

Foreign Policy of the Kingdom of Bhutan

FOREIGN POLICY

“The fundamental goal of Bhutan’s foreign policy is to safeguard the sovereignty, territorial integrity, security, unity, and enhance the wellbeing and economic prosperity of Bhutan. The realization of this goal hinges on the maintenance of friendly and cooperative relations and collaboration with all countries to promote a just, peaceful and secure international environment.”

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Guiding Principles for Bhutan’s foreign policy which have been drawn from the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan are:

1. Safeguard the sovereignty, territorial integrity, security and unity of Bhutan;
2. Preserve the political, cultural, and spiritual heritage of the country;
3. Develop friendly and mutually beneficial relations with all countries;
4. Achieve socio-economic self-reliance;
5. Enhance sustainable socio-economic development of the country;
6. Contribute towards building a peaceful, secure and prosperous world;
7. Promote respect for the rule of law, peaceful co-existence and peaceful settlement of disputes.

VISION

“Advancing Gross National Happiness for a peaceful, prosperous and sovereign Bhutan”

MISSION

“A professional Foreign Service that is responsive to Bhutan’s interests and aspirations”

OBJECTIVES

1. To safeguard the sovereignty, territorial integrity, security and unity of Bhutan and promote its unique identity, cultural heritage and the pursuit of Gross National Happiness.
2. To promote Bhutan's peaceful co-existence and develop friendly relations with all countries and engage in regional and multilateral cooperative efforts.
3. To be a responsible and constructive member of the international community and contribute towards the global effort in safeguarding international peace, security, understanding and cooperation.
4. To contribute towards sustainable socio-economic development of the country and promotion of trade relations/FDI and economic partnerships.
5. To adopt a principled approach on all issues by upholding international law and promoting peaceful settlement of disputes.
6. To provide consular services and protect the rights and interests of Bhutanese abroad.

I. STRATEGIC OVERVIEW:

1. Bhutan is a small landlocked developing country. It is located between two large and most populous countries in the world (India and China).
2. Bhutan's history, geo-political location and the continuously evolving regional and global strategic environment determines its foreign policy. Further, the kingdom's limited resources to pursue its national goals and interests weigh heavily on the design of its foreign policy.
3. Diplomacy has always been a vital tool in Bhutan's engagement with its neighbours and the world at large in safeguarding its sovereignty, security and pursuing development.

II. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

1. After the unification of Bhutan as a nation state by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in the 17th Century, Bhutan's focus had been on repulsing invasions from Tibet and Mongol armies from the north. During this period, Bhutan established diplomatic and monastic ties with Nepal, Ladakh and Sikkim.

2. The expansion of British presence into Cooch Bihar and Assam for tea plantations in the 18th century came in direct conflict with Bhutan's influence in these areas. Several battles between the British and Bhutanese were fought along these corridors known as the Duar Wars, which led to the signing of the Treaty of Sinchula in 1865. The treaty provided for perpetual peace between the British Government and the Government of Bhutan.
3. After the Duar Wars, Bhutan entered into a policy of self-imposed isolation. While maintaining friendly relations with the British, the Bhutanese leaders ensured that the British did not have a presence inside Bhutan. The communication between Bhutan and the British was carried out through the Office of Bhutan's representative in Kalimpong (in present day West Bengal).
4. In 1904, Trongsa Penlop Ugyen Wangchuck successfully mediated peace between the British and the Tibetans during the Younghusband expedition to Tibet which enhanced his stature both at home and with the British.
5. In 1910, under the directions of His Majesty Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck, the First King, Bhutan entered into a treaty with the British (Treaty of Punakha), which further reinforced Bhutan's sovereignty and formed the basis of Bhutan's foreign policy until the departure of the British from India.
6. With the departure of the British from India in 1947, His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck, the Second King formalized Bhutan's relations with newly independent India through the signing of the India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty of 1949. In light of the fast evolving political environment in the region in 1950, Bhutan's foreign policy underwent a paradigm shift from one of self-imposed isolation to gradual but steady engagement with the outside world, leading to the path of socio-economic development while preserving its rich cultural heritage and pristine environment.
7. The state visit of His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the Third King of Bhutan, as the Chief Guest for India's Republic Day celebrations in 1954 at the invitation of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the historic visit of Prime Minister Nehru to Bhutan in 1958 laid the foundations for the excellent relations that the two countries enjoy today.
8. His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the Third King decided to end the policy of self-imposed isolation and pursue the path of planned socio-economic development. Bhutan commenced its first Five Year Plan (planned socio-economic development) in 1961 with generous assistance from India. In 1962, Bhutan became a member of the Colombo Plan, Universal Postal Union (UPU) in 1969, United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) in 1970. Bhutan was unanimously voted in as a

member of the United Nations Organization (UN) in 1971. Following Bhutan's admission to the UN, Bhutan also became a member of its related organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Group of 77 and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). During this period, Bhutan had diplomatic relations with only India. The Office of the Special Representative of India was opened in Thimphu in 1968 and a Resident Mission of Bhutan with a Special Representative was established in Delhi in 1971. The two resident missions were designated as Embassies in 1978. The second country that Bhutan established diplomatic relations was with Bangladesh in 1973.

9. In order to avoid being involved in international power politics prevalent during the period, Bhutan joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1973. The interactions during the NAM Summits resulted in Bhutan establishing diplomatic relations with Kuwait in 1983 and Nepal in 1984. The establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985 was also a result of interaction between friendly countries of South Asia during subsequent NAM Summits.
10. His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth Druk Gyalpo continued the gradual expansion of Bhutan's relations and engagement with other countries and international organizations. Bhutan began receiving assistance from the UNDP and other related organizations of the UN. Subsequently, the UNDP Resident Office was also established in Thimphu in 1979. Bhutan also joined the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1982 and began receiving assistance. Diplomatic relations with the Netherlands, the European Union, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland and Norway were established in 1985 and with Japan in 1986.
11. By 2003, Bhutan had expanded its diplomatic relations with 22 countries from different parts of the world which included Sri Lanka and Pakistan from the SAARC region, Austria, Finland, South Korea, Thailand, Bahrain, Singapore and Canada. In 2009, Bhutan established diplomatic relations with Belgium and set up an Embassy in Brussels which is also the headquarters of the European Union. Bhutan became an observer to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1999.
12. Bhutan departed from its policy of following a gradual approach to establishing diplomatic relations with development assistance as the main criteria in 2009 when Bhutan made a bid for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council in 2012 and established diplomatic relations with 28 countries.

13. Even as Bhutan was expanding its relations and engagement with the outside world, the ties of friendship, understanding and cooperation with India grew in strength. The Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty of 2007 provides the framework for further strengthening the exemplary friendship, understanding and cooperation between India and Bhutan in an increasingly globalized world.
14. His Majesty The King has further strengthened India-Bhutan relations by building on the trust and friendship consolidated by His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo. His Majesty The King was invited as the Chief Guest for the Republic Day of India in 2013 and to demonstrate the friendship and close ties between India and Bhutan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose Bhutan as his first official visit abroad after coming to power in response to the invitation from His Majesty The King.
15. His Majesty The King has further enhanced Bhutan's relations with other friendly countries like Japan, Thailand, Bangladesh, Singapore and Kuwait. His Majesty's State Visit to Japan in 2011 to convey sympathy and solidarity of the Bhutanese people towards those who suffered as a result of the Great East Japan Earthquake was greatly appreciated by the Japanese people.
16. Under His Majesty The King's reign, Bhutan's status as an active and responsible member of the international community has gained further prominence. His Majesty's multilateral vision for the country is centered on the principles of international solidarity and cooperation in addressing global issues. In keeping with this Royal vision and reflecting the country's long-standing support and commitment to the UN, and its obligation as a member of the international community to promote international peace and security, Bhutan began participating in UN Peacekeeping Operations in 2014. This was a major foreign policy initiative reaffirming Bhutan's interests and values in support of a more stable, resilient and prosperous world.
17. In the age of globalization and knowledge-based economies and societies, the level of scientific and technological capacities of a nation will determine its development and progress. Scientific and technological issues are also increasingly dominating global affairs. His Majesty The King has emphasized the importance for Bhutan to actively leverage its diplomacy and tap into the growing science base of more advanced countries to help develop our human resource capacity and stimulate innovation. Under Royal initiative Bhutan has laid the foundation of a satellite program in order to take advantage of emerging space technology and its application for the benefit of the country.

III. BILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS

1. Bhutan's foreign policy since emerging from the policy of self-imposed isolation was driven by the imperative to promote its sovereign and independent status and to facilitate political and economic cooperation.
2. While political considerations continue to be important, trade and economic imperatives are assuming increasing significance in the expansion and conduct of Bhutan's diplomatic relations. Its policy, however, continues to be deliberate and purposeful, keeping in mind the resource constraints and actual needs and interests.
3. Bilateral relations with India continue to be an important aspect of Bhutan's foreign policy, both politically and economically. The two countries share strong historical, geographical, political, economic, religious, and cultural ties. India was the first country with which Bhutan established diplomatic relations in 1968 and has been assisting Bhutan in its planned development since the inception of the planned development since 1961. Cooperation in the development of the hydropower sector in Bhutan is the centerpiece of the mutually beneficial economic cooperation between Bhutan and India. The close cooperation has now also extended to space with the two countries jointly collaborating on the development of a satellite to be launched in 2021.
4. In the immediate region, Bhutan has diplomatic relations with all the member states of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and enjoys very good bilateral relations with them. Bhutan established diplomatic relations with Bangladesh in 1973, Nepal in 1983, Maldives in 1984, Sri Lanka in 1987, Pakistan in 1988 and Afghanistan in 2010.
5. Since the 1980s, the region of East and South-East Asia has featured prominently in the expansion of Bhutan's bilateral relations, particularly to enhance trade and development cooperation. Bhutan established diplomatic relations with Japan in 1986, South Korea in 1987, Thailand in 1989, Singapore in 2002, Indonesia in 2011, Mongolia, Vietnam and Myanmar in 2012.
6. In West Asia, Bhutan established diplomatic relations with Kuwait in 1983, Bahrain in 1992, United Arab Emirates in 2012, Armenia in 2012, Turkey in 2012, Kazakhstan in 2012, Tajikistan in 2012, Azerbaijan in 2013, Oman in 2013 and Israel in 2020.
7. In Europe, Bhutan established diplomatic relations with the European Union, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland and Norway in 1985, Finland in 1986,

Austria in 1989, Belgium in 2009, Spain, Luxembourg, Czech Republic and Serbia in 2011, Andorra, Slovenia, Slovakia, Poland in 2012 and Germany in 2020.

8. In the Americas, Bhutan established diplomatic relations with Canada in 2003, Brazil in 2009, Cuba in 2011, Argentina, Costa Rica and Colombia in 2012.
9. In Africa, Bhutan has established diplomatic relations with Morocco, Mauritius, Eswatini and Egypt in 2012.
10. In Oceania, Bhutan established diplomatic relations with Australia in 2002 and Fiji in 2011.
11. Today, Bhutan enjoys diplomatic relations with 54 countries and the European Union. There are currently 14 countries that have appointed Honorary Consuls/Honorary Consuls General in Bhutan and Bhutan is represented by 14 Honorary Consuls/Honorary Consuls General abroad. The Royal Government is in the process of appointing 4 additional Honorary Consuls abroad.
12. Bhutan hosts three resident Embassies (India, Bangladesh and Kuwait), as well as the Consulate General of India in Phuentsholing. There is also the presence of The Royal Thai Consulate General's Office, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), Austrian Coordination Bureau (ACB), Bhutan Canada Foundation (BCF), Netherlands Development Organization (SNV), Pro-Bhutan Association, Helvetas, Australian volunteers program and Bhutan Foundation offices in Bhutan.
13. The Royal Government's policy on expansion of diplomatic relations is deliberate and gradual, and closely aligned to the country's capacity and needs. But at the same time, Bhutan strives to enhance friendly relations and engagements with all countries, with or without diplomatic relations, and this engagement has been expanding rapidly in recent years. Today, we engage meaningfully with many major economic and political powers, including the United States with which we cooperate on a number of areas in the educational, economic and social fields.
14. In the vicinity, we have friendly and cooperative relations with the People's Republic of China, which is Bhutan's immediate neighbor to the north. Bhutan supports the "One China Policy" and engages with China on issues of common interest. Cultural exchanges and trainings are areas in which the two countries cooperate, in addition to trade and tourism which in recent times have seen a substantial increase. The two countries also cooperate on issues of common interest in the United Nations and other international fora.

15. Bhutan and China have been having boundary talks since 1984. Twenty four rounds of talks at ministerial level have been held in addition to nine rounds of discussions at the experts level. The 10th Expert Group Meeting and the 25th Boundary Talks are expected to be held soon. The boundary talks also provide a channel for exchanges on other matters of common interest between the two countries.

IV. MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS

1. As a small landlocked developing country, multilateral engagement is an important aspect of Bhutan's foreign policy both in political and economic spheres.
2. The first multilateral organization Bhutan joined was the Colombo Plan in 1962. This membership enabled Bhutan to avail of the much-needed technical and economic assistance to carry out its development plans. Bhutan's membership to the United Nations in 1971 is the biggest milestone in its multilateral engagement.
3. Today, Bhutan is a member to over 95 International organizations including international and regional sports organizations. Bhutan is also a State Party to 122 International instruments. While many of these treaties and conventions have limited relevance for now, the Royal Government of Bhutan has subscribed to a number of such treaties and conventions as an expression of Bhutan's solidarity with the international community and to demonstrate its commitment to the rule of law. The Royal Government will continue its efforts to become a State Party to all relevant multilateral conventions and treaties, taking into consideration its national interest and implementing capacity.
4. Bhutan is also a member of important groupings such as the Group of 77 (G77), the Least Developed Countries (LDC) and the Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDC) which are important in advancing Bhutan's interest as they provide a collective voice and strength in international political and security matters as well as economic and social issues.
5. Bhutan will continue to engage meaningfully with the member states of the UN, its specialized agencies and other multilateral organizations to promote goodwill and cooperation in order to promote international peace, prosperity and security.
6. As an expression of the importance attached by Bhutan in its multilateral engagements and solidarity with the international community, Bhutan continues to seek membership in relevant groupings within the UN and other international organizations. Bhutan has also sought membership to new groupings at the UN such as the Friends of Mountains, Alliance of Civilization and Alliance for Poverty.

7. Under the United Nations systems, Bhutan hosts the country offices of the UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, WHO, FAO, UNFPA, UNODC, WWF, ICAO and the World Bank. There is also the presence of the IFC and Save the Children offices in Bhutan.

V. REGIONAL ENGAGEMENTS

1. It is imperative for Bhutan to engage at the regional level to safeguard and promote its national interests. Such platforms also provide opportunity for Bhutan to regularly meet and interact with leaders, officials and professionals from member countries to learn and share experiences and information.
2. At the regional and sub-regional level, Bhutan joined the Colombo Plan in 1962, Bhutan is a founding member of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which was established in 1985. Bhutan joined the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) in 2004 and the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) in 2005. In addition to these, Bhutan is also a member of numerous other regional organizations such as ICIMOD, AFoCO and ABU.
3. The Secretariat of the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) is located in Thimphu and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) also has an office in Bhutan.

V. CONSULAR ENGAGEMENTS

1. An important aspect of Bhutan's foreign policy is to facilitate and provide assistance to members of the diplomatic missions and foreigners in Bhutan and Bhutanese travelling and residing overseas. With the increasing number of foreigners visiting Bhutan and more Bhutanese travelling and living abroad, the need to keep up and upgrade the consular services has also increased.
2. The Royal Government continues to provide appropriate courtesies to visiting dignitaries and improve consular services including providing better and streamlined services to Bhutanese travelling and living abroad.

VI. FOCUS AREAS

1. Bhutan will continue to pursue and promote Gross National Happiness for the sustainable development of the country.
2. On the political front, Bhutan's foremost foreign policy priority is to safeguard the Kingdom's sovereignty, territorial integrity, security and unity. Any foreign policy

endeavour shall be consistent and serve to enhance, strengthen and protect this priority.

3. On the socio-economic front, Bhutan has made remarkable progress since the implementation of planned development in 1961. However, as a small, landlocked, and least developed country, Bhutan continues to face numerous challenges and structural impediments that contribute to its economic vulnerability. Bhutan is slated to graduate from the UN Least Developed Countries category in 2023. In order to make graduation successful and sustainable, the country's efforts are focused on building economic resilience and productive capacity, and this requires the strong support of development partners. Bhutan has also adopted the 21st Century Economic Roadmap and for its realization, economic diplomacy will play an important role.
4. On the bilateral front, Bhutan will continue to promote and maintain friendly relations with countries and expand engagements with all partners in keeping with our priorities and challenges.
5. On the multilateral front, Bhutan will engage effectively with the international community to safeguard international peace and security, respect international laws and norms and collaborate in addressing global issues and challenges. Bhutan will continue to actively broaden its engagement in UN peacekeeping.
6. On the regional front, Bhutan will continue to pursue a constructive and purposeful engagement while remaining mindful of the political and resource constraints.
7. On the consular front, Bhutan will continue to streamline and improve service delivery to the Bhutanese diaspora and the international community in Bhutan by developing an e-consular system and strengthening institutional capacity.
8. Recognizing that science, technology and innovation are key to economic and social development, Bhutan will aim to incorporate science and technology diplomacy more firmly into its foreign policy. The advancement of scientific and technological capabilities will enable further development within the country and in achieving the SDGs, and also contribute to international collaboration to address national and global issues.

VII. ROLE OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS (MFA)

1. The MFA has been entrusted with the mandate and responsibility to implement Bhutan's foreign relations in keeping with the guiding principles, the vision, mission and objectives of its foreign policy.

2. The MFA is the formal channel of communication of the Royal Government with all foreign governments, organizations and entities.
3. The MFA conducts Bhutan's relations with bilateral, multilateral and international organizations on the basis of its national interests and in accordance with international law, norms and practices.
4. The MFA shall take an active role in advancing Bhutan's economic agenda by interfacing with existing and new partners.
5. The MFA shall provide protocol courtesies and consular services.
6. The Permanent Missions of the Kingdom of Bhutan, the Royal Bhutanese Embassies and Royal Bhutanese Consulates are the field offices of the MFA through which the foreign policy objectives are further carried out on the ground.
