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Bhutan–China Boundary Issues: The Complexities of Colonial History and Its Aftermath in Himalayan Asia

Dr. Monika Chansoria

“Frontiers are indeed the razor’s edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war and peace, of life or death of nations” stated Lord George Nathaniel Curzon of Kedleston, who served as Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905.¹ Contextually speaking, the motivations behind China’s diverse campaigns to expand its influence across the Himalayan states is well a manifestation of the aforesaid. The mountain passes of Nepal and Bhutan are critical to gain access to the fertile Himalayan valleys and the Gangetic plains.² The principal approach taken by China to fulfill its strategic objectives in the Himalayan neighborhood has been its ‘mapmanship’ or, in other words, its ‘cartographic aggression.’³

Expansionism as a strategy adopted by China in Asia conformed to Mao’s ideas regarding pan-China tendencies.⁴ Be it in Southeast Asia or Southern Asia, the operative logic and method to mobilize millions for action remained similar to establishing Chinese hegemony across Asia.⁵ In a 1968 opinion piece published in *New Times*, China’s attempts to label Bhutan as Chinese territory amounted to grossly falsifying history and displaying an expansionist appetite.⁶ Moreover, it also became known that Chinese communists considered all adjacent border areas critical to mainland China’s own security.⁷ Recall that in the 1930s Mao disparaged the imperialist powers for

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- 1 Lord George Nathaniel Curzon of Kedleston, *Frontiers*, The Romanes Lecture, (Oxford, 1907).
 - 2 Tibor Mende, *China, and Her Shadow* (Coward-McCann, New York: 1962), p. 21.
 - 3 *The Hindu Weekly*, September 8, 1958; also see, *The Times* (London) January 1, 1955; and see, Mark C. Feer, “India’s Himalayan Frontier,” cited in *Far Eastern Survey*, vol. 22, October 1953, pp. 137-141.
 - 4 *Man, God, or Sphinx*, cited in *Hindustan Times*, July 13, 1968.
 - 5 Mende, n. 2, p. 19.
 - 6 “Chinese Great Power Chauvinism” quoted in *Hindustan Times*, July 6, 1968.
 - 7 AD Barnett, *Communist China, and Asia: Challenge to American Policy*, (Oxford University Press, London: 1960), p. 79.

taking away many Chinese-dependent states, crucially mentioning Bhutan as well.⁸

Bhutan's geographic and historical isolation from the rest of the world gave the country natural protection from the international fallout of the Cold War. While China became Bhutan's neighbor only by virtue of its occupation of Tibet, there is no historical evidence of any direct Chinese treaty relations with Bhutan. Beijing's assertions of past authority over the Buddhist kingdom are based on a 'supposed inheritance of rather vaguely defined Tibetan suzerain rights'⁹ whereas there have been strong reservations and questions regarding their applicability.

Bhutan shares deep cultural, familial, and religious ties established via Buddhism, with links to the seat of His Holiness the Dalai Lama through a tributary relationship since the 17th century. Among the many outcomes of the Dalai Lama's victory in Tibet was the inauguration of tributary relations between the Lhasa pontiff and Bhutan's authorities. What this signified also was Bhutan's recognition of the Dalai Lama's ultimate spiritual authority and of the preeminent position of the Lama's sect over all other Tibetan Buddhist sects. While certainly not devoid of political significance, this preeminence did not signify in any way Bhutan's political subordination to Lhasa – a fact which is amply borne out by the history of the relationships among these countries.¹⁰ There is thus no substantial evidence in history upon which China could base a legal or historical claim to any of the Himalayan border states, either through direct treaty relations or, for that

matter, through the supposed "inheritance of Tibetan treaty rights."¹¹ Traditional religious Tibet-Bhutan ties were ruptured with the exile of the 14th Dalai Lama from Tibet in 1959 and the victory of the communists in China. The deeply religious ruling elite of Bhutan, especially the royal family, were not favorably disposed either to communism, or to China for that matter.¹²

The political history of Bhutan's ties with Tibet can be traced back to the beginning of the eighth century, when Tibet was at the zenith of its military might. Its armies entered Bhutan with little resistance and subjected it to Tibetan rule. Close on the heels of the Tibetan armies came the Lamas and the common people. They settled down in Bhutan, and there were widespread inter-marriages. The western regions of Bhutan came to be inhabited, predominantly by people of Tibetan and mixed Tibetan-Bhutanese origin. By the ninth century, Tibet's military might was on the decline, and the Tibetan armies withdrew from Bhutan. The central authority the native Bhutanese themselves sought to establish also lost hold over the country. Consequently, Bhutan relapsed into a state of fragmented sub-regions, with no centralized control whatsoever. Topographical peculiarities led to the growth of numerous linguistic and cultural sub-regions.¹³

Political History of Bhutan in the Early 20th Century

At the beginning of the 20th century, following the withdrawal of the British from Tibet in 1908, China tried to impose its political authority on Tibet and marched into Lhasa. As a

8 Mao Tse-tung, "The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party," (December 15, 1939 version), *Current Background*, no. 135, November 10, 1951.

9 Ibid.

10 Leo E. Rose, "Sino-Indian Rivalry and the Himalayan Border States," *Orbis*, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 203.

11 VP Gupta, "Expansionist Bases of China's Policy: A Legal and Political Case Study in Relation to Sikkim and Bhutan," *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 29, no. 3, July-September 1968, p. 264.

12 For related reading see, Dorothy Woodman, *Himalayan Frontiers*, (London: Cresset Press, 1969), p. 314.

13 RC Misra, "Bhutan-China Relations," *China Report*, vol. 17, no. 2, March-April 1981, pp. 44-45.

consequence, the 13th Dalai Lama fled Lhasa and came to India, followed there by a number of Tibetans passing through Bhutanese territory. The Chinese *Amban* at Lhasa wrote to the King of Bhutan addressing him still as ‘Deb Raja’ (Holy King) even while accusing him of having allowed the Dalai Lama’s men into India through Bhutanese territory with goods that were meant for the Dalai Lama.¹⁴ The Bhutanese officer at Phari was fined for having helped the Dalai Lama’s men. The Chinese *Amban*’s letter carried details about the passage of these men.¹⁵

Later, both Nepal and Bhutan were claimed as ‘vassal states of China.’¹⁶ By 1910, General Chao Erh-feng of Sichuan province occupied Lhasa and laid claim to the five Himalayan kingdoms, including Bhutan, on behalf of China’s Qing dynasty. The British colonial rulers of India saw the Himalayan kingdoms as an inner defense line for India protected by a Tibetan buffer zone and summarized China’s view of them as an ‘outer line of defense necessary for the protection of Tibet... irredentist regions to be regained as soon as possible...’¹⁷ Meanwhile, Bhutan’s first hereditary monarch, Ugyen Wangchuk, signed the Treaty of Punakha with the British government of India in 1910 at Punakha Dzong. The Treaty of Punakha was not a stand-alone document, but represented a modification of the Treaty of Sinchula of 1865, the prior working agreement between Bhutan and British India.

The British Indian government had perceived that the so-called traditional claims of Beijing in Bhutan had no historical or legal basis. However, this was no guarantee of China desisting from

repeating its claims in future, or of preventing Bhutan from being lured into Chinese designs.¹⁸ Checkmating foreign influence, particularly that of the Chinese in the southern Himalayas, was a key objective for the British at that point, and for that they followed a legalistic approach, realizing that Chinese intrigues in Bhutan could be thwarted only if the British had a legally recognized right. This alone would give them the authority to intervene on behalf of Bhutan. The 1910 treaty, which revised a few key articles in the earlier 1865 agreement, was thus signed with Bhutan.¹⁹

The 1865 working agreement signed between Bhutan and British India was formally crystalized almost half a century later in the form of the 1910 Treaty of Punakha. Under the Treaty of 1910, Britain guaranteed Bhutan’s independence and took control of Bhutanese foreign relations. It also affirmed Bhutanese independence as one of the few Asian kingdoms never conquered by a regional or colonial power. Crucially, Article VIII in the 1865 agreement, as revised in the Treaty of 1910, stated: “... the Bhutanese government agrees to be guided by the advice of the British government in regard to its external relations.” In the same article, it was explicitly laid down that the British government undertook not to interfere in the internal administration of Bhutan.

Following the conclusion of the Treaty of 1910, Chinese attempts to claim suzerainty over Bhutan and to assert that it was China’s ‘vassal’ found expression in letters addressed by the Chinese *Amban* at Lhasa to the ruler of Bhutan, requiring him to comply with sundry orders

14 Foreign Secret (E) Proceedings, August 1910, no. 272, NAI.

15 Manorama Kohli, “Chinese Interest in Bhutan: Evolution of the British Indian Perspective,” *China Report*, vol. 19, no. 4, July-August, 1983, p. 42.

16 Sub-enclosure to Foreign Secret (E) Proceedings, January 1911, no. 204, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI), New Delhi.

17 John Rowland, “A History of Sino-Indian Relations,” cited in Woodman, n. 12, p. 215.

18 Foreign Secret (E) Proceedings, October 1908, no. 125, NAI.

19 Kohli, n. 15, p. 42.

such as circulation of Chinese-Tibetan rupees in Bhutan. China's attempts to enforce circulation of Chinese currency in Bhutan²⁰ indicated its intention of establishing an independent and direct relationship with Bhutan, ignoring altogether the consequences of the Treaty of 1910.

Chinese diplomacy between 1908-1910 reveals that, as the withdrawal of the British from the Chumbi Valley was completed, Chinese overtures towards Bhutan and, for that matter, towards all the Himalayan territories acquired an expansionist character. The unfolding of the Chinese project in Bhutan became discernible towards the opening of the year 1908. The Chinese *Amban* once again wrote to the King of Bhutan, informing him of the forthcoming visit of a Chinese officer to 'report on the conditions of the country, its climate, its crops and its people.' The letter stated:

The Bhutanese are the subjects of China, who is the Lord of Heavens. You, *Deb Raja* (Holy King), and two Penlops think that you are great. But you cannot continue without paying attention to the orders of your rulers... The Popon will inspect your climate distances of places, crops, etc... The *Deb Raja* must try to improve the trade of the country and the condition of the tenantry. If any assistance is wanted, let me know.²¹

The Chinese officer who finally visited Bhutan did not go beyond Paro and, more significantly, was not extended much welcome in Bhutan. The King of Bhutan, in fact, rejected all Chinese claims in clear and unequivocal terms.²²

Although the Chinese authorities at Lhasa had been informed of the Treaty of 1910 that Bhutan had signed, the Chinese officials were not deterred. The British Indian officers attributed the change in the attitude of the Chinese to the strong position which they had come to assume in Tibet by 1910. As long as affairs in Tibet remained in a precarious condition, Beijing did not try to exert any kind of pressure on Bhutan. No sooner than affairs in Tibet were settled to the satisfaction of the Chinese, though, they started extending all kinds of claims towards Bhutan as well as Nepal.²³ However, the firm stand taken by the British Indian government placed a check on all Chinese attempts, and there was no fresh attempt by China to interfere in the internal affairs of Bhutan.²⁴ Though not an Indian state, Bhutan continued to be a protectorate of the British government in India for all practical purposes until 1947, when the British withdrew and India achieved its independence from colonial rule.²⁵ The geo-political realities of the Himalayan region coupled with security needs made the British realize that the people of Bhutan, Nepal, and India's north-eastern region were of the same ethnic stock as Tibet, sharing cultural and religious ties.²⁶

Bhutan–China Relations in the Post-Colonial Period

Bhutan's border with India remains clearly identified and demarcated. When signing the Treaty of 1949, India returned about 32 square-miles of land territory in the area known as Dewangiri to Bhutan to accommodate its claims. China, on the other hand, following the victory of the communist revolution, described Bhutan

20 Foreign Secret (E) Proceedings, August 1910, nos. 266 & 268, NAI.

21 Foreign Secret (E) Proceedings, October 1908, no. 129, NAI.

22 Foreign Secret (E) Proceedings, October 1908, no. 119, NAI.

23 Foreign Secret (E) Proceedings, August 1911, no. 596, NAI.

24 Misra, n. 13, p. 49.

25 Ibid., p. 48.

26 Kohli, n. 15, p. 43.

as one of the ‘five fingers’ of its ‘Tibetan palm.’ China had had no relations with Bhutan since 1947, with historians and analysts attributing this to the Treaties of 1910 and later 1949. The treaty which the Republic of India signed with Bhutan in 1949 is largely said to be a continuation of the Treaty of 1910.²⁷ Following the Treaty of 1949, China tacitly recognized the special treaty relationship between India and Bhutan, though it had grave reservations, particularly about Article 2 of the Treaty which empowered the government of India to guide Bhutan’s external affairs upon the latter’s request.

Particularly after 1959, China began reasserting its supposed ‘claims’ over Bhutan. Maps were published in which Bhutan was shown inside the domain of China. Even though there have been instances where Bhutanese elite have softened their attitude towards China, the latter’s policy in Tibet continued to arouse hostility in traditional Bhutanese society, which remains culturally tied to Tibet. Bhutan’s policy towards China is circumscribed by numerous political and economic considerations. Moreover, Bhutan’s apprehensions over the ultimate politico-strategic objectives of Chinese policy in the Himalayan region have not disappeared.

When activity in Tibet gained momentum in 1958-1959, Chinese maps began showing almost the entire eastern district of Tashigong and pockets of north-eastern and north-western Bhutan as parts of China.²⁸ All normal travel and trade between Bhutan and Tibet came to an end after China suppressed the Tibetan uprising and the 14th Dalai Lama and his followers fled Lhasa and sought refuge in India in 1959. The following year, 1960, Bhutan sealed its borders with Tibet, closing the traditional trade routes

northward to Shigatse and Lhasa from Paro, Punakha, and Tashigong as well as the brisk trade route via Yatung in the Chumbi Valley to the west. The Royal Government of Bhutan adopted a cautious policy towards Tibet and offered asylum to hundreds of Tibetan refugees in 1959-1960, asking them later, however, either to accept Bhutanese citizenship or leave the country.²⁹

Historically, Bhutan maintained checkpoints all along its boundary with Tibet and exercised effective administrative jurisdiction up to this boundary. The Bhutanese officials conducted official tours and collected taxes from the land areas extending up to it. Moreover, Bhutanese citizens regularly utilized the lands up to their border, with the local Tibetan officials in areas adjacent to the border respecting this boundary.³⁰ The discrepancy existing in this area was confirmed when the Chinese side handed over the coordinates of the most strategic southeast corner of Bhutan to India, which viewed the coordinates as being incorrectly shown in Chinese unofficial and official maps.

The Post-Communist-Revolution Annexation of Tibet (1950) and Bhutan’s Developing Strategic Relevance

Two successive political developments, namely the communist revolution in China in 1949 and China’s annexation of Tibet in 1950, further underlined bordering Bhutan’s political and strategic vitality. Surveying the political history and geographic location of Bhutan provides a strong rationale for studying the consequences of its relationship with Beijing. The ‘forward’ element of China’s foreign and defense policy remained visible in its policy

27 Manorama Kohli, “Dragon Kingdom’s Urge for an International Role,” *India Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 2, April-June 1981, p. 229.

28 #5 of *China Pictorial*, published July 1958, protested by India, cited in Surjit Mansingh, “China-Bhutan Relations,” *China Report*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1994, p. 177.

29 Gupta, n. 11, p. 265.

30 Ibid.

of extending its sway and influence over the peoples and territories of peripheral regions such as Mongolia, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, parts of India's northern and northeast frontiers and, to an extent, even Burma. Having clearly defined its area of immediate influence, the *Amban* of China in Lhasa famously drew an analogy and proclaimed that Nepal, Tibet, and *Druk Yul* (Bhutan) were like the 'molar teeth' in the mouth of China. The Chinese *Amban* also stated, "China, Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim might be compared to the five principal colors, viz., yellow, red, blue, black and green... if we would cooperate with one another, we may presumably promote the interests of all."³¹

Given that the traditional boundary between India and Tibet lies along the Himalayan watershed, Bhutan's eastern boundary is contiguous with Indian territory. To many, Chinese moves and claims lacking any legal or political merit amounted to political maneuvering aimed at gaining further access to the southern territory of Bhutan. In 1959, Chinese officials illegally dispossessed the designated authorities of the government of Bhutan of eight villages/enclaves³² situated in western Tibet over which Bhutan had been exercising administrative jurisdiction for more than 300 years, namely, Khangri, Tarchen, Tsekhor, Diraphu, Dzung Tuphu, Jangehe, Chakip, and Kocha. There is ample traditional and customary evidence to substantiate Bhutan's claims in this regard.

For centuries, Bhutan appointed the local officers who governed these villages, collected

taxes, and administered justice. Tibetan authorities consistently recognized that these villages belonged to Bhutan. More importantly, these eight villages were not subjected to Tibetan law, nor did they pay any tax to Tibet. By annexing these villages, China violated Bhutan's legitimate authority over these villages. This was officially conveyed by India at the request of the state of Bhutan to China in its official notes of 19th and 20th August 1959. The official notes represented to the Chinese government that the rightful authority of the Bhutanese government over these enclaves needs to be restored. Moreover, Bhutan's National Assembly passed a special resolution specifically drawing attention to the errors in Bhutan's boundary depicted in the Chinese maps. These maps included about 300 square miles of territory which, according to the McMahon Line and Indian maps, belongs to Bhutan.³³ India argued:

Under treaty relations with Bhutan,³⁴ the government of India is the only competent authority to take up with other governments matters concerning Bhutan's external relations. The rectification of errors in Chinese maps regarding the boundary of Bhutan and Tibet is, therefore, a matter which must be discussed along with the boundary of India with the Tibet region of China in the same sector (emphasis added).³⁵

The official response to this was a Chinese note: "Concerning the boundary between China and Bhutan, there is only a certain discrepancy (emphasis added) between the delineation on

31 *Excerpts from a letter from the British Representative in Nepal to the Government of India*, January 20, 1907, Foreign Secret (E) Proceedings, June 1907, no. 638, NAI.

32 SD Muni, "Bhutan Steps Out," *The World Today* (Royal Institute of International Affairs), vol. 40, no. 12, December 1984, p. 516.

33 Government of India's Note, August 21, 1958, drawing attention to the erroneous depiction of the boundary in Chinese maps.

34 Lok Sabha Secretariat, *Foreign Policy of India: Text of Documents*, 1959, pp. 15-20.

35 Gupta, n. 11, p. 264.

the maps of the two sides in the sector south of the so-called McMahon Line.”³⁶

The boundary dispute between Bhutan and China originated following the Chinese occupation of Tibet when China refused to recognize the traditional watershed principle which had been the dividing line between Bhutan and its northern neighbor Tibet. Because of this, an area of about 500 square kilometers in northeastern Bhutan was shown as falling within Chinese jurisdiction. In 1959, in the wake of the brutal suppression of the Tibetan revolt by China, as many as eight Bhutanese enclaves near Mount Kailash were seized by Beijing. They have ever since been treated as parts of western Tibet. Because of the disputed boundary, Bhutan has persistently been lodging protests with Beijing against intrusions from across the border, especially in the rainy season, when Tibetan graziers were noticed venturing well inside Bhutanese territory.³⁷

The question of the boundary first became an issue between Bhutan and China in 1959. While pursuing its policy of integrating Tibet, China in July 1959 seized control of the Bhutanese-administered enclaves in western Tibet in the vicinity of Mount Kailash and the Gartok region. A Chinese map in 1961 showed parts of eastern, northern, and western Bhutan as Chinese. Since the mid-1960s, there have been many Chinese encroachments on Bhutanese territory. The methodology applied was having armed Chinese graziers regularly penetrate well inside unpatrolled Bhutanese areas and creating permanent settlements thereafter to claim

such areas as Chinese. Having found success in systematically capturing strategic locations, the most extensive encroachments were known to have taken place in 1967, 1979, and 1983.³⁸ Bhutan registered strong protests over these Chinese encroachments and faulty maps. China’s standard reply to India since 1958 had been that it did not recognize India’s right (under Article II of the 1949 Indo-Bhutanese Treaty) to negotiate on behalf of Bhutan. Instead, China insisted on dealing with Bhutan directly.³⁹

Himalayan Borders during the 1962 China-India War

At Bhutan’s request, India dealt on Bhutan’s behalf with China with the matter of the latter’s territorial claims through the decade of the 1960s, though China did not concede India’s right to do so.⁴⁰ In the several meetings held before 1961 between government officials of the People’s Republic of China on the question of the extent of the boundary to be considered, the Indian side suggested that the boundaries between China and Bhutan must be included. The Chinese side expressed its disagreement with this assertion, and asserted its own claim on the border of Bhutan.⁴¹ The original Bhutan–Tibet boundary, which eventually came to become the Bhutan–China boundary, is a natural, traditional, and customary one which follows the crest of the Himalayan range forming the main watershed between the Amo Chu and the waters flowing into Ram Tso, Yu Tso, Nyang Chu and Kuru Chu in Tibet and the Paro Chu, Punakha, Thimbu Tongsa and Bumtang rivers in Bhutan. This natural alignment has significantly been the traditional and customary boundary

36 Chinese Note, December 26, 1959; also see *India-China Border Problem*, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India, November 26, 1962.

37 Manorama Kohli, “Bhutan-China Border Talks,” *China Report*, vol. 20, no. 3, May-June 1984, p. 3.

38 Muni, n. 32, p. 515.

39 Ibid.

40 The respective positions of India and China on Bhutan’s frontier with Tibet, stated in MEA, *Report of the Officials of the Government of India, and the People’s Republic of China on the Boundary Question* (New Delhi: 1961).

41 Note sent by the MEA (New Delhi) to the Embassy of China in India, September 19, 1963.

between Tibet and Bhutan. The watershed principle is firmly rooted in international law and, in mountainous regions, no other general principle is in existence.⁴²

On the Bhutanese side, the brutal suppression of Tibet and the developments of 1959 generated fear and suspicion. Moreover, the 1962 China-India border war made Bhutan even more wary of Chinese intentions and strategy for the entire Himalayan border region. Resultantly, it turned down several Chinese offers. Among other things, the border conflict in 1962 was also a struggle for security and supremacy in the entire Himalayan region. Apart from the strategic advantage which the control of the Himalayan heights would have given to either, each had at stake historic and cultural links with the region. Even their strategic interests evolved out of the centuries-old ethnic, religious, economic, and cultural ties which existed between the peoples and tribes of this region.⁴³

The year 1971 was an important one in which China voted in favor of Bhutan's membership in the United Nations, thereby explicitly recognizing it as an independent country; the King of Bhutan made a strong statement supporting Indian policy – of which China was very critical – on the newly emerging state of Bangladesh.⁴⁴ Despite the enlargement of Bhutan's external dealings in the 1970s through the United Nations, direct talks between Chinese and Bhutanese officials on the border issue only began in the mid-1980s.

From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, Bhutan took a stand which did not conform to the interpretation of earlier decades. The

Druk Gyalpo (King) said in 1979 that “to leave the border undemarcated would be to the disadvantage of Bhutan in the long run.” A historical question lingering to this day is whether Bhutan will be willing to sacrifice itself for China's regional territorial ambitions and strategy. Can Bhutan's leadership afford risking its unique identity to be reduced to the status of Tibet? In 1972, India surveyed Bhutan's border with the Tibetan region occupied by China, and assisted Thimphu in establishing its own Survey Department. The establishment of the Boundary Commission followed in 1981, which, based on the survey reports and historical data and documents, formulated definite Bhutanese claims on its boundary with Tibet (China). Following this, Bhutan established informal contacts with the Chinese when a diplomatic note was sent to the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi in March 1981, followed by informal contacts in New York and New Delhi.

Beginning of Formal Bhutan-China Boundary Talks in 1984

The first formal Sino-Bhutanese meeting took place in Beijing in April 1984 when Beijing and Thimphu held their first direct discussion on the question of boundary settlement.⁴⁵ The Chinese insisted upon three claim lines in the western sector. One was Bhutan's, maintained since 1956-58 and supported by historical documents, traditional practices, and surveys. The second was China's, based on Chinese maps and earlier claims and lying inside Bhutan's Ha, Dukye and Bumthang areas close to the Chumbi Valley. The third lay between these two, still inside Bhutanese territory but marking the physical presence of Chinese inhabitants secured through the numerous periodic encroachments

42 Stephen B. Jones, *Boundary Making* (Washington, 1945) pp. 101-104; for related reading and reference also see, Elizabeth Kolsky, “The Colonial Rule of Law and the Legal Regime of Exception: Frontier “Fanaticism” and State Violence in British India, *American Historical Review*,” vol. 120, no. 4, October 2015.

43 Kohli, n. 15, p. 37.

44 Mansingh, n. 28, p. 176.

45 Muni, n. 32, p. 516.

highlighted earlier in this paper.⁴⁶

The Bhutanese have suspected that China will refuse to accept the Bhutanese claim line and instead bargain toughly over its two claim lines. This will be to eliminate the strategic advantage that India and Bhutan enjoy over China in the Chumbi Valley region. That is why China, while formulating the basic criteria for the settlement of boundaries, added the principle of ‘existing reality’ (in order to justify its physical presence) to the traditional references to ‘watershed’ and ‘traditional practices of grazing rights and collection of local taxes.’ Archives reveal that, in 1984, the Bhutanese side did not accept the principle of ‘existing reality’ that became a key point of contention during the subsequent round of talks held in Thimphu following the Beijing talks.

Bhutan and China subsequently signed two key agreements in 1988, namely, the *Guiding Principles on the Settlement of the Boundary Issues* and the *Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Border Areas*, to set the base for talks that basically focus on disputed areas to Bhutan’s north and west, abutting the Doklam plateau. In 1989, both countries claimed the Pasamlung and Jakarlung valleys, with China offering Pasamlung and Jakarlung in return for Bhutan’s key western sectors in 1990. Bhutan reasserted its claims in the western sector in 1996, highlighting its importance as pastureland and complaining of the intrusion of herdsmen from China (Tibet) in disputed regions in the north. China declined to reduce or go back on any of its claims in the western sector. In 2000, Bhutan extended new claims in the western sector and proposed technical discussions between experts. Almost a decade and a half later in 2014, Bhutan and China endorsed the joint technical field survey

report on the Beyul-Pasamlung regions, and subsequently agreed that the next joint technical field survey should focus on the western regions.

In 2023, the 12th Expert Group Meeting (EGM) discussed a ‘three-step roadmap’ for restarting stalled Bhutan-China boundary talks. The EGM, which oversees the actual boundary talks, was held in Thimphu just four months after the 11th round of EGM talks in Kunming. However, the meeting did not announce any breakthrough in setting a date for the next (25th) round of boundary talks, which have not been held since 2016. Any deal between Beijing and Thimphu that accedes to a “swap arrangement” between areas to the north (including the Pasamlung Valley) with Doklam to the west would be of concern to India, given the proximity to India’s narrow “Siliguri Corridor” that connects all of India’s northeastern states with the rest of India. In March 2023 the Bhutanese prime minister disclosed during a media interview that boundary talks in Thimphu were expected soon, adding that the process of “demarcating territories” and “drawing a line” could be completed “after one or two more meetings.”⁴⁷

Conclusion

Bhutan’s China policy has limited objectives, at least in the short term. While securing a comprehensive agreement on the boundary question will remain Bhutan’s priority, its bilateral and regional initiatives have been driven by fear and apprehension for its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence. Thimphu, like any nation state, remains intent on confronting any form of territorial violation to preserve its internal stability, political independence, and economic development.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ As cited in the report, “Bhutan-China boundary expert group talks pick up speed, officials hold second meeting this year,” *The Hindu*, May 27, 2023, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bhutan-china-boundary-expert-group-talks-pick-up-speed-officials-hold-second-meeting-this-year/article66897804.ece>

Since the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, the Bhutanese have nursed anxieties of a Chinese military intervention in the region. The strategy of prolonging border-related negotiations to extract maximum strategic concessions is a well-demonstrated tactic displayed by Beijing across Asia. The long-feared communist threat still looms large in Himalayan Asia. Perhaps its manifestation has changed over time into an aggressive economic-cartographic foreign policy posturing. The 21st century awaits to see how Himalayan state politics, particularly Bhutan's statecraft as a landlocked country, will strive to balance out its limited assets and its longstanding friendship with India with the resolution of its decades-old boundary issue with China whilst ensuring that Thimphu does not lose out territorially to China.