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Q5(b)

Bhutan has historically been an ally of India, but the China-Bhutan border-related issues have become a security issue for India. Discuss.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 2 · 10 marks · India and the Global Centres of Power

India and the Global Centres of Power: USA, EU, Japan, China and Russia.

Core demand of the question

- State the India-Bhutan special relationship
- Explain China-Bhutan boundary talks and why they concern Indian security
- Use Doklam, the **Siliguri corridor** and possible diplomatic ties as the core

Revision summary

Bhutan is India's closest Himalayan partner through treaty history, hydropower and military training.

China-Bhutan boundary talks and Chinese construction at Doklam in 2017 made the trijunction an Indian military crisis.

The **Siliguri corridor** and the LAC context turn Bhutan's western sector into Indian strategic depth.

Sakteng and possible China-Bhutan diplomatic normalisation add political pressure.

India must back Bhutanese sovereignty without treating the trijunction as a purely bilateral China-Bhutan file.

Introduction

Bhutan has been India's closest Himalayan partner: a friendship treaty, coordinated diplomacy, Indian military training, and hydropower as the economic spine. China-Bhutan border talks, and Chinese pressure on that boundary, have become a **security issue for India** because Bhutan's northern and western frontiers sit on India's strategic depth. The relationship remains an alliance in practice. The border file is no longer only Thimphu's.

Body

Historical ally

The 1949 treaty, updated in **2007**, ended the requirement that Bhutan be guided by India on external affairs, but the security partnership continued. India is the primary market for Bhutanese hydropower. The Indian Military Training Team still sits in Bhutan. For a small state between two giants, that bet on India has been the structure of survival.

Why the China border is India's problem

China and Bhutan do not have formal diplomatic relations, yet they have held many rounds of boundary talks. Beijing's claims in the **western sector**, near the trijunction with India, and occasional pressure in the **east** (including statements around **Sakteng**), matter because they rearrange the map above the **Siliguri corridor** - the narrow link between India's northeast and the rest of the country. In **2017**, Chinese road-building at **Doklam** on Bhutanese territory produced a **73-day stand-off** with the Indian Army. Delhi treated an alteration of the trijunction as a direct threat, not as a bilateral China-Bhutan technicality.

A boundary 'package' that traded northern pastures for western territory could, in a worst case, bring Chinese presence closer to the ridge that overlooks the corridor. Even without a settlement, Chinese villages, roads and patrols along the disputed line create facts on ground that India must read as **LAC-adjacent**. Bhutan's wish to settle with China and perhaps open diplomatic relations is rational for Thimphu. It is a **two-front cartographic risk** for Delhi already facing China on the **Line of Actual Control**.

Discuss, do not panic

India cannot veto Bhutanese diplomacy without looking like a patron and thereby pushing Thimphu to balance. The workable line is: support Bhutan's sovereignty, keep hydropower and people-to-people density, and insist that **trijunctions are trilateral in effect**. Doklam showed that India will physically contest a change. The security issue is real. It is managed by partnership, not by treating Bhutan as a district.

Flow diagram

India-Bhutan partnership -> Hydropower training treaty
China-Bhutan border talks -> Doklam 2017
Doklam 2017 -> Siliguri corridor risk
Siliguri corridor risk -> Indian security issue

Conclusion

Bhutan remains India's ally in the Himalaya. China-Bhutan border moves, especially at Doklam and toward the Siliguri approaches, are Indian security business because geography ties the three states. Delhi's task is to keep the alliance by respecting Bhutanese agency while refusing unilateral change at the trijunction.

Facts & figures

Doklam 2017

Seventy-three-day India-China stand-off after Chinese road work on territory claimed by Bhutan near the trijunction.

2007 treaty update

Replaced the 1949 'guidance' clause with friendship and cooperation; security intimacy continued.

Siliguri corridor

Narrow Indian land link to the northeast; western Bhutanese claims sit above this geography.

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