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## India-Bhutan Relationships under the Narendra Modi Regime

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### Abstract

India and Bhutan have a good rapport founded on geographic closeness, cultural affiliation, economic collaboration, and approach to strategy. Under the current leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has had the Neighbourhood First policy, with Bhutan at one of the centres of the policy. This article looks at the changing patterns in the bilateral relations between the two nations, in the era of the Modi regime, particularly in terms of politics, economy, culture and strategies. Under the tenure of Modi, the two countries have strengthened their diplomatic and economic partnership, particularly in hydropower, trade and connectivity initiatives. The Bhutan government has been keen on ensuring sustainable development and stability in the region, and this has enhanced the position of India as the most reliable strategic partner of Bhutan. High-level visits and conversations have established trust, and both countries are collaborating to solve issues such as climate change and border control. The article critically examines the India-Bhutan relations under the Modi regime, a perfect example of a solid contract that takes due account of the sovereignty of Bhutan without being against the regional interests of India within South Asia.

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### Introduction

The relationship between India and Bhutan is one of very strong and sustainable bilateral relations in South Asian, built over centuries and cultural affiliations, not to mention that they have a high degree of mutual respect and trust. Narendra Modi came to power in 2014; since then, India has been concerned with its policy of neighbourhood first, considering Bhutan one of its key neighbours. The cooperation has taken a new height now, and India is the biggest development partner in Bhutan. It has invested massively in hydropower, infrastructure and connectivity projects in pursuit of triggering economic growth and integration in the region. The Modi government has described its closeness through frequent high-level visits as well as its commitment to the sovereignty and sustainable development of Bhutan.

The other issues that the two countries have been collaborating on are environmental conservation, climate change and border security. Under the Modi leadership, both neighbouring countries have believed in mutual respect for each other while giving emphasis on their strategic interests. They have also respected the regional peace and prosperity while developing their individual nations. This paper examines the evolution of their partnership, including key state visits, development initiatives, security collaborations, and potential future challenges.

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### **India-Bhutan Historical Relations**

The relationship between India and Bhutan is not similar to other relationships that involve geopolitics, but rather is based on history, culture, and spirituality. This is not a strategic alliance between the two but an expression of the values and respect for each other that occurs over a course of centuries, of how to live peacefully and co-exist through cooperation. The historical links can be found in the way's Buddhism was introduced in India to Bhutan in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, where Guru Padmasambhava was instrumental in introducing Buddhism into Bhutan through Vajrayana Buddhism.

This association has outlined the spiritual foundation of Bhutan and continues to have effects to date in terms of Bhutanese culture. The formalisation of the modern relations began with the period of British colonialism, where the hostilities were ended in 1865 by the Treaty of Sinchula, which surrendered the territories to British India. The Treaty of Punakha provided the internal autonomy and a pact to consult British India on foreign affairs to Bhutan in 1910. The development of political and economic relations was based on the signing of the Treaty of Friendship in 1949, according to which Bhutan became a sovereign state, and India helped with the management of the foreign relations of this country. In 1958, Nehru also paid a visit to Bhutan, and therefore India established a relationship with Bhutan, which further solidified the relationship with Bhutan when India assisted Bhutan in developing of infrastructure and education system. The indicator of a new partnership was observed in 2007 after the Indo-Bhutan Treaty of Friendship was updated to emphasise Bhutan's sovereignty and non-interference.

### **Cultural and Educational Ties**

The Modi government not only gives life to the India-Bhutan cultural ties but also renews them. India makes a significant contribution to preserving the rich cultural heritage in Bhutan. More scholarships and educational exchange programmes for students have been transferred to the two countries. Bhutan has been receiving financial support to enable and preserve its monasteries and cultural buildings. In addition, India also promotes its culture through the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) and yoga outreach in Bhutan. The Indian monks and religious leaders have been paying occasional visits to Bhutan, relying on their shared Buddhist heritage as a soft power instrument and enhancing the people-to-people contacts.

### **Bhutan's Strategic Importance for India**

The strategic position of Bhutan to India cannot be underestimated. Bhutan is a very important ally due to its territorial location, political stability and its cultural association. The Bhutanese country is a strategic buffer country between India and China, and its foreign and defence

policies have been impacting Indian interests because the country is located in the eastern Himalayas. Bhutan shares 699 kilometres of its borders with the Indian states of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, which are strategically important for the territorial integrity of India. Any unrest in Bhutan is a great concern to India because of its close proximity to the Siliguri Corridor, which is necessary to reach to north-eastern India. The other strategic consideration is the North border with China; the Doklam plateau problem indicates why Bhutan will be included in the Indian defence policy. The Doklam standoff in 2017 depicted the extent to which the Indians could commit to the sovereignty of Bhutan, as Indian troops had to enter the country to end the Chinese road construction. In addition to this, the hydropower partnership with Bhutan is also crucial to the energy security of India, and this partnership sustains a steady, renewable energy source.

### **Modi's First Visit as a Symbol of Friendship**

In May 2014, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarked on his first foreign visit, and the country that he chose to visit was the kingdom of grandiosity, Bhutan, and his selection is not without symbolism and meaning. These visits indicated that India was willing to do more of its diplomatic missions with its neighbours and marked the start of a new era in their history. During his visit, Modi addressed the Bhutan Parliament, where he delivered a very touching speech that contained a lot of warmth and hope. He inaugurated the grand Supreme Court building, which was constructed with Indian aid. The Prime Minister mentioned the important areas of coordination, including education, infrastructure connectivity, hydro power exploration, and the potential growth and happiness of both countries. His visit was welcomed wholeheartedly in Bhutan, as the closest bilateral relations in the region.

### **Economic Cooperation and Hydropower Diplomacy**

The grounds of the economic relationship between the two nations are hydropower. The biggest trade partner and investor in Bhutan is India, where approximately 70 per cent of Bhutan's electricity is exported to India. Indian assistance has resulted in the completion of hydroelectric power plants of massive scale, such as Tala (1,020 MW), Chukha (336 MW) and most recently, Mangdechhu (720 MW). India-Bhutan Trade and business have been thriving under the rule of Prime Minister Modi. The Indian government has prompted the Indian government to realise a 10,000 MW target of hydropower and provide concessional funding for Bhutan's plans. In addition, there are new joint ventures between the two countries that have been signed. One such project that exemplifies the bilateral partnership and has received the Brunel Medal for the best civil engineering project is the Mangdechhu Hydroelectric Project, which began its operation in 2019.

### Bilateral Trade and Development Assistance

The primary trading partner of Bhutan is still India. In 2021-22, bilateral trade was INR 10,000 crore. India has aided in the successful Five-Year plans of Bhutan about INR 4,500 crore in the 12<sup>th</sup> plan (2018-2023). Some of the large development projects undertaken with the assistance of the regime of Modi include the construction of roads and bridges (Project DANTAK). The Bhutanese approach of Gross National Happiness (GNH) will be in compliance with the inclusive and sustainable development of India. Modi has made India increase its digital diplomacy to Bhutan by launching the South Asia Satellite (GSAT-9) in 2017 which is beneficial to Bhutan with telecom and remote sensing and has signed an agreement to co-develop and launch a Bhutan satellite (BHUTAN-1 in 2018 and more advanced in 2022 as part of the Indian Digital South Asia program) (as well as, collaboration in digitalisation, e-governance and cyber infrastructure).

### Strategic and Security Cooperation

Bhutan is also a strategic buffer country that is placed at the border between the two giant nations of India and China. India has helped Bhutan with its military upgradation by establishing the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT) that plays a significant role in training its armed forces, which will ultimately enhance the defence of the Himalayan nation. The standoff at Doklam in 2017 turned out to be one of the milestones of the complex game between India, Bhutan and China. Things were getting out of control as the Chinese soldiers engaged in the construction of a road in the disputed territory of Doklam - a territory that Bhutan and China had been claiming for themselves. India reacted to this provocation by initiating heavy military actions to protect the territorial integrity of Bhutan based on the bilateral agreements that had existed over the years. This bold intervention was a reflection of how India was considered to take the issue of Bhutan's security seriously, and this elicited arguments on the matter of Bhutan's strategic autonomy when a foreign power is concerned. The collaboration between Indian and Bhutan with regard to border security improved significantly after the standoff.

### Growing Bhutan-China Closeness

The last couple of years have recorded an increase in the degree of diplomatic relations between Bhutan and China; this is a pointer to a potential transformation of Bhutan's traditional conservative foreign policy, which has been India-oriented. Nonetheless, irrespective of the fact that Bhutan lacks any formal diplomatic ties with China, the increasing number of high-level negotiations and boundary discussions has made New Delhi worried. In October 2021, a significant advance was achieved with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Bhutan and China that established a "Three-Step Roadmap" of accelerating the

discussions of the border. Associating with China would open new economic frontiers to Bhutan, particularly due to the fact that it is a landlocked country. However, such a growing intimacy is an issue for India, since such an endeavour by the Chinese to secure the allegiance of Bhutan can be a bigger plan to reduce India's hold in South Asia. Any agreement over such disputed territories as Doklam could directly impact the security of India, at least as far as the Siliguri Corridor is concerned.

### Conclusion

The India-Bhutan relations in the strategic spheres had grown tremendously, diversified, and improved in the Narendra Modi regime. The political goodwill, culture, and proximity to the geographic region have helped in making India the most trusted ally of Bhutan. Both in the good and the bad times, India has helped Bhutan in various ways, including infrastructure, hydro power, education and security. However, the existence of China as a power in the region results in the necessity of making India more alert, respecting the autonomy of Bhutan, and creating new diplomatic strategies. As Bhutan opens up its foreign policy and as the modernisation of its economy takes place, India must transform from a traditional benefactor to a collaborative partner, which serves the interests of Bhutan, but does not put the Indian interests in danger. Overall, the relations of India and Bhutan during the rule of Narendra Modi can be taken as a success case of South Asian diplomacy.

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