas has changed in recent years, as is evident from the series of events in the region. In 2020, the area witnessed several territorial-related tensions between India and Nepal, Bhutan and China, and India and China. There were also reports of the Chinese taking over some of the villages near the China-Nepal border. In such situations, it is interesting to observe how China has established or is in the process of establishing itself in the border regions of the smaller South Asian Himalayan countries.

Nepal

In the Himalayas, Nepal is one country that has significantly increased its engagements with China in recent years. China's influence here is palpable in almost all aspects - from economic, political to cultural. Their bilateral relationship has seen tremendous improvements over the years. However, in 2020, this relationship faced a glitch when several reports surfaced, claiming that China had been encroaching into Nepal's territory.²⁵ Several leaders from the Nepali Congress, the largest opposition party in Kathmandu, alleged that the PLA troops had trespassed in the Humla district in northwest Nepal, where they had crossed the border into the Limi valley and Hilsa. There, they had moved the boundary pillars and constructed military bases.²⁶ Nepali authorities also confirmed that the Chinese had built nine to eleven houses inside the Nepali territory.²⁷ The locals of Humla marched to the Chinese embassy in Kathmandu, organising protests and holding placards with anti-Chinese slogans. However, the government of Nepal has officially denied any such claims of China's invasion of Nepal's territory.²⁸

Pakistan

China and Pakistan remain "all-weather friends," and this camaraderie has increased India's tensions with both countries.²⁹ China and Pakistan are land-linked only through the Gilgit-

²⁵ Kirti Pandey, 'Nepal's intriguing silence as China's PLA encroaches into Lapcha-Limi area, barricades 9 buildings to Nepalese', *Times Now*, 22 September 2020, <https://www.timesnownews.com/international/article/nepals-intriguing-silence-as-chinas-people's-liberation-encroaches-into-lapcha-limi-area-barricades-9-buildings-to-nepalese/656490>. Accessed on 10 January 2021.

²⁶ 'Nepal's opposition leader claims China has 'encroached our territory' in Humla district', *The Print*, 11 October 2020, <https://theprint.in/world/nepals-opposition-leader-claims-china-has-encroached-our-territory-in-humla-district/521562/>. Accessed on 10 January 2021.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Huma Sattar, 'China and Pakistan's All-Weather Friendship', *The Diplomat*, 12 March 2015, <https://the-diplomat.com/2015/03/china-and-pakistans-all-weather-friendship/>. Accessed on 8 October 2021.

Baltistan, which India claims as its territory but is administered by Pakistan.³⁰ Gilgit-Baltistan holds a significant place under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is a part of the larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China. Under this initiative, China has financed over \$38 billion of power generation and infrastructure projects.³¹ To add, in November 2020, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan announced a provincial status of the fifth province to Gilgit-Baltistan, much to India's annoyance.³² This created tension in New Delhi and India's spokesperson of the external affairs ministry, Anurag Shrivastava, released a statement on Twitter condemning the move, "The Government of India firmly rejects the attempt by Pakistan to bring material changes to a part of Indian territory."³³

Notwithstanding India's condemnation on this issue, in January 2021, China and Pakistan also formally agreed to jointly construct a 33-metre-wide road which would link the Karakoram highway with Astore in Gilgit-Baltistan.³⁴ India sees this move by China and Pakistan as a tactic to build pressure in Ladakh as this road will enable China to bring military weapons into Gilgit-Baltistan, which would threaten Indian positions in Ladakh. Apart from connectivity, China is also financing the construction of hydropower projects in the region. In 2020, Khan inaugurated the Diemer-Bhasha Dam construction, which is a joint production of China Power, a Chinese state-run firm and the Frontier Works Organization of the Pakistani military.³⁵ China and Pakistan's increasing activities in the disputed region have evoked New Delhi to rethink its security in its northern frontiers.

India

The year 2020 was a year of deterioration in the Sino-India bilateral relationship. Indian and Chinese troops were embroiled in one of the deadliest clashes in Ladakh in the summer of 2020.³⁶ Prior to this clash, India had accused the PLA troops of transgressing into the region. However, it escalated into a violent confrontation last year when the two troops collided near Patrol Point 14 in the Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh after India claimed that China

³⁰ 'India rejects Pakistan's status to Gilgit-Baltistan, says it has no locus standi', *Hindustan Times*, 1 November 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-rejects-pakistan-s-status-to-gilgit-baltistan-says-it-has-no-locus-standi/story-f6YrbUy4Ot3dgGJwmiSDwM.html>. Accessed on 8 February 2021.

³¹ Tom Hussain, 'Next Ladakh? In India-China stand-off, a new front looms in Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan', *South China Morning Post*, 7 November 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3108622/next-ladakh-india-china-stand-new-front-looms-pakistans-gilgit>. Accessed on 4 February 2021.

³² Imtiaz Ahmad, 'Imran Khan announces provincial status for Gilgit-Baltistan despite anger at home, opposition from India', *Hindustan Times*, 1 November 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/imran-khan-announces-provincial-status-for-gilgit-baltistan-despite-anger-at-home-opposition-from-india/story-589JQ9iMb9JlB52lx6ittN.html>. Accessed on 4 February 2021.

³³ Suchitra Karthikeyan, 'India Rejects Pakistan's Accord Of 'provisional Provincial Status' To Gilgit-Baltistan', *Republic World*, 1 November 2020, <https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/politics/india-rejects-pakistans-accord-of-provisional-provincial-status-to-gilgit-baltistan.html>. Accessed on 4 February 2021.

³⁴ IANS, 'China building new road in Gilgit Baltistan - India hits back in Indo-Pacific', *The Economic Times*, 18 January 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-building-new-road-in-gilgit-baltistan-india-hits-back-in-indo-pacific/articleshow/80305144.cms>. Accessed on 4 February 2021.

³⁵ Geeta Mohan, 'India raises objection as Imran Khan, China inaugurate Diemer Bhasha Dam construction in PoK', *India Today*, 15 July 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-raises-objection-as-imran-khan-china-inaugurate-diemer-bhasha-dam-construction-in-pok-1701014-2020-07-15>. Accessed on 4 February 2021.

³⁶ 'India-China clash: 20 Indian troops killed in Ladakh fighting', *BBC News*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53061476/>. Accessed on 11 January 2021.

had transgressed into its side of the Line of Actual Control.³⁷ This clash resulted in the death of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of casualties from the PLA troops as there was no official statement from China.³⁸ The valley's significance for China lies in the fact that it eases China's monitoring activities in the entire Aksai Chin plateau, an area claimed by India but administered by China. Despite multiple rounds of negotiations between the two countries to decrease tensions, nothing substantive had been concluded.³⁹ Finally, in February 2021, the two countries decided to disengage their troops from the region in a "phased, coordinated and verified manner".⁴⁰

Apart from the Western sector, tensions between India and China have also erupted in the eastern sector of Arunachal Pradesh. China has always claimed the Tawang area of Arunachal Pradesh as its extension of the TAR, which India has strongly denied.⁴¹ The ongoing tensions rose when at the beginning of 2021, Planet Labs, an earth imaging company in California, released images that showed a newly built village on the banks of River Tsari Chu in the Upper Subansiri district, which lies between the two countries.⁴² The reports confirmed that the village is constructed 4.5 kilometres inside the Indian territory. This move by the Chinese is also seen as an attempt to reinforce its territorial claims in the state.⁴³

On 20 January 2021, Indian and Chinese troops were also involved in a physical brawl in Naku La when the Indian soldiers tried to stop the PLA troops from entering the region.⁴⁴ Located in Sikkim, this area, which is also the border point between India and China, has been a flashpoint of Sino-Indian conflicts for decades.

Similarly, as boundary negotiations have yet to restart in Bhutan, China's attempts to unilaterally change the territorial status quo has implications for both Bhutan and India.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ 'Galwan Valley: India and China downplay reports of soldier release', *BBC News*, 19 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53102629>. Accessed on 11 January 2021.

³⁹ Liu Zhen, 'China-India border row: prepare for the long haul in talks, Indian foreign minister says', *South China Morning Post*, 04 December 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3112651/china-india-border-row-prepare-long-haul-talks-indian-foreign>. Accessed on 11 January 2021.

⁴⁰ Associated Press, 'India, China Begin Troop Withdrawal From Contested Border', *US News*, 11 February 2021, [https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-02-11/india-china-begin-troop-withdrawal-from-contested-border#:~:text=SRINAGAR%2C%20India%20\(AP\)%20%E2%80%94,for%20months%2C%20both%20countries%20said.&text=China's%20Defense%20Ministry%20said%20in,%E2%80%9Csynchronized%20and%20organized%E2%80%9D%20disengagement](https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-02-11/india-china-begin-troop-withdrawal-from-contested-border#:~:text=SRINAGAR%2C%20India%20(AP)%20%E2%80%94,for%20months%2C%20both%20countries%20said.&text=China's%20Defense%20Ministry%20said%20in,%E2%80%9Csynchronized%20and%20organized%E2%80%9D%20disengagement). Accessed on 14 February 2021.

⁴¹ Prabin Kalita, 'Arunachal Pradesh part of south Tibet, claims China again', *The Times of India*, 8 September 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/aranachal-pradesh-part-of-south-tibet-claims-china-again/articleshow/77992800.cms>. Accessed on 11 January 2021.

⁴² Kinling Lo and Rachel Zhang, 'China-India border dispute: village built in conflict zone part of Beijing's poverty alleviation scheme, source says', *South China Morning Post*, 24 January 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3118949/china-india-border-dispute-satellite-images-reveal-new-chinese>. Accessed on 30 January 2021.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, 'Indian troops brawl with Chinese counterparts on border', *The Guardian*, 25 January 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/25/india-soldiers-brawled-with-chinese-counterparts-on-border>. Accessed on 30 January 2021.

Implications of Chinese Territorial Claims in Bhutan on India's Security

China's inroads into the Himalayas have put India's border security in a dilemma. The age-old Indo-Nepal relationship has hit a rough patch due to China's growing engagement with the incumbent Nepalese communist government and India's own shortcomings in fulfilling its commitments towards Nepal which has further played to China's advantage. On several occasions, Nepal has also called out India for interfering in its domestic politics and claiming territories, where differences still prevail between the two countries.

As for Pakistan, it remains an all-weather friend to China, and the CPEC through the Gilgit-Baltistan region makes India's security in its northern borders more vulnerable.

Therefore, Bhutan remains the only buffer state between India and China. With regards to the newly built Pangda village mentioned above, Bhutan's nonchalant attitude towards the Chinese construction within its territory has worried India. New Delhi perceives this act of Beijing as a part of its larger encirclement strategy in the region, where it puts pressure on the smaller Himalayan states to harass India. Now that the Sino-India bilateral relationship has come to a standstill, India is taking a special interest on the issue of Pangda village and is monitoring the possible repercussions it could have on New Delhi's security.⁴⁵

India and Bhutan share a cordial relationship vide the 1949 Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship, which was revised in 2007. Through this treaty, the two countries vow to disallow their territories to be used "for harmful activities to the national security and interest of the other."⁴⁶ They also formally and mutually demarcated their borders in 2006 after signing the final map strips, a process that took 45 years to complete. The areas of demarcation were in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam and West Bengal.⁴⁷ Bhutan has also fairly shown its strategic commitments towards India's defence on various occasions: the Indo-China war in 1962 and backing India's push for Bangladeshi independence during the Liberation war of 1971, to name a few.⁴⁸ Therefore, India sees China's increasing activities in Bhutan as a tactic to create a rift in this special Indo-Bhutan relationship. The package deal on the border offered by China to Bhutan is an appropriate example to corroborate this claim. China's offer for Bhutan to give up on its western frontiers in return for the central territories has direct implications for India's security. Doklam, situated in the west of Bhutan, is located close to India's Siliguri Corridor, which links India's mainland with its north-eastern states. Access to Doklam would give China leverage over India's northeast part, where it claims the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. This would also cut off the bridge between India's mainland and the northeast, leaving the country militarily vulnerable.

⁴⁵ Vishnu Som, 'Bhutan's Denial Of China Incursion Is "Blatant Untruth": Global Observers', *NDTV*, 21 November 2020, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/bhutan-denies-chinese-incursion-blatant-untruth-say-global-observers-2328012>. Accessed on 14 February 2021.

⁴⁶ 'India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/newsletters/SAP/pdf/march07/india_bhutan_treaty.pdf. Accessed on 8 February 2021.

⁴⁷ IANS, 'India, Bhutan formally demarcate border', *Hindustan Times*, 14 December 2006, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/india-bhutan-formally-demarcate-border/story-uav6wv85NCFdKt4dpkNLKJ.html>. Accessed on 8 February 2021.

⁴⁸ P Stobdan, 'India's Real Problem Lies in its Bhutan Policy, Not the Border', *The Wire*, 14 July 2017, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-china-doklam-real-problem-bhutan>. Accessed on 8 February 2021.

The location of Pangda village is crucial for India's security as it lies near Doklam. China's recent claims in Bhutan's Trashigang district are also of concern to India. The district marks as a border between Bhutan and India's Arunachal Pradesh. China's access to Trashigang would directly threaten India's security in Arunachal Pradesh and subsequently in northeast India.

Conclusion

China's strategic territorial incursion into the South Asian Himalayan states has increased Sino-Indian tensions which will lead to further military pressure over time. China's activities have also widened the rift between India and its Himalayan neighbours. The smaller Himalayan states like Nepal and Pakistan, as mentioned above, have built good ties with China at the cost of deteriorating bilateral ties with India. This has enabled Beijing to establish strong footprints in the region.

Bhutan is generally seen as a trusted and close neighbour of India. However, in the past, Bhutan has also, on several occasions, displayed its desire to establish close ties with China and acted against India's interests in international forums. In 1979, during the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) summit in Havana, Bhutan voted in favour of admitting the Pol Pot-led Cambodian Khmer Rouge regime in the group, which India had opposed and China had supported.⁴⁹ Former Bhutanese Prime Minister Jigme Thinley has also been supportive of establishing diplomatic relations with China due to its status of being one of the world's fastest-growing economies. According to him, Bhutan should take advantage of China's economic position and potential for its benefit. In 2012, he also met the then-Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao at the sidelines of the Rio Summit in Brazil. Post this meeting, there were reports of Thinley expressing his desire to establish diplomatic relations with China. Bhutan has, however, denied these reports.⁵⁰

As indicated above, besides securing its Himalayan borders, India has an added responsibility of maintaining good relationships with its neighbours in order to meet the Chinese challenge. The hydropower sector remains one of the most important areas of cooperation between India and Bhutan as it helps secure economic integration.⁵¹ Bhutan, though rich in water resources, lacks the amenities and infrastructure to utilise them effectively. In this light, India has collaborated with Bhutan to build several hydropower projects in the country. India should, therefore, strengthen its engagement with Bhutan in this sector since it has a larger scope for cooperation. It should also revise the concessionary grants it provides to Bhutan, which has significantly reduced in the last few years, for the

⁴⁹ Suhasini Haider, 'The Egg between Two Rocks: How Bhutan Has Engaged 27 India and China in Very Different Ways', *South Asia Discussion Papers – Navigating India China Rivalry: Perspectives from South Asia*, Institute of South Asian Studies, September 2020, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/SADP-Navigating-India-China-Full-Final.pdf>. Accessed on 4 February 2021.

⁵⁰ Ananth Krishnan, 'China, Bhutan 'ready' to establish diplomatic ties', *The Hindu*, 22 June 2012. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-bhutan-ready-to-establish-diplomatic-ties/article3559058.ece>. Accessed on 4 February 2021.

⁵¹ Amit Ranjan, 'India-Bhutan Hydropower Projects: Cooperation and Concerns', Working Paper No. 209, Institute of South Asian Studies, 17 October 2018, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Working-Paper-No.-309-India-Bhutan-Hydropower-Projects.pdf>. Accessed on 23 February 2021.

maintenance of these projects.⁵² Apart from the hydropower sector, India and Bhutan can also cooperate in areas of technology, education, tourism and healthcare.

In January 2021, India gifted 150,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses to Bhutan and other South Asian countries like Nepal and Bangladesh under its diplomatic initiative *Vaccine Maitri* or 'Vaccine Friendship'. Bhutan Prime Minister Lotay Tshering said, "It is of unimaginable value when precious commodities are shared even before meeting your own needs, as opposed to giving out only after you have enough."⁵³ Former Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay added that this act by India "bears testimony to the strong friendship between" India and Bhutan.⁵⁴ Such gestures should continue as they will help re-build trust and cooperation between the two countries.

India must be careful and sensitive in its approach towards its Himalayan neighbours. It is also time for India to reassess its policies and commitments in the region.

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⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Sidhant Sibal, "Gesture of compassion & generosity", says Bhutan PM as country gets 'Made in India' vaccines", *WION*, 20 January 2021, <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/gesture-of-compassion-generosity-says-bhutan-pm-as-country-gets-made-in-india-vaccines-358043>. Accessed on 23 February 2021.

⁵⁴ 'Former Bhutan Prime Minister thanks India for gifting COVID-19 vaccine', *ANI*, 21 January 2021, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/former-bhutan-prime-minister-thanks-india-for-gifting-covid-19-vaccine20210121004851/>. Accessed on 23 February 2021.