

India-Nepal relations: geo-strategic challenges from Kalapani and Lipulekh Tri-Junction

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ABSTRACT

India-Nepal relations have historically been characterized by deep interdependence and cultural affinity. However, recent territorial disputes, particularly concerning the strategically significant Kalapani and Lipulekh tri-junctions, have introduced complex challenges to this traditionally close partnership. Situated at the confluence of India, Nepal, and China, these contested areas are not only pivotal for regional security but also hold significant implications for trade routes, military strategy, and diplomatic engagements across South Asia. This article critically examines the geo-strategic significance of these disputed territories, assessing their impact on India-Nepal bilateral relations and the broader dynamics of regional stability. The analysis underscores the challenges arising from overlapping territorial claims, which are further exacerbated by China's expanding influence in the region. By investigating the strategic underpinnings of these disputes, the article evaluates potential diplomatic pathways and confidence-building measures to address the growing strain on bilateral ties. In conclusion, the article offers strategic recommendations emphasizing the importance of mutual respect, sustained dialogue, and collaborative efforts to foster a peaceful resolution. It argues that such measures are essential to safeguarding regional stability and preserving the historically robust relationship between India and Nepal.

Keywords: *India-Nepal relations, Lipulekh, Kalapani, Territorial disputes, Regional security, China's influence, Diplomatic alternatives.*

Introduction

India-Nepal relations have long been shaped by a complex interplay of geographical, historical, cultural, and strategic factors. Among these, the border dispute at the Kalapani-Lipulekh tri-

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junction stands as a prominent and contentious issue, influencing bilateral ties and broader regional dynamics in South Asia. Located at the crossroads of India, Nepal, and China, the Kalapani-Lipulekh region is not only a critical geographical point but also a strategic flashpoint, reflecting deeper concerns about sovereignty, security, and regional geopolitics.

The root of the Kalapani-Lipulekh dispute lies in divergent interpretations of historical treaties and maps, particularly the Treaty of Sugauli (1815–16) between Nepal and the British East India Company. While Nepal claims the area based on historical and cartographic evidence, India asserts its control over the region due to its perceived strategic necessity and longstanding administrative presence. The issue escalated significantly in 2019 when India published a new political map following the reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir, which included the disputed region. Nepal responded with its own political map in 2020, claiming the territory, thus exacerbating tensions between the two nations.

The geo-strategic importance of Kalapani and Lipulekh is underscored by their proximity to the Himalayan passes that serve as critical links between India and Tibet, a region of growing geopolitical competition with China. For India, control over these areas is vital for northern border security and access to trade routes with Tibet. For Nepal, the issue is equally significant, symbolizing national sovereignty and territorial integrity, with strong domestic political overtones.

This article seeks to explore the geo-strategic challenges posed by the Kalapani and Lipulekh tri-junction in the context of India-Nepal relations. It delves into the historical roots of the dispute, its implications for bilateral ties, broader regional dynamics of South Asia, particularly in the face of China's expanding influence and also providing an alternative for the future. By analyzing this issue through the lenses of geography, history, and geopolitics, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the enduring complexities shaping India-Nepal relations.

Current geo-strategic status

The current geo-strategic status of the Kalapani-Lipulekh tri-junction is a complex and contentious issue, deeply embedded in regional geopolitics and reflecting the intersecting strategic priorities of India, Nepal, and China. For India, the region holds critical importance for national security and serves as a gateway to Tibet (Muni, 2020). The issue resurfaced prominently on November 2, 2019, when India released an updated political map following the reorganization of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. This move sparked disagreements between India and Nepal regarding the inclusion or exclusion of specific territories (Kumar, 2021, p. 100). In particular, the updated map showed the disputed Kalapani area as part of Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh district (Nayak, 2020, p. 2). Although India had depicted this region in its maps for decades, the latest map reignited longstanding disputes (Aryal & Pulami, 2024, p. 698; Xavier, 2020, June 11).

In response, Nepal strongly opposed India's actions, asserting that the region in question is an unresolved territory belonging to Darchula district in its Sudurpashchim province (Nayak, 2020). In November 2019, Nepal's foreign ministry issued an official statement expressing dissatisfaction and concern over the disputed area's depiction in India's revised map. The statement read:

The Nepal government is committed to protecting the country's external borders and it is determined on its principled position that such border disputes with the neighbouring countries should be resolved through diplomatic channels after assessing the historical documents, facts, and evidence (Statement cited in Mohan, 2022).

The publication of the revised political map was followed by the construction of a link road. On May 8, 2020, India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh digitally inaugurated an 80-kilometer link road from Dharchula to the Lipulekh Pass, connecting India with the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China (Rae, 2021; Kumar, 2021, p. 100; Muni, 2020). This project aimed to facilitate faster

access to the Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage route and exemplifies India's intent to strengthen logistical and strategic connectivity in the Himalayas (Muni, 2020).

However, Nepal has vehemently opposed the development, asserting that it violates its territorial sovereignty, as the road traverses territory it claims as its own (Aryal & Pulami, 2024, p. 692) and denouncing India for changing the status quo without first consulting diplomats and issued a note (Kumar, 2021, p. 100). The note read:

The Government of Nepal has consistently maintained that as per the Sugauli Treaty (1816), all the territories east of Kali (Mahakali) River, including Limpiyadhura, Kalapani and Lipulekh, belong to Nepal. This was reiterated by the Government of Nepal several times in the past and most recently through a diplomatic note addressed to the Government of India dated 20 November 2019 in response to the new political map issued by the latter (MFA, 2020).

Additionally, Nepal escalated the dispute by officially releasing a new map in 2020, incorporating Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura into its national boundaries (Mohan, 2020; Rae, 2021, p. 21) and subsequently provides a legislative cover through a constitutional amendment in June 2020 (Rae, 2021, p. 106). This move, while politically significant domestically, has deepened the diplomatic standoff between the two countries.

The strategic significance of the tri-junction is heightened by its proximity to China, adding layers of complexity to regional dynamics. For India, retaining control over Kalapani and Lipulekh is crucial not only for securing its borders but also for countering China's expanding influence in the Himalayan region. Incidents like the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes (The Hindu, 2022) and China's growing infrastructural presence in Nepal have intensified India's apprehensions about potential encirclement. By 2015, China had overtaken India in foreign direct investments in Nepal, contributing 42% of Nepal's total FDI during 2015–16 (Thakur, 2023, p. 425). Additionally, Nepal joined China's Belt and Road

Initiative (BRI) in May 2017 (Murton, 2024, p. 82), proposing thirty-five projects for consideration under the initiative. Beijing later requested that the list be narrowed down to nine key projects. On April 29, 2019, during the second Belt and Road Forum (BRF), the foreign ministers of Nepal and China formalized agreements, officially integrating Nepal into China's overarching BRI framework aimed at fostering 'Belt and Road Cooperation: Shaping a Brighter Shared Future' (Murton & Lord, 2020, p. 5).

Nepal, on the other hand, finds itself in a precarious position, striving to assert its sovereignty while navigating the strategic interests of its two powerful neighbours. The dispute has stoked strong nationalist sentiments in Nepal, with political parties frequently using the issue to rally public support. In particular, KP Sharma Oli has been accused of leveraging the controversy to consolidate his political dominance in the country. In Nepal, the concept of popular nationalism often stems from the creation of an opposing entity or the 'other', with India frequently assuming this role (Aryal & Pulami, 2024, p. 693). This dynamic further complicates the possibility of a diplomatic resolution.

Despite several rounds of diplomatic dialogue, the stalemate persists, reflecting deep-seated mistrust and a lack of political will on both sides to compromise. The issue transcends bilateral relations, emerging as a symbol of the broader geopolitical tensions in South Asia, particularly in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's Act East Policy. The ongoing impasse at Kalapani-Lipulekh thus serves as a microcosm of the challenges faced by India and Nepal in balancing their historical ties with contemporary strategic imperatives.

Geo-strategic impact of Kalapani and Lipulekh Tri-Junction on India-Nepal relations and South Asia

The Kalapani and Lipulekh dispute is not merely a territorial disagreement but a complex geo-strategic issue with far-reaching consequences for the bilateral relations between India and Nepal, and for the broader South Asian security architecture. These regions, located at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, hold

immense strategic importance for both countries, and the dispute over them has significantly altered the dynamics in the region.

Strategic importance of Kalapani and Lipulekh: a geopolitical perspective

Kalapani is a strategically important tri-junction valley situated at the intersection of India, China, and Nepal, currently administered by India. It includes the Lipulekh Pass, which serves as a connection to Tibet. The Kalapani region remains undemarcated and is a subject of dispute between India and Nepal, with Nepal asserting claims over a significant portion of the territory (Sharma, 2024). The area represents a critical intersection of geopolitical, strategic, and historical importance and covers an 330 sq. km area, in Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh district, is bordered by the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China to the north and Nepal to the east and south (Bhattacharjee, 2020, May 24). Kalapani, located near the headwaters of the Kali River (Rae, 2021), is pivotal for determining the western boundary between India and Nepal, as per the Treaty of Sugauli (Trivedi, 2008, p. 201). Similarly, the Lipulekh Pass serves as a vital trade and military corridor connecting India with Tibet. These areas form a tri-junction connecting India, Nepal, and China, making them a focal point for regional geopolitics (Muni, 2020). These locations are also crucial for maintaining India's northern border security against potential Chinese incursions and facilitating trade and movement through the Himalayan region.

Historically, Lipulekh Pass has been a significant trade route linking India with Tibet and China, particularly during the British colonial era (Muni, 2020). The British recognized the region's value for commerce, particularly in trading Tibetan wool, and promoted the Kali River as the boundary with Nepal (Dhungel et al., 2021, p. 22). Beyond trade, the Lipulekh Pass holds cultural importance as a route for Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims traveling to Kailash Mansarovar. For centuries, these Himalayan passes supported the livelihoods of mountain communities and fostered cross-border cultural exchanges (Bhattacharjee, 2020; Chandran, 2024).

The strategic significance of Kalapani and Lipulekh became evident during the 1962 Sino-Indian War, which exposed India's vulnerabilities in defending poorly fortified Himalayan routes. While India faced advances from Chinese forces through other passes like Se La in Tawang, the lack of military preparedness at Lipulekh underscored the critical need for stronger defenses in these regions (Bhattacharjee, 2020, May 24; Kumar, 2020).

Today, these regions play a crucial role in India's border management strategy. Kalapani serves as a strategic observation point overlooking Tibet and the adjoining Chinese territory. The region also provides access to the Lipulekh Pass, a crucial trade and pilgrimage route with significant military importance (Muni, 2020, May 22). Infrastructure connecting India to Lipulekh via Kalapani through road connection enhances troop mobility and logistical support, essential for a robust defense in the Himalayas (Kumar, 2021; Xavier, 2020).

The Lipulekh Pass holds considerable strategic importance for India, acting as a vital conduit for the movement of troops and supplies to the north-western section of the Indo-Tibetan border (Muni, 2020). Its location offers a direct route for military operations and logistical support, improving India's capacity to deploy forces swiftly in response to potential threats from China's Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Additionally, the pass plays a crucial role in sustaining communication and supply chains with forward military positions. India's infrastructure development in the Lipulekh area is part of a broader plan to strengthen border defences and enhance rapid mobilization in the event of Chinese aggression (Khanal, 2021; Subramanian, 2020). This strategic location enables India to project its influence and maintain a strong presence in a sensitive geopolitical region, thus safeguarding both national security and regional stability.

Historical context and competing narratives

The Treaty of Sugauli, which Nepal and the British East India Company signed in 1816, is the source of the Kalapani and Lipulekh dispute (Rae, 2021; Sharma, 2024). Significant

geographical changes resulted from the treaty, which was concluded following the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-1816), sometimes referred to as the Gorkha War, and marked the conclusion of hostilities with a British triumph (Muni, 2015, p. 400; Baral, 2018, p. 205). For the first time, an official border between the two countries was formed by this agreement (Tripathi, 2019, p. 191). The treaty established the Mechi River as Nepal's eastern border and the Mahakali River as its western border. It also described how ridges in Sikkim and the Darjeeling hills would be included (Thapliyal, 2024, p. 219; Trivedi, 2008, p. 201).

Determining the Kali River's origin is at the heart of the Kalapani controversy. The origin of the River is interpreted in a variety of ways (Nayak, 2020, p. 3). India says the river starts at Lipulekh and then joins other streams and tributaries to become the Mahakali. On the other hand, Nepal claims that the Kali River comes from Limpiyadhura, while the stream that comes from Lipulekh is known as Lipu Khola. Thus, Kalapani is the region that lies between these two streams (Muni, 2020; Sharma, 2024). Nepal refers to Article 5 of the Treaty of Sugauli, which states:

The Rajah of Nepal renounces for himself, his heirs, and successors, all claim to or connection with the countries lying to the west of the River Kali and engages never to have any concern with those countries or the inhabitants thereof (Rae, 2021, p. 107).

Thus, Nepal argues that all territories east of the Kali River historically fall under its jurisdiction. While India agrees with this principle, its claims stem from the ambiguity in the treaty regarding the identification of the Kali River and its source (Muni, 2020).

Nepal argues that maps produced between 1819 and 1867 clearly indicate that the Kali River originates from Limpiyadhura. These maps assert that, in accordance with Article 5 of the Treaty of Sugauli, all territory east of this river belongs to Nepal. However, after 1879, the stream originating from Lipulekh began to be identified as the Kali River, while the river flowing from

Limpiyadhura was renamed Kuti Yangti (Dhungel et al., 2021, pp. 6-7). Nepal contends that this change might have been deliberately implemented by the British government to advance their commercial and strategic interests, particularly to utilize the Lipulekh Pass as a trade route to Tibet (Muni, 2020).

India subsequently inherited control over the Kalapani and Lipulekh regions from the British administration, with Independent India gaining access to these areas following British rule (Muni, 2020). According to Indian official records, administrative and revenue documents from the 1830s, preserved by the Uttar Pradesh state government, indicate that Kalapani was historically administered as part of the Pithoragarh district. India later reinforced its claim through administrative actions and the deployment of security forces (Gupta, 2000, October 17; Kumar, 2021, p. 100). Furthermore, a scientific survey conducted in 1879 produced a map that identified the Lipulekh Pass as part of India and designated Kalapani as the origin of the Kali River, with the Kuti Yangti recognized as one of its Himalayan tributaries converging near Gunji (Rae, 2021, p. 118). This historical complexity continues to fuel the competing narratives of both countries over the Kalapani and Lipulekh region.

Security concerns and regional stability in South Asia

The Kalapani and Lipulekh dispute transcends bilateral tensions, carrying significant implications for the security and stability of South Asia. The region is inherently fragile due to longstanding territorial disputes, ethnic tensions, and political instability. Territorial disputes are a key source of conflict, exemplified by the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan. The dispute, which stems from the 1947 partition, has led to multiple wars and ongoing military skirmishes. Despite international mediation efforts, the conflict remains unresolved and continues to destabilize the region, with both countries maintaining nuclear arsenals (Ganguly et al., 2019; John, 1997). Similarly, the India-China border disputes, particularly along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), have caused military confrontations, most recently

in Galwan Valley on 15, June 2020 (Pathak, 2024), illustrating how territorial claims in the Himalayas remain a volatile flashpoint.

Ethnic tensions also deeply impact South Asia, as seen in Sri Lanka's civil war between the Sinhalese-majority government and Tamil separatists. The war, which lasted from July 1983 to May 2009, resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and set development back by decades, widespread suffering and exacerbating ethnic divisions (Anandakugan, 2020; The Economic Times, 2023). In a different context, Balochistan's insurgency in Pakistan highlights the ongoing struggle of ethnic Baloch separatists seeking greater autonomy or independence. The Pakistani state's military response has only deepened the region's instability, making it a persistent challenge for both domestic governance and regional security (Bansal, 2008).

Political instability in South Asia is exemplified by Afghanistan's prolonged conflict, which saw the hardline Islamist Taliban return to power in 2021 (The Hindu) after two decades of United States (U.S.) intervention, lasted on 31 August 2021 as the longest war in American history (The White House, 2021). During U. S. stay in Afghanistan or the Afghan war, cost the US more than \$2 trillion and resulted in thousands of casualties to all concerned parties (Najam, 2024, p. 957). This has created a significant security vacuum, impacting not only Afghanistan but also its neighbours, particularly Pakistan and India. Similarly, Nepal's volatile politics, characterized by frequent changes in government and internal divisions, has hindered its ability to manage both domestic affairs and foreign relations, especially with India and China, creating a fragile geopolitical environment (Kulkarni, 2024). These examples collectively illustrate how unresolved territorial, ethnic, and political issues in South Asia pose significant risks to regional stability, with spillover effects that extend beyond national borders.

The Kalapani-Lipulekh issue underscores the challenges faced by smaller states, such as Nepal, in navigating the complex geopolitics of South Asia. Nepal, situated as a landlocked nation between China and India, faces challenges in maintaining a trade

and military equilibrium between these two powers in the geopolitical arena. To address this, Nepal adopts a hedging strategy aimed at fostering peaceful relations with both neighbours (Johny, 2024, p. 1). China's expanding economic and political clout in Nepal has elevated Kathmandu's role as a key player in South Asian geopolitics, enabling it to act as a counterbalance to Indian influence (Bhattarai, 2022). One prominent example of this is the surge in imports from China, particularly electric vehicles (EVs), which has significantly increased in recent years. Simultaneously, imports from India have declined, sparking concerns in New Delhi over its waning economic influence in Nepal. On the political front, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), or CPN-UML, is widely regarded as advocating for closer relations with China. This stance aligns with the party's ideological orientation and nationalist outlook, which is often perceived as being critical of India (Tamang, 2024, August 9).

For Beijing, Nepal represents a strategic gateway to South Asia, enhancing its regional presence and influence. Conversely, New Delhi views China's growing foothold in Nepal as a direct challenge to its security and strategic interests in the region. This dynamic has compelled Nepal to adopt a more independent stance, navigating the competing interests of its two powerful neighbors, which not only strains its traditionally close relationship with India but also raises the stakes in South Asian geopolitics (Bhattarai, 2022, p. 62). This dynamic compels Nepal to adopt a more independent stance, potentially straining its historically close ties with India and amplifying regional geopolitical tensions.

Way forward: alternatives and suggestions

The resolution of the Kalapani and Lipulekh dispute requires a multifaceted approach encompassing diplomatic engagement, third-party mediation, Economic cooperation and regional cooperation. Strengthening bilateral mechanisms and implementing confidence-building measures (CBMs) are essential for fostering mutual trust and preventing conflict escalation.

One significant CBM is the India-Nepal Joint Commission, established in 1987 to provide a platform for deliberations on bilateral issues, including border disputes (MEA, 2024). After being inactive for over two decades, the Commission's revival in 2014 reflected renewed commitment to sustained diplomatic dialogue (MEA, 2024). Similarly, the Boundary Working Group (BWG), created in 2014, addresses technical aspects of border management, such as constructing, repairing, and restoring boundary pillars and clearing 'no-man's land' (Drishti IAS, 2020). These technical efforts support a more stable boundary framework and help minimize disputes.

Furthermore, the Foreign Secretary-level mechanism tackles specific boundary disputes, including Kalapani and Susta, leveraging technical expertise from the BWG at the Surveyor General level (Giri, 2019). Together, these institutional mechanisms provide a structured pathway for constructive engagement and peaceful conflict resolution.

In addition to bilateral measures, third-party mediation could be explored to facilitate dialogue. International precedents, such as the Permanent Court of Arbitration's resolution of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border dispute (2000) and U.S. mediation in the Egypt-Israel peace agreement (1979), demonstrate how impartial mediation can resolve complex territorial issues (Permanent Court of Arbitration, n.d.; Carter, 2024). However, any mediation effort must align with the preferences and sensitivities of both nations to avoid infringing on their sovereignty. A combination of strengthened bilateral mechanisms, technical cooperation, and, where appropriate, third-party facilitation offers a pragmatic roadmap to resolve the Kalapani-Lipulekh dispute. These efforts would not only promote stability in India-Nepal relations but also contribute to regional harmony.

In tandem with diplomatic efforts, both India and Nepal must balance their national interests with regional stability. India's strategic concerns about China's growing influence in Nepal must be carefully managed (Tamang, 2024), as Nepal's sovereign rights and security are equally critical for maintaining peace in the

region. Positioned as a buffer state between the two regional giants, India and China, Nepal must navigate its foreign policy to safeguard its territorial integrity without compromising its diplomatic relationships with either country (Chand, 2023, p. 3).

A collaborative security framework could be developed to address these concerns, ensuring that both nations respect each other's security imperatives while fostering regional stability. Additionally, multilateral cooperation through regional organizations like SAARC, of which Nepal became a founding member in 1985, could provide a platform to address not only territorial disputes but also broader security and economic issues. This approach could promote a more collaborative and stable regional environment for India and Nepal (Teekah, 2024).

In addition to these diplomatic measures, security sector reforms are essential. Both India and Nepal must enhance border management and surveillance to prevent misunderstandings and military standoffs. Joint security exercises, such as the 'SURYA KIRAN' series, started in 2011, play a crucial role in enhancing military relations, fostering mutual understanding and trust between their respective security forces (Sinha, 2024). For instance, the 17th edition of the exercise, conducted in Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand, from November 24 to December 7, 2023, focused on strengthening coordination and cooperation between the two nations (PIB, 2023).

In the long term, India's approach to Nepal must evolve from viewing the country merely as a buffer state to one of regional cooperation. Strengthening Nepal's neutrality and encouraging it to maintain a balanced relationship with both India and China would ensure long-term peace and stability in the region (Bhattarai, 2022). A cooperative regional approach to South Asian security would provide a comprehensive solution to the Kalapani and Lipulekh dispute, helping to maintain a stable and secure South Asia.

Conclusion

The territorial dispute over Kalapani and Lipulekh has significantly strained India-Nepal relations, evolving from a bilateral issue to a broader regional security concern. Situated at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, these territories hold crucial geo-strategic value due to their proximity to important trade routes and the evolving security landscape in South Asia. The conflict, rooted in historical maps and competing territorial claims, has escalated in recent years, particularly with the abrogation of Article 370 and 35A of the Indian Constitution and construction of the road through the Lipulekh pass by India in 2020. This move exacerbated Nepal's concerns and ignited a diplomatic row that continues to reverberate through regional dynamics.

The geo-strategic impact of the Kalapani and Lipulekh dispute is far-reaching. On a bilateral level, it has strained India-Nepal ties, impacting not only diplomatic relations but also cooperation in sectors like trade, security, and regional integration. Nepal's increasing alignment with China, particularly through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has further complicated the situation, with the dispute now being viewed through the lens of India-China competition in the region. This alignment has implications for South Asian stability, as it introduces new dimensions to the strategic balance, particularly in the context of China's growing influence in Nepal and its potential to use the dispute as leverage in its broader geopolitical ambitions.

Addressing this dispute requires a careful and nuanced approach. It is critical for both India and Nepal to engage in sustained dialogue and diplomatic negotiations, underpinned by mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and historical concerns. Regional cooperation, facilitated through forums like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) or other multilateral platforms, could offer a path forward to easing tensions and fostering greater understanding. A long-term resolution lies in recognizing the geo-strategic significance of both countries and ensuring that their respective national interests are balanced through diplomacy rather than unilateral actions.

Ultimately, the resolution of the Kalapani and Lipulekh dispute will not only determine the future trajectory of India-Nepal relations but will also have broader implications for regional peace and stability in South Asia. A diplomatic resolution will set a positive precedent for managing border disputes in the region, promoting stability, and mitigating the influence of external powers that may seek to exploit these tensions for their own strategic gains.

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