

JAMIA MILLIA ISLAMIA

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Press Release

JMI organizes an online lecture on ‘Bhutan’s Foreign Policy: Coping with Geo-Political Dilemmas’

The MMAJ Academy of International Studies organised an Online Lecture on the topic *Bhutan’s Foreign Policy: Coping with Geo-political Dilemmas* on 12th July 2021. Prof. Rajesh Kharat, Director, School of International Relations and Strategic Studies, University of Mumbai, delivered the lecture.

Prof. Ajay Darshan Behera, Officiating Director, MMAJ-AIS welcomed the speaker and the participants. In his opening remarks, he highlighted that Bhutan which had popularised the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), has been facing some geo-political challenges since last several years. Bhutan, a small country is caught up in the geo-political manoeuvres between its two big neighbours, India and China. It is important to understand how Bhutan has been coping with these challenges.

Prof. Kharat began by describing the nature of foreign policy of Bhutan and argued that it is geo-political rather than geo-strategic. He highlighted the tremendous impact of China and India on Bhutan’s foreign policy and argued that this limits the foreign policy options of Bhutan. This aspect is very much evident in the foreign policy discourse in Bhutan. One can identify different perspectives regarding Bhutan’s relations with her two big neighbours among the Bhutanese political elite. But over a period of time, Bhutan’s foreign policy has become more mature.

Prof. Kharat elaborated on various historical trajectories that Bhutan’s foreign policy went through. He discussed in detail about the “Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship” signed between Bhutan and India in 1949. In his opinion this Treaty consolidated the all weather relationship between Bhutan and India. Keeping the spirit of the 1949 Treaty intact, India and Bhutan signed a new Treaty in 2007 which ensured that the sovereignty of Bhutan will remain intact and both the countries will help each other in all possible ways. The Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959 cut the spiritual and cultural relations between Bhutan and Tibet. This development created immense amount of insecurity in Bhutan that led the country to shed the age old policy of isolationism practiced by the Bhutan state. Bhutan also decided to open her territory to the Tibetan refugees on humanitarian ground which was not viewed kindly by the Chinese.

Prof. Kharat also talked about the boundary dispute between Bhutan and China and the pressure tactics applied by China on Bhutan. The territorial claims made by China in the Doklam valley in 2017 built new pressures on Bhutan. This issue indicated the geo-political and geo-strategic dimensions of the India-Bhutan-China triangle. Bhutan has recognised the possible territorial threats from China and is trying to evolve a strategy to counter that while maintaining close relations with India. Prof. Kharat pointed out that over the years China relied more on soft diplomacy in dealing with Bhutan but that is changing in the contemporary period.

The lecture was well attended by participants from all over the country. It was followed by an elaborate question and answer session where a number of questions were raised by the faculty members and participants. Prof. Ajay Darshan Behera, Officiating Director, MMAJ-AIS thanked the speaker for his insightful analysis and the participants for their active participation.

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