

International Politics of Bhutan*

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Introduction

This paper discusses the extent to which international relations theories, which are mainly based on the behavior and interest of the big powers, explain the international behavior of small states. In order to do so, four different theories that are most commonly used to explain the international behavior of small states are reviewed briefly. Bhutan's international affairs, emphasizing on its relations with India is described and explanations provided using these theories. These theories predict that other small states would behave in a similar manner. To test this, Bhutan's relation with India is compared with the relation between Nepal and India. Nepal's relations with India differ from that of Bhutan's. This difference is empirically supported by their voting behavior in the United Nations. The existing theories fail to explain different relations of two similar states vis-à-vis a big neighbour. Some alternative explanations have been provided. The paper concludes by emphasizing that no existing international relations theories explain the behavior of small states. More studies incorporating cultural, political and social characteristics and involving foreign policy experts of small states are suggested.

A Review of International Relations Theories Related to Small States

There is a wide consensus among scholars and students of international relations that are interested in small states that the small states have been ignored by the prevailing international relations theories. In very limited instances where international politics of small states are mentioned, the

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states are described as small are so only relative to their neighbours or larger powers with which they are compared. For example, in *Power and Interdependence*, Keohane and Nye discuss the asymmetric relationship between the US on the one hand and Canada and Australia on the other. Australia and Canada are small only when compared to the US. Apart from the issue of differences in sizes of the states, there are several other dimensional differences that characterize global politico-economic system. There is an international hierarchy of growing complexities, discontinuities, and inequalities (Fauriol, 1984. 12-13).

One of the most common theories used to explain international policies of small states is structural scarcity theory. It emphasizes that the lack of economic and military capabilities constrain the behavior of small states. They are dependent on the states that have these capabilities (Vogel. 1983. 58). (in Holl ed.)

The concept of bandwagoning is other most commonly used theory to explain international behavior of small states (Väyrynen, 1997. 46). (in Inbar & Seffer ed) It is stated that that in a situation of threat small states will almost always align with the threatening power.

There are two other theories that have been used to study behavior of small states. First one is the world systems analysis and it emphasizes the economic dynamics of the entire international system. According to this theory, the world is divided into a three-layer hierarchy of core, semi-periphery and periphery. It is believed when the world's economy expands, it contributes productive power of the hegemonic core, which in turn enables substantial penetration into the periphery. It also states that in the long run, there will be rivalry among the core powers, leading to protectionist and bilateral trading arrangements. This enables the peripheral states to exercise economic independence. (Väyrynen, 1983. 90) (in Holl ed). The second one is the dependency school. It distinguishes states into dominant and

dominated. It is believed that the dominant states penetrate with transnational economic forces into the economies and politics of smaller states. (Väyrynen, 1983. 83) (in Holl ed). Given these theories, let us now discuss the international policies of Bhutan and try to see if the above theories explain them.

Bhutan's International Politics

Bhutan emerged out of self-imposed isolation in the early 1960s. Except for a few contacts with Tibet and British India, it did not have contacts with other countries earlier. Since then, Bhutan has cautiously and gradually joined the international community of nations and organizations.

Right from the beginning, Bhutan's international politics has been characterized by its close and intimate relationship with India. It agreed to be advised by India in international affairs. A treaty to this effect was signed in 1949 (Rose 1977, 77), before the country abandoned its isolation, but took on importance only after 1961. Formal diplomatic relations between Bhutan and India at the ambassadorial level were established in 1978. However, cooperation between the two countries started much earlier. Bhutan launched its first five-year plan in 1961. The first two five-year plans were exclusively financed by India. Construction of roads constituted the main component of Indian assistance. Later on it also included construction of schools, hospitals and agricultural centers. Today, Indian assistance to Bhutan is largely in hydropower industry. Apart from economic assistance, India also provides military assistance to Bhutan. It provides basic training to the Bhutanese armed force personnel. On the political front, the two countries enjoy a very stable relationship. Although the political leadership and the governing parties change fairly frequently in India, the two countries have not had any political differences. They share membership in several multilateral and regional organizations. Although Bhutan has neither the capacity nor

the intention to develop nuclear weapons, it has supported India's nuclear policies.

The maintenance of a very close and intimate relationship with India does not mean that Bhutan took India into a total trust. Bhutan has always been aware of the asymmetries between the two. In order to counter this feeling of insecurity, Bhutan has been diversifying its international relations, Bhutan applied for membership in a number of international organizations and gradually became a member of them. It was admitted to the United Nations in 1971. The UN opened a United Nations Development Program office in Thimphu in 1979. Bhutan is now a member of more than 150 international organisations. In addition, diversification of its international relationships also took the form of expansion of bilateral relations with other countries, mostly with small countries that share similar experiences. It has diplomatic relations with Austria, Denmark, Norway, The Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland. In Asia, Bhutan has bilateral relationships with Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Maldives, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Kuwait, Bahrain, Finland, Norway, Australia, and Thailand. These are more formal than intimate, however, and Bhutan does not maintain office in many of them.

As its contacts with the outside world increased, Bhutan gained more experiences in international politics. Internally, various development activities, especially progress in education, had great impacts on Bhutanese policy makers. These changes enabled the policy makers to define a unique security that fitted with its demographic, socio-cultural, and geopolitical realities. Apart from military, political, and economic aspects of security, Bhutan also considers threats to its culture and environment as major security problems. Such concerns have effectively been expressed through its development philosophy, known as Gross National Happiness, which emphasizes the happiness of its citizens as the ultimate objective of any development pursuit that it undertakes. This philosophy is implemented in the day-to-day

activities of the country through the preservation of the culture and the environment, the promotion of equitable economic development and of good governance. Bhutan has increasingly used this philosophy to attract the attention of the outside world.

Explanations to Bhutan's International Behaviour

Bhutan's intimate relationship with India can be explained from several perspectives. Bhutan is located in a very strategic part of the world. It has the world's two most populous and economically growing countries as its neighbours. Given its physical, demographic and economic size and the geo-political realities in which it exists, Bhutan is in a very precarious situation. Thus, it is the lack of economic, military and political capabilities to ensure its security that brought about its collaboration with India. India provides economic and defense assistance to Bhutan. These points suggest the functioning of structural scarcity theory.

Bhutan's efforts to diversify its international relations are rooted in its own national security concerns. Bhutan's fear of confining its international relations to India increased in 1975, when India overran Sikkim, immediately to the west of Bhutan (Chetri 1998, ?). The need to offset Indian domination led Bhutan to establish relations with many countries and organizations around the globe. Despite its dislike for Bhutan's diversifying moves, India has always restrained itself from committing actions that would set the two neighbours into conflict. India is aware that any conflicts with Bhutan will not be a rational move for it. Bhutan serves as a buffer between China and India along part of a very extensive border. Besides, since independence in 1947, India has been left connected to its northeastern states by a narrow strip of land called the Siliguri Corridor, lying between Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Bhutan. Most of these states have experienced, and continue to experience, active insurgency against the Indian central government. Bhutan and Bangladesh help protect the narrow corridor that connects

these states to the main part of India, and therefore can play an important role in India's strategic plans.

Economically, as a landlocked country, Bhutan relies on India for access to the sea. India is its major trading partner. In 1999, India accounted for 75% of Bhutan's imports and 94.5% of its exports. India is the major donor to Bhutan. But the economic relationship between the two is not a unidirectional one. Although to a lesser degree compared to Bhutan's dependence on it, India also relies on the former for economic matters. Apart from helping Bhutan, its investments in Bhutan serve to boost the economies of the Indian states that border Bhutan. Most of the industries in West Bengal now depend on electricity imported from Bhutan. Many Indians are employed in Bhutan.

It is apparent from these explanations that it's the structural scarcity that determines Bhutan's relation with India and its behavior in other international behavior. However, contrary to structural scarcity theory's emphasis on the prominent nature of the dependency of small states on big ones, we find that the big power is also dependent on the small power. As structural theory fairly explains Bhutan's relation with India, supporters of this theory would predict that it would hold true for any country similar to Bhutan.

Nepal has been chosen for comparison. Like Bhutan, Nepal is a landlocked country depending on India for access to sea and other economic inputs. However, Nepal is much poorer than Bhutan. In 1997, Nepal's per capita income was US 220 whereas Bhutan's was US\$ 594.¹ Nepal's per capita availability of land and forest resources have deteriorated with the increase in population. The situation of unemployment has worsened over the years. Its structural scarcity is much more severe than Bhutan's. By the logic of the theories, it is expected to have even more intimate

¹ Bhutan National Human Development Report, 2000

relationship with India than Bhutan. Yet its relationship with India is a very hostile one.

In the 1950s, Nepal and India had differences over the issue of rights of landlocked states to transit facilities and access to the sea. In 1969, Nepal asked India to withdraw its security check-posts and liaison groups in Nepal. India withdrew very reluctantly. Throughout the 1970s, India supported Nepalese Congress Party² to oppose the monarchy in Nepal. In 1987 India threatened expulsion of Nepalese settlers from neighbouring Indian states. Nepal retaliated by introducing a permit system for Indians working in Nepal and imposing a 55 per cent tariff on Indian goods. In 1988, Nepal signed an agreement with China to purchase weapons. India retaliated by imposing economic sanctions. In 1989, Nepal decoupled its currency from the Indian rupee which previously had circulated freely in Nepal. Indian retaliation prevented Nepal from using port facilities in Calcutta³. In recent times, the two have been having disputes over sharing of water resources.

The prediction of structural scarcity theory fails. It does not explain the behavior of all small states vis-à-vis their neighbours. The case of Nepal also proves that other theories such as small powers aligning with the threatening power don't hold true. Bhutan aligns with India while Nepal doesn't. The world systems approach and dependency school which emphasize the economic issues as the core of international relations, also don't provide a credible explanation as although both Bhutan and Nepal are economically dependent on India, they have different form of relations with India. How can we then explain the different strategies that Bhutan and Nepal adopt towards India?

² Nepal Congress Party first came into being in Varanasi, India in 1940s. It's formation was supported by Indian Congress Party

³ Information used here has been taken from
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/nptoc.html>

Alternative Explanations

Examination of the differences in certain basic characteristics that Nepal and Bhutan had at that point of time in their histories may suggest some explanations to their different relations with India. I start by looking at two issues: general awareness and the domestic institutions. Although both Bhutan and Nepal were considered closed before the 1950s, Nepal had frequent contacts with the outside world. Nepal's Prime Minister Jung Bahadur traveled to England in 1850 and returned convinced of the necessity to have good relations with industrialized countries. Since then, European architecture and fashion were given popular acknowledgement in Nepal. Institutionally, administrative procedures and legal frameworks for interpreting civil and criminal matters, revenue collection, landlord and peasant relations, inter-caste disputes, and marriage and family law, were established. These institutions were largely used to centralize the power of monarchy.

In the same period, Nepal's awareness of the world further increased through its involvement in different military operations with the British army. Nepal offered military assistance to the British during the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857 in India, and its troops fought World War I and World War II. The returning Gurkha troops who were now aware of the outside world started newspapers, which later became the forum of intellectual debate and discussion. Thus, Nepal had a high degree of awareness of the outside world and some form of institutions when it opened up in 1951.

On the other hand, Bhutan remained completely closed and it did not develop any domestic institutions. Until the monarchy was established in 1907, it was governed by a very unstable form of political institution where the civil and military activities were looked after by a temporal ruler and the religious activities by a religious ruler. The institution of monarchy ensured political stability. The reigns of the first two kings were mostly confined to maintaining internal

political stability. Its awareness of the outside world remained low. The two Kings also did not establish any kind of domestic institutions.

The initiatives taken by the Third King in the 1950s suggest that Bhutan was by then more aware of the outside world. Many political changes were taking place in the region. India had gained its independence from Britain in 1947. To the north, China had occupied Tibet in 1951. Soon after these events, the Third King established National Assembly in 1953. In the mean time, events in the north were becoming more threatening. In 1959, China had taken over Tibet forcefully and Dalai Lama fled to India. Bhutan almost immediately launched its first five-year plan in 1961. The five-year system plan was the first formal approach to economic development. These developments emanated largely in response to the international events taking place in the region. Thus, while Nepal already had fairly established forms of domestic institutions when it opened up, Bhutan had to develop them rather in a short span of time. This suggests a close link between domestic institutions and international affairs. A weak domestic institution is a source of threat to the national security of small states.

Bhutan's decision to align with India and not with China could also be related to the events just described. Bhutan viewed China as a revolutionary power. When China took over Tibet formally in 1951 and more directly, and forcefully, in 1959, Bhutan sympathized with Tibet's fate. As a country that shares the same religion and culture as Tibet's, Bhutanese policy makers perceived China in Tibet as posing serious threats to Bhutan's independence and security (Holsti 1982, 42). On the other hand, Nepalese elites had little "empathy for the Buddhist political and cultural system in Tibet and demonstrated only minimal sympathy for the fate suffered by Tibet" (Rose, 1977. 82). Besides, on some occasions in the past China tried to claim suzerainty over Bhutan. It published maps, which showed sizeable portions of Bhutan as part of Tibet and sent pamphlets preaching

Communism into Bhutan from across the border. (Rahul 1971, 103-105). Nepal never saw as much threat from Chinese as Bhutan did.

Bhutan and Nepal differ significantly in terms of the nature of political structure and its stability. Democracy was restored in Nepal in 1990 but Nepal still faces political instability. There have been frequent changes of government. Corruption and inter-party and intra-party conflicts are widely prevalent. Opposition parties label any initiative by the ruling party as selfish and anti-Nepal even though some initiatives would benefit the country as a whole. For example, in 1991, the opposition party opposed Prime Minister G.P. Koirala's initiatives to have close economic and security ties with India. Conflicts and feuds among Nepal's political elites have prevented Nepal from developing a consensus policy towards India. Besides, many view Nepal Congress Party as an extension of the Indian Congress Party. There is an ever-increasing effort to pursue policies quite different from India. In Bhutan, there are no political parties and there had been no fight for power among factions or any groups. It enjoys a very stable political structure and has been pursuing a relationship with India which ensures its economic and military security.

A Comparison of Bhutan's UN roll call votes with Nepal and India

So far, we have indicated difference in the behavior of Bhutan and Nepal vis-à-vis India and have provided some explanations for them. Let us now try to support these claims by looking at one specific instance. For this purpose, data on UN roll call votes from 1975 to 1985, i.e. from the 30th to the 40th sessions of the UN General Assembly, has been analyzed. Bhutan became a member of the UN only in the 27th session, and the first couple of years of its membership was a learning period during which it participated in only a few roll call votes. Therefore, the 30th session has been taken as the starting point of analysis. Data is immediately available only up to the 40th session.

General Assembly votes take three forms: yes, no or abstain. Only those votes in which all three voted were taken for comparison. Votes were classified into the following major categories: disarmament and nuclear weapons, human rights, economic issues, territorial integrity, and international security. All the issues related to nuclear weapons, disarmament, non-use of force, chemical and biological weapons have been included in the disarmament and nuclear weapons category; issues related to apartheid, gender and religious rights in the human rights category; all the issues related economic development and resources under economic issues; colonialism and occupation of territories under territorial integrity; and issues related UN peace keeping forces and international peace conferences and talks under international security. A small number of issues, which did not fall within these categories, have been left out of this analysis. The following table shows the pattern of votes for India, Bhutan and Nepal from the 30th to 40th sessions of the UN General Assembly.

Session	Country	Disarmament & Nuclear Weapons			Human Rights			Economic Issues			Territorial Integrity			International Security		
		Y	A	N	Y	A	N	Y	A	N	Y	A	N	Y	A	N
30 th	India	14	1	1	20	0	0	11	0	0	15	2	1	1	0	0
	Bhutan	13	2	1	19	1	0	10	0	0	14	3	0	1	0	0
	Nepal	16	0	0	15	5	0	11	0	0	16	1	0	1	0	0
31 st	India	10	3	1	23	0	0	22	1	0	21	0	1	5	0	0
	Bhutan	9	4	1	24	0	0	23	0	0	17	1	0	5	0	0
	Nepal	14	0	0	21	2	0	23	0	0	19	3	0	5	0	0
32 nd	India	11	3	0	28	0	0	22	1	0	20	0	1	5	0	0
	Bhutan	11	4	0	28	0	0	23	0	0	19	1	0	5	0	0
	Nepal	15	0	0	26	2	0	23	0	0	19	2	0	5	0	0

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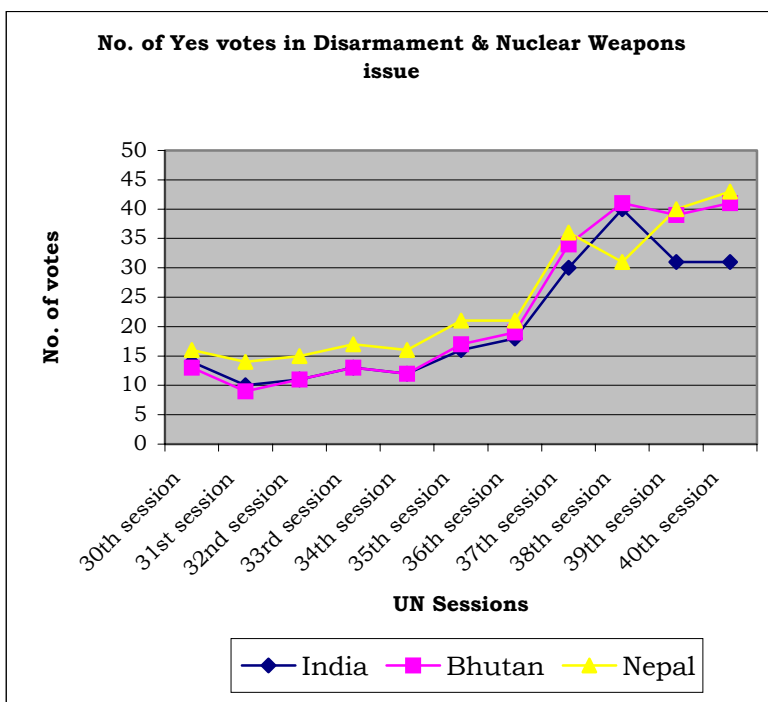
Note- Y: yes; A: abstain; N: no

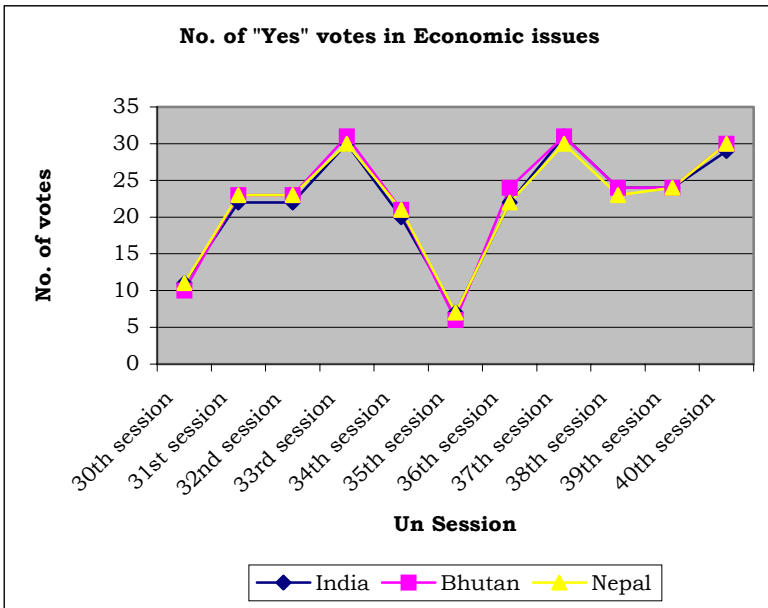
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Session	Country	Disarmament & Nuclear Weapons			Human Rights			Economic Issues			Territorial Integrity			International Security		
		Y	A	N	Y	A	N	Y	A	N	Y	A	N	Y	A	N
33rd	India	13	4	1	32	1	0	30	1	0	19	1	1	17	0	0
	Bhutan	13	4	1	33	0	0	31	0	0	19	2	0	17	0	0
	Nepal	17	1	0	26	7	0	30	1	0	17	4	0	16	1	0
34 th	India	12	4	1	28	2	0	20	2	0	27	0	1	11	0	0
	Bhutan	12	4	1	28	1	0	21	0	0	27	1	0	11	0	0
	Nepal	16	1	0	24	6	0	21	1	0	24	4	0	11	0	0
35 th	India	16	4	2	39	2	1	7	1	0	12	2	1	4	0	0
	Bhutan	17	4	1	38	2	1	6	0	0	13	1	0	4	0	0
	Nepal	21	1	0	37	5	0	7	1	0	12	3	0	4	0	0
36 th	India	18	7	1	27	1	0	22	2	0	35	2	0	4	0	0
	Bhutan	19	1	1	26	2	0	24	0	0	34	2	0	4	0	0
	Nepal	21	4	0	24	4	0	22	2	0	32	5	0	4	0	0
37 th	India	30	9	2	34	2	1	31	0	0	29	2	1	6	1	0
	Bhutan	34	4	1	33	4	0	31	0	0	29	2	0	6	1	0
	Nepal	36	3	0	34	3	0	30	1	0	29	3	0	7	0	0
38 th	India	29	15	2	27	1	0	24	0	0	28	1	0	13	2	0
	Bhutan	40	3	1	25	3	0	24	0	0	27	1	0	15	0	0
	Nepal	41	5	0	24	4	0	23	0	0	26	2	0	15	0	0
39 th	India	31	12	2	40	1	0	24	1	0	22	1	0	13	1	0
	Bhutan	39	3	1	38	3	0	24	1	0	20	1	0	13	0	0
	Nepal	40	4	0	34	6	0	24	1	0	22	1	0	14	0	0
40 th	India	31	16	0	33	1	1	29	0	0	24	2	0	14	0	0
	Bhutan	41	4	0	35	1	0	30	0	0	23	1	0	14	0	0
	Nepal	43	4	0	34	2	0	30	1	0	22	3	0	15	0	0
Total votes	India	215	78	13	331	11	3	242	9	0	252	13	7	93	4	0
	Bhutan	248	37	9	327	17	1	247	1	0	242	16	0	95	1	0
	Nepal	280	23	0	299	46	0	244	8	0	238	31	0	97	1	0

Source: UN Roll Call Data, SSDS, Stanford University

The above table demonstrates a clear and distinct pattern of votes. The number of differences in “Yes” votes is higher in the nuclear and disarmament issues. There is a small difference in the human rights category too. The three countries vote almost in the same manner on other issues. For example, the difference in the total number of “Yes” votes among the three countries is very small on issues related to economic questions, territorial integrity and international security. This indicates that a big neighbour does not influence a small state’s voting pattern on all the issues. Following charts show the pattern of votes described above.



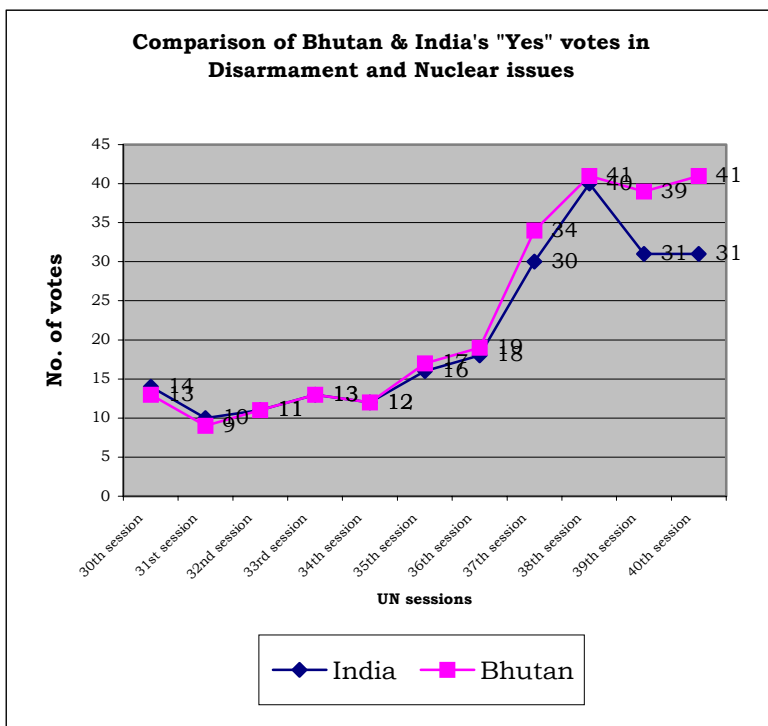


Having seen this general pattern, let's now discuss some more specific issues and try to analyze whether the data supports the general findings that we have seen, i.e. Bhutan and Nepal behave differently vis-à-vis India. We have seen that the voting pattern is almost similar on economic, territorial integrity and international security issues. But closer analysis of votes on disarmament and nuclear weapons issues is suggestive.

Analysis of the data shows that Bhutan's votes on issues related to disarmament and nuclear weapons closely follow India's. In fact, Bhutan's total number of "Yes" votes in the 32nd, 33rd and 34th sessions are identical to India's votes. This suggests the Indian influence in Bhutan's voting pattern. On the other hand, Nepal's votes on these issues differ by a large margin from India's. This confirms that Nepal's international politics does not follow India. This supports our argument

that the two small states with similar economic and physical features, do not behave the same way.

Data also shows a trend that needs further discussion. Beginning with 37th session, Bhutan's voting pattern differs from India's. In the figure below, except for the 38th session, the difference in the number of votes between Bhutan and India on disarmament and nuclear issues widens and the difference becomes greater towards the end of the period under review.



As the data showed some interesting trend, issues on which Bhutan voted differently from India were analyzed further. Analysis shows some counter-intuitive voting behavior by

Bhutan. As a small country, one cannot expect it to have any ambition to develop nuclear weapons but it abstains in many of the issues, which it is expected to support. It even abstains on the issues in which India votes “yes”. In the past most of its abstentions were on the same issues that India abstained from voting. So, how can we account for such a trend by a country, which has so far been supportive of India.

Looking into the diplomatic history of Bhutan, this different voting pattern of Bhutan coincides with the efforts taken to establish its international image. The sessions, which show a different voting pattern, fall in the early 1980s(1982, 1983, 1984 and 1985). During the same period, Bhutan became member of several international organizations and established diplomatic relationships with countries other than India. It joined IMF, World Bank, IDA and FAO in 1981; WHO, UNESCO, and ADB, in 1982; and became a member of SAARC, UNCTAD and ICIMOD in 1985. In 1985, it also established Permanent Mission to the UN in Geneva and diplomatic relations with Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and Norway. The different pattern of Bhutan’s voting pattern towards the end of the period under review can be attributed to its diversifying diplomatic relations. This is highly suggestive of the role of the international organizations and the network of diplomatic relations in international politics of a state. However, this conclusion needs to be qualified. Unless more researches are carried out by interviewing Bhutanese foreign policy experts, it cannot be concluded for sure that Bhutan has decided to differ with India. One could only suggest that Bhutan was very tactful and voted different from India only on the issues that India wouldn’t care to bother how Bhutan voted. There are enough facts to support this argument. Bhutan has followed Indian stand on issues that India considers important. Because India refuses to ratify the Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Comprehensive Test Ban treaties, Bhutan has also not ratified them. Bhutan supported India’s nuclear test in 1998.

Conclusions

In conclusion we could say that no single existing theory explains the international politics of small states adequately. They fail to account for different behavior of two small states with similar economic and physical limitations. The level of awareness, domestic institutions, culture and the nature of political structure and stability determine their international behavior. This suggests that there can be no universal theory which can explain the behavior of small states with different culture, politics, domestic institutions and perceptions of security. A next stage of study, involving different experts of foreign policies on Bhutan and Nepal, could go a long way in confirming the some suggestive explanations provided to their different behavior towards India.

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