

Student Feature – Theory in Action: Constructivism and Bhutan’s National Interests

Written by Sarina Theys

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SARINA THEYS, SEP 9 2019

This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.

Bhutan is a Buddhist kingdom located in the Himalayas. The material structural conditions are reflected in its population of approximately 745,000, a territory that amounts to 38,394 square kilometres, a weak economy and a very small military. On top of this, Bhutan shares a national border with the two major powers in Asia: China in the north and India in the south. Bhutan’s location is geographically sensitive as the country serves as a buffer state between these major powers, which perceive each other as rivals rather than friends. In addition to this, the Chinese leadership claimed, after it annexed Tibet in the 1950s, that Bhutan’s territory was also part of its mainland. To date there remains an ongoing border dispute between Bhutan and China and there have been reports that the Chinese army has made several incursions into Bhutan. Likewise, India has had a hand in Bhutan’s foreign policy. Article 2 of the India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty (1949) notes that ‘Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of India in regard to its external relations.’ Although this Article was revised in 2007, commentators have reported that India still holds a degree of influence over Bhutan.

An overview of border disputes between India, China and Bhutan

From a realist perspective, one would argue that Bhutan is in an unfavourable position as it is hindered by its geographical location and cannot compete for power with its neighbours. The preservation of its national sovereignty would likely depend on the outcome of the greater competition between China and India. A constructivist view, on the other hand, would argue that these structural conditions do not necessarily constrain Bhutan’s ability to pursue its national interests since they are not the only conditions that influence state behaviour: the *meaning* given to these structural conditions also matters. For example, when Tibet was annexed by China, Bhutan felt threatened. As a result, it closed its border in the north and turned to India, its neighbour in the south. From that moment onward, Bhutan perceived China as a potential threat and India as a friend. To date, Bhutan and India perceive each other as friends whereas Bhutan has no official relations with China. These social relationships represent the ideational structure that originated from the meaning given to the material structure. It is important to note, however, that the social relationships are subject to change depending on the ideas, beliefs and actions of Bhutan, India and China. For example, an agreement on the border dispute between China and Bhutan could change how both countries perceive each other. This change might lead to the establishment of an official relationship, the nature of which is friendship rather than enmity. A constructivist is well placed to detect and understand these changes since their object of enquiry focuses on the social relationships between states.

Bhutan has also developed a distinctive national identity that differentiates it from its larger neighbours. This identity projects Bhutan as ‘the last surviving independent Mahayana Buddhist Kingdom in the world’ (Bhutan Vision 2020, 24–25). The usage of the word ‘independent’ refers directly to Bhutan’s national interest – the preservation of its national sovereignty. Bhutan’s national identity is socially constructed through a *Bhutanisation* process that started in the 1980s, when the fourth king of Bhutan introduced the ‘One Nation, One People’ policy. This policy demanded the observance of a code of conduct known as *Driglam Namzhag*. This code of conduct is built upon strict observance of

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vows – such as strong kinship loyalty, respect for one’s parents, elders and superiors, and mutual cooperation between rulers and ruled. It also reinforced the rules for wearing a national dress – the *gho* for men and the *kira* for women. In addition to this, Dzongkha was selected as the national language of Bhutan. The Driglam Namzhag can be thought of as a regulative norm because the aim of the policy is to direct and constrain behaviour. For example, although Bhutan’s national identity suggests that the Bhutanese comprise one homogeneous group, Bhutan is actually a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual country. There are three main ethnic groups: the *Ngalongs*, the *Sharchhops* and the *Lhotshampas*, who are of Nepali descent. Of these, the Ngalongs and the Sharchhops are Buddhists, while the Lhotshampas are mostly Hindus who speak the Nepali language. The policy had severe consequences for the Lhotshampas as Nepali was no longer taught in schools and people who could not prove residence in Bhutan prior to 1958 were classified as non-nationals. Consequently, thousands of Lhotshampas were expelled from Bhutan in the 1990s. Thus, the code of conduct is used by the Bhutanese authorities to create cultural unity and to stimulate citizens to reflect upon their cultural distinctiveness, which is paramount in creating a national identity.

Bhutan’s Forgotten People

A norm needs to go through a lifecycle before it becomes established. In the case of Bhutan, we can witness the first phase, *norm emergence*, in the creation of the Driglam Namzhag by the Bhutanese authorities. The second phase, *norm acceptance*, required Bhutanese citizens to accept the Driglam Namzhag, including the national dress and Dzongkha as the national language. Once this acceptance occurred, *norm internalisation* occurs. The completion of this process entails that the behaviour of the Bhutanese citizens is circumscribed by these norms and practices. This circumscription also shows the constitutive nature of the Driglam Namzhag, which created new actors – that is, Bhutanese citizens who act and behave according to specific rules. We can see, for instance, that these norms and practices are regulated to date. For example, Bhutanese citizens are obliged to wear the national dress during national events and when they attend school or work. This regulation is, as explained earlier, important as the behaviour of a state and its citizens should comply with the norms that are associated with Bhutan’s national identity. The regulation also signifies that these norms are perceived as something good by the Bhutanese authorities, which underlines the prescriptive nature of norms.

Kathryn Sikkink on the norm lifecycle.

Amitav Acharya discusses constructivism as part of an address about ‘Global IR’.

Bhutanese PM and Foreign Minister addresses:

<https://www.unmultimedia.org/avlibrary/asset/1976/1976864/>

<https://www.unmultimedia.org/avlibrary/asset/1455/1455719/>

Members of the Bhutanese elite have also created a second identity, which projects Bhutan as a leader in advancing a holistic and sustainable development paradigm. This identity is based on Bhutan’s development philosophy, Gross National Happiness (GNH), which criticises the well-known Gross Domestic Product (GDP) approach for being solely focused on the economy of a state. Instead, GNH promotes a balance between material wellbeing and the spiritual needs of the mind. It is implemented and embedded in Bhutan’s political and educational systems. Members of the Bhutanese elite have predominantly used the United Nations as a platform to promote the idea internationally. Subsequently, the United Nations adopted Resolution 65/309, which states that the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental goal and that the gross domestic product indicator was not designed to, and does not adequately reflect, the wellbeing of people. Projecting their country as the last surviving independent Mahayana Buddhist kingdom in the world and as a leader in advancing a holistic and sustainable development paradigm enables Bhutanese authorities to signal their country’s status as an independent sovereign state. It also allows Bhutan to increase its international visibility, which is advantageous when tensions run high with and among its neighbours.

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