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EDITORIAL SUMMARY

Bhutan's Opening move, its Gelephu gambit (IR, GS Paper-II)

Background

- The Gelephu plan, launched by Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in December 2023, is to build a "Gelephu Mindfulness City" (GMC) with a unique Bhutanese architectural blueprint across 1,000 square kilometres, as a special administrative zone with separate, investor-friendly laws.
- As a carbon-neutral city, Gelephu would include only non-polluting industries (mainly IT, education, hotel and hospital sectors), and would be promoted as an investment destination and health and wellness hub in the middle of the region.
- It would also lie at the crossroads of India's "Act East" plans for connectivity to Myanmar, and on to Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Indo-Pacific region as well as the new India-Japan connectivity plans between India's north-eastern States through Bangladesh to the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean.
- As Gelephu is landlocked, it is dependent on other countries, primarily India, to provide the infrastructure for trade and transport out of the special administrative region.

Key Points of the Article/Lead

- The highly ambitious Gelephu Plan will require a major leap of faith and financial assistance from India. The inception of Gelephu project is necessitated by the economic challenges faced by Bhutan.
- The physiographical location of With warmer temperatures than in the mountains, Gelephu gets high amounts of rainfall during a monsoon season that lasts several months, leading to considerable flooding each year.
- The surrounding forests and wildlife populations place Gelephu right in the middle of elephant corridors, which at times has caused the issues of insurgency in India's North Eastern Region.
- Apart from hydropower, tourism is Bhutan's mainstay, but the kingdom has always discouraged mass tourism, preferring instead a "high value, low volume" motto to ensure sustainability.
- However, if Bhutan wants to increase these revenues, it must scale up its capacity to take in more tourists and visitors and land bigger planes, which need a much larger airport than the present one in the narrow Paro valley.
- The first part of the Gelephu project involves scaling up the Gelephu airport and tarmac to international standards, which will need financing and expertise from India.
- The growing "outmigration" of Bhutanese youth in search of jobs abroad is another challenge, and the government hopes a mega project such as Gelephu will stem that.
- Gelephu project offers Bhutan a way to open itself up in a controlled manner to the rest of the world, while also continuing negotiations with Beijing for a stable border.



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- For India too, Bhutan is its only direct neighbour not currently in Beijing's orbit - broadening its ties with China should keep it focused on the Gelephu project.
- Bhutan's requests have seldom ever been rejected, and India is the leading source of investments in Bhutan, comprising 50% of its total foreign direct investment.
- When it comes to investment in infrastructure, Gelephu's needs will fit together with New Delhi's own plans for the region: railway lines right up to the border with Bhutan; better roads to feed into the trilateral highway to Myanmar and South East Asia; cooperation with Japan to coordinate roads and bridges construction in Bangladesh in order to access Chattogram and Mongla ports; and upgrading border posts with all three land neighbours to allow efficient trade.
- In addition to climate-friendly solar and wind power generation projects, India's plans for a South Asian power grid that would draw electricity from Nepal and Bhutan, with supply to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka would lend itself to more consistent power supplies needed for Gelephu.
- However, the Gelephu project faces immense challenges, like India's many other connectivity projects such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (through Iran-Russia via Chabahar to Central Asia) faces western sanctions), and the IMEC (through the United Arab Emirates-Saudia Arabia-Greece), and I2U2 initiative (Israel-India-UAE-U.S.) etc.
- The goodwill generated by India's generous support to Sri Lanka during its economic crisis and steadfast relationship with Bangladesh can be multiplied by similar forays in other directions, such as helping Nepal defray the costs of its new airports by allowing over-flight rights, continuing the projects committed to the Maldives despite recent setbacks in ties, and even considering a new chapter with Pakistan, amidst all its other political and economic turmoil.
- Therefore, India must find a wayout to help Bhutan: a country that shares language, faith, culture, geography and climate with its North Eastern region, as the Gelephu project offers a chance for the region to conjure an imagination beyond the problematic present — one that is a huge gamble for Bhutan, but also a potential game changer for the region, with help from India.

Source : *The Hindu*

India-Bhutan Relations /Key Points

- India and Bhutan share a unique and time tested bilateral relationship, characterized by utmost trust, goodwill and mutual understanding. The special relationship has been sustained by a tradition of regular high level visits and dialogues between the two countries.
- The basic framework of India-Bhutan bilateral relations is the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1949 between the two countries and revised in February 2007.
- India has been extending economic assistance to Bhutan's socio-economic development since the early 1960s when Bhutan launched its Five Year Plans.
- India continues to be the principal development partner of Bhutan. It is Bhutan's largest trading partner.
- There are vibrant cultural exchanges between the two countries. A number of Bhutanese pilgrims travel to holy Buddhists sites in India.
- Reflecting the special nature of the relationship, the two countries share an open border with regular exchange of travelers in both directions for work, tourism, shopping, medical care etc.