India and Bhutan: New and Emerging areas of cooperation as we Look Ahead

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It is no exaggeration when we say that Bhutan and India share extraordinary ties of friendship and cooperation. Marked by mutual understanding, goodwill and timeless respect, it is a partnership forged not only by our shared experiences but also by our civilizations growing together, overlapping in both history and culture, existing for thousands of years. And most importantly, at the heart of the Bhutan-India partnership is the belief that our future will only serve to embolden friendship.

In 2018, we commemorated fifty years since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between our two countries. In 2020, and on the eve of India’s 74th Independence Day, we could ask what are the new and emerging areas of cooperation between our two countries?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s first visit abroad as Head of Government was to Bhutan in June 2014. Soon after being elected for a second term, he visited Bhutan again in August 2019. Both these visits ensured that Bhutan and India have branched off into new areas of cooperation that also have resonance with the themes advocated by His Majesty the King of Bhutan: education, technology, and innovation with a focus on empowering youth.

In the sector of space science and technology, the Prime Ministers of Bhutan and India have inaugurated the Thimphu Ground Earth Station of ISRO’s South Asia Satellite, which is expected to greatly increase convenience of communication, public broadcasting, and disaster management in Bhutan. Our two teams are also working together to build a small satellite for Bhutan, which will include the training of Bhutanese space engineers in India. Education has always been a priority, the difference now is the focus on STEM, through a fostering of institutional tie-ups between premier Indian institutes and their counterparts in Bhutan. Most recently, two Bhutanese students were selected to pursue Post-Graduate studies at the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, under the newly instituted India-Bhutan Friendship Scholarship. Similarly, IIITs Bombay and Delhi have also offered two full-ride scholarships for Bhutanese Post Graduate students in the current financial year. Two seats are reserved every year for Bhutanese students at the reputed All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi on a self-financing basis. Since last year, India has also begun offering two annual Undergraduate Scholarships for Bhutanese students at the reputed All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi on a self-financing basis. Since last year, India has also begun offering two annual Undergraduate Scholarships for Bhutanese students at the reputed All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi on a self-financing basis. Since last year, India has also begun offering two annual Undergraduate Scholarships for Bhutanese students at the reputed All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi on a self-financing basis. Since last year, India has also begun offering two annual Undergraduate Scholarships for Bhutanese students at the reputed All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi on a self-financing basis.

In 2020, the Indian Minister of Railways and Commerce & Industry, Shri Piyush Goyal, had visited Bhutan for the first-ever ‘Bhutan-India Start-Up Summit’, which served as a platform to kick start stronger business engagement across all sectors between India and Bhutan. One of the key outcomes of the visit was a tie-up between Bhutanese agri-producers and major Indian supermarkets. The two sides have begun discussions to work out a commercial arrangement for retail marketing of Bhutanese organic food products in India. We are optimistic that this arrangement will boost Bhutanese agri-exports, adding a freshness dimension to the bilateral commercial relationship.

Another significant outcome of Minister Goyal’s visit was the announcement by the Confederation of Indian Industry, one of India’s leading industry associations, to open their first South Asia Office in Bhutan. This Office could serve as a platform to open a new Land Customs Border Point-of-Entry (POE) for Bhutan. This will greatly reduce vehicular traffic along the Indo-Bhutan border.

In extending all possible assistance to Bhutan during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of ensuring uninterrupted movement of commodities, facilitating the return of over 1350 Bhutanese nationals, handover of essential medicines and medical supplies to Bhutan, as well as the virtual training of Bhutanese health professionals. We are pleased to see how India’s gesture has been publicly appreciated by the Bhutanese leadership and we view this as a reflection of the special bonds of trust and understanding between India and Bhutan that have existed over decades.

Indeed, our time-tested relations serve as an epitome of immaculate neighbourly relations for the rest of the world.

Going forward, India will continue to expand and deepen this development partnership across all spheres, in keeping with the wishes, priorities and aspirations of Bhutan and its people.

The writer is the Ambassador of India to Bhutan. (Views expressed in this article are the writer’s own.)