

was nominally independent although under very strong Indian influence. India until the 1960s took little interest in Bhutan whatsoever, allowing the King to exercise effective control. They did worry about Sikkim because the “chogyal” was married to an American, and she had quite a following in the United States and constantly stirred up American domestic opinion about the plight of the Sikkimese under India. Eventually the Indians closed down the Sikkim’s limited sovereignty, as they had of the other princely states shortly after independence.

Q: Today is July 10, 1998. Tony, first you mentioned Bhutan. What about Bhutan?

QUAINTON: It is not a place I think about very often, but for a period in the early 1970s and late 1960s, I was considerably involved with the early days of our relations with Bhutan, both because I was a participant in the first two official visits to the capital of Bhutan. Then later as desk officer for India, I was present when we decided to admit Bhutan to the United Nations, or to vote in favor of their admittance, and then at the first meeting between the Secretary of State and the Bhutanese permanent representative. So, these were the early days of the U.S.-bilateral relationship. In point of fact, an American diplomat had been on Bhutanese soil before I went on the first delegation in 1967, and that was John Kenneth Galbraith, who actually crossed the border in the early 1960s and met with Bhutanese officials just on the other side of the Indo-Bhutanese border. But, he did not travel up into the mountains, the Himalayas, which are the real heartland of the Bhutanese people.

Washington decided that it would be desirable to have exploratory missions go to Bhutan. One went in 1967, another one the following year, composed of the external counselor in New Delhi, first Galen Stone and then Herb Gordon, accompanied by a political section officer, in both cases myself, and by a representative of our consulate general in Calcutta, which had consular responsibility for the territory of Bhutan. We did not have diplomatic relations with the Bhutanese. In fact, no government had diplomatic relationship with the Bhutanese except the government of India. So, it was really quite an important decision to send a delegation to Thimphu with a view of meeting with the senior members of the Bhutanese government. On neither occasion did we meet with the king but we met with ministers of his government and senior officials.

On both occasions we first flew down into the lowland area bordering the Indian state of Assam and then flew on from there into Paro, the only airport in Bhutan. The little border town of Phuntsholing was nothing more than a handful of houses and a large stone marker indicating where the Central Bank of Bhutan was to be built. The Bank, however, did not yet exist. Bhutan did not have its own currency with the exception of one coin, a one rupee coin, which had been issued several years before. Otherwise, Bhutan used Indian currency for all of its transactions. Indeed, there weren’t very many transactions to be carried out. Most of Bhutan’s foreign exchange was derived from the sale of postage stamps. These sales began after the Second World War when Bhutan issued its first postage stamps and the Indian government permitted it to join the International Postal Union. This was Bhutan’s first foray into international affairs. The Bhutanese issued all sorts of stamps, square, triangular, circular, three dimensional, trying almost everything that would make their stamps saleable on the international market. This limited

international activity was much encouraged by Shirley MacLaine, who was one of the principal advisers and supporters of the Bhutanese government.

Q: She is a movie actress.

QUAINTON: Yes. But until 1967, very few foreigners had gone to Bhutan. It was and is a beautiful mountain kingdom run by a royal family. Tibetan Buddhism is its national religion. In every valley there are monasteries. The country was then, and I suppose still is, largely run on feudal lines. The peasants provide contributions in kind to the monks in the monasteries in each valley, and the monasteries provide centers of culture, local defense and civil organization. It was then an extremely primitive country which was just emerging into the 20th century under Indian tutelage.

I remember on our first visit we stayed in the Indian guest house in Thimphu and went to call on the finance minister. The embassy's external counselor, Galen Stone, cashed the first traveler cheque in the history of Bhutan. He asked the finance minister where it would be possible to cash such a check since there didn't appear to be any banks in the country, and indeed there were no banks as far as we could judge. The finance minister pulled a tin box out of a drawer in his desk and did the exchange himself at the current rate of exchange for the Indian rupee. There was almost no foreign aid. The Indians had built some roads. The Japanese had a small program which they supported in the Paro valley to help the Bhutanese grow vegetables on the basis of Japanese experience of growing vegetables in cold climates, Bhutan being a relatively cold country. Unfortunately the project was something of a failure because the Bhutanese were not vegetable eaters but meat eaters and were not much interested in the cabbages and other vegetables that the Japanese taught them how to grow. The Japanese themselves fell on very hard times in 1967-68 when there was a famine in the mountains, rain being short. The Japanese were kept alive by food contributions from the Bhutanese peasant farmers even though there wasn't very much being produced. In short, economic development was very difficult.

The second visit was very much like the first. We again visited a range of officials, tried to develop limited contacts, saw some of the historical sites and monasteries, which were very beautiful. But, we didn't go beyond that towards any kind of developed political relationship. And I don't think there was another such visit to Bhutan for several years thereafter. However, the Bhutanese decided in 1970 that they would like to join the United Nations. This raised an important issue for us. I was at that time the political officer for India with responsibility for Bhutan. There was nothing that required any work until a senior Bhutanese official came to Washington with the express purpose of seeking the U.S. government's support for the entry of Bhutan into the United Nations.

We consulted the bureau of international organizations affairs which expressed very strongly negative views. Bhutan did not meet the existing criteria for membership, which we had invented. The criteria were based on population, gross national product, size of export revenue, designed to keep mini states out of the United Nations. We did not want a collection of tiny states with no economic or political significance in the UN. We prepared an appropriate briefing paper for Alexis Johnson, then the under secretary of state for political affairs, who was the senior official designated to receive the Bhutanese representative. The key recommendation in the paper was

that he convey to the Bhutanese our inability to support their candidacy for membership in the United Nations at that time. We got the memo up with suitable advanced notice. I was the notetaker. I think the assistant secretary for Near East and South Asian affairs, Joe Sisco, was the other person who sat in. The Bhutanese, if I remember correctly, was a relative of the king, perhaps his younger brother. He came in and made a pitch to the under secretary about the importance Bhutan attached to its emergence into the modern world and its desire for membership in the United Nations. Under Secretary Johnson, who presumably had not read his briefing paper or did not understand it, said, "That is fine, we will certainly support you." We then became committed to the recognition of Bhutan's international aspirations. There was horror in the Bureau of International Organization Affairs that the threshold that we had set was going to be ignored. Bhutan's gross national product was very small. It had only 800,000 people and I think we had a threshold of a million population to meet our criteria.

At the following session of the general assembly, the Bhutanese having been duly admitted sent a permanent official there and it was decided that Secretary Rogers would meet with the newly admitted member of the United Nations. He, Assistant Secretary Joe Sisco, and I, greeted the Bhutanese representative, who in this case was the king's brother and, I think, prime minister at the time. Secretary Rogers had had no time to read his briefing paper either and he received his briefing from me as I stood at his side in the men's room before we went into the meeting. The meeting was something less than satisfactory.

Our only interest was that Bhutan join with us in opposing the entry of the People's Republic of China into the United Nations. Our position on the "ChiRep" question was still very firmly opposed to the entry of the People's Republic. Secretary Rogers made a strong pitch on this point. The Bhutanese explained that, given their geography, it would not be possible for them to agree to this. They were committed, as were their neighbors to the south, India, to supporting the aspirations of the People's Republic of China to join the United Nations. Before we got to that stage, Secretary Rogers, in order to be pleasant, tried to ascertain something about the country about which he knew nothing. He began by asking the Bhutanese representative where their country was located. The representative politely explained that it was situated between China and India. What did they export? The representative said they didn't export anything. What were their industries? They did not have any industries. The conversation went from one negative to another as Secretary Rogers tried rather desperately to understand what it was that kept this country together. It was entirely amiable, but we did not look very well informed about Bhutan. Then, when the conversation shifted to the Chinese representation issue, the Bhutanese were, unfortunately, not forthcoming.

But, it was an interesting case study of how a little country managed to manipulate us into getting what it wanted, which was essentially a degree of political independence from India by getting itself into the United Nations. Of course, we still do not have relations with the government of Bhutan in a formal sense. There are no missions in Thimphu except the Indian mission, but visits have become more regular and the Bhutanese have, I think, gone beyond the production of postage stamps in their national development.

Q: I would have thought right from the beginning when you were dealing with this, the Indians would have said no and kept you from going up there just so that they could keep Bhutan as theirs and not have it play at all an independent role.

QUAINTON: It was quite hard to get the first authorization to go in. We waited many months for permission. We made it clear to the Indians that we were not at this point seeking diplomatic relations with Bhutan, that we wanted to inform ourselves about the country. The Indians were very suspicious that what we were trying to do was to pry Bhutan loose from the Indian sphere of influence. On the other hand, the Indians did not oppose Bhutan's admission into the United Nations. I think they thought that they would be able to control Bhutanese foreign policy as long as other countries did not set up autonomous embassies in Thimphu. But, it was always one of our concerns that we not get crosswise with the Indians over a country which was of no fundamental importance to us.

Q: What was the push for us doing anything?

QUAINTON: Largely because it was there. There were no American citizens resident in Bhutan. There was no trade with Bhutan. Americans bought a certain number of Bhutanese postage stamps, but this was not a basis on which you could build a very substantial relationship. We were concerned throughout this period about the border states as potential areas of Chinese influence. That is, Nepal and Bhutan as independent states, and Sikkim as a quasi independent state. Of course, this is only six or seven years after the Chinese invasion of India in 1962. So, we also wanted to keep track of Chinese activities to the degree we could. There didn't seem to be any particular Chinese activity in Bhutan. But, we also wanted to demonstrate that we recognized the independence of Bhutan even though our concern was about a threat from the Chinese, not from India. But, I think there was also a desire to show our presence along the southern frontier of China at a time when we were very concerned about Chinese hegemonic aspirations in South Asia.

End of reader