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India–Bhutan Relations after the 2017 Doklam Standoff: Continuity and Change in Bilateral Cooperation

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Abstract

India-Bhutan relationships have also been stable in the aftermath of the 2017 Doklam standoff, but the nature of the bilateral cooperation started expanding gradually. This paper will look at the relationship between the two countries in post Doklam based on the continuity and change viewpoint, where areas of earlier collaboration have been retained even as new avenues of economic-technological-developmental interaction are being forged. The study examines the years 2017-26 developments in strategic cooperation, hydropower, renewable energy, trade, connectivity, and use of digital technology, education, healthcare, and development assistance using a qualitative and analytical approach that finds its basis in the scholarly literature, official documents, bilateral statements, and policy sources. The discussion shows that Doklam failed to give rise to a radical break in the Indian-Bhutan relations. Rather, the context of strategic trust and security coordination and development cooperation has continued to be significant pillars, with the partnership extended to the realms of railway and multimodal connectivity, renewable energy, space and digital cooperation, human-capital development and emerging economic projects like the Gelephu Mindfulness City. The analysis shows such a shift in the historically-security- and hydropower-based relationship to a more diversified development and connectivity relationship. It claims strategic collaboration coupled with economic diversification, developing technological capabilities, and being sensitive to the independence of Bhutan will be the key determinants in strengthening the resilience of bilateral relations in the long run.

Keywords: India, Bhutan, Doklam Standoff, Bilateral Cooperation, Hydropower, Connectivity, Gelephu, South Asia

1. Introduction

India-Bhutan relations have culminated in a unique partnership within South Asia, not by strategic closeness but by long-term co-operation in development, energy, trade and human-centred aspects. Despite these advances, the bilateral interaction over the decades has progressively moved beyond the conventional development aid and

hydro power links to broader interactions of infrastructure, interconnectedness, education, health care, technology, renewable energy and economic integration. This relationship was cemented on an important institutional basis with the India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty of 2007 that strengthened the respect of sovereignty, territorial integrity and national interests of the countries. The 2017 clash of Doklam should be considered an effective point of reference with which one can trace the further development of this cooperation. The conflict placed the strategic significance of the geographical location of Bhutan into the limelight and how events taking place within the territorial landscape of Bhutan could have a far-reaching impact on India. Meanwhile, Doklam also emphasised that it is important to acknowledge that Bhutan is an actor that has its own territorial interests, diplomatic priorities and development goals. Accordingly, the post-Doklam era cannot be seen solely through the prism of India changing its strategies of strategic competition with China; it should also be viewed through the prism of the dynamic nature of India-Bhutan bilateral cooperation.

Another important characteristic of the period following 2017, which has drawn a great spectrum of attention, has concerned the diversification of the relationship beyond the classic pillars. Hydropower still remains a significant part of bilateral economic interaction, only that the cooperation has diversified more with the introduction of solar energy, green energy, connectivity, digital and other future realms of industry. Likewise, the development partnership of India with Bhutan has also taken a broader orientation to include infrastructure, education, healthcare, skill development, agriculture, youth programmes and institutional capacity building. These changes imply that bilateral relations are being diversified and interdependent on the economic transformation, on a long-term basis for Bhutan. It has led to connectivity as another dimension of this transforming partnership. Suggested railroad connectivity, enhanced highways, border stations, multimodal transport, and digital networks have provided opportunities for economic integration between the two nations. These initiatives are significant not merely in the sense that they enhance physical mobility and market accessibility but also in the fact that they may assist in tourism, investment, regional trade, and economic diversification of Bhutan. The new significance of the Gelephu Mindfulness City is another evidence that proves the bilateral relationship to be more and more interconnected with new economic geographies, investment opportunities, and sustainable development.

The change has also been evident in the areas where the bilateral discussions were less pronounced. Collaboration in space technology, sat app, digital infrastructure, education, youth development, sports, medical and career training is evidence that the relationship is increasingly becoming institutionally and socially diversified. The importance of such developments in bilateral partnerships is that the longevity of a bilateral partnership between nations is not only determined by strategic and government cooperation, but also by the enhancement of general social, technological, and economic connections. Simultaneously, the relationship between the two post-Doklam still exists in a multi-dimensional regional context. The escalating presence of China in the Himalayan region and the continuing boundary relationship between Bhutan and China are also significant contextual factors. India thus has to address the dilemma of ensuring it safeguards its valid security interests even as it preserves a stand that does not interfere with Bhutan on its sovereignty and the making of its own choices. In the case of Bhutan, the issue is how it can continue to maintain its intimate relationship with India whilst struggling to diversify economically and not lose sufficient room in its relations with other members of the region.

It is against this backdrop that the overall interest of this paper is to explore the

fact whether the India-Bhutan relationship post-Doklam signifies a fundamental change or an extension of an already formulated relationship. The approach of the study to answering this question involves the use of the continuity and change framework. Strategic trust, development cooperation, hydropower, political engagement, and security coordination are all aspects of continuity. Evidence of change can be seen in the increased importance of connectivity, renewable energy, digital collaboration, space technology, education, healthcare, trade, and new business activities. The paper then analyzes the relationship of post-2017 as a strategic continuity process that is accompanied by functional diversification. Instead of treating Doklam purely as a security crisis, the paper believes that it is a significant junction where the further development of bilateral cooperation can be evaluated. The discussion aims to prove that India -Bhutan relationships have slowly transformed into a less security-based and hydropower-focused form of relation to a wider development, connectivity, and economic relation, even though with the same pillars that have historically held bilateral relations.

2. Historical and Conceptual Context of India–Bhutan Relations

Historical interaction, geographical proximity, and India's support of the modern development process of Bhutan served as the basis for establishing India-Bhutan relations. Planned development in Bhutan started with the First Five-Year Plan in 1961 with the support of India. Development assistance grew in the following decades to include infrastructure, education, healthcare, communications, agriculture and energy. Hydropower was the key sector of bilateral relations. Bhutan has significant potential for hydropower, whereas India has a huge and increasing need for electricity. The resultant relationship has brought about benefits for both Bhutan and India, as Bhutan receives revenues and development assistance, whereas India receives access to renewable electricity. Hydropower is still an anchoring provision of bilateral economic cooperation by the MEA. Another key in the modernisation of the bilateral relationship was the 2007 Friendship Treaty. It developed an architecture of non-interference and respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national interests. It is also the treaty that enhanced collaboration in security and other areas that were agreed upon. This serves to explain the relationship in terms of three dimensions that are related:

- The interdependence between strategies and security due to geography and the China factor;
- Economic-development interdependence was historically focused on hydropower and development aid; and
- Socio-cultural interdependence founded on educational, religious, cultural and people-to-people interconnections.

It is another fourth dimension, post-Doklam, that has introduced connectivity and technological interdependence, such as railways, roads, digital networks, space technology and new forms of green-energy cooperation.

3. Review of Literature

The available literature on the relations between India and Bhutan has proved that the relationship between the two countries is multi-dimensional and covers areas of strategic security, diplomacy, economic cooperation, development, energy, border management, and geopolitics of the region. According to the literature, the fact that India and Bhutan have had close and relatively stable cooperation; however, the evolving environment of the region, especially the increasing role of China and the strategic importance of the Himalayan region has brought new complications. According to the studies presented below, the conceptual and empirical basis of the analysis of continuity and change of relations between India and Bhutan following the 2017

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In India-Bhutan Relations: Present Trajectories and Future Possibilities, Bisht (2023) concentrates on the modern trend of bilateral relations and the perspectives of their evolution in the future. The study is significant as it takes the discourse further than the historical security-based theorization of the partnership and takes into account the evolving dynamics of bilateral involvement. It is a helpful framework to evaluate the extension of cooperation to the newer regions and to see how the relationship can be adjusted to the evolving regional and international conditions. In the current research, the work of Bisht aids in developing an argument that India-Bhutan dynamics have held the traditional grounds in their relations, and they have come to new perspectives at the same time.

Karmazin (2023) puts the India-Bhutan relationship in a wider context of post-colonial sovereignty and shifting international order. This strategy holds special significance since the foreign-policy decisions of Bhutan are deeply related to issues of sovereignty, territorial integrity, strategic autonomy, and the relations of Bhutan to the forming neighbours. The paper assists in uncovering the reason why Bhutan cannot be perceived just by the strategic interests of India or China. Rather, self-serving national interests and sovereign decisions of Bhutan are a significant aspect of such a relationship. This view is especially helpful when one considers Doklam, when the issue of territorial sovereignty and the tension between Bhutanese interests and the security of the wider region came to the fore.

The article by Dihidar (2024) examines bilateral relations between India and its Himalayan neighbours, namely Nepal and Bangladesh, in the context of the development of Indian foreign policy. The research applies to the context of examining the role of Bhutan in India's neighbourhood diplomatic approach and the growing significance of the Neighbourhood First Policy. It shows that there is both a strategic and a developmental aspect in the way India is involved in interaction with the Himalayan neighbours. Gradually, concerning the current research, the work of Dihidar will give us a more expansive policy frame to study the ongoing relationship India has with Bhutan following the Doklam reason and how much further that cooperation can go past the traditional issues of security.

Thapliyal (2022) focuses on such strategic issues about India in relation to Nepal and Bhutan, specifically the Himalayan geography, border security, and the presence of China in the region. The research is powerful due to the Jawboning of the geographical position of Bhutan as of great relevance in the strategic computations of India. These anxieties were highlighted by Thapliyal in a particularly evident way in the 2017 Doklam standoff, when events in a Bhutan-owned portion of the contentious western border region directly collided with the India-China security concerns. The paper thus has a great strategic context to lean on as it seeks to examine the ongoing applicability of security co-operation in post-Doklam India-Bhutan relations.

Bhutia (2022) explores the significant problems and challenges in India -Bhutan relations. The research proves that along with overall friendly relations of the bilateral partnership, the relationship is characterized by such issues as those related to strategic interests, economic relations, and the changing conditions in the region. This input comes in very handy since it does not allow the relationship to be perceived solely on the grid of friendship and cooperation. It implies the necessity to consider the spheres of dependence, asymmetry, and new regional needs and the positive aspects of bilateral relations. The current paper expands this line of thought with respect to how the problems have changed since Doklam.

Nga, Hiep, Thuy, and Huyen (2019) present a historical overview of India and Bhutan treaties of 1949 and 2007. Their work has significance in terms of grasping the institutional development of bilateral relations. The replacement between the 1949 Treaty and the 2007 Friendship Treaty was a significant shift in the official foundation of India-Bhutan relations. The 2007 framework is especially important to understand the modern relationship due to the reflection of the variation of engagement of India and Bhutan and an institutional basis to relate between these countries with mutual interests. The given part of history would enable the current study to identify the differences between the continuity in the long-term and the transformations that occurred after 2017.

The article by Kaura and Rani (2020) focuses on the 2014-2019 timeframe of the neighbourhood policy in India and the way it impacts politics and policy outcomes. Their work also offers a significant export-policy guide to comprehend how India treated its neighbouring states at the time of the Doklam standoff. The work assists in placing India-Bhutan relations in the larger context of how the neighbourhood diplomacy of India is evolving under the Modi government. It is especially helpful in explaining how the bilateral relations with Bhutan were linked to the even greater attempts by India to increase its engagements with its neighbours.

Chandra (2020) analyses the geo-strategic aspects of India-Bhutan relations. The paper underscores the importance of the geographical location of Bhutan, and how bilateral relations have effects that go beyond traditional economic and diplomatic collaboration. The location of Bhutan has made the country a significant strategic position for India, because of the eastern location of the country. This type of geo-strategy is crucial to elucidate why any happenings in Bhutan can shape broader regional security calculations, especially in competition between India and China. The work by Chandra thus forms a substantial basis for analysing the strategic implications of the Doklam standoff.

Devi (2021) takes a particular case study of the India-China standoff in Doklam in terms of geopolitical, historical, and future outcomes. The research is directly connected to the current study since Doklam is the main hub clockwise around which the analysis of 2017 is organized. The publication by Devi contributes to setting the premise that the Doklam incident cannot be perceived as merely a confrontation issue at a border level; instead, it was linked to historical geo-territorial conflicts, the rivalry of regional powers, and the Himalayan geowares. The paper is therefore useful in giving the background behind the evaluation of the impact the standoff had on future relations between India and Bhutan.

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Mohammed (2025) analyses Indian foreign policy in relation to China post 2014 in terms of opportunities and challenges. Even though the paper is more focused on India-China relations, it applies to India-Bhutan relations since China is one of the key external forces that should be factored in as China forms part of the Indian strategic calculus in the Himalayan belt. The research gives a more general background on how to analyze the China aspect of Indian policy following Doklam. It assists in understanding the reason why the progress of the India-China relationship could be of any significance to the India-Bhutan relations.

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Dubey (2018) offers a more comprehensive evaluation of Indian foreign policy since the time of the Modi regime and especially in relation to the neighbourhood and major powers. The paper can be helpful to contextualize India–Bhutan relations within the broader change of India-outward interaction after 2014. It is also applicable to the current study in the knowledge of how neighbourhood diplomacy and major-power competition work together in Indian foreign policy. This broader view is relevant to the analysis of the Indian attitude towards Bhutan in the course of and as a result of the Doklam crisis.

A more recent contribution is made by Abasar and Singh (2026), who analyze the framing of the 2017 Doklam standoff by sentiment analysis of Times of India headlines and comparing it to India-China tensions in 2025. Their research shows that Doklam remains a relevant topic in the present day in both the public and strategic discourse. The media sentiment analysis also brings into the literature a new angle of approach, which can be categorized largely under geopolitical, diplomatic, historical, and policy analysis. According to the research and analysis, the political and strategic importance of Doklam is even greater than the immediate solution to the conflict in 2017.

Research Gap

The literature under review provides a collective argument that the Indian-Bhutan relations are determined by strategic trust, proximity, security cooperation, development partnership, hydropower, economic interdependence, and the China factor. Current literature offers a lot of analysis of the historical basis of the relationship, the 2007 Friendship Treaty, Himalayan security, the Doklam standoff, and the location of Bhutan in the broader geopolitics of the region. Nevertheless, the systematic bilateral cooperation transformation, which has taken place after Doklam, has received comparatively scarce attention. Specifically, the diversification of the relationship into more recent spheres like renewable energy, railway and multimodal connectivity, digital cooperation, space technology, education, youth development, healthcare, and new economic initiatives will need additional consideration. It is also necessary to determine whether these emerging arenas are a true shift in the bilateral relationship or merely a continuation of the conventional strategic association. Thus, the current

work attempts to address this gap by investigating India-Bhutan relations in the aftermath of the 2017 Doklam confrontation in the context of the concepts of continuity and change. It particularly examines how the conventional pillars of strategic and economic collaboration have been preserved with the emergence of new facets of connectivity, technology, energy, development, and economic interactions in the post-Doklam era.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the Doklam standoff in 2017 affected India-Bhutan relationships and evaluate the future of strategic cooperation.
2. To examine bilateral cooperation shifts in aspects like trade, hydropower, renewable energy, connectivity, technology, and development.
3. To analyze the China and geopolitics of the region have contributed to the formation of modern India-Bhutan relations.
4. To evaluate the new opportunities and challenges in the India-Bhutan relationship in the post-Doklam.
5. To assess the future of India-Bhutan relations regarding regional security and Bhutan's strategic autonomy.

5. Research Methodology

The research has a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach to research. It is founded mostly on secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, edited volumes, policy research, official documents, bilateral statements, government publications and research reports. The research discusses the years 2017 to 2026, but focuses more on post-Doklam standoff events. The conceptual and analytical foundation is made on the basis of the scholarly sources, including journals, research papers, articles, etc. The current developments in the bilateral agreements and policy initiatives are analyzed using official sources of the Government of India and the Royal Government of Bhutan. It is thematically structured in terms of security, development, energy, trade, connectivity, technology, and emerging strategic challenges.

6. The 2017 Doklam Standoff and Its Strategic Significance

The Doklam crisis arose when the Chinese troops tried to build a road in a region occupied by Bhutan. Bhutan found the construction to be not in line with its bilateral agreements with China. India got involved due to the geographical and strategic importance of the region and its prospects for the India-China-Bhutan tri-junction. In June 2017, India clarified its official stand, claiming that Bhutan had been agitating against Chinese road construction and that both Bhutanese and Indian governments were constantly in touch. The risk posed by unilateral alteration of the status quo at the tri-junction, India claimed, could lead to grave security consequences. The significance of the position of Doklam to India is partly attributed to the fact that the plateau is located close to the Siliguri Corridor, which is the slim, narrow land bridge between mainland India and the northeastern parts. The events in the Doklam region therefore have consequences on the territorial security of India. In the case of Bhutan, with which a boundary with China that had not been resolved, the matter was intimately related to the problem of sovereignty. To analytically avoid this reduction of Doklam to an India-China confrontation is therefore of significance. The key stakeholder was Bhutan since the disputed region falls under the territory that Bhutan claims.

There were three key realities depicted by the crisis.

- The first reason is that the territory-related conflicts that Bhutan faces can directly impact Indian national security.

- Second, the developing infrastructure capabilities in the Himalayan region by China place strategic pressure on both Bhutan and India.
- Thirdly, the India-Bhutan relationship is still extremely pertinent to the stability of the eastern Himalayas.

It was also due to the decision in favor of Indian security and Bhutanese strategic autonomy that the balance was revealed as insecure because of the crisis. Traditionally, Bhutan has had a good relationship with India, but at the same time, it was trying to find a peaceful solution to its boundary difference between them and China. The future Bhutan foreign policy of India, therefore, should be sensitive to security and at the same time be respectful in and to Bhutan choice-making.

7. Continuity in India–Bhutan Relations after Doklam

7.1 Strategic Trust and Security Cooperation

The continuity of strategic trust came as the most important after Doklam. There was no worsening of the political relationship in the crisis. Rather, the two parties maintained usual high levels of diplomacy and consultations. The bilateral relations between the two countries have been institutionalized by the 2007 Friendship Treaty, and both countries are still in a process of coordinating their efforts along the border-management and security front. The MEA states that both countries have similar perceptions of strategic interests and closely cooperate on security and border management. This sustained pattern sustains the observation of Mallesham (2023) on the strategic nature of the bilateral relationship and that of Thapliyal (2022) on the significance of Bhutan in the Himalayan security space in India. Nevertheless, the post-Doklam Indian foreign policy is not merely a variation on previous policy. India has also been working toward giving Bhutan greater economic and infrastructural resilience as a way of making contributions towards the stability of the region, although indirectly.

7.2 Political and Diplomatic Engagement

The frequent visits at the leadership level have been a significant attribute of the bilateral relations. The balance of visits since 2017 shows that the standoff did not impact the political basis of this relationship. Indian leadership has traditionally engaged at high levels with Bhutan, with Bhutanese King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck making several visits to India. The significance of the relationship was reaffirmed in March 2024 by a visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bhutan as part of India's Neighbourhood First policy. Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay also became the first overseas visitor to the country he made in 2024 after assuming office, also indicating the future political importance of India in Bhutan's foreign policy. In his visit, the two nations talked of development cooperation, connectivity, infrastructure, education, health, agriculture, skilling and the Gelephu Mindfulness City. The trend shows that regardless of the changes in governments and regional dynamics, the relationship has remained highly politically institutionalised.

8. Change and Diversification in Bilateral Cooperation

8.1 From Hydropower-Centred Cooperation to Broader Energy Partnership

Traditionally, hydropower was the focus of the Indian-Bhutan economic relations. An example was the 720 MW Mangdechhu project, which became a big milestone in bilateral energy collaboration during its inauguration in 2019. There is also the 1,200 MW Punatsangchhu-I and 1,020 MW Punatsangchhu Project that India and Bhutan have been carrying on. Nevertheless, it has undergone a substantial change since the post-Doklam era from an exclusionary hydropower alliance to a wider energy alliance. In March 2024, during the visit of the Prime Minister Modi's visit to Bhutan, there

was a joint vision with regard to the India-Bhutan Energy Partnership. The framework extends the collaborative process outside traditional hydropower into solar power, green hydrogen, and other fields of renewable energy. In India, in terms of its 2024 annual report, there is also cooperation in the field of non-hydro renewables, and at the same time, renewable-energy opportunities are developed. The current continued energy relationship with traditional energy relates to the drawing up of the 1,020 MW Punatsangchu-II project. The opening in November 2025 and the export of electricity strengthened hydropower collaboration, and the negotiations on the restart of the activities on Punatsangchu-I showed further adherence to the idea of large-scale energy cooperation. Therefore, the energy relationship has not only been sustained but indeed is evolving: hydropower is still driven to be at the center, though there is a slowing trend in favor of cooperation, which is shifting towards renewable-energy diversification.

8.2 Development Partnership and Bhutan's Socio-Economic Transformation

The bilateral relations of India and the US still stand on the reliable support of development assistance. Traditionally, there was aid in the form of infrastructural and simple development. However, during the post-Doklam era, the basis of development cooperation has also increased significantly. India, during the 2024 bilateral talks, reaffirmed its follow-up on Bhutan's 13th Five-Year Plan. The topics associated with development assistance included infrastructure, road connectivity, rail connectivity, digital connectivity, agriculture, healthcare, education, developing skills, and preserving culture. This change is significant since Bhutan is pursuing diversity of the economy and a reliance on traditional sectors that are overly reliant. The development partnership between India and other countries is more favored toward the development of human capital and diversification of the economy, instead of merely funding physical infrastructure. The relationship thus shows the shift of development assistance as a form of infrastructure assistance to a development partnership as capacity building and economic transformation.

9. Connectivity as a New Strategic Pillar

One of the most significant viewpoints of the post-Doklam collaboration is connectivity. The 2024 India-Bhutan joint statement stressed physical linkage via railways, roads, airways and waterways and trade infrastructure, economic and digital connectivity. Another development embraced in the two countries was the cross-border rail connections between Kokrajhar and Gelephu and between Banarhat and Samtse. There is another meaning in these projects beyond transportation. This can facilitate economic isolation, enhance accessibility to Indian markets, tourism and investment, as well as regional integration, as a better-connected Bhutan is less trapped in economic seclusion. This is further enhanced by the creation and functionalisation of other border facilities. In November 2024, the Integrated Check Post at Darranga in Assam was operationalised, and the Inland Waterways Terminal and Multimodal Logistics Park at Jogighopa became significant in novel India-Bhutan connectivity. In September 2025, the two countries signed an MoU related to cross-border rail connections. The interconnectedness of India and Bhutan is thus a significant transformation of the older pattern of India-Bhutan relations. The post-Doklam cooperation, unlike in the past when much of the collaboration was focused on hydropower and development projects, is gaining ground to establish an integrated economic/logistical space.

10. Gelephu Mindfulness City and the Emerging Economic Partnership

The Gelephu Mindfulness City project that Bhutan embarked on is one of the most important ones in the modern India-Bhutan relations. The project signifies Bhutan's

desire to create a new economic centre founded on sustainable urbanisation, investments, technology, connectivity and the unique development philosophy of the country. The support given to the initiative by India has been based on the fact that it has the potential to enhance economic and investment connections between the two countries. In March 2024, in the framework of a bilateral activity, India opened the door to the Gelephu course and associated it with enhancing connectivity and economic collaboration. Connectivity in the area of Gelephu is also strategically important with Indian support. The proximity of Gelephu to the Indian border presents opportunities for trade, tourism, logistics, and investment. Any railway linkage between Gelephu and Kokrajhar would have a significant positive effect on the penetration of the Indian markets. The project thus forms a symbol of a new type of bilateral collaboration where economic geography, connectiveness, private capital and strategic considerations all intersect.

11. Digital and Space Cooperation

The Gelephu Mindfulness City project that Bhutan embarked on is one of the most important ones in modern India-Bhutan relations. The project signifies the desire to create a new economic centre founded on sustainable urbanisation, investments, technology, connectivity and the unique development philosophy of the country. The support given to the initiative by India has been based on the fact that it has the potential to enhance economic and investment connections between the two countries. In March 2024, in the framework of a bilateral activity, India opened the door to the Gelephu course and associated it with enhancing connectivity and economic collaboration. Connectivity in the area of Gelephu is also strategically important with Indian support. The proximity of Gelephu to the Indian border presents opportunities for trade, tourism, logistics, and investment. Any railway linkage between Gelephu and Kokrajhar would have a significant positive effect on the penetration of the Indian markets. The project thus forms a symbol of a new type of bilateral collaboration where economic geography, connectiveness, private capital and strategic considerations all intersect.

12. Youth, Education, Health and Human-Centred Cooperation

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13. Trade and Economic Interdependence

India is the single biggest trading and development partner to Bhutan. This association is helped by the geographical closeness and reliance of Bhutan on Indian routes to most of its international trade. The Indian market, especially the export of electricity, has been traditionally beneficial to Bhutan's economy. The events after

Doklam, though, have seen attempts to expand bilateral trade. The two nations have ंद पउचवतजंदज बवदेपकमतंजपवदण जीम ेमबनतपजल पदजमतमेजे वि प्दकपं ंतम दवज नदविनदकमकए इनज वअमतपदकनसहमक चतमैनतम तिवउ जीम प्दकपंदे ूवनसक मतवकम ठीनजंदमेम बवदपिकमदबमण ।द मेजंइसपैीमक तमसंजपवदैीपच पदअवसअमे बवदेनसजंजपवदए ंदक दवज वदमे.पकमक ेजतंजमहपब ंदजपबपचंजपवदेण

- China's Expanding Regional Presence: The economic growth in infrastructure and its foreign relations with Bhutan are key strategic variables for China. The India-China rivalry may put more strain on Bhutan to exercise a balance in its relationship.
- Hydropower-Related Economic Vulnerabilities: Hydropower has continued to be a relevant source of Bhutanian economic power, whereas overreliance on one of the fields is a hazard. Large projects can be adversely impacted by cost increases, time, and energy market fluctuations on their financial sustainability.
- Connectivity and Infrastructure Gaps: Hydropower has continued to be a relevant source of Bhutanian economic power, whereas overreliance on one of the fields is a hazard. Large projects can be adversely impacted by cost increases, time, and energy market fluctuations on their financial sustainability.
- Asymmetry in Economic Relations: Hydropower has continued to be a relevant source of Bhutanian economic power, whereas overreliance on one of the fields is a hazard. Large projects can be adversely impacted by cost increases, time, and energy market fluctuations on their financial sustainability.
- Environmental Sustainability: Large hydropower and long-duration infrastructure projects have to be harmonized with the environmental interests of Bhutan and with its Gross National Happiness philosophy. The inclusion of climate resilience, biodiversity protection and sustainable development must be part of future cooperation.

17. Future Prospects

The success of transformation into a more diversified partnership between governments, businesses, communities, universities and technological institutions might be the key to the future of India-Bhutan relations, which is predominantly still state-to-state in nature.

- First, cooperation in the sphere of renewable energy may also become a key development. Solar power, green hydrogen, energy storage and electric mobility can be used to complement the hydropower potential in Bhutan.
- Second, connectivity has the potential to change the economic geography of Bhutan. The cross-border rail connection, enhanced road networks, waterways and other border infrastructure can reduce transportation expenses and increase Bhutan's access to markets in India and other nations.
- Third, Gelephu is a region that might gain significant economic cooperation upon receiving investments, logistics, digital infrastructure, tourism and skills development, which are contributed by India.
- Fourth, space and digital cooperation would enable Bhutan with technological potential, otherwise costly to establish on its own.
- Fifth, education and human-capital collaboration can contribute to forming a new generation of Bhutanese professionals who are more technologically, entrepreneurial, and administrative professionals.
- Sixth, India needs to enhance its collaboration with Bhutan on climate change and environmental regulation. Ecological security of the Himalayas is an interest in common, and the relationship can be enhanced through cooperation in the area without strategic sensitivities.

Lastly, Bhutan must remain as a policy towards India as an independent partner but not as a buffer state. This would contribute to building trust and ensure a more sustainable partnership with India.

18. Findings of the Study

The results of the study are the following key findings:

- Doklam reinforced, but could not weaken the basics of India-Bhutan relations. The strategic value of bilateral cooperation was brought to the limelight through the crisis.
- There is high strategic continuity. Security consultation, addressing the border, and high-level political involvement all still remain the pillars of bilateral relations.
- There is diversification of economic cooperation. Hydropower has not been forgotten, but renewable energy, investment, trade, connectivity and technology have gained more importance.
- The issue of connectivity has become a strategic economic priority. Rail, roads, border facilities, waterways and logistics are taking centre stage on the relationship.
- It is growing into a technology-based relationship. Space cooperation, digital connectivity and capacity building are significant new aspects.
- The development cooperation becomes more human-centred. The key elements have been brought out as education, healthcare, skills, youth, sports and entrepreneurship.
- Gelephu is one of the prospects that could bring change. Its creation can enhance economic integration in India-Bhutan as well as introduce a new gateway to regional connectivity.
- The most important strategic variable continues to be China. The border negotiations between Bhutan and China and the Chinese development of the infrastructure will remain to impact the strategic calculations of India.
- Strategic autonomy of Bhutan must be kept at heart. Bilateral relations between Bhutan and other countries should be sustainable: Bhutan should have its sovereignty and right to decide by its own.
- This post-Doklam alliance is what can be described as continuity via diversification. The classic strategic pillar is the same, only that the level of collaboration has increased significantly.

19. Conclusion

The 2017 Doklam standoff signified a significant shift in the relationship between India and Bhutan, as it compromised the intimacy of Bhutan with regard to its territorial interests, India with regard to its security interests, and China with regard to its increasing strategic interest in the Himalayas. But the bilateral partnership was not shaken by the crisis; instead, it strengthened the bilateral strategic trust, security collaborations, political involvement, and developmental relationships. Meanwhile, the post-Doklam relationship has grown to encompass aspects beyond conventional hydropower and security partnership to renewable energy, connectivity, digital and space technology, education, healthcare, youth development, and novel economic projects like Gelephu Mindfulness City. The paper thus finds that present India-Bhutan relations embody both strategic continuity and substantial diversification. Future collaboration will be based on the need to balance the security needs of India against the sovereignty and strategic autonomy of Bhutan, together with the need to encourage sustainable economic development and regional

connectivity.

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