

Bhutan as a Buffer State between India and China (2014-2025)

Strategic Balancing, Sovereignty and survival of Bhutan

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Abstract : The escalating strategic rivalry between India and China in south Asia has transformed the Himalayan region into a centre of geopolitical competition. In this context, Bhutan's position is particularly significant, given its location between two regional powers. Traditional literature on buffer state often views them as passive entities that merely provide geographical separation however, Bhutan's situation challenges this perspective. This article argues that Bhutan is not merely a geographical buffer but an active strategic actor that safeguards its sovereignty and security through diplomacy, strategic balancing and policy flexibility.

The research focuses on the period from 2014 to 2025, examining developments such as the Doklam standoff, Bhutan-China border negotiation, and India's neighbourhood first policy. Realism , Balance of power theory and small state theory serve as the analytical framework. The study's key finding is that Bhutan's foreign policy is based on risk minimization rather than power maximization while maintaining a close strategic partnership with India, Bhutan also continues cautious diplomatic engagement with China through this approach Bhutan has successfully preserved it's autonomy amidst regional rivalries.

Keywords:- *Bhutan, Buffer state, India-China Relations, Strategic Balancing, Small State Theory, Diplomacy, Sovereignty*

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the growing competition between India and China has become a major feature of Asian geopolitics. Both competing nations are vying for economic growth, strategic influence, and regional leadership. The impact of this contribution is not limited to the two countries themselves but directly affects neighbouring states as well. Bhutan is one such state, holding immense strategic importance due to it's geographical location.

Bhutan is situated in the Himalayas, nestled between India and China¹. While it is a small state in terms of size and military capability, its location makes it a significant player in regional politics. Traditional literature often characterizes buffer state as a passive zones² however, Bhutan's conduct in contemporary geopolitics suggests that buffer states too possess active agency. This article examines how Bhutan managed its position between India and China from 2014 to 2025 and how it preserved its sovereignty and security through strategic balancing

NEED OF THE STUDY.

Bhutan's strategic importance has grown significantly in recent years, particularly in the context of the India-China rivalry. Events such as the Doklam Standoff, border negotiations between Bhutan and China, and evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Himalayas have established Bhutan as a key actor in regional politics. Despite this, existing literature largely views Bhutan merely as a passive buffer state. Comparatively little academic attention has been paid to Bhutan's active diplomatic role, strategic decision-making, and strategies for preserving its sovereignty. This study seeks to address this gap. The research examines how Bhutan safeguarded its national interests through strategic balancing and cautious diplomacy between 2014 and 2025. It also makes a significant contribution to the understanding of small-state behavior, buffer-state politics, and South Asian geopolitics.

1.1 Data and Sources of Data

This study is primarily based on secondary sources of data. Information has been collected from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, policy documents, official statements, and reports published by research institutions. Data has also been gathered from publications of the Ministry of External Affairs of India, the Government of Bhutan, and international organizations. News reports, academic databases, and credible online sources have been used to examine developments related to India-Bhutan relations, Bhutan-China border negotiations, and regional geopolitical changes during the period 2014–2025.

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan, *About Bhutan* (Thimphu: MoFA, accessed 2026).

² Martin Wight, *Power Politics* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978), 160–165.

1.2 Theoretical framework

Research is based on three major theories

Realism

According to realism, the international system is anarchic and the primary objective of every state is survival.³ Realism is useful for understanding Bhutan's foreign policy because the country constantly manages security threats and strategic vulnerabilities.

Balance Of Power

The balance of power theory explains that states adopt balancing strategies to prevent the rise of a single dominant power⁴. Instead of developing its own military power, Bhutan pursues external balancing by maintaining strategic cooperation with India.

Small State Theory⁵

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive-analytical research methodology. The research examines Bhutan's role as a buffer state between India and China during 2014–2025 through the analysis of secondary data. Theoretical perspectives such as Realism, Balance of Power Theory, Small State Theory, and the Buffer State Concept are used as analytical frameworks. A case study approach has been employed to evaluate major developments, including the Doklam Standoff, India-Bhutan strategic cooperation, and Bhutan-China border negotiations, in order to understand Bhutan's foreign policy behaviour and strategic balancing.

1.3 Bhutan- India Relations: Strategic Partnership And Security Dependence

Relations between Bhutan and India are considered among the most stable bilateral partnership in south Asia. Historical Trust Economic cooperation and security coordination form the core element of this relationship.

Since 2014, India's neighbourhood first policy Has accorded special importance to Bhutan. High level visits and diplomatic engagement have strengthened bilateral ties. Hydropower cooperation remains a major pillar of Bhutan's economy, and India is its most important economic partner.

The security dimension is equally significant. Given bhutan's limited military capabilities, defence cooperation with India strengthens its strategic security. IMTRAT and regular military coordination are key components of this partnership.

From Bhutan's perspective, India is nor merely a neighbour but also a security guarantor. However, Bhutan's policy is not based on complete dependence it seeks to maintain a balance between cooperation and autonomy

1.4 Bhuta-China Relations: Cautious Engagement And Strategic Restraint

From diplomatic relations have not been established between Bhutan and China yet the process of border negotiations and official talks has been ongoing for several years .

Between 2014-2025, China sought to increase its engagement with Bhutan proposals for a border settlement and discussions regarding infrastructure were part of this process. Bhutan avoided direct confrontation with China and adopted a negotiations-based approach.

The primary objective of Bhutan's strategy is to avoid conflict. While maintaining engagement with China Bhutan has not allowed its traditional security ties with India to be weakened.

This approach reflects Bhutan's diplomatic flexibility the country neither openly aligns with China nor completely isolates itself from Chinese engagement.

1.5 Bhutan as a Buffer State: Strategic Analysis

Bhutan's case differs significantly from the traditional understanding of buffer state. Classical theory views Baker states as a zones of separation However Bhutan actively manages its strategic position.

The 2017 Doklam standoff was the most significant Example of this . Bhutan challenged Chinese road construction and India intervened in support of Bhutan . This Incident highlighted not only Bhutan's strategic vulnerability but also its geographical relevance.

³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 4–15.

⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 117–128.

⁵ Christine Ingebritsen et al., *Small States in International Relations* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 1–15.

The core objective of Bhutan's foreign policy is preservation of its sovereignty. To achieve this, Bhutan Adopt three major strategies:

Close Security Cooperation With India

1. Cautious diplomatic engagement with China.
2. Strategic neutrality and restraint amidst Regional tensions.

Bhutan does not pursue Power maximization It's a policy is based on risk minimization and Preservation of stability. This approach helps Bhutan To maintain both its survival and autonomy amidst Regional rivalries.

1.6 Finding And Discussion

Research reveals several important findings.

Frist, Bhutan is not a passive state it actively makes policy decision and influences regional dynamics.

Second, Bhutan's foreign policy is a combination of balancing and hedging, Strategic alignment with India and controlled engagement with China reflect this approach.

Third, Bhutas diplomacy is driven by objectives of security and sovereignty foreign policy decisions are based on the strategic calculation rather than emotional or ideological factors.

Fourth, Despite being a small state Bhutan has maintained its relevance through diplomacy and strategic flexibility .

1.7 Conclusion

Bhutan's experience demonstrates that understanding buffer states merely passive geographical identity is not adequate. During the period of 2014- 2015, Bhutan preserved its sovereignty and security through strategic balancing , Diplomatic Caution and policy flexibility between India and China.

The primary objective of Bhutan's foreign policy has been risk management and stability preservation not a power accumulation. Our close partnership with India and cautious engagement with China has allowed Bhutan to maintain strategic space made a regional Rivalries.

Therefore, It is more appropriate to understand Bhutan is an active strategic actor rather than a passive buffer state. This case also contributes to broader international Relations literature because it shows that small states can exercise meaningful agencies despite limited resources and play important role in regional stability.

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