Geopolitics of Bhutan and its Relevance in the Security of India

Ms.Geetanjali Sharma¹, Dr.Ajay K Sharma²
Ph.D Scholar, Associate Professor
Department of Geography
S.P.C. Government College Ajmer (M.D.S.University Ajmer)

ABSTRACT: Bhutan is located between China and India, two heavy-weight players in the international arena. Bhutan has always been following India’s footsteps in terms of foreign policy. Not until 1984 did Bhutan begin its boundary negotiation with China. Bhutan could play a critical role for China: firstly in furthering its strategic depth against India’s north-eastern periphery; second in restraining its Tibetan dilemma from spilling over into Bhutan; and lastly, in stopping Bhutan from being guided by Indian concerns alone. However, after seventeen rounds of negotiation no concrete result has been obtained. Given the importance of the historical context in explaining the India-China-Bhutan dynamics, the first section deals with the historical-contemporary trajectory. The second section focuses on the contemporary geopolitical aims and objectives of China in particular in South Asia via-a-is India and the missing links that Bhutan could fill. Tibet’s and India’s inevitable influence both political and cultural on the China-Bhutan relationships will be part of the entire discussion. This paper also explores the root causes of the failure of the negotiation and the present situation of the triangular relationship, as well as the interaction and development between Bhutan, India, and China through analysing the relationship of the strategic triangle since 1950 and so on. The major findings of the study are that the China’s claim over the western part of the Bhutan is a strategic claim, which is only a few km away from Siliguri corridor that is the only corridor connecting India’s north east part to the rest of the country. China may use this corridor in future at the time of war to choke India’s north east.

Keywords: Bhutan, Chumbi Valley, China-India Boundary Negotiations, Silliguri Corridor

I. Introduction:

The Kingdom of Bhutan, also known as the land of thunder dragon ¹ often described as being physically small in size with limited military potential and economic scope. The country is landlocked between China and India, measures 46,500 square kilometres, and has a population of about 730,000.² In spite of these limitations, Bhutan has earned the reputation of being a peaceful country where the development of threats from militancy, terrorism, and economic disparity within itself has virtually been absent. In this sense, Bhutan has thus far been more fortunate than many of its neighbours in the South Asian region.

This has been in part owing to its self-isolationist policy up until the second half of the 20th century, and the preservation and promotion of a strong sense of individuality that has ensured

¹ The Bhutanese people refer to their country as Druk Yul, which means Land of the Thunder Dragon.
social adherence and unity. Bhutan was a “closed-door” regime under the ruling of 1st and the 2nd kings, rarely had contact with the outside world. The 4th king Jigme Singhye Wangchuck, carried on with the policy of 3rd king of cautious opening-up and introduced political reforms in 1998. He passed his administrative power to the Council of Ministers and proposed a draft version of Constitution to transform the hereditary monarchical system of the country to the constitutional monarchy.

However, Bhutanese have been historically receptive towards the issues of security, with frequent disruptions occurring from internal aggressive sections prior to establishment and amalgamation of the monarchy in 1907. The invasion of Britishers in the 18th century, (1773) resulted in Treaty of Sinchula in November 1865. Britishers received 2,000 square meters of territory in the east of Tista River including Kalimpong in exchange of annual financial assistance to the Bhutan. The treaty was forcefully revived in January 1910 in Punakha, due to which Bhutan faced a problem of immigration of Nepalese and Hindus. Entry of Nepalese was banned in 1959, causing an exodus of many Nepalese. No solution has surfaced despite countless negotiations, and the issue has become a headache between Bhutan and Nepal and drawn attention from the international community, with the United Nations, USA, UK, and the European Union all tried to intervene to strike a solution. 3Despite the fact that many Nepalese have lived in Bhutan for decades, the population census held by Bhutan in 1988 still expelled many “illegal” Nepali immigrants.

In 1989, Bhutan introduced the “One Nation, One People Policy” aimed at strengthening national identity and preserving cultural tradition. India, following its declaration of independence, signed a treaty with Bhutan in August 1949 offering to “supervise” Bhutan’s foreign relations and agreeing to provide annual financial assistance4Not until the early 1960s did Bhutan manage to gradually rid itself of the status as the princely state under Britain and India and walk away from closed-door policy. Per se, preserving its sovereign independence and territorial integrity has always been a matter of great importance for Bhutan.

Bhutan’s geopolitical position between two superpowers India and China has a heavy influence in its foreign policies. The landlocked geographical position, border conflicts with china and high dependency for economic survival all collectively poses obstacles to the road to establishing independent foreign policy. Bhutan’s foreign policies revolve around certain objectives of national security, territorial integrity, economic development, sovereignty, cultural heritage preservation and improvement in relationship with India. Before 1972, Foreign Affairs were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Development, afterwards when the Ministry of

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Foreign Affairs established most of Bhutan’s foreign policies were centred on internal affairs as well as India. Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, Bhutan opted for economic multilateralism that was a major structural change in its foreign policies. Stable but restricted foreign relations did not surface until the 1980s, and in 1985 Bhutan became the member state of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). At present, only 22 nations have formal diplomatic ties with Bhutan.

In order to avoid the game of two superpowers, Bhutan maintained its neutral stance during the cold war. Bhutan cautiously and gradually improved relations with countries including India in exchange of more aid, better opportunities for economic development and protection of its independent status. Since 1974, only a few numbers of tourists were permitted to travel Bhutan and high taxes were imposed on foreign travellers including strict rules and regulations were made for tourists. The country used to welcome only 6,000 foreign travellers each year, thus is also started known as a country “furthest away from the world and closest to the blue sky.”

The geopolitical scenario of the whole region changed radically with the announcement of PRC in 1949. The entire Himalayan region and Indian sub-continent underwent a great change with the impressments of Tibet by the People’s Liberation Army of People’s Republic of China in 1950. The annexation of enclaves of Bhutan in Tibet by PRC and presence of Chinese troops along the border of Bhutan forced Bhutan to re-examine its traditional policy of isolation and the urgency to develop communication lines with India was felt. Due to the expansionist policy of China Bhutan was more inclined towards the democratic system of India. As a country that shares the same religion and culture as Tibet’s, Bhutanese policy makers perceived China in Tibet as posing serious threats to Bhutan’s independence and security (Holsti 1982, 42). Thus, Bhutan started the process of improving relations with India, the progression of socioeconomic development began thereafter with Indian assistance. The stability of whole Himalayan region ensures the internal as well as external security of India and after the sudden attack of China on India in 1962; it becomes necessary for India to safeguard its interest by maintaining good relations with its neighbouring countries. Bhutan and Nepal could serve as reliable buffer states of India.

II. Objectives of the Study:
The paper focuses on the triangular relationship of the India-Bhutan-China. Keeping in view the changing trends of the trajectory relationship following objectives have been set-
1. To explain the changing trends in the historical-trajectory relationships.

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2. To find out the contemporary geopolitical aims and objectives of China in particular in South Asia via-a-is India.
3. To analyse the current scenario between the Bhutan-china and to find out the causes of failure of talks between china-bhutan over border issues.
4. To give suggestions to strengthen Indo-Bhutan relationship.

III. Methodology:

The paper is based on the secondary sources of data. A number of government records, journals and books have been taken into consideration. A detailed study of the past and current situation between the three countries has been done. Due to economic constraint the visit to the neighbouring countries was not possible but, the silliguri corridor was visited and detailed study of the current situation was observed.

IV. Result and Discussion:

Bhutan-China Border Issues:

Bhutan shares 605 km out of 1,075-kilometer border of its border with India and the rests 470 km is adheres to China. Bhutan has traditional ties with Tibet; it was once the connecting bridge between Tibet and the east part of South Asia. The strong socio-economic ties could be apparent with the cross movement of Tibetan people along the Manas Chhu in east Bhutan and Paro Valley in west Bhutan to Assam, Bangladesh, and Bihar for religious, cultural, and trade activities. The fair in Bumthang, east Bhutan was a huge attraction for many Tibetan people. The Tibetan caravans offered wool, brick tea, edible salt, and musk in exchange for Bhutan’s rice, paper, and dried pepper. Local governments of Tibet used to deploy officials in areas near Bhutan to purchase rice. It used to be a ritual for Tibetans to travel a long distance along the Manas Chhu to embark on pilgrimage at monasteries near Guwahati, Assam. After the China’s penetration in Tibet, Bhutan had to close its border area due to the heavy influx of Tibetans in the country, leading to shutting down all cross-border trade activities. No formal trade or commercial relations has been established between Bhutan and China since then.

Border issues between Bhutan and China incorporated into China-India border discussions. But in 1959, a letter was delivered by then PRC Premier Zhou Enlai to Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru expressing China’s wish to stage direct bilateral talk with Bhutan in order to separate two border issues. Although no direct border negotiations between China and Bhutan begin until 1984. But afterwards, the capital cities of Beijing and Thimphu have been taking turns hosting the annual border negotiations. By 2004, 17 rounds of talk had been conducted, with the 17th round being held in Bhutan. Until the 1970s, India was representing Bhutan in talks with China over the broader Sino-Indian border conflicts.

9] 11 Tan Renxia, ibid, p. 133.
The scenario took a U-turn after Bhutan took membership of United Nations in 1971. It was the time, when Bhutan incidentally alongside India, voted in the favour of PRC filling the seat occupied by the ROC and openly supported the "One China" policy. Bhutan also invited Chinese ambassador to India to attend the coronation of JigmeSingyeWangchuk as the king of Bhutan. Thereafter, a series of talks held between the two countries.

In 1983, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian and Bhutanese Foreign Minister Dawa Tsering held talks on establishing bilateral relations in New York. In 1984, China and Bhutan began annual, direct talks over the border dispute. In 1996, China offered to exchange 495 sq. km area of Pasamlung and Jakarlung valleys in the northern borders of Bhutan for Sinchulumpa, Dramana and Shakhtoe with an area of 269 sq. km in the north-west Bhutan which share borders with Sikkim, India, but no final decision was taken.
After the series of talks, China and Bhutan engaged in a bilateral agreement for maintaining peace and stability on the border in 1998. The five-article agreement demands mutual respect and equal status regardless of the territory and power of a nation. China states its complete respect for Bhutan’s independent status, sovereignty, territorial integrity in the agreement and both sides sought to build ties based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence.\(^\text{18}\) However, Bhutan’s kings nodded his head on territory exchange in 1997 but, the talks stopped after China again offered the exchange of land mentioned above.\(^\text{19}\)

In 2002, however, China presented what it claimed to be 'evidence', asserting its ownership of disputed tracts of land; after negotiations. China denied offering its kindness over the issue when asked to extend the generosity of a superpower to a small country like Bhutan by stating that it cannot afford to be generous to every single neighbour considering that it has other neighbours as well.\(^\text{20}\)

Although, China is violating the norms of agreements by building military roads on the area come under Bhutan’s territory. It has provoked tensions between the two countries. countries are getting stronger day by day and it can be evident from the Bhutan’s King pledge to support China in issues related to China’s sovereignty such as Taiwan, human rights, and Tibet\(^\text{21}\) which is not a good sign for India.

**Bhutan-India Relationships**

Bhutan’s relation with India has been very close; the two shares intimate bonds in the areas of foreign affairs, the economy, trade, education, technology, national defence and security. On August 8 1949, Bhutan and India signed the Treaty of Friendship, stating the policy of non-interference in each other's internal affairs and maintaining peace between the two nations.\(^\text{22}\)

The treaty does not mention Bhutan’s status as a sovereign state and Bhutan agreed to take India’s guidance and consideration while dealing with any third country especially in the matter of foreign and defence affairs. The treaty also established free trade and extradition protocols.\(^\text{23}\) With the annexation of Tibet and declaration of India’s then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru that any aggression against Bhutan would be seen as aggression against India had robust ties between the countries.

Even after, being one of the major role-players in the foreign policy of Bhutan, India never interfered in the internal affairs of Bhutan. India supported Bhutanese government when it


\(^{23}\) For more details visit Indo-Bhutanese relations http://lcweb2.loc.gov/rr/india/queries?&id=adv-bfie/DQCID+b00078
expressed its wish to renegotiate parts of the treaty to enhance Bhutan's sovereignty. India supported Bhutan in signing a new trade agreement in 1972 that provided an exemption from export duties for goods from Bhutan to third countries. Even after the India-Bhutan relationship never gets affected by concerns over the treaty provisions unlike in Nepal, where its 1950 treaty with India has been the subject of great political controversy and nationalist resentment for decades.  

From 2003 to 2004, the Royal Bhutanese Army conducted operations against anti-India insurgents of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) that were operating bases in Bhutan and using its territory to carry out attacks on Indian soil. In 1972, India re-negotiated the 1949 treaty with Bhutan, accepted the provision that Bhutan need not to take India's guidance on foreign policy with broader sovereignty and not require Bhutan to obtain India's permission over arms imports.

**Strategic Triangular Relationship between Bhutan, India, and China**

In order to analyse and understand the trend of changing triangular relationship of the Bhutan-India-China, the development of the relationship between the three countries for the past five decades can be divided into four phases:

1. **Chart 1: The 1950s: Romantic Triangle**

   ![Diagram of the 1950s relationship between Bhutan, India, and China]

   - **India (Pivot) partner**
   - **China (Wing)**
   - **Bhutan (wing) partner**

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25] Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. [http://www.ipcs.org/printSouthAsiaArticle.jsp?action=showView&kValue=2540&status=article&keyArticle=](http://www.ipcs.org/printSouthAsiaArticle.jsp?action=showView&kValue=2540&status=article&keyArticle=)

26] [Singh Visits Bhutan to Show India Backs Its Democratic Changes](http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601091&sid=ae7X6KWq6mCk&refer=india)
This period was totally in favour of India. It was the time when India established formal diplomatic ties in the form of five principles to peaceful coexistence with the PRC in 1954 and became the first non-socialist country to do so. As for Bhutan-India relationship, India signed an agreement in 1949, in which Bhutan agreed to follow India’s advice in foreign and defence affairs. The ties between China and Bhutan shut down in 1959 when Bhutan closed its borders with China in order to avoid the heavy influx of Tibetans in 1959. In this triangular relationship, China and Bhutan were the wings of India. The relationship between India and Bhutan was that of a partner and India was in the desirable pivot position.

**Chart 2: The 1960s to Mid 1970s: Stable Marriage**

It was the time when border disputes started between China and India. The tensions eventually led to full-scale border war between China and India in October 1962, which ended in defeat for India. Throughout the period, the development of Sino-India relationships underwent a severe damage. No sign of improvement seen until 1976 and Hatred between the two led to 14 years of “cold war”. The acerbity between China and Bhutan resulted in favour of India. Bhutan had been inclined towards India throughout the period, getting military training, defence equipment, funds and technical staffs for its five-year projects from India. In this period, the relationship between India and Bhutan was still that of partnership and China assumed the worst position of outcast in the triangular relationship.

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28 [The MacMahon line was introduced during October 1913 and July 1914 when Britain and India (then under British occupation) were holding border talks with Chinese and Tibetan representatives in Simula, a summer resort town in northwest India. Sir A. Henry MacMahon, representative of Britain, secretly co-designed the line with Chadral, head of Tibetan delegation on March 24, 1914 in Delhi, assigning the territory to the ownership of India. See Kuei-hsiang Hsu, “A Study on Development of Sino-India Relations—focusing on border issues and Tibet issues,” Bimonthly Journal on Mongolian & Tibetan Current Situation, Vol.12, No. 4 (Taipei: Mongolian & Tibetan Affairs Commission, July 2003), p. 10.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MacMahon_LINE)
Chart 3: Late 1970s to Mid-1980s: Romantic Triangle

India (Pivot) partner

+ +

China (wing) — — Bhutan (wing)

It was the time when India tried to regenerate lost ties with PRC by deploying ambassadors with China in 1976 breaking 17 years ice. China and India began talks on border issues from 1980 onwards. It was the most important period of geopolitical ties between the three. At the same time, China claimed the most controversial region of Doklam highlands under the control of Bhutan, had a direct effect on the security concerns of India. On the western side of Doklam Highlands Chumbi Valley is situated which is only a few kilometres from Silliguri Corridor, which is a narrow stretch of land that that connects India’s north east with the rest of India. This situation becomes more serious when China proposed the idea of “north for the west”. In talks with Bhutan, China offered the 495 square kilometres in the northern borders of Bhutan in exchange for the 269 square kilometres in northwest Bhutan. It was done to extend the area of Chumbi Valley for modernisation of military and building railway network in the same. In its attempt of break down the Bhutan-India alliance, China tried to separate the Sino-Bhutan border issues from Sino-India border talks in order to talk to Bhutan separately and extend diplomatic relations. The attempts had not been successful until 1984. During the period, India enjoyed its pivot position, as Bhutan did not develop any independent ties with China and China India relationship began to unfreeze.

(4) Chart 4; Positive Partnership

India (Pivot) partner

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China — — Bhutan partner

After the announcement of upgrading status of Arunachal Pradesh from union territory to state, there was a huge uproar in the China against the stand. But the two sides develop the ties
with mutual understanding, leading to sign the “Agreement on Maintaining Peace and Stability in the Line of Control Region of China-India Borders” in 1993 and “Agreement on Establishing Mutual Trust in Military Affairs in the Line of Control Region of China-India Borders” in 1996. The Sino-India relationship took a u-turn after the nuclear tests of India in 1998, proving India’s development in the defence sector. Afterwards, the two countries have been engaged in many bilateral meeting of specialists, with no final solution accepted by both sides.\(^n\)

The present situation between three countries is in the favour of India. Although the relation between Bhutan and China improved after the 17 round talks and several mutual visits, but Bhutan is still in the favour of India safeguarding its status of the buffer zone of India between the two.

V. Geopolitical and Geostrategic Analysis

Though the current situation of the triangular relationship is in favour of India but, India needs to strengthen its military power in the globalization era. China has been increasing its military power along Indo-China Border. Chumbi Valley which is just few kilometres away from Siliguri Corridor can be used as a trump card to choke India North-eastern region from rest of the country.

Bilateral talks no doubt has been a part of Indian Foreign Policy but we will have to ask from the past experiences were these talks really gave any positive results. Bilateral talks will be beneficial if we will have full strength and military back up like China to encounter any threat in future.

Both the countries started the journey of Independence almost altogether but it is high time to have a deeper look into the relationship with China. Research should be done minutely on the devil motives of China to expand its territory in search of more resource and territorial land. War should be the last option but the competitive and expansionist policies of China forcing India to look the relationship in a new way. China has been safeguarding the stands of Pakistan against India in United Nations also.

“Size doesn’t matter” this has been proved by Bhutan in context of Indo-China relationship. The country has been a buffer zone between the two countries and is always been stand in favour of India. India in return have to safeguard the interests of its neighbouring countries. Indian army has been guiding the military of Bhutan. India should convey message to China that no matter whatever be the situation India will always safeguard the interests of Bhutan.

China has been questioning the presence of India in Bhutan but we will have to give them direct message that India will never interfere in the sovereignty of any other nation. But if any

\(^{29}\) Following the signing of “Statement of Guiding Principles for Relations and Full-Scale Cooperation between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of India” in 2003, China and India both dispatched representatives to conduct border talk. The Chinese representative was Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Dai Bingguo, and the Indian representative as National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra. The two held talks on October 23-24, 2003 in Delhi and January 12-13, 2004 in Beijing. Following the parliamentary election in May 2004, India had its cabinet reshuffled by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the Congress Party. On June 1 of the same year, National Security Adviser J.N. Dixit was named special representative of India in border talks. Dixit met with Chinese representatives in Delhi on July 26-27, 2004 and later in Beijing on November 18-19, 2004.
country needs the help of India then it will surely safeguard the stand of the neighbouring countries. India has to reshape its Foreign Policy.

India should maintain cultural, social as well as political relationship with Bhutan. Cultural roots are very deeper between the two nations. This should be used as a tie up note between the two nations. Festivals, fests and cultural programmes can be arranged to nourish the lost bind. Conferences, seminars, educational training courses can help the youth to understand the Indian motive in a positive manner. Bilateral talks with full military potential can be the way to deal with China.

VI. Conclusion:

Bhutan’s geopolitical position makes it a most important part in the geopolitical scenario of the whole region. Dokhlam plateau and Arunachal Pradesh are the centre key issues between the India and china. After the seventeen rounds of bilateral talks, china proposed an exchange of Northwest Territory of Bhutan with northern lands, which is a threat to India’s security. After the establishment of Democracy in the Bhutan and renewal of the Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship of 1949 Bhutan is free to take any decision in international forums. Now after the opening up its trade and tourism sector with China would usher development and investments from there, which later on can be a threat to India’s North East frontier and Silliguri Corridor as well. 30

China’s expansionist policy can be seen in the old context when China refused to accept the Simla Accord, contending that the Tibetan government was not sovereign and, therefore, did not have the power to conclude treaties. Chinese forces forcefully occupied the region of tibet, as indeed china’s continued military modernization and incremental upgrade of its military posture in tibet to enable rapid force deployment, backed by logistical capability and communication infrastructure are worrisome. China’s attempts at strategic balancing in South Asia by forging military and economic ties with all of India’s neighbours some of whom have fractious ties with New Delhi, by expanding its naval power have greatly exacerbated bilateral tensions. The Latest manifestation of this has been Chinese attempts to build roads into Bhutainan. The Chinese Premier Wen Zia Bao and Bhutanese Prime Minister Jigme Thinley’s much-touted meeting on the side-lines of Rio + 20 Summit recently seems to have come about in pursuit of Bhutan’s ambition to a non-permanent seat in the UNSC in 2013 against South Korea. However, if Bhutan and Nepal were to come within the Chinese sphere of influence, the precarious land route along the Siliguri corridor a virtual Chicken Neck of seven north-eastern states would become vulnerable prone to being cut off by the Chinese determined push – isolating the entire eastern sector. It is for this reason Bhutan’s neutrality is extremely important and absolutely imperative as it forms a barrier

30 | Shishir Gupta, India must wake up to Chinese threat http://www.hindustantimes.com/helv/delegates-called-to-mull-china-threat/article1-886066.aspx
and buffer to Chinese desires of expansion to the South towards the Siliguri plains. Chinese designs in Bhutan pose a threat in being to Indian security.  

A couple of weeks ago, Hong Lei, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, stated 'The boundary issue between China and India is left by the colonial past. We need to deal with this issue properly. Before a final settlement is reached, we hope that India will not take any actions that may further complicate the situation.

Judging the current situation, it can be seen that Bhutan wants to establish diplomatic ties with China without inviting anger of India. Yet more large-scale diplomatic operations of China toward the south and even Southeast Asia are a testimony to its increasingly ambitious Intentions, so India needs to be more protective towards China’s activities in the region. India should try to maintain friendly relation with the countries like Japan, Australia, U.S.A etc to overcome the increasing impact of China. Arranging bilateral ministerial regular visits and talks will generate India friendly environment in Bhutan. Sharing modern technology, opening Indian education institutions. Offering jobs to Bhutanese in India may maintain a healthy relation with Bhutan. It’s necessary for India to keep this triangular relationship in its favour in order to ensure the security of India especially Its north eastern region.

Appendix

Kings of Bhutan and Their Reigns

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
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<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>1861</td>
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<td>Second</td>
<td>1905</td>
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<td>Third</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>1952—1972</td>
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<td>Fourth</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>1972—</td>
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</tbody>
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(Sources: Sinha, A.C., Himalayan Kingdom — Bhutan: Tradition, Transition

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31 I see JFR Jacob piece on Bhutan, quoted on IDSA Community website.


[20] Kuei-hsiang Hsu, “A Preliminary Study of the Triangular Relationship between Bhutan, China, and India
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    http://www.indianarmy.nic.in/rimtrat.htm