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A Thematic Exploration of the Kalapani Issue as a Test of India Nepal Strategic Partnership in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The Kalapani border dispute, centered on a 373-square-kilometer area in the Himalayas, epitomizes the complex interplay of historical cartography, strategic imperatives, and diplomatic fragility in India-Nepal relations. Emerging from conflicting interpretations of the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli and the Kali River's origin, the territorial clash has escalated into a litmus test for bilateral trust, exacerbated by Nepal's 2020 constitutional map claiming Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura The dispute's strategic significance—anchored in its tri-junction proximity to China and control over the Lipulekh Pass, a vital Indo-Tibetan trade corridor—has intensified security anxieties for India, fueling Nepali perceptions of sovereignty erosion. Despite historical cultural affinity and economic interdependence, recurring tensions reveal how domestic nationalism, competing security paradigms, and China's growing regional influence have strained the partnership. The study argues that unresolved cartographic ambiguities and shifting geopolitical alignments threaten to escalate the Kalapani dispute into a broader regional crisis, highlighting the urgent need for institutionalized dialogue. It analyzes the historical and legal foundations of the dispute, examines its strategic significance—particularly in the context of China—explores the influence of domestic politics and nationalism on both sides, and assesses the impact on India-Nepal relations and regional stability, along with the effectiveness of existing diplomatic mechanisms in addressing the conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

Few territorial disputes in South Asia have so persistently challenged the foundations of bilateral relations as the Kalapani issue between India and Nepal (Kumar and Thakur, 2024). The origins of the dispute can be traced back to the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli, signed after the Anglo-Nepal War, which designated the Kali River as the western boundary of Nepal and the eastern boundary of British India (Thakur and Kumar, 2022). However, ambiguity over the precise origin of the Kali River soon surfaced: Nepal claims the river begins at Limpiyadhura, thereby including Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura within its territory, India maintains that the river's source is at the Kalapani springs, placing the disputed area within its Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand (Aryal and Pulami, 2024). The divergence in interpretation compounded by shifting colonial-era administrative practices—such as the British move around 1865 to align the border with the watershed rather than the river itself—laid the groundwork for a dispute that would remain dormant for decades before reemerging as a flashpoint in modern South Asian geopolitics (Barik and Laishram, 2024).

The Kalapani territory, a rugged Himalayan region spanning approximately 35 square kilometers at an altitude of 3,600–5,200 meters, holds not only symbolic but also significant strategic value (Dwivedi and Pandey, 2021). The area encompasses the Lipulekh Pass, a historic trade and pilgrimage route to Tibet and the sacred site of Kailash Mansarovar, and lies at the trijunction of India, Nepal, and China, making it a focal point for regional security concerns (Bhattarai and Pulami, 2020). The dispute remained largely unaddressed from 1961 until 1997, when Nepal began raising the issue more assertively, particularly after India and China agreed to reopen the Lipulekh Pass for trade (Thapa and Sharma, 2023). In May 2020, tensions escalated sharply when Nepal released a new political map claiming Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura, following India's inauguration of a new road to Kailash Mansarovar through the disputed area. The move triggered diplomatic protests and reignited nationalist sentiments in both countries, further complicating efforts at resolution (Apostolopoulou and Pant, 2022).

Despite the open border and deep-rooted cultural ties between India and Nepal, the Kalapani issue has become a litmus test for their strategic partnership in the 21st century. Multiple rounds of bilateral talks and the formation of a Joint Technical Level Boundary Working Group in the 1980s have failed to produce a mutually acceptable solution, with both sides holding firm to their historical and cartographic claims (Kumar and Thakur, 2024). The persistence of the dispute is exacerbated by shifting regional dynamics, including Nepal's perceived tilt towards China and growing distrust of Indian intentions (Aryal and Pulami, 2024). The Kalapani issue underscores how unresolved historical ambiguities, evolving strategic interests, and rising domestic nationalism can transform a cartographic disagreement into a broader challenge for regional stability and cooperation (Thakur and Kumar, 2022).

Statement of problem

The Kalapani dispute remains a persistent and unresolved territorial conflict between India and Nepal, rooted in differing interpretations of the origin of the Kali River as defined in the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli. Despite multiple rounds of bilateral negotiations since 1998 and the establishment of joint technical committees, both countries have failed to reach a consensus, with each side presenting historical and administrative evidence to support its claims. The issue escalated in 2020 when Nepal released a new political map extending its claim to Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura, provoking diplomatic tensions and nationalist sentiments on both sides. The ongoing impasse not only undermines the spirit of the India-Nepal strategic partnership but also poses risks to regional stability, especially given the area's strategic significance and proximity to China. The lack of resolution continues to fuel mistrust, complicating broader bilateral cooperation and integration efforts.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive method with a qualitative approach to examine the Kalapani issue as a test of the India-Nepal strategic partnership. Data was collected through an extensive review

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of secondary sources, including academic literature, treaties, government documents, and media reports. Qualitative content analysis is adopted to identify main themes and patterns in the narratives and strategic considerations of both countries. Comparative analysis with other South Asian border disputes provided additional context. The methodology enabled a comprehensive understanding of the historical, political, and strategic dimensions shaping the dispute and its implications for bilateral relations.

Objectives

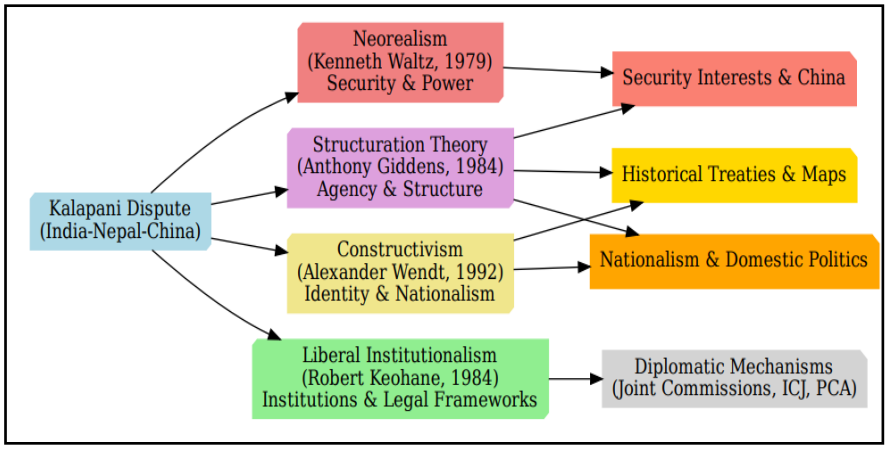
1. To analyze the historical origins and legal interpretations underlying the Kalapani dispute between India and Nepal.
2. To examine the geopolitical and strategic significance of the Kalapani region for both countries, particularly in relation to China
3. To evaluate the role of domestic politics and nationalism in shaping the narratives and policies of India and Nepal regarding the Kalapani issue
4. To assess the impact of the Kalapani dispute on the overall India-Nepal strategic partnership and regional stability
5. To investigate the effectiveness of existing diplomatic and institutional mechanisms in managing and resolving the Kalapani dispute.

Theoretical framework

A robust theoretical framework for analyzing the Kalapani dispute between India and Nepal draws from several foundational theories in international relations and conflict resolution, each offering distinct insights into the persistence, management, and (potential) resolution of territorial conflicts. The dispute, which centers on a small but strategically significant region at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, is shaped by historical grievances, national identity, power dynamics, and the evolving regional order.

Neorealism, as articulated by Kenneth Waltz (1979), emphasizes the anarchic structure of the international system and the primacy of state security and power. From this perspective, the Kalapani dispute persists because both India and Nepal perceive strategic and security interests in controlling the territory. India's infrastructure development in the region, especially under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the NDA government, and Nepal's constitutional assertion of its claims, can be seen as efforts to maximize security and deter encroachment by rivals, including China. Neorealism also explains why the dispute is resistant to resolution: the stakes are heightened by the proximity of China, a rising power, and the region's value as a buffer and access point to Tibet.

Figure 1.1 Theoretical Lenses on the Kalapani Dispute



Liberal institutionalism, advanced by scholars like Robert Keohane (1984), posits that international institutions and legal frameworks can facilitate cooperation and peaceful dispute resolution. This is evident in the diplomatic and institutional mechanisms established by India and

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Nepal, such as the Joint Technical Level Boundary Working Group and the Nepal-India Joint Commission. These mechanisms reflect a commitment to dialogue, negotiation, and adherence to international legal norms, as prescribed by the United Nations Charter's prohibition on the use of force and the role of bodies like the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is often limited by the political will of the parties involved, as well as domestic pressures and nationalist sentiment.

Constructivism, as developed by Alexander Wendt (1992), highlights the role of identity, historical narratives, and social constructs in shaping state behavior. The Kalapani dispute is deeply embedded in the national identity of both India and Nepal, with each side invoking historical treaties, maps, and cultural ties to legitimize their claims. Nationalism, as noted by contemporary analysts, has been instrumentalized by political leaders in both countries to rally domestic support, making compromise more difficult. Nepal's decision to enshrine its claims in its constitution and India's assertive infrastructure projects reflect not only material interests but also the symbolic significance of the territory.

Anthony Giddens Structuration Theory (1984) provides a useful lens for understanding the interplay between agency (the actions of political leaders, such as Modi and Oli) and structure (the enduring historical, legal, and geopolitical context). The Kalapani dispute is shaped by both the agency of leaders who use the issue for political gain and the structural constraints imposed by historical treaties, international law, and regional power dynamics. In practice, the resolution of the Kalapani dispute requires a synthetic approach that combines the insights of realism (addressing security concerns and power asymmetries), liberalism (strengthening institutional mechanisms and legal frameworks), and constructivism (addressing identity and historical narratives). The persistence of the dispute despite existing diplomatic mechanisms underscores the need for greater political will, mutual respect, and creative solutions, such as joint management or shared sovereignty, as suggested in recent scholarship. The Kalapani dispute exemplifies the complex, multifaceted nature of territorial conflicts in international relations, where law, power, and identity are inextricably linked.

Result and discussion

Historical and legal background of the Kalapani dispute

The Kalapani dispute stands as one of the most persistent and complex border issues between India and Nepal, drawing international attention due to its historical roots, legal ambiguities, and recent political developments (Singh et al., 2023). In the era of start-up diplomacy and evolving regional partnerships, the Kalapani issue underscores how historical treaties and modern geopolitics continue to shape South Asian relations (Blank et al., 2015). The origins of the Kalapani dispute trace back to the early 19th century, specifically to the Treaty of Sugauli signed in 1816 between the British East India Company and the Kingdom of Nepal. The treaty, concluded after the Anglo-Nepalese War, stipulated that the Kali River would serve as the western boundary of Nepal. According to Article 5 of the treaty, Nepal relinquished all claims to territories west of the Kali River, the British acknowledged Nepalese sovereignty over lands to the east (Mehsud et al., 2020).

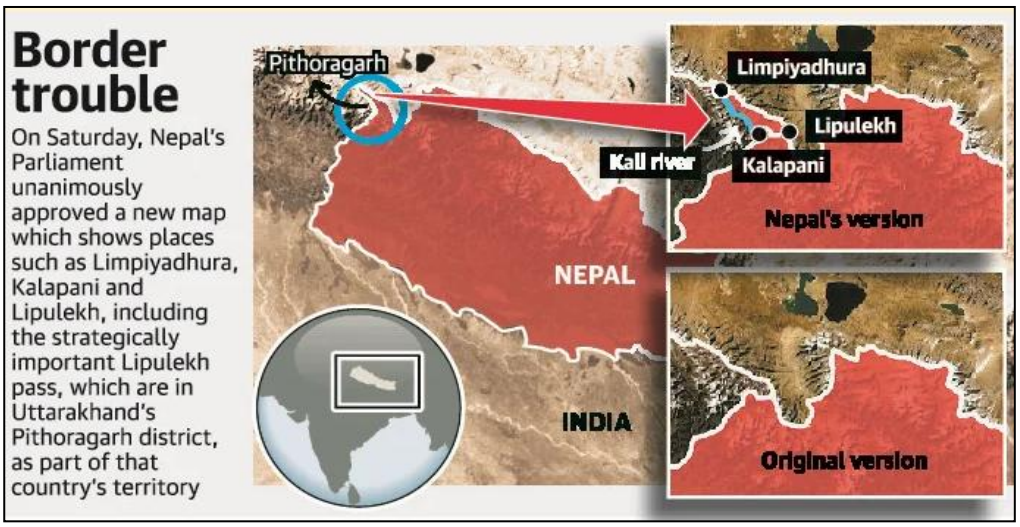
However, the core of the dispute lies in the differing interpretations of the river's origin. Nepal asserts that the Kali River originates near Limpiyadhura, thus claiming the land east of this source—including Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura—as its own. India, on the other hand, maintains that the river begins at the Kalapani springs, which places the disputed territory within India's Pithoragarh district in Uttarakhand (Marwah et al., 2023). The divergence in the identification of the river's source has fueled the territorial disagreement for over two centuries (Khan et al., 2021). During British rule, the administration initially retained control over the entire Byans region, both east and west of the river, citing traditional ties to Kumaon. In 1817, after Nepalese representations, the British transferred the Byans region east of the Kali to Nepal. Yet, disputes persisted, especially as Nepal later claimed the Kuthi valley, arguing that its stream was the true Kali River. British surveyors, however, insisted that

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the main Kali branch was the stream from Kalapani springs, and thus the Kuthi valley remained with British India (Minhas et al., 2020). In the late 19th century, the British unilaterally shifted the boundary near Kalapani to the watershed of the river, a move seen by Nepali scholars as strategically motivated to gain vantage points over the Tibetan plateau. The shift, made Nepal was a British-protected state, has been viewed by some as an unauthorized alteration of the border (Singh et al., 2023).

Figure 1.2 Mapping Sovereignty: The India-Nepal Dispute over Kalapani



After India's independence, the Kalapani area continued to be administered as part of the Pithoragarh district, with Indian administrative and revenue records from the 19th century supporting the claim (Roy and Cawasji, 2017). Nepal, however, largely ignored the issue until the late 20th century, when it began to raise the matter more forcefully, especially after 1997 (Maitra and Chatterjee, 2021). In 1998, both countries agreed to resolve border disputes, including Kalapani, through bilateral talks, but no resolution has been achieved despite numerous negotiations. Tensions escalated in 2020 when India inaugurated a new road to the Kailash Mansarovar, passing through the disputed territory. Nepal objected, amending its constitution to include Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura in its official map (Apostolopoulou and Pant, 2022). India criticized this as a unilateral act not based on historical evidence, reaffirming its commitment to negotiations. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), India has emphasized a "Neighbourhood First" policy, but relations with Nepal have faced turbulence, particularly after the 2015 blockade and the 2019 publication of India's new political map (Marwah, Ramanayake, and Yasmin, 2023).

Modi's government has maintained that the Kalapani area is Indian Territory, citing historical records and administrative continuity. The NDA has also participated in bilateral mechanisms, such as the Joint Technical Level Boundary Working Group, but the Kalapani and Susta disputes remain unresolved. The Kalapani dispute is rooted in historical treaties, colonial-era administrative decisions, and differing legal interpretations of river origins. Despite multiple rounds of talks and changing political dynamics, including under Narendra Modi's NDA government, the issue persists as a symbol of the complexities inherent in South Asian borders and diplomacy (Maitra and Chatterjee, 2021).

Geopolitical and strategic importance of Kalapani, especially regarding China

Kalapani is a small but highly strategic region located at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, and its significance has grown in recent decades due to shifting geopolitical realities and the interests of all three countries (Ghimire, 2024). The origins of the Kalapani dispute can be traced back to the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli, signed after the Anglo-Nepal War, which defined the Kali River as the boundary between British India and the Kingdom of Nepal (Kharel, 2024). However, the exact source of the Kali River has been a matter of contention, with Nepal claiming the river originates at

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Limpiyadhura, further northwest, India asserts that the river begins at the Kalapani springs, further southeast (Bhattarai, 2021). The divergence in interpretation has led to overlapping territorial claims, with Nepal stating that Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura fall within its Darchula district, and India maintaining that these areas are part of Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh district (Rai, 2023). During the British colonial era, the boundaries in the region were altered several times.

In the late 19th century, around 1865, the British shifted the border near Kalapani to the watershed of the Kalapani River, rather than the river itself, which allowed them to claim the area now known as the Kalapani territory (Timalsina, 2023). Scholars like Manandhar and Koirala argue that the move was motivated by strategic interests, as the highest point in the region, Point 6172, offers an unobstructed view of the Tibetan plateau (Sharma, 2024). The British position was that the Kali River began only from the Kalapani springs, and thus the Sugauli Treaty did not apply to the region above these springs (Rae, 2021). The redefinition of boundaries was never formally agreed upon with Nepal, which was under significant British influence at the time, even though it was nominally independent (Gupta, 2021). After India's independence in 1947, the Kalapani region continued to be administered as part of India. Administrative and revenue records from the 1830s onward show that Kalapani was part of the Pithoragarh district, then a part of Almora district (Thapa, 2024). The region remained largely uncontroversial until the 1962 Sino-Indian War, after which Indian military units occupied Kalapani as a strategic buffer against China (Bista, 2023). Notably, King Mahendra of Nepal reportedly offered Kalapani to India after the 1962 war to help address India's security concerns about China, and Nepal did not object to Indian presence in the area for several decades.

It was only in 1998 that Nepal officially raised the Kalapani issue with India, seeking to resolve it through bilateral talks. The move was influenced by domestic political considerations in Nepal, as noted by scholars like Leo E. Rose, and coincided with a period of increasing Nepalese nationalism and suspicion of India's intentions (Kharel, 2024). Both countries have since held multiple rounds of negotiations, including a prime ministerial-level agreement in 2000 to demarcate outstanding areas by 2002, but the dispute remains unresolved (Ghimire, 2024). In the 1980s, a Joint Technical Level Boundary Working Group was established to delineate the boundary, successfully demarcating all but the Kalapani and Susta areas. The significance of Kalapani is heightened by its proximity to the Lipulekh Pass, a vital route for the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra and a major strategic corridor to Tibet (Rai, 2023). In May 2020, India inaugurated a new road to Lipulekh, sparking protests from Nepal, which claimed the move violated prior understandings to resolve boundary issues through negotiation (Bhattarai, 2021). India, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the NDA government, reaffirmed its commitment to dialogue but maintained that the road followed a pre-existing route and was within Indian Territory (Gupta, 2021).

Geopolitically, Kalapani is crucial for India as it provides a vantage point to monitor Chinese activities in Tibet and secures a sensitive frontier. For Nepal, the issue is tied to sovereignty, national identity, and balancing relations between India and China (Timalsina, 2023). The dispute has also been influenced by Nepal's shifting foreign policy, especially under leaders like K P Oli, who have sought closer ties with China to counterbalance Indian influence (Bista, 2023). The Kalapani region thus remains a flashpoint, reflecting the complex interplay of history, geography, and strategic interests among India, Nepal, and China (Sharma, 2024).

Domestic politics and nationalism shape India and Nepal's positions.

The Kalapani dispute between India and Nepal stands as a vivid example of how domestic politics and nationalism can shape foreign policy narratives and decisions (Chhetry, 2021). The region, located at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, has long been a matter of contention, but its prominence in public discourse and political maneuvering has grown significantly in the 21st century, especially as both countries have seen a rise in nationalist sentiment (Ashraf, 2022). Domestic politics in Nepal have played a central role in reigniting the Kalapani issue (Sangroula, 2021). For decades after the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli, which defined the Kali River as the boundary between British India and

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Nepal, the dispute remained largely dormant (Das, 2008). Nepal virtually ignored Kalapani from 1961 to 1997, but as political competition intensified in the late 1990s, the issue became a convenient tool for rallying nationalist sentiment and consolidating political support (Pandey, 2019). In September 1998, Nepal agreed with India to resolve all border disputes, including Kalapani, through bilateral talks, but the matter has remained unresolved despite numerous negotiations (Panda, 2022). The dispute flared up again in 2020 when Nepal, under Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, released a new political map that included Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura within Nepal's borders (Baral, 2021). The move was widely seen as an attempt to mobilize public opinion and distract from internal political crises, including challenges to Oli's leadership and criticism of his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (Raju, 2020).

Nationalism in Nepal has been further institutionalized through the inclusion of the disputed territories in school textbooks and even currency notes, embedding the narrative of territorial loss and the need for reclamation among the youth and general public (Kumar, A., 2021). The government's actions have often been accompanied by large-scale protests in Kathmandu and other cities, with anti-India slogans and calls for a more assertive foreign policy (Baral, 2021). These moves are also seen as a response to growing Chinese influence in Nepal, as Beijing's support offers Kathmandu an alternative to traditional reliance on India (Pandey, 2019). India's response has been shaped by its own domestic political dynamics and rising nationalism under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the NDA government (Das, 2008). The Modi administration has emphasized infrastructure development and national security, exemplified by the 2020 inauguration of a new road to Lipulekh Pass, which passes through the disputed Kalapani region (Panda, 2022). The project was presented domestically as a triumph of connectivity and defense readiness, particularly important in the context of heightened tensions with China following the Galwan Valley clash (Ashraf, 2022). The release of a new Indian political map after the revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, which included Kalapani as part of Uttarakhand, was another assertion of India's territorial claims and sovereignty (Kumar, A., 2021). The Indian government has consistently maintained that the Kalapani area has been administered as part of Pithoragarh district since the 1830s and has dismissed Nepal's claims as unilateral and not based on historical facts (Chhetry, 2021).

Nationalism and domestic politics have thus hardened positions on both sides, making compromise more difficult (Sangroula, 2021). In Nepal, the Kalapani issue has become a symbol of sovereignty and resistance to perceived Indian dominance, in India, any concession is seen as a potential sign of weakness, especially under a government that has built its image on strong leadership and territorial integrity (Raju, 2020). The dispute, therefore, remains a potent political irritant, with both governments using it to bolster their domestic standing, even as it complicates bilateral relations and opens space for external actors like China to exert influence (Baral, 2021)

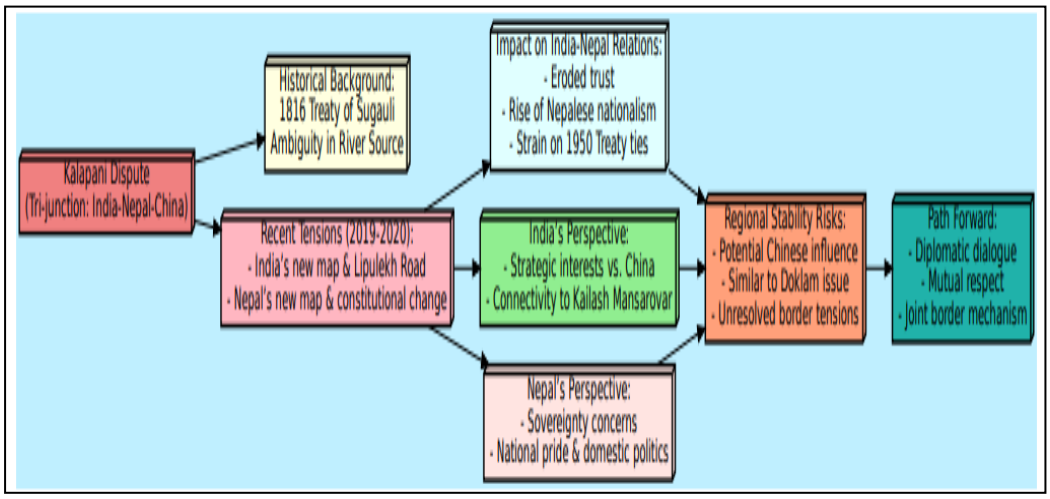
Dispute's impact on India-Nepal relations and regional stability

The Kalapani dispute, situated at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, has become a pivotal issue affecting the India-Nepal strategic partnership and regional stability in South Asia (Singh et al., 2023). The region, covering about 35 square kilometers, is not only strategically significant due to its proximity to the Lipulekh Pass and the Tibet Autonomous Region, but it also carries deep historical, political, and emotional resonance for both countries (Blank et al., 2015). The dispute has evolved into a symbol of the broader complexities in India-Nepal relations, with ramifications that extend well beyond the immediate border area (Mehsud et al., 2020). The origins of the Kalapani dispute can be traced to the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli between the Kingdom of Nepal and British India, which defined the Kali River as the boundary (Dhungel, 2009). However, ambiguity over the river's true source led to divergent interpretations: Nepal claims the river originates at Limpiyadhura, thus including Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura within its Darchula district, India asserts the river begins further south, making the region part of Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh district (Gyawali, 2009). For decades, Kalapani was not a contentious issue; Nepal largely ignored it from 1961 until the late 1990s, when it began to feature more prominently in Nepalese domestic politics (Kumar, S., 2020).

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Figure 1.3 Impact on India-Nepal relations and regional stability



The dispute resurfaced dramatically in 2019 and 2020 (Pandey, 2023). After India's revocation of Article 370 and the reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019, the Indian government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the NDA, released a new political map that included Kalapani as part of Uttarakhand (Minhas et al., 2020). Nepal objected strongly, claiming the area as its own, and in May 2020, India's inauguration of a new road to Lipulekh Pass further inflamed tensions (Raju, A. S., 2019). Nepal responded by amending its constitution and releasing a new national map that included Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura as part of its territory (Aryal, 2022). India rejected Nepal's claims, calling the map an artificial enlargement of territory and urging resolution through diplomatic dialogue (Chadda, 2022). These developments have placed considerable strain on the India-Nepal strategic partnership (Gyawali, 2021). Traditionally, India and Nepal have shared close cultural, economic, and security ties, exemplified by the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship and an open border that allows free movement of people and goods (Sridharan, 2008). However, the Kalapani dispute has eroded trust, with Nepal perceiving India's actions as unilateral and dismissive of Nepalese sovereignty (Marwah et al., 2023). The dispute has also become a potent domestic political issue in Nepal, fueling nationalist sentiment and calls for a more assertive foreign policy, particularly under leaders like Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli (Khan et al., 2021).

From India's perspective, the Kalapani region is vital for national security, providing a strategic vantage point against China and ensuring connectivity to the Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage route (Rafique, 2021). The Modi government's infrastructure push in border areas has been framed domestically as both a development initiative and a demonstration of sovereignty, especially in the wake of heightened India-China tensions (Davis, 2023). However, the assertiveness has been interpreted in Nepal as a disregard for mutual consultation and historical sensitivities, further complicating bilateral relations (Chadda, 2022). The broader impact of the Kalapani dispute extends to regional stability (Marwah et al., 2023). The unresolved border issue opens the door for external influence, particularly from China, which has expanded its engagement with Nepal in recent years (Mehsud et al., 2020). Beijing has largely remained silent on the Kalapani issue, the potential for China to exploit rifts between India and Nepal cannot be discounted (Singh et al., 2023). The dispute thus mirrors other regional flashpoints, such as the 2017 Doklam crisis, underscoring the interconnectedness of Himalayan geopolitics (Raju, A. S., 2019). Despite multiple rounds of talks since 1998 and repeated affirmations of commitment to peaceful resolution, the Kalapani dispute remains unresolved, serving as a persistent irritant in India-Nepal relations (Pandey, 2023). It highlights the challenges of managing historical legacies, nationalist politics, and strategic interests in a rapidly evolving regional context (Aryal, 2022). For the India-Nepal partnership to regain its traditional warmth and for regional stability to be

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preserved, both sides will need to demonstrate political will, mutual respect, and a readiness to engage in genuine dialogue (Dhungel, 2009).

Effectiveness of diplomatic and institutional conflict management

The Kalapani dispute between India and Nepal is a long-standing border issue that has tested the effectiveness of diplomatic and institutional mechanisms in both countries (Chhetry, 2021). The region, a 35-square-kilometer area at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, has been claimed by both India and Nepal since the 19th century, with the dispute intensifying in recent decades due to shifting political priorities and rising nationalism (Kumar, A., 2021). Efforts to resolve the Kalapani dispute through diplomatic channels date back to the 1980s, when India and Nepal established the Joint Technical Level Boundary Working Group (JTLBWG) (Ashraf, 2022). The group was tasked with demarcating the entire boundary between the two nations, and by the late 1990s, it had successfully delineated all but two contentious areas: Kalapani and Susta (Das, 2008). In 1988, Nepal officially brought the Kalapani issue before India, and in 2000, during talks between Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, both sides agreed to resolve outstanding border issues, including Kalapani, by 2002 (Baral, 2021). However, the foreign secretary-level mechanism set up for this purpose failed to make significant progress, and the dispute remained unresolved (Panda, 2022).

The return of the Kalapani issue to the forefront of bilateral relations occurred in the 2010s, particularly after Narendra Modi and the NDA government assumed power in India in 2014 (Pandey, 2019). Modi's first visit to Nepal as Prime Minister saw both countries agreeing to establish a boundary working group to expedite the settlement of border issues, including Kalapani and Susta (Raju, 2020). Despite the renewed commitment, progress has been slow, with periodic flare-ups—most notably after India's publication of a revised political map in November 2019 and the inauguration of a new road to Lipulekh Pass in May 2020, both of which drew strong protests from Nepal (Ranjan, 2016). Nepal's response was to amend its constitution in June 2020, incorporating a new map that included Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura as part of its territory (Kharel, 2024). The move, which received unprecedented national consensus in Nepal, has made the dispute even more difficult to resolve, as it now has constitutional backing and widespread public support (Sharma, 2024). Indian officials have criticized Nepal's unilateral cartographic assertion, arguing that it violates the bilateral understanding to resolve such issues through diplomatic dialogue and historical evidence (Bhattarai, 2021).

Despite these challenges, both countries have reiterated their commitment to resolving the dispute through established diplomatic mechanisms (Ghimire, 2024). Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli of Nepal stated in 2024 that there is a clear understanding with India to address border issues, including Kalapani, through diplomatic channels (Timalsina, 2023). The seventh meeting of the Nepal-India Joint Commission at the foreign minister level in January 2024 included discussions on the border issue, and both sides committed to completing work on the remaining sections of the border as soon as possible (Gupta, 2021). Technical work, such as the construction and restoration of border pillars and preparation of no-man's land, continues, albeit slowly (Thapa, 2024). However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is hampered by several factors. First, the inflexibility introduced by Nepal's constitutional amendment and India's firm stance on its territorial claims has limited the scope for compromise. Second, domestic politics and rising nationalism in both countries have made it politically risky for leaders to make concessions, further slowing progress. Third, the dispute is complicated by strategic considerations, given Kalapani's proximity to China and its importance for regional security. Diplomatic and institutional mechanisms such as the JTLBWG, Joint Commission meetings, and high-level bilateral talks exist and have achieved some technical progress; they have not yet been effective in resolving the Kalapani dispute. The mechanisms are constrained by political, constitutional, and strategic factors, and the issue remains a persistent irritant in India-Nepal relations. For a breakthrough to occur, both sides will need to demonstrate greater political will, flexibility, and a renewed commitment to dialogue based on historical facts and mutual respect.

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Findings of the study

1. The Kalapani dispute originates from the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli, with differing interpretations of the Kali River's source, leading to a long-standing territorial disagreement rooted in historical, legal, and cartographic ambiguities.
2. Despite multiple negotiations since 1998 and the establishment of diplomatic mechanisms like the Joint Boundary Working Group, the dispute remains unresolved due to deep-rooted historical claims, political nationalism, and strategic concerns.
3. Nepal's 2020 constitutional map claiming Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura intensified tensions, as it was backed by domestic consensus, complicating diplomatic efforts and challenging bilateral commitments to resolve border issues peacefully.
4. India considers Kalapani vital for national security, regional connectivity, and strategic dominance near China, especially given its proximity to the Lipulekh Pass, which is crucial for trade, pilgrimage routes, and regional influence.
5. The dispute is embedded in broader regional security concerns involving India, Nepal, and China, with geopolitical strategies, including China's growing influence and Nepal's balancing act, impacting regional stability and border management.
6. Domestic politics and rising nationalism in both countries influence border policies, making leaders cautious about making concessions that could be politically risky, thereby slowing conflict resolution efforts and perpetuating mistrust.
7. Existing diplomatic mechanisms, such as bilateral talks and technical committees, have achieved limited progress, primarily technical rather than resolving the core territorial disagreements caused by strategic and political barriers.
8. The dispute strains the historically friendly India-Nepal relationship, challenging the trust-building efforts essential for economic cooperation, cultural ties, and regional integration, especially amidst rising geopolitical competition in South Asia.
9. External influences, especially China's expanding engagement with Nepal, heighten strategic competition, with potential implications for regional stability, thereby making the Kalapani issue a critical flashpoint in Himalayan geopolitics.

Recommendations

1. India and Nepal should establish a new high-level, time-bound Joint Boundary Resolution Committee, co-chaired by senior diplomats from both sides and including technical experts and military representatives. This committee should be mandated to review all available historical documents, maps, and administrative records, and submit biannual progress reports to both governments.
2. Both countries should commission a team of independent historians, geographers, and legal experts to collaboratively examine archival records, British-era maps, and local testimonies. This transparent, evidence-based approach will help build mutual trust and ensure that claims are grounded in verifiable facts.
3. India and Nepal should commit to holding regular Foreign Secretary-level talks and Joint Commission meetings focused specifically on the Kalapani dispute, with clear agendas and follow-up mechanisms. These meetings should be insulated from short-term political pressures, ensuring continuity regardless of changes in government.
4. Encourage cross-border cultural, educational, and community exchanges in the Kalapani region and adjacent areas. Highlighting shared heritage and people-to-people ties will reduce mistrust and foster a sense of joint stewardship over the borderlands.

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5. Create a joint task force comprising security, customs, and local administrative officials to manage day-to-day issues in the disputed region. This body can address local grievances, prevent incidents, and ensure that the border remains peaceful and open for legitimate movement.
6. Both countries should agree to refrain from unilateral actions—such as infrastructure development, deployment of additional security forces, or changes to official maps—until a mutually acceptable resolution is reached. Public commitments to CBMs will signal sincerity and help de-escalate tensions.
7. If bilateral mechanisms fail to yield results, India and Nepal should consider third-party mediation or arbitration through international bodies such as the United Nations or the International Court of Justice, provided both parties consent. The successful resolution of the India-Bangladesh maritime dispute through the Permanent Court of Arbitration sets a useful precedent.
8. Recognize the shifting nature of Himalayan Rivers and the environmental fragility of the region in boundary negotiations. Jointly develop protocols for sustainable management of shared water resources and disaster response, ensuring that ecological factors are not overlooked.
9. Explore the creation of a special economic zone or joint infrastructure projects—such as roads, electricity, and tourism facilities—in the Kalapani region. Shared economic benefits can transform the border from a source of conflict into a platform for cooperation and prosperity.
10. Both governments should promote responsible, non-inflammatory media coverage of the dispute. Joint guidelines and media workshops can help prevent sensationalism, reduce misinformation, and promote balanced narratives that support peaceful resolution.

Contribution of the Study

Kalapani dispute is through a comprehensive and mutually respectful dialogue that considers historical facts, legal interpretations, and strategic interests. The study contributes by providing an in-depth analysis of the origins, developments, and current dynamics of the conflict, highlighting its significance for regional security and bilateral relations. It emphasizes the importance of understanding domestic politics and nationalism's role in shaping the dispute, demonstrating how political narratives influence diplomatic efforts. The research evaluates existing mechanisms for conflict resolution, identifying their strengths and limitations, and offers actionable policy recommendations to foster trust and cooperation. By integrating historical, legal, geopolitical, and political perspectives, the study seeks to create a strategic framework that supports sustainable resolution, enhances regional stability, and strengthens the India-Nepal partnership in the 21st century. Its insights aim to guide policymakers towards pragmatic solutions that address core issues, promoting peace and mutual respect.

CONCLUSION

The Kalapani dispute reflects a complex interplay of historical ambiguities, strategic geopolitical interests, and domestic political sentiments that have prolonged and intensified the conflict over decades. Rooted in contested interpretations of the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli and differing claims regarding the origin of the Kali River, the dispute highlights how historical agreements can become flashpoints for modern expressions of nationalism and assertions of sovereignty. Both India and Nepal regard the region as crucial to their strategic interests—India due to its proximity to China and key trade routes such as the Lipulekh Pass, and Nepal as a core part of its territorial integrity and national identity. This makes diplomatic resolution difficult amid rising nationalist sentiments in both nations. The political dynamics within each country further complicate the issue: in Nepal, nationalist leaders have leveraged the dispute to rally public support and assert independence in the face of both Indian and Chinese influence; in India, strong leadership and the defense of territorial integrity remain dominant political narratives, limiting flexibility in negotiations. Moreover, external strategic factors are significant, as the region lies at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, making it a critical vantage

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point for regional security—particularly given India's concerns over China's expanding presence in South Asia.

Despite multiple negotiations and mechanisms like joint technical committees, progress remains slow and hindered by inflexibility, domestic political risks, and strategic calculations. The dispute has emerged as more than a territorial disagreement; it reflects broader regional dynamics, including shifting alliances and regional power plays. As nationalist narratives strengthen on both sides—exacerbated by recent constitutional amendments, cartographic assertions, and public protests—the challenge lies in fostering trust and dialogue rooted in historical facts and mutual respect. Therefore, resolving the Kalapani dispute demands a comprehensive approach that balances legal, historical, and strategic realities, promotes diplomatic flexibility, and recognizes the importance of regional stability. Only through sustained, genuine dialogue—anchored in mutual understanding and strategic accommodation—can both India and Nepal hope to transform the long-standing conflict into an opportunity for strengthening their strategic partnership and regional peace in the 21st century.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The research is conducted independently without any financial or personal influence, ensuring an unbiased analysis and integrity in presenting the findings related to the Kalapani issue as a test of India–Nepal strategic partnership in the 21st century.

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