



Evolution Of Bhutan As A Buffer State Between India And China

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Abstract: The paper explores the historical evolution of Bhutan as a buffer state between India and China, tracing its transformation from the colonial era to contemporary geopolitical dynamics. The analysis begins with British colonial interventions in the Eastern Himalayan region, particularly focusing on the 1772 skirmish, the Treaty of Sinchula (1865), and the Treaty of Punakha (1910), which established Bhutan's early dependence on and alignment with British India. These colonial-era policies and treaties not only redefined Bhutan's territorial and diplomatic orientation but also initiated its role as a strategic buffer zone. The post-colonial phase, including the 1949 Indo-Bhutan Treaty and the rise of Communist China, further entrenched Bhutan's buffer status. Events such as the 1959 Tibetan Uprising and the 1962 Sino-Indian War intensified India's strategic interest in Bhutan. More recently, the 2007 Indo-Bhutan treaty revision and the 2017 Doklam standoff have reinforced Bhutan's geopolitical relevance. The hypothesis guiding this study is: Colonial-era interventions laid the foundation for Bhutan's evolution as a buffer state between India and China. Using a qualitative, descriptive approach rooted in postcolonial theory, the paper uses manual content analysis to highlight how colonial legacies continue to influence Bhutan's foreign policy and regional positioning.

Index Terms - British Colonialism, Postcolonial theory, Bhutan, Buffer state, Colonial legacy

I. Introduction

Bhutan, a small Himalayan kingdom, holds a unique and strategic position in South Asia. Sandwiched between two major powers, India and China, has historically functioned as a buffer state, absorbing geopolitical pressures and maintaining regional equilibrium. In international relations, buffer states are smaller countries situated between two or more larger, often adversarial powers. Rather than simply occupying physical space, these states serve a deeper strategic function within what scholars call buffer systems, a configuration that reveals important insights into regional power dynamics and rivalries. Traditionally, buffer states have played a dual role: they act as insulating zones that reduce the likelihood of direct conflict between stronger neighbors and serve as early indicators of external threats, allowing dominant states to prepare and respond in time (Chand, 2023). Bhutan's emergence as such a state was not a mere accident of geography, but a process shaped in large part by colonial interventions during British rule in the Indian subcontinent. This study adopts a postcolonial theoretical lens to examine Bhutan's evolution, focusing on how historical imprints of colonialism continue to influence the country's strategic identity and relationships with neighboring powers.

Postcolonial theory, as articulated by J. Daniel Elam, is fundamentally concerned with the political, historical, economic, and cultural legacies of colonial rule. It holds that the modern world cannot be fully understood without recognizing the enduring impact of European imperialism and colonialism from the

18th to 20th centuries. This approach allows us to examine Bhutan's current geopolitical positioning not as an isolated or natural outcome, but as one historically shaped by British colonial policies, treaties, and strategic designs.

This paper hypothesizes that colonial-era interventions laid the foundation for Bhutan's evolution as a buffer state between India and China. The aim is to critically examine how treaties and policies enacted under British colonialism formalized Bhutan's geopolitical role and how this legacy continues to shape regional dynamics in contemporary times.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: 1. What specific colonial policies or treaties established Bhutan's role as a buffer state during British rule? 2. How did British departure from India affect Bhutan's buffer status? 3. How does Bhutan continue to be a buffer state between India and China in contemporary times?

The objectives of this research are to analyze the colonial policies and treaties that formalized Bhutan's role as a buffer state during British rule, to understand the impact of Indian independence on Bhutan's role as a buffer state and to explore Bhutan's contemporary buffer state status between India and China.

This paper traces the continuity and transformation of Bhutan's buffer role across historical and contemporary periods.

II. Review of Literature

The strategic evolution of Bhutan as a buffer state between India and China has been discussed through a range of historical and contemporary perspectives. Much of the existing literature emphasizes Bhutan's unique geopolitical location and the role it has played historically in regional diplomacy, conflict, and strategy. Bhutan's buffer status is often traced back to the colonial period, when the British engaged with Bhutan through both conflict and treaty. The skirmish of 1772, followed by the Treaty of Sinchula in 1865 and the Treaty of Punakha in 1910, are seen as foundational events that shaped Bhutan's early external relations (Bulletin of Tibetology, 1971). These treaties helped formalize Bhutan's position as a peripheral but significant state between two imperial powers, British India and Qing China.

The post-colonial transition further solidified Bhutan's buffer role. The 1949 Indo-Bhutan Treaty of Friendship provided a framework through which India assumed responsibility for Bhutan's external affairs, in return for non-interference in Bhutan's internal matters (Sarkar, 2017). This treaty is frequently cited as a pivotal moment that aligned Bhutan firmly with India in the early Cold War years, especially following the 1959 Tibetan Uprising and the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Scholars argue that during this period, Bhutan began to play an increasingly important role in India's security architecture in the eastern Himalayas, serving as a strategic frontier between India and an emerging China.

In recent years, Bhutan's diplomatic balancing has become more complex. Malik and Sheikh (2016) examine how Bhutan's foreign policy orientation has remained sensitive to changes in India-China relations, especially in light of China's growing regional assertiveness. They highlight that the revision of the Indo-Bhutan Treaty in 2007 allowed Bhutan greater autonomy in its foreign engagements, reflecting an evolving but cautious attempt to maintain strategic neutrality. However, this autonomy remains bounded by Bhutan's continued dependence on India for economic aid, military training, and infrastructural development.

III. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design rooted in postcolonial theory to examine Bhutan's evolution as a buffer state between India and China. The central aim is to explore how colonial legacies have influenced Bhutan's strategic identity and diplomatic choices, and how these legacies continue to shape its interactions in the postcolonial period.

3.1 Data Collection and Source Selection

It involves both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official treaties such as the Treaty of Punakha (1910) and official documents of Bhutan. Secondary sources consist of scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and credible news analyses that address Bhutan's geopolitical positioning and diplomatic conduct. The sources were chosen keeping in mind their relevance to British colonialism and Bhutan. They were taken from the 1850s (to ensure inclusion of colonial interventions) to 2024 (to ensure contemporary relevance).

3.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis is conducted through manual content analysis, a qualitative technique used to identify recurring themes and patterns within textual data. The analysis is organized around the following thematic categories: Colonial Policies and Treaties: This theme explores how British imperial strategies and agreements, particularly the Treaty of Punakha, institutionalized Bhutan's role as a buffer state.^{[1][2]} Post-Colonial Transition: This theme investigates how Indian independence and the changing regional order influenced Bhutan's strategic status, including the impact of the 1949 Indo-Bhutan Treaty and subsequent diplomatic shifts.^{[3][4]} Contemporary Status and Relevance: This section analyzes Bhutan's current geopolitical stance, including its policy of cautious neutrality and the implications of events such as the 2017 Doklam standoff for its buffer role.

IV. The Colonial Foundations of Bhutan as a Buffer State

4.1 British India's Strategic Interests in the Himalayas

British India's interest in the Himalayas was primarily rooted in the security of its northern frontiers. The British viewed the mountain kingdoms, Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan, not as isolated monarchies, but as important geopolitical buffers. This thinking was reinforced during the 19th century when Russian influence was expanding in Central Asia and China retained historical links with Tibet. For the British, control over or influence in Bhutan offered a form of forward defence, reducing the vulnerability of British India to northern encroachments (Lama, 2023). Moreover, Bhutan's proximity to Assam and Bengal, important colonial territories in British India, made its political alignment and stability especially important to colonial administrators. Bhutan's rugged terrain and limited external interaction also made it suitable for indirect control, aligning with the British policy of managing the frontiers through local monarchs while avoiding direct annexation (Rose, 1974).

4.2 Younghusband Expedition and Bhutan's Peripheral Role (1903–1905)

Although Bhutan was not directly involved in the British Younghusband Expedition to Tibet, the event had significant implications for Bhutan's strategic position. The expedition aimed to establish trade and reduce Russian influence in Tibet. After the 1904 Treaty of Lhasa, British interest in surrounding Himalayan states increased, and Bhutan was further recognized as a vital intermediary territory between British India and a politically volatile Tibet (South Asia Outreach, n.d.).

4.3 British Strategies: Annexation of Territories, Subsidy Payments, and Treaties

The British employed a combination of military action and diplomacy to establish their influence over Bhutan. They annexed territories, negotiated treaties, and ultimately secured Bhutan's foreign relations under their guidance, all while maintaining a facade of Bhutanese independence. The British adopted a model of "subsidized allegiance" where they avoided annexation in favor of monetary payments. Bhutan's economic dependency on these subsidies made it easier for the British to influence Bhutan's external posture without resorting to direct colonial rule. This approach allowed Britain to exercise control over strategic highland zones while minimizing administrative costs and avoiding formal colonisation (Lama, 2023; Joseph, 2007). This strategy served broader colonial interests in the Himalayas, particularly in creating buffer zones to protect British India's vulnerable northern frontiers.

4.4 The 1772 Skirmish and Early British Engagement

The first significant confrontation between Bhutan and British India occurred in 1772, when Bhutanese forces occupied parts of Cooch Behar. The local ruler of Cooch Behar, seeking protection from British encroachment, appealed to the East India Company. British military intervention led to Bhutan's defeat, and in 1774, the Treaty of Cooch Behar was signed. Under this treaty, Bhutan was forced to relinquish its claim over Cooch Behar and agreed to send a diplomatic mission to Calcutta every five years. While Bhutan retained some autonomy, this treaty marked the beginning of British influence over Bhutan's external affairs (Sarkar, 2017).

4.5 The Duar War and the Treaty of Sinchula (1865)

Tensions between Bhutan and British India escalated in the 19th century due to cross-border raids and disputes over control of the strategic Duar region. This led to the Duar War in 1864–1865, culminating in Bhutan's military defeat. The Treaty of Sinchula, signed in November 1865, forced Bhutan to cede the Assam and Bengal Duars to the British and accept an annual subsidy of 50,000 rupees (OnWar, n.d.). This treaty marked the formal beginning of British India's influence over Bhutan's foreign affairs, despite allowing Bhutan to retain internal autonomy (Rennie, 1866).

4.6 The Treaty of Punakha (1910)

To formalise Bhutan's position within the British strategic framework (reduce Tibetan and Chinese influence) the British signed the Treaty of Punakha with Bhutan in 1910. This treaty increased the annual subsidy and stipulated that Bhutan would be guided by British India in matters of external relations ("The Treaty of Punakha, 1910," n.d.). It institutionalized Bhutan's status as a dependent but not colonized state, free to govern itself domestically but barred from independent foreign policy and solidified Bhutan's dependency on British financial support (Poulouze, 1971).

4.7 British Colonialism's Impact on Bhutan's Status as a Buffer State

The cumulative effect of these treaties, military interventions, and diplomatic strategies was the formalization of Bhutan's role as a buffer state. It was no longer just a passive geographical zone but an active component of British India's frontier security policy. While Bhutan retained its monarchy and internal governance, its foreign policy became tightly tethered to British interests (Lama, 2023).

V. Post-Colonial Transitions and Bhutan's Strategic Position

Bhutan's geopolitical identity underwent significant transformation in the aftermath of British decolonization in South Asia. The withdrawal of the British from India in 1947 left Bhutan at a crucial juncture, with the Himalayan kingdom needing to redefine its foreign policy amidst shifting regional power dynamics. Its strategic positioning between two rising Asian powers, India and China, compelled Bhutan to gradually recalibrate its diplomatic and security posture, while preserving its sovereignty and unique identity.

5.1 India's Independence and Bhutan's Diplomatic Realignment

Following India's independence, Bhutan quickly sought to establish new bilateral ties. This led to the Treaty of Friendship between India and Bhutan in 1949, which reaffirmed Bhutan's sovereignty while simultaneously reinforcing India's role as a guide in Bhutan's foreign affairs. The treaty mirrored several aspects of the earlier 1910 Treaty of Punakha, which had been signed between Bhutan and British India. However, the 1949 treaty was presented as more egalitarian, emphasizing non-interference in internal affairs while maintaining India's advisory role in Bhutan's external engagements ("The Treaty of Punakha, 1910," n.d.). This continuation underscores a core concern of postcolonial theory: how colonial legacies persist and morph rather than disappear.

Bhutan accepted annual subsidies from India and allowed Indian guidance in external matters in exchange for military protection and continued support for its sovereignty, a clear indicator of Bhutan's buffer role being carried forward into the post-colonial framework. (Royal Government of Bhutan, n.d.).

5.2 Bhutan's Approach to China Post-1949

While Bhutan shared historical cultural and religious ties with Tibet, China's invasion of Tibet in 1950 and its subsequent incorporation into the People's Republic of China drastically altered the region's political dynamics. Bhutan, perceiving this development as a threat to its own territorial integrity, adopted a cautious foreign policy that included closing its border with Tibet and refusing to establish formal diplomatic relations with China (Lama, 2023).

The Chinese government's publication of maps in the late 1950s that included parts of Bhutan as Chinese territory further deepened mistrust. This compelled Bhutan to strengthen its alliance with India, particularly in the context of China's growing assertiveness along the Himalayan frontier.

5.3 The 1959 Tibetan Uprising and Bhutan's Security Concerns

The 1959 Tibetan uprising and the Dalai Lama's escape to India marked a turning point in the Himalayan security environment. Bhutan feared a spillover of unrest and responded by fortifying its border with Tibet and expelling Tibetan monastic tenants from Bhutanese territory. These actions reflected a heightened sense of vulnerability and a growing alignment with India's security framework (Rose, 1974; Lama, 2023).

This period also saw Bhutan beginning to engage with the outside world cautiously. While maintaining its deep historical and religious ties to Tibet, Bhutan avoided direct entanglement in Sino-Tibetan issues. It focused instead on maintaining national integrity through controlled modernization and selective engagement in international institutions.

5.4 Strategic Continuity and India's Role in Bhutan's Security

India's role in Bhutan's security remained central through the Cold War period. India helped Bhutan build its first roads and infrastructure, integrating it economically and strategically with the Indian subcontinent. Bhutan's reliance on India was not only due to shared borders but also a function of shared concerns regarding Chinese expansionism. India's deep integration into Bhutan's strategic infrastructure, while beneficial, also reveals neocolonial patterns of dependency. This aligns with postcolonial concerns that

former colonies often continue to operate within the orbit of dominant powers, suggesting a shift from colonial rule to informal empire.

The 1962 Sino-Indian War served as a stark reminder of regional volatility. Bhutan, caught between two powerful neighbors, reaffirmed its security dependence on India. Although Bhutan and China began boundary talks in the 1980s, no formal diplomatic relations were established, and issues of border demarcation, particularly in areas like Doklam, remained contentious (Poulse, 1971).

VI. Bhutan in Contemporary Times – Colonial Legacies and Bhutan's Buffer State Status

Bhutan's foreign policy has evolved considerably over the past several decades. From being an isolated Himalayan kingdom focused on preserving its cultural identity, it has transitioned into a strategically aware actor navigating regional and global politics. However, Bhutan's contemporary status as a buffer state between India and China is not a recent development, it is deeply rooted in the colonial legacies of British India. The strategic frameworks and geopolitical perceptions established by British colonialism continue to shape Bhutan's foreign policy choices and its position in the regional order.

6.1 Post-1962: The Sino-Indian War and the Colonial Buffer Logic Reasserted

The 1962 Sino-Indian War marked a pivotal shift in Bhutan's foreign policy outlook. Although Bhutan was not a direct participant, the war revived colonial-era anxieties about the Himalayan frontier and reaffirmed its role as a strategic buffer between two great powers. This perception was first established during British rule, when Bhutan, along with Tibet and Nepal, was seen as a protective shield for the Indian subcontinent against northern threats.

Following the war, Bhutan reassessed its isolationist stance, which had been partially shaped by its earlier encounters with British colonial aggression, such as the Duar War and the 1910 Treaty of Punakha. The post-war environment echoed British frontier thinking, India, now independent, adopted similar strategies to what the British once pursued: securing Himalayan buffers to prevent Chinese ingress.

In 1971, Bhutan joined the United Nations, marking its entry into global diplomacy. While this was a step toward international recognition, it also served to assert sovereignty against the shadow of both historical and contemporary territorial pressures (The Permanent Mission of Bhutan to the United Nations, n.d.). India supported Bhutan's move, reminiscent of the protector-protégé dynamic institutionalized during colonial times. Yet Bhutan's UN accession also signified a subtle rejection of the dependency model perpetuated by the British Raj and reinforced in the early post-colonial period.

6.2 2007: Revising the Indo-Bhutan Treaty and Resisting Colonial Continuities

The 1949 Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty, signed just two years after Indian independence, reflected the enduring colonial logic of external control over Bhutan's foreign and defense policies. It replicated the 1910 British-Bhutan treaty language, especially the clause that Bhutan would be "guided" in its external affairs. This was a direct continuation of British strategic imperatives, designed to prevent Bhutan from engaging independently with China or other powers.

As Bhutan's confidence and international presence grew, it increasingly resisted these inherited constraints. The 2007 revision of the treaty was a significant attempt to dismantle colonial-era hierarchies, an act of postcolonial resistance, signaling Bhutan's growing refusal to be circumscribed by inherited diplomatic subordination. The new treaty enshrined mutual respect for sovereignty and non-interference, affirming Bhutan's independent agency in foreign affairs (ORF, 2022). While India remained Bhutan's primary security partner, the treaty revision marked a break from the dynamics instituted by the British and preserved in early Indo-Bhutan relations (Lama, 2023). Bhutan's gradual diplomatic outreach beyond South Asia should be seen in this light, not as a break from tradition, but as a conscious effort to redefine its buffer role on its own terms, distancing itself from the colonial-era model of controlled dependence.

6.3 2017: The Doklam Standoff and the Persistence of Colonial Borders

The 2017 Doklam standoff once again thrust Bhutan into the spotlight of great power rivalry. China's attempt to build a road in the disputed Doklam plateau led Bhutan to protest, and India to intervene militarily, resulting in a 73-day standoff (Akhoon, 2020). The crisis was not just about modern strategy, it was also a direct consequence of ambiguous borders and treaties left behind by British colonial cartographers, who had only partially demarcated the northern frontiers.

Doklam lies near the "tri-junction" of India, Bhutan, and China, a region whose boundaries were vaguely defined in British-era documents. The standoff highlighted how Bhutan's buffer status remains tied to unresolved colonial legacies. India's military involvement echoed the colonial rationale of protecting the Himalayan frontier, even as Bhutan sought to resolve the issue through peaceful negotiation (NDTV, 2017; ORF, 2022).

6.4 Bhutan-China Relations: Navigating Colonial Inheritance and Strategic Autonomy

Bhutan's lack of formal diplomatic relations with China must also be understood in the context of colonial legacies. While Bhutan maintains ties with 57 countries (The Permanent Mission of Bhutan to the United Nations, n.d.), China remains excluded largely due to unresolved border issues that stem from British-era treaties and the historical buffer state model.

China has consistently viewed Bhutan as a strategically located territory within the larger framework of Tibet and the Himalayas, an outlook not unlike that of the British during their imperial competition with Qing China. For Bhutan, opening diplomatic ties with China could provoke strategic anxieties in India, echoing colonial fears of rival powers gaining influence over buffer states.

Thus, Bhutan's cautious engagement with China through unofficial channels reflects its effort to protect its sovereignty while remaining bound by historical limitations imposed by colonial border politics (ORF, 2022; Lama, 2023). Bhutan's insistence on bilateral, non-coercive negotiations signals a departure from colonial-era dynamics where such territories had little say in their own external affairs.

6.5 Contemporary Balancing: Reimagining the Colonial Buffer Role

In 2024, Bhutan finds itself at the heart of a geopolitical landscape shaped by post-colonial realignments and colonial continuities. With growing India-China tensions, Bhutan's strategic relevance has only increased. However, rather than merely serving as a passive buffer, Bhutan is actively reshaping this role.

By prioritizing non-alignment, environmental sustainability, and gradual diplomatic diversification, Bhutan challenges the colonial conception of a buffer state as a dependent pawn. Still, the strategic tightrope it walks, maintaining close security ties with India while avoiding provocation with China, is a testament to how deeply colonial-era strategies are embedded in the region's geopolitics (Lama, 2023). Furthermore, Bhutan's policy of "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) represents its attempt to carve a unique, postcolonial identity within the global community. However, this attempt has been complicated by Bhutan's limited diplomatic maneuvering space, as both India and China continue to treat it as a geopolitical chess piece. This paradox exemplifies the postcolonial dilemma where a state's desire for sovereignty and development is often impeded by inherited colonial structures and contemporary international pressures.

Bhutan's calculated decision to remain diplomatically distant from China, while expanding its global partnerships, is both a continuation and redefinition of its historical buffer status. As it engages with multilateral forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in an observer capacity and cautiously increases trade with China, Bhutan retains the ability to maneuver—an agency it was long denied during colonial and early post-colonial periods (Kaul, 2022).

Even as Bhutan gradually asserted its independence, including revising the Indo-Bhutan Treaty in 2007 to remove India's advisory role in foreign policy, the shadow of colonialism lingered. Bhutan's foreign policy choices remained carefully calculated to avoid antagonizing either India or China, a delicate balancing act rooted in colonial-era spatial and strategic logic. This historical continuity illustrates how postcolonial states often navigate sovereignty within structures they did not design.

VII. Conclusion

This study has examined Bhutan's evolution as a buffer state between India and China through the lens of postcolonial theory, highlighting the enduring legacy of colonial interventions on its strategic identity and foreign policy. British colonial strategies, including the use of treaties such as the Treaty of Sinchula (1865), the Treaty of Punakha (1910), and others, were instrumental in constructing Bhutan's role as a geopolitical buffer. These policies, often implemented through annexation and economic subsidies, laid the groundwork for Bhutan's constrained sovereignty and limited autonomy in regional affairs.

Although British colonial rule formally ended with India's independence in 1947, Bhutan's buffer status did not dissolve. Instead, it transitioned into a new form of postcolonial negotiation, this time with India as the dominant regional power. The 1949 Treaty of Friendship further reinforced Bhutan's strategic positioning under Indian influence, showcasing how colonial-era structures were repurposed in post-independence South Asia. Bhutan's attempts to reassert its agency, such as the revision of the treaty in 2007 and its increased participation in international organizations, indicate a desire to escape the rigid identity of a buffer and pursue a more autonomous foreign policy.

However, the 2017 Doklam standoff sharply revealed the fragility of Bhutan's position. Despite its efforts toward sovereign diplomacy, the standoff underscored how Bhutan remains entangled in the power dynamics of its larger neighbors. The crisis reaffirmed its geopolitical vulnerability and demonstrated that colonial legacies continue to define its reality.

While Bhutan has made strides toward asserting a more independent global presence, the imprint of colonial history remains visible. Postcolonial theory thus provides a valuable framework for understanding

Bhutan's constrained diplomacy—not as a relic of the past, but as a lived reality shaped by a colonial past that still casts long shadows on the present.

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