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India's Strategies on its Periphery: A Case Study in the India–Bhutan Relationship

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Summary

This paper explores India's foreign policy strategies in its relationship with its neighbor Bhutan — probably one of the most asymmetric regional relationships in the world, and one that has come center stage in the context of the tensions between India and China over disputed territory in Doklam in 2017. Against this backdrop this paper takes a look back at the India–Bhutan relationship during the years 2007 to 2016, following Bhutan's transition to democracy. It focuses on two specific policy fields: Bhutan's diplomacy, and particularly its efforts to establish relations with China, India's rival in the region; and Indo–Bhutanese development cooperation in the field of hydropower projects. The paper uses an analytical framework focused on three ideal-typical strategies that regional powers like India can pursue: empire, hegemony, and leadership. The findings show that while India tends to pursue a "leadership" strategy on hydropower projects, it has a contrasting approach when it comes to Bhutan's diplomacy, indicating several incidences of "hard hegemony." These divergent strategies are related to the different interests connected to the two policy fields: while India is willing to establish an equal partnership in the economic-driven policy field of bilateral hydropower projects, it tends to pursue a very unequal and hard hegemonic strategy in the one of Bhutan's diplomacy because closer Bhutan–China ties are considered India's own security interests.

Keywords: South Asia, regional powers, Bhutan, India, foreign policy strategies, diplomacy

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