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## **Geopolitics of Indo-Nepal Border Conflict**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The aim of this research paper is to bring to light the influence of geopolitical imperatives in the shaping of Indo-Nepal border conflicts. The geographical imperatives of Nepal's location, brings it into India's "sphere of influence", which has been the cause of Nepal's frustration over the years. India's location in the center of South Asia, not to mention its size, has led to the feeling in its neighbouring countries that India behaves like a "big brother", interfering in their domestic and foreign affairs. This has led to many, especially a land locked country like Nepal to turn towards China, the other big neighbouring country to balance India. Moreover, the situation is complicated by virtue of the fact that boundaries between India and Nepal remain fuzzy owing to their colonial histories and the undulating Himalayan topography and the crisscrossing rivers.*

*Taking these factors into mind, the paper seeks to analyse the role of geopolitics in the conflicts between India and Nepal. For this purpose, it pays special attention to the recent Kalapani border dispute. This paper thus, explores the reasons why India and Nepal have failed to arrive at a resolution since the Treaty of Peace and Friendship, concluded in 1950.*

### **KEY WORDS**

*Geo-politics, Kalapani, Foreign Policy, Small state syndrome, Indo-Nepal Relations*

### **RESEARCH QUESTION AND RATIONALE OF THE PAPER**

The fundamental research question of this paper is- how do geopolitical imperatives affect Indo-Nepal conflicts by taking the case of Kalapani dispute. Neighbours India and Nepal, who share an open border, have not always had the most amicable of relations, oscillating from one extreme to the other. Kalapani discord has the potential to disrupt the other aspects of their ties, especially in the domains of the economy and cross-border security. Further, if the two countries fail to arrive at a resolution to the disagreement, it might give other stakeholders such as China an opportunity to interfere. The paper, for this purpose, seeks to lucidly lay out the current political geographical positions and historical imperatives of the conflict.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This paper heavily refers to the works of Umesh Bhattarai, foreign policy expert in Nepal, especially "Geopolitical Dimension of Nepal and Its Impact in South Asia." to understand the

geo-political realities and imperatives of Nepal. It also refers to the article “India and Nepal’s Kalapani border dispute: An explainer” by Sohini Nayak, C Raja Mohan’s article in the Hindu “Delhi Must Focus on India’s Relations with Nepal” to give a context of the dispute. Dixit and Dhakad’s article “Territoriality amidst Covid-19: A Primer to the Lipu Lek Conflict between India and Nepal” and Satyendra Kamrakar’s article “Geopolitics of Kalapani Dispute: Who Bells the Cat?” have been used to give a historical background of the issue. This paper heavily borrows from the works of Buddhi Shrestha to give a brief explanation of the border administration efforts done by both countries jointly. Freidman’s works have been referenced to explain the geo-political development of the Indian subcontinent and how it is different from European geo-political development. Additionally, various newspaper articles and blogs by foreign policy experts have been cited along with the citation of various Maps of the area concerned.

## INTRODUCTION

International security and its relevancy to nation’s stability are heavily influenced by the geo-political situation of a country. Geo-politics is a relationship among politics, geography, demography, and economics. It dictates the overall governmental policies—especially in respect to foreign policy adopted by a nation within the region. Geo- politics is the study of the political and strategic relevance of geography in a pursuit to national and international power (Khanal, 2011). So, the location and the physical environment are important factors to decide international power structure of a nation in the global as well as in regional context.

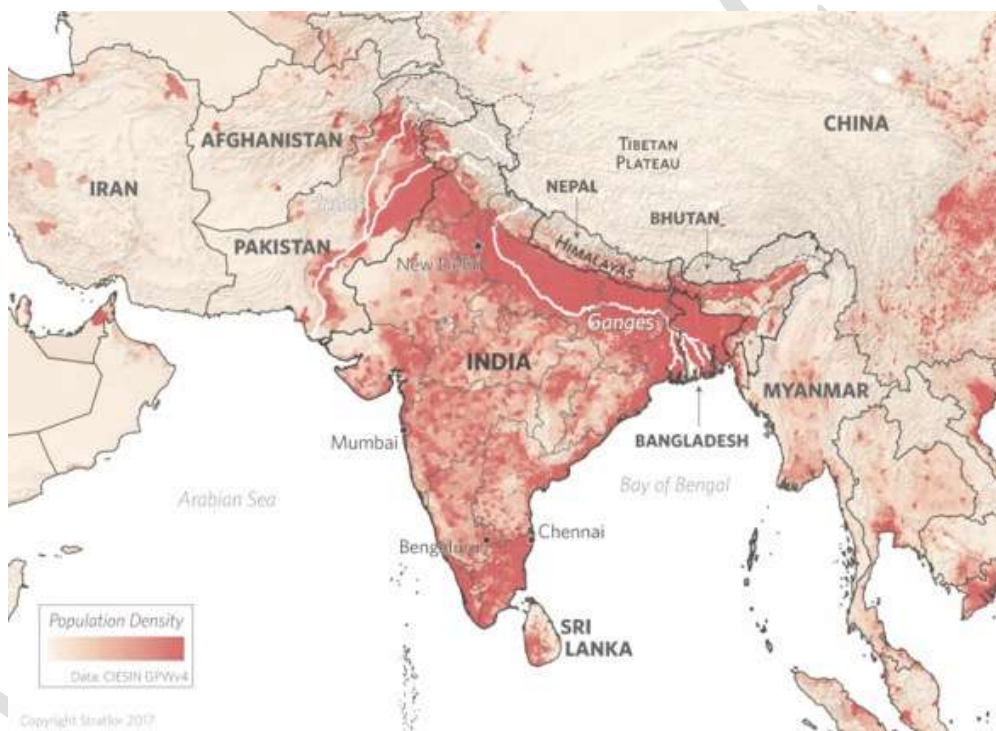
India and Nepal have shared a multi-dimensional and cordial relationship over many decades. Since the launch of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries on 17 June 1947, India and Nepal have worked to maintain their mutual commitment to peaceful co-existence as immediate neighbours. However, the 1880-kilometre border running along West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Sikkim has not been without disputes (Behara, 2011). It is in this context that an attempt is being made to understand the Kalapani Dispute between the two countries. It can be easily said that this dispute is a ground for competing territorial nationalism owing to both countries’ colonial history and Nepal’s landlocked position.

## OVERVIEW

To understand the root causes of Indo-Nepal border issue, the geopolitics of the Indian Subcontinent needs to be looked at as a whole. It is a self-contained region that includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan (Bhattarai, 2016). It’s called” self-contained” because it is a region that is isolated on all sides by difficult terrain or by ocean. In geopolitical terms it is— ‘an island’ (Friedman, 2008). The geography of the subcontinent constrains the behaviour of governments that arise there.

Freidman explains the above by comparing the Indian Subcontinent to non-Russian Europe because they both have peninsulas jutting out of their land mass. Despite this geographical similarity, he remarks, that they have had radically different patterns of development. He qualifies this by explaining how the Europeans developed long-standing and highly differentiated populations and cultures, which evolved into separate nation-states such as Spain, France, Germany and Poland. Their precise frontiers and even independence have varied over time, but the distinctions have been present for centuries — in many cases

predating the Roman Empire. The Indian subcontinent, on the other hand, he explains, historically has been highly fragmented but also fluid (except when conquered from the outside). Over fairly short periods of time, the internal political boundaries have been known to shift dramatically. The reason for the difference is fairly simple. Europe is filled with internal geographic barriers: The Alps and Pyrenees and Carpathians present natural boundaries and defensive lines, and numerous rivers and forests supplement these. These give Europe a number of permanent, built-in divisions, with defined political entities and clear areas of conflict. There are no internal fortresses in the Indian subcontinent, except perhaps for the Thar Desert. What is permanent in the subcontinent is the frame, the mountains, and beyond these the wastelands. This can be most clearly seen when looking at the population distribution of the surrounding regions. The subcontinent is isolated as a population center, surrounded by comparatively empty regions. It is not only a question of the mountains around it, although those are substantial barriers; the terrain beyond the mountains in every direction is sparsely populated, and in many ways its resources are insufficient to support a sizeable, sedentary civilization (Freidman, 2008).



MAP- <https://www.opinionglobal.cl/the-geopolitics-of-india-a-shifting-self-contained-world/>

### **NEPAL'S GEO-POLITICAL POSITION AND INFLUENCE ON INDO-NEPAL TIES**

Nepal has a pivotal position in the Himalayas between the Central and South Asian Region. Its geographical position forms a critical geo-strategic setting for the security of India especially to its Gangetic belt; and to the North—existence of the sensitive Tibet—Autonomous Region of China; which has made Nepal's position more strategic (Khanal, 2011). It's a buffer state between India and China, though it is largely considered as coming under India

geo-political ambit/sphere of influence (Singh, 2010). This is so because its separated from its two other neighbours, Bangladesh and Bhutan by Indian territory. This makes it dependent upon India for its external transit routes and sea-access, even for most goods coming from China<sup>i</sup>. That is why Nepal holds significant importance for India's security and geopolitical ambitions (Singh, 2010).

For a small state like Nepal, foreign policy manoeuvrability and roles in the international politics are limited by a number of factors: the most limiting factors are the location, level of economic development and territorial size. The strategic location that Nepal occupies has limited freedom of manoeuvre. Barston stated, "The freedom of choice and type of external relations of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland is very limited because of economic dependence resulting largely from their land locked geographical location vis-à-vis South Africa and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe)" (Barston, 1971). Similarly, the geographical location Nepal occupies and its economic dependence mainly with India and landlocked position limit the freedom to manoeuvre in its foreign policy. As being in the middle of the two giants, depicted by King Prithvi Narayan Shah as "Yam between two builders" basically dictated its foreign policy throughout the history (Bhattarai, 2015).

Nepal's perception of insecurity (coming from a perception of its smallness) is a psychological phenomenon resulting from its physical environment which in turn is a consequence of its size (Khadka, 1997). Since such a perception has also shaped its orientations and relations with the outside world, it has been preoccupied almost single-mindedly as to how best to seek protection from any potential risk to its sovereignty. It's a defensive mentality that has been developed, created because of its immediate neighbours.

Former Indian Foreign Minister Mr. K. Natwar Singh once said, "Geography dictates Nepal-India relations". According to the Department of Survey, HMG, Nepal occupies a 1590 – kilo-meter-long border with India and 1414km border with China. As Dahal argues that "Nepal occupies pivotal position in the Himalayas – between the Central and South Asian regions, a part of Euro-Asian landmass, to use Mackinder's terminology" (Dahal, 1997). "To the north of this monarchical kingdom is Tibet, the Autonomous Region of communised China; to the east, west, and south are the federal states – Bengal, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh – of republican India". Dahal further argues that such a Nepal's position forms its geo-strategic setting critically important for India's security and stability of its heartland, the Gangetic belt, where an enormous share of its human and resources base is concentrated. It is the primary reason why India has been striving toward a firmer influence in Nepal for its territorial and political defence in areas that border on China, which Indian strategists perceive as the actual rival of India<sup>iii</sup>. Due to its strategic importance for Indian defence from China to the north, the British had done everything to transform Nepal into a friendly buffer state between China and British possessions in India, the 1816 Sugauli Treaty was the result. After the end of British rule in India, the post-colonial government of India had also taken note of Nepal's strategic importance and quickly signed a Treaty of Peace and Friendship covering all aspects of Nepal – India relations in 1950, followed by a letter of exchange (Bhattarai, 2015). "The open border between India and Nepal has existed since the colonial era. It has provided a springboard of opportunities for both countries especially, for a landlocked country like Nepal. But, along with opportunities, it also gives rise to many issues such as lack of documentation of people crossing the border, improper demarcation of checkpoints,



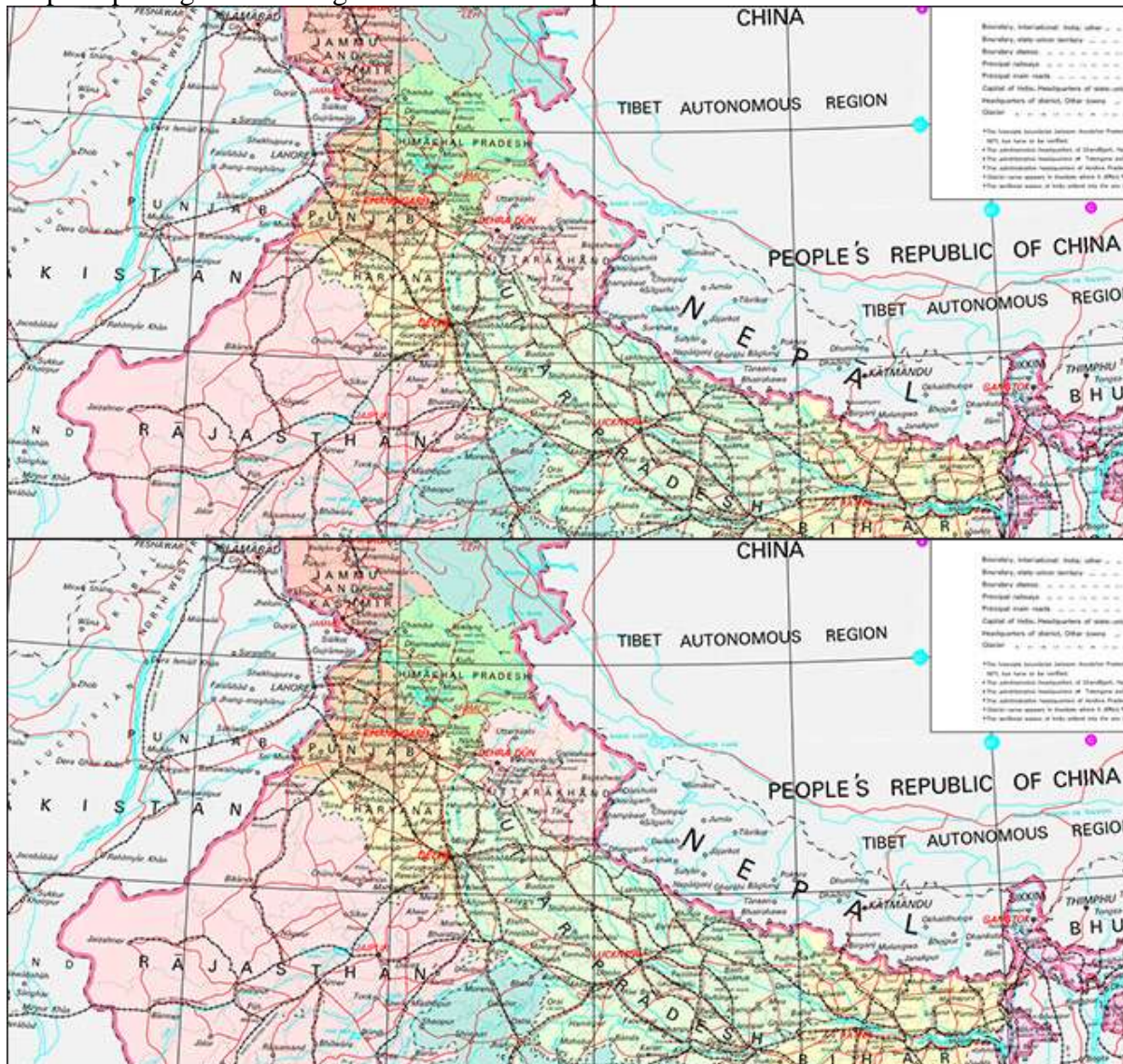
lackadaisical attitude of the boded personnel etc. These issues complicate the already fuzzy border between Nepal and India, especially the Western border” (Bhattarai, 2015).

## **OVERVIEW OF KALAPANI DISPUTE**

In November 2019, the Home Ministry of India released a new edition of the Indian political map, showing Jammu and Kashmir along with Ladakh as the new union territories of India. The same map also showed the disputed 'Kalapani' region in the Greater Himalayas as within India's borders. The map portrayed the area as part of the Pithoragarh district in the state of Uttarakhand. Nepal immediately issued an objection to the map, as it identifies the region as an unsettled territory of the Dhar Chula district in the country's Sudurpashchim province. In November 2019 the Ministry of External Affairs, Nepal, under the leadership of Foreign Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali also issued a statement for the media stating that, "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." In response, India has maintained that the map is "accurate". The new map—and the consequent objection from Nepal—brought forth the unresolved border disputes between the two countries. These disagreements involve not only Kalapani but also areas like Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura, and Susta (Nayak, 2020). The problem was further complicated when India inaugurated the BRO link road from Dhar Chula to Lipulekh, called the Kailash Mansarovar Road, without consulting with Nepal. Moreover, the May 2015 Lipulekh Agreement between China and India, specified that the Lipulekh corridor can be used by India as and when required. Baral says that—"Point 28, in 41 points joint statement, clearly violates Nepal's sovereignty as it was signed without Nepal's involvement. That was the first time, the two countries mentioned Lipulekh, the tri-junction between Nepal, India and China, in their bilateral statement since 1953; neither India nor China, consulted Nepal before agreeing to open the route through Lipulekh" (Baral, 2015) This attitude of India, is viewed quite negatively in Nepal, with India often being labelled as a "big bully". Since, a landlocked Nepal sandwiched between two giants suffers from a "small state syndrome", any and all treaties between India and Nepal are looked at with suspicion. Prof. S.D Muni has written that India's "marwari attitude" doesn't help its cause and often leads its smaller neighbours to perceive its moves as a threat to their sovereignty. E.g. the blockages of 1989 and 2015 were viewed as bullying tactics by India in Nepal which eroded the trust between the two countries. This perception of India in Nepal complicates the border issue, as not only does Nepal want to engage with India on a multilateral basis instead of a bilateral one, but, any solution or suggestion coming from India are immediately thrashed for being as coercive and unilateral. This inhibits resolution of the conflict.

The Lipulekh Pass is the most flexible and shortest route to reach Taklakot, a Tibetan township of China. It is here that there is the presence of a strategically important hill with 6,180 meters height on the south of Kalapani (Shrestha, 2003). India's access to this corridor will not only make it economically sound with trading windows with Tibet, but would also facilitate its security and observation of the 'Kalapani'. Nepal is not unaware of this situation and has since been calculating its diplomatic steps vis-à-vis both the regional superpowers (Nayak, 2020).

Map: Depicting the Pithoragarh district and Kalapani border



Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2 November 2019

Indeed, the Kalapani area is of strategic significance in South Asian diplomacy as it serves as a tri-junction between India, China and Nepal. Given that Nepal is a "buffer state" between the other two countries—both with great-power aspirations in the region—the Kalapani dispute has important ramifications on the relations between the three.

Historically, India and Nepal were both parts of the colonised sectors of the British East India Company. The origin of the dispute lies in the 1816 Sugauli treaty between the erstwhile Gorkha empire of Nepal and British India, following the 1814 Anglo-Nepal war. As a result of this treaty Nepal had to part with Sikkim and Darjeeling to British India and the east and west borders were fixed using the Mechi river and Mahakali River respectively. Key to the disagreement over Kalapani is the origin of River Kali. There are varied views regarding this river and its source. As the river flows northwards, it gets divided into 2. This is where the confusion lies- whether to take the west side river or the east side. According to the Sugauli



Treaty the west side river was taken as the boundary as it was clear and thick as compared to the east side distributary. Thus, till the 1880's this was the de-jure border between both the countries, as depicted in colonial era maps. However, the British soon realised the strategic importance of the triangular strip of land and surreptitiously changed their maps to show the east side distributary as the de facto boundary between the two. Maps after 1880 started mentioning a separate River Kali originating from the Lipulekh Pass, apart from the Kuti; Nepal lost some 310 square kilo-meters of land in the process, and it did indeed call out the "cartographic aggression" (Shrestha, 2003).

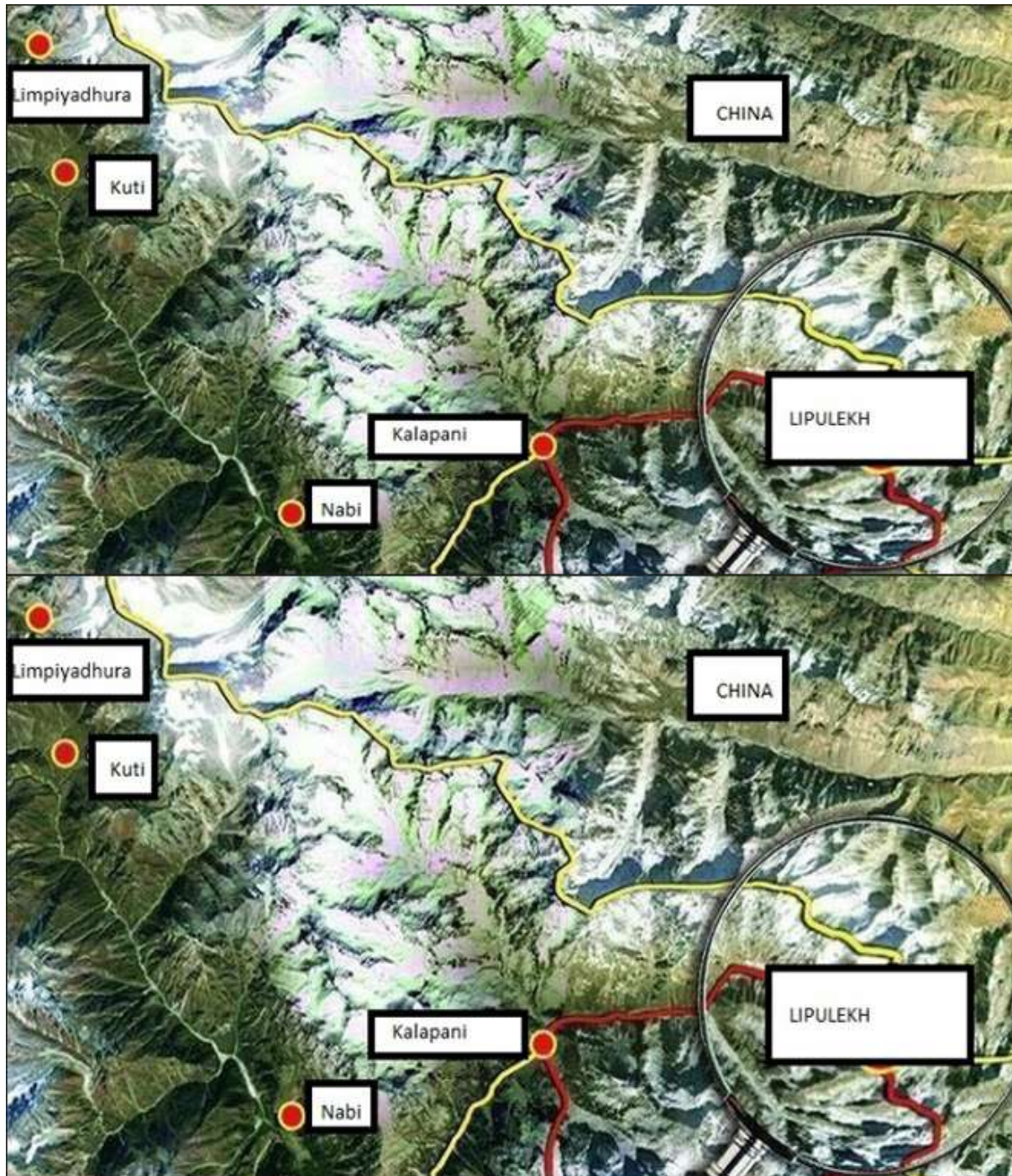
This continued to be the de-facto border between the two countries even post-Independence, thanks to the 1950 Treaty of Friendship signed between India and Nepal, and the open border existing between the two. Consideration also needs to be given to the fact that Nepal, then was under the rule of monarchy, which was fine with the colonial era boundary between the 2 countries, hence, when during the 1962, Indo-China war, India asked to station its troops in the tri-junction, permission was given by the monarchy. Kalapani was regarded as a 'safe zone 'for Indian troops to be stationed, as its high altitude of 20, 276 feet was "effective defence against the Chinese" (Baral, 2015). At that time, too, China recognised Kalapani as India's. Nepal, however, had conducted elections in the area in 1959 and collected land revenue from its residents, until 1961(Jha, 2019). Since then, Indian military outposts have continued to exist in that area. Thus, the Limpiyadhura triangle remained in limbo, in the northwest corner of Nepal. The Panchayat era from 1960 until 1990 was a time of closed society, with administrators directly reporting to the Narayanhiti Royal Palace. Both King Mahendra and his son King Birendra seem to have decided to keep quiet regarding the area in question, and their many vulnerabilities vis-à-vis India. The royal autocracy kept the strip towards Limpiyadhura off the government maps, and this is what created difficulties for the Nepali narrative. Meanwhile, the Nepali public got used to maps without the Limpiyadhura triangle, actually following the post-1860 cartography propagated by the British<sup>iii</sup> (Dixit & Dhakal, 2020).

It should also be noted that since then, the Kalapani region truly became disputed especially post the 1990, when democracy came in Nepal, overthrowing the monarchy. After the democratically elected government came into power they had access to the colonial era maps and they found out the original boundary between India and Nepal on the western front. Hence, most maps drawn by Nepal show the River Kali originating about 16 kilo-meters northwest of Kalapani at Limpiyadhura in the Zaskar range of the Himalayas. A map drawn in 1827 has been often regarded as "authentic", as mentioned by Shrestha, as it carries the note, "Published According to Act of Parliament by James Horst Surgh, Hydrographer to the East India Company 1<sup>st</sup> Feb.1827"<sup>iv</sup>(Shrestha, 2003). Since, these maps are created by the Nepali establishment, India maintains that it doesn't trust them.

In 2000, there was an attempt to conduct a field survey in that area to determine the border between then PMs Atal B. Vajpayee and G B Koirala, but nothing came out of it as India didn't free the area of its military outposts. However, till now Nepal, in its political map had never shown this region as its own, it is only after the release of the new map by India, and India's unilateral decision to construct a BRO road from Dhrachula to Lipulekh, without consulting with Nepal that the situation flared up.

Buddhi Narayan Shrestha, sums up that, the Nepali establishment is of the view that the river which flows to the west of Kalapani is the main River Kali, originating at either

Limpiyadhura or the nearby Lipulekh pass, which are both within the Nepalese territory, thus justifying the area as an inherent part of Nepal. While, India, argues that the River Kali originated from a smaller rivulet named Pankhagad, lying on the southern portion of Kalapani and the subsequent ridge on the eastern part of this area is the true border, and therefore making the territory part of India. (Nayak, 2020) Indeed, the River Kali has yet to be demarcated. Moreover, while it is known as 'Kali' at the upper reaches, the middle portion is called 'Mahakali' and the lower, 'Sarjoo' or 'Gogra'; this aggravates the confusion about where it belongs (Nayak, 2020).





Map: depicting the Lipulekh Pass along with Kalapani, <https://www.change.org/p/kalapani-belong-to-nepal-situate-as-part-of-vyasa-valley-of-darchula-district-of-western-mahakali-not-of-india>

## ATTEMPTS AT BORDER ADMINISTRATION

Both India and Nepal have done little to resolve the bottlenecks along their borders, including in the Kalapani region. The Kalapani border has yet to be properly demarcated, especially the so-called 'no-man's land' in the area (Nayak, 2020)

For example, it was only in November 2019 that a joint team of security personnel from the Armed Police Force (APF) of Nepal and the Indian Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) commenced a campaign for clearance with regard to the 'no-man's land' in the border near Sunsari and Morang on the Indian and Nepali sides, respectively. Following this, those who were found to have been encroaching the area—between border pillar number 185/PP74 (main) to border pillar number 184 (main)—were evicted. Of these border pillars, 23 were found to be missing in the Sunsari district (Menyangbo, 2019).

The Nepal-India Joint Border Inspection Mechanism of 1981 and the Nepal-India Joint Border Management Committee, formed in 1997 were set up in the past. Additionally, in order to make agreements and bilateral talks on border clearer, the Nepal-India Joint Technical Level Boundary Committee (JTBC) was constituted in 1981 (dissolved in 2008) (Baral, 2010). These organisations mainly worked to bring about a comprehensive border management system along with the re-establishment of the boundary pillars from the British era and the periodic inspection of keeping the boundary intact. Boundary base maps and strip maps of 1:15000 scale covering 50 meters from either side were also created with the construction of boundary pillars—which are basically subsidiary or additional pillars in the specific riverine segments (Baral, 2010). Not much has been achieved however, in terms of creating a rules-based order. JTBC completed 97 percent of the boundary problems which may be categorised as relatively minor in nature. The remaining three percent was claimed to be beyond their capacity to resolve. This area includes the Kalapani-Limpiyadhura—the largest encroachment of 370 square kilometres, Susta of 24km and various other spots occupying around 15km. There are around 71 spots covering a total of 606 square kilometres (Shrestha, 2007). One of the most important reasons behind the continuation of such a status is the unavailability of old maps and documents for demarcation. There are also 'cross-occupations' that require major identification here. A fitting comment is one by Bernardo Michael in "The Natural environments and the Shifting Borders of Nepal by Buddhi Narayan Shrestha": "Even today, the presence of boundary disputes between India and Nepal, clearly show that this project of drawing modern boundaries will always be an unfinished one, because human actions can never be fully constrained by lines drawn on a map" (Shrestha, 2007).





Map: Depicting Limpiyadhura, Kalapani and Lipulekh

Source: Budddhi Narayan Shrestha, 'Authenticity of Lipulekh border pass', June 2015.

## CONCLUSION

Colonial era efforts to survey this area and draw a boundary between the two countries using natural features as focal points didn't align with the cartographic needs for precision and ideas of where a country's territory began and ended.

Determination of boundary is a political issue and often political interest-driven negotiations act as a spur to augment the importance of the river manifold. Of course, any river can be treated as a marker of the distinct political border but the problem arises due to the remarkable natural shifting of the river. This is the base problem of the Kalapani dispute (Karmokar, Bandhopadhyaya & Nag, 2020). India and Nepal must chalk out their borders in a formal and friendly manner, to avoid other disputes such as the one over the Kalapani area. Both India and Nepal must invest in negotiating new border management agreements to take into consideration recent events. After all, the demands of the times have changed since the time the Kalapani border dispute first emerged. In the process, the people of both countries should be prioritised (Nayak, 2020). Further, Kathmandu and New Delhi should not allow a further hardening of positions on Limpiyadhura, while delinking this matter from the myriad other issues that make up the layered and textured relationship between the two countries. To begin with, a silent agreement is needed saying that responsible officials on both sides must refrain from further statements or declarations that could spoil the atmospherics for negotiations. Meanwhile, in time, a modality can be developed for Indian pilgrims to take the Lipu Lek route. Nepal and India must sit down and study the maps and historical



commitments, while being mindful of each other's security needs in this strategic area. The time and energy saved through de-escalation can be used by both sides to go back to the archives, and to consult experts on identifying the 'main flow' of rivers as they reach up to the headwaters (Dixit & Dhakad, 2020).

The 1950 Treaty, which proclaims an "everlasting friendship" between the two nations, has become the symbol of Indian hegemony in Nepal. It makes no sense for Delhi to hanker after a "special relationship" that a large section of Kathmandu does not want. If Delhi wants a normal and good neighbourly relationship with Kathmandu, it should put all major bilateral issues on the table for renegotiation — including the 1950 treaty, national treatment to Nepali citizens in India, trade and transit arrangements, the open border and visa-free travel.

Delhi should make it a priority to begin talks with Nepal on revising, replacing, or simply discarding the 1950 treaty. It should negotiate a new set of mutually satisfactory arrangements. India had conducted a similar exercise with Bhutan to replace the 1949 treaty during 2006-07. The issues and political context are certainly more complicated in the case of Nepal (Mohan C, 2020).

India shouldn't let the relationship atrophy. Only those bilateral relationship rooted in shared interests endure. Discarding the appearances of the "special relationship" might, in fact, make it easier for Delhi to construct a more durable and interest-based partnership with Kathmandu that is rooted in realism and has strong popular support on both sides (Mohan C, 2020).

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#### ENDNOTES:

- <sup>i</sup> this makes Nepal vulnerable to India's trade and transit policy towards Nepal, and contributes to the perception of India being as coercive and a big bully.
- <sup>ii</sup> One of the most vital reasons of insecurity for India is the presence of China, which shares 1,439 kilometers of border with Nepal. Nepal and China had also signed a boundary agreement after much dispute on 21 March 1960. There were problems regarding the Mount Everest, to mention one, which was finally and formally settled when the then visiting

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Chinese Prime Minister Chou En-Lai declared in 1960 that "Mount Everest belongs to Nepal." From here, the border-related issues between the northern neighbour and Nepal have been more stable and peaceful, giving them the opportunity to nurture relations in other integral issues like trade and connectivity (Shrestha, 2007). Moreover, Nepal is also an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China. (Nayak, 2020)

iii This is opposite the experience, for example, of India where New Delhi claims Aksai Chin as the eastern part of Ladakh though it has been in Chinese possession since Independence. Through the publication of official maps, Aksai Chin continues in the Indian public's imagination as part of modern India's geography.

iv Former Nepali Prime Minister Kirtinidhi Bista said in 2017: "There is no written agreement between King Mahendra and Prime Minister Nehru that India can produce. King Mahendra is long dead and the political system itself has changed in Nepal. Neither side has produced papers from the archives as such while the public rightly wants resolution. In absence of papers, there is no other way but to define the border according to words of the Sugauli Treaty." (Dixit & Dhakad, 2020)