

Rivers, geostrategy and the state sovereignty: Understanding the Kalapani dispute and its geopolitical implications for India and Nepal

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Abstract

The Kalapani dispute, stemming from competing territorial assertions by India and Nepal, highlights the complex relationship among rivers, geostrategy, and national sovereignty. The Kalapani region, located at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, possesses considerable strategic importance because to its closeness to essential Himalayan passes and water supplies, notably the Kali River, which is crucial in delineating the boundary. This conflict underscores the intricacies of deciphering colonial-era treaties, geographical uncertainties, and evolving geopolitical agendas. Nepal claims its sovereignty through historical accords, whereas India highlights critical necessities related to national security and regional stability. The conflict has strained bilateral relations, affecting diplomatic, economic, and cultural interactions between the two countries. Comprehending the Kalapani issue necessitates an analysis of its geopolitical foundations, the strategic importance of trans-boundary rivers, and the influence of water diplomacy on state sovereignty. This study examines these factors, providing insights into the broader regional geopolitics of South Asia.

Introduction

Rivers are vital strategic assets, influencing geopolitical relations, economic development, and environmental sustainability. In South Asia also the member states often vie for water resources and hydroelectric power interests. Rivers are vital for agriculture, energy generation, and urban sustenance, with nearly half its population relying on them. Major river systems such as the Indus and Ganges-Brahmaputra span multiple countries, creating interdependencies among nations like India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and China. Hydropower projects along these rivers are increasingly being developed, but this can lead to disputes if not managed collaboratively. Effective management of river systems is essential to mitigate climate change effects and ensure sustainable water supply (Afzal et.al 2004). Control over water resources is viewed through the lens of national security. China's actions over the multi-state rivers like Brahmaputra cause great concern for countries farther downstream like Bangladesh and India. Rivers also support diverse ecosystems and agricultural practices, requiring protection for human populations and biodiversity.

The Danube River dispute, involving Hungary and Slovakia, is a significant international water dispute that has led to a legal case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1993. The dispute arose over Slovakia's construction of dams, which Hungary claimed would harm its ecological interests. The Rhine River Pollution case, shared by France, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, has focused on pollution control. In 2004, the ICJ ruled that France must compensate for excess pollution discharged into the Rhine (Salman, 2006).

In America, the Colorado River dispute involving Arizona and California over water rights has led to potential resolutions favouring Arizona while imposing substantial costs on California to secure its water supply (Van Alstyne, 1960). The Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint (ACF) River dispute involves Georgia, Alabama, and Florida over water usage from the ACF River system (Bryan, 2008). The Klamath River dispute involves California and Oregon over water rights affecting agricultural irrigation and fishery conservation.

Inter-state river disputes in Europe and America illustrate complex interactions among legal frameworks, environmental concerns, and competing resource needs. These conflicts often require legal adjudication or cooperative management strategies to ensure sustainable use of shared water resources. Disputes over navigation rights, pollution, and water management have underscored the challenges of sharing a vital resource among nations with differing priorities.

Rivers have historically played a crucial role in shaping natural boundaries and often become flashpoints in geopolitical conflicts. In recent decades, India and Nepal have also diverged on certain territorial and river issues. The prominent issue that affects their poetical relations is about Kalapani or Mahakali or Kali River. Kali River exemplifies this phenomenon, as its course determines the territorial limits between India and Nepal. A notable example in the South Asian context is the Brahmaputra River, which flows through China, India, and Bangladesh. The river has been a source of disputes due to concerns over water sharing, dam construction, and its strategic importance for agriculture and energy production (Giordano & Wahal, 2022; Barua, 2017).

The Kalapani region, located at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, occupies a geographically and strategically critical position in the Himalayan terrain. It lies in the northwestern part of Nepal's Darchula District and India's Pithoragarh District in Uttarakhand (Nayak, 2020). This high-altitude region is not only important for its proximity to the Lipulekh Pass—a vital trade and military route to the Tibetan Plateau (Muni, 2020) but also for being the source of the Kali River, a key natural boundary between India and Nepal. The region's geopolitical significance extends beyond its physical location, as it intersects the interests of India, Nepal, and China, making it a focal point of territorial disputes and diplomatic engagements.

In contemporary geopolitics, the Kalapani dispute holds significant implications. For Nepal, the issue is intrinsically linked to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. For India, the region is of strategic value due to its proximity to the Chinese border, acting as a buffer zone in a region of heightened security concerns. The dispute is further complicated by the Lipulekh Pass, which has become a focal point in India-China relations due to its importance for trade and military logistics. In addition, the dispute underscores broader themes of water security, border management, and regional diplomacy. The role of rivers as both natural boundaries and vital resources adds complexity to the Indo-Nepalese relationship, making the Kalapani region a key area of interest in South Asian geopolitics. The current paper examines the Kalapani river dispute between India and Nepal and its larger geostrategic implications for South Asia in general and the two states in particular. It also explores how the increased Chinese presence in the Indian subcontinent and its BRI project have also furthered the divergence between India and Nepal in recent years and created more security implications for India.

Rivers as natural boundaries in geopolitical disputes

Rivers have historically served as natural boundaries due to their clear geographic demarcation and strategic importance. Scholars like Prescott and Triggs (2008) have examined the role of rivers in shaping international borders, arguing that while rivers provide visually and practically convenient boundaries, their dynamic nature often leads to disputes. Changes in river courses, sedimentation, and variations in water flow can create ambiguities in territorial demarcation, resulting in overlapping claims and geopolitical tensions. Similarly, Paul Horgan's *The Great River: The Rio Grande in North American History* is a compelling and richly detailed exploration of the Rio Grande's role in shaping the history, culture, and geopolitics of North America. Through meticulous research and evocative prose, Horgan traces the river's journey from a vital resource for indigenous peoples to a contested border between the United States and Mexico. He examines the river's influence on trade, migration, conflict, and identity, offering a nuanced perspective on the complex relationship between the two nations. In *Hydropolitics in the Third World: Conflict and Cooperation in International River Basins*, A. P. Elhance also explores the complex dynamics of water resources in trans-boundary river basins. He examines the geopolitical tensions and opportunities for cooperation among countries sharing rivers, focusing on developing nations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Elhance discusses the challenges posed by competing demands for water, including political, economic, and environmental concerns. Through case studies, the book illustrates both the potential for conflict and the avenues for diplomatic collaboration, highlighting the role of water in shaping international relations and regional stability.

The Indus Waters Treaty, signed on September 19, 1960, between India and Pakistan, serves as a key example of a river dispute involving boundaries and resource-sharing. It was with the mediation of the World Bank that the treaty provided India rights over the eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej) and Pakistan rights to the western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab) (PIB, 2019, February 22). While often regarded as one of the most successful international treaties, it has survived frequent tensions, including conflicts, and has provided a framework for irrigation and hydropower development for more than half a century. Former U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower described it as "one bright spot ... in a very depressing world picture that we see so often" (World Bank Group, 2018, June 11). However, India's hydropower projects on the western rivers have kept tensions alive, particularly after May 2005, when India began constructing the Baglihar Dam on the Chenab River (Miner et al., 2009). This underscores how even treaty-defined river boundaries can remain sources of friction. The Nile River dispute further illustrates the complexities of shared water resources. Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia have historically contested control over the Nile, with Egypt asserting its historical rights based on colonial-era agreements (United Nations, 2021, July 8). The development of Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in 2011 has exacerbated tensions, since Egypt perceives it as a danger to its water security. The Nile case underscores how the upstream-downstream dynamic complicates relations between riparian nations, making cooperative management challenging.

The roots of Kalapani dispute between India and Nepal could be traced back to the Treaty of Sugauli (1815), signed between the British East India Company and the Kingdom of Nepal, following the Anglo-Nepalese War (Muni, 2015). The treaty established Kali River as the western boundary of Nepal. However, the lack of clarity regarding the river's precise origin has led to conflicting overlapping territorial claims. Nepal argues that the river originates at Limpiyadhura, northwest of Kalapani, and therefore claims Kalapani, Limpiyadhura, and Lipulekh as part of its territory. India, on the other hand, contends that the river's source is near Kalapani itself, asserting its jurisdiction over the region (Muni, 2020, May 22). This cartographic ambiguity, compounded by the absence of detailed surveys during the treaty's formulation, has fueled a longstanding border dispute that continues to strain Indo-Nepalese relations.

The Kalapani dispute between India and Nepal reflects similar issues of ambiguity and strategic interest centered on the Kali River (Mahakali). India asserts that the Kalapani River originates from springs located below the Lipulekh Pass, which places it within the territory of Uttarakhand. Indian officials reference administrative records dating back to the 1830s, which show that the Kalapani area has been traditionally administered as part of the Pithoragarh district. Nepal claims, Lipugad, a small

spring to the west of Kali river as part of Kali River which India protests based on records. Official sources in India claim that the administrative and revenue records dating back to 1830s (available with the UP state government), show that Kalapani area has traditionally been administered as part of Pithoragarh district. A State Police post was established by the state government at the now disputed site in 1956 and operated from here till 1979. Since 1979, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) have been manning a post for surveillance over the area, which is on the tri-junction of the international boundaries of India, Nepal and the autonomous region of Tibet in China (Gupta, 2001). However, the lack of precise geographical data during the 19th century has prolonged the disagreement. This case exemplifies how uncertainties in river demarcation can exacerbate boundary disputes and strain bilateral relations.

Sovereignty and water resources in international relations

Sovereignty in international relations refers to the authority of a state to govern its territory without external interference (Storey, 2015). States often assert their sovereignty over water resources and rivers, as these are vital for their economic, environmental, and strategic security. Control over rivers and their tributaries can be a tool for asserting territorial claims, as water is essential for agriculture, industry, and energy production. States often use watercourses to solidify territorial boundaries and manage access to resources (Barua, et al., 2017; Dellapenna, 1994). States have the authority to govern and administer natural resources inside their boundaries under the Permanent Sovereignty over Natural Resources theory, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1962 (United Nations, 1962). Disputes over rivers, such as the one involving China, India, and Bangladesh on the Brahmaputra, and India and Pakistan on Jhelum and India and Nepal on Kali illustrate the significance of rivers in establishing or challenging the territorial claims and state sovereignties. In addition to providing resources, they provide considerable importance for these nations. They impact human livelihoods, regional stability, and national security of the concerned states.

Hydro-politics and India-Nepal relations

Closely knitted with river disputes are the consequent disputes over hydroelectric projects, floods and water overflows during the rains and irrigation systems. "The impacts of new dams and diversions are felt across borders, and the development of new water infrastructure can increase political tensions in transboundary river basins. International water treaties and river basin organizations serve as a framework to potentially deescalate hydro-political tensions across borders" (Petersen-Perlman et al 2017). The vulnerability of transboundary water sources, particularly river systems, in geopolitics and foreign policy emphasizes the urgency for a new type of diplomacy to prevent conflict, foster cooperation over shared water sources, and solve water disputes (Keskinen, et al. 2021). The various hydroelectric approaches seek to address the constraints posed by political imperatives and varying contexts on trans-boundary water relations, aiming to promote the resolution of disputes over shared water resources.

In the context of India-Nepal relations, conflicts over trans-boundary rivers often stem from power imbalances among riparian states, where a more influential state exerts its authority over others. The hydro tensions surrounding the sharing of water from rivers like the Kosi, Gandaki, and Mahakali between India and Nepal exemplify this dynamic. These disputes highlight the complexities of managing shared resources amidst differing national priorities and asymmetrical power relations (Bagale & Adhikari, 2020, p. 659). Disputes have emerged when Nepal has sought to assert greater control over its water resources or entered into agreements with third-party nations, such as China. For instance, the Upper Tamakoshi Hydroelectric Project, a 456-megawatt initiative, was recently completed and became fully operational, showcasing Nepal's efforts to collaborate with external partners to harness its hydropower potential, a move that has occasionally raised concerns in India about regional water dynamics and strategic alignments (Global Times, 2022). This intertwines sovereignty claims, environmental concerns, and regional power dynamics, with India seeking to maintain control over trans-boundary water sources while managing Nepal's development and cooperation with China in hydroelectric projects.

Geostrategic importance of the Kalapani region

Kalapani holds significant importance for India's national security, particularly concerning its northern borders (Shukla, 2006). The region is strategically pivotal due to its location at the tri-junction between India, China, and Nepal. Situated in Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh district, Kalapani's proximity to both Nepal and China underscores its critical role in the geopolitical landscape (Nayak, 2020). The area has been a point of contention between India and Nepal, with disputes intensifying after the release of revised political maps by India in November 2019 and Nepal in 2020. Nepal subsequently amended its Constitution to incorporate a new political map that included Kalapani and Lipulekh as part of its territory (Mohan, 2020, June 13).

Control over Kalapani has broader strategic implications, particularly given its proximity to the Sino-Indian border and the tri-junction point, which serves as a critical node in regional security dynamics (Muni, 2020, May 22). Tensions escalated further following India's inauguration of a new road to Kailash Mansarovar via Lipulekh, which Nepal opposed. In response, Nepal's Armed Police Force (APF) established a new post near the disputed area, a move that India viewed as provocative. This development prompted Indian Army Chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane to comment that Nepal's actions appeared to be influenced by "someone else" (implicitly referring to China) in the context of the Lipulekh issue (Thakur, 2020). The interplay of strategic interests, regional security concerns, and national sovereignty claims continues to make Kalapani a focal point in Indo-Nepalese relations, with implications for broader geopolitical stability in the Himalayan region.

From a security standpoint, Kalapani is vital for India's defense strategy, offering a vantage point to monitor Chinese military activities along Nepal's border with Tibet (Bhattarai, 2022, p. 5), SS Pangti, retired bureaucrat and an expert on India-Nepal border affairs said that it is crucial for India to maintain control at Kalapani in a bid to keep an eye on the activities across the border (Pangti as quoted in Trivedi, 2017, August 9). The Indian military presence in Kalapani acts as a buffer against potential

people's Liberation Army (PLA) incursions. Moreover, the region 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). In case of India Lipulekh Pass is of great geostrategic importance since it provides access to nearby Chinese settlements. A Chinese township located in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR),¹ Taklakot can be reached using this route, which is both the quickest and most easier option.

Just like the border townships in Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh the residents of the valley traded food grains (gur, barley, wheat, rice, etc.) with Tibetan traders at the big mandi in Taklakot, Purang, and other Tibetan market towns from June to November until the 1962 India-China War. They also traded carpets, sheep, ponies, and mules, silver goods, musk, Tibetan tea, and Thangkas² (Rae, 2021, pp. 108-109). The Pass, having a 6,180-meter-high elevation, provides India a strategic access, bolstering its geo-economic security and military superiority adjacent to the Chinese border. The contested area is of paramount significance for India, providing New Delhi with a strategic advantage grounded in the historical backdrop of the 1962 border conflict with China (See Chaudhary, 2015). Since the mid-1950s, India has stationed troops in the Lipulekh and Kalapani regions to bolster its military preparedness against potential Chinese aggression through the Himalayan region. This strategic deployment has gained greater significance in recent years, particularly given China's plans to extend the Qinghai-Tibet railway³ to Nepal's borders through the mountainous terrain (Bhattarai, 2022, p. 78).

Nepal as a buffer and the geostrategic competition between India and China

As a buffer state between India and China since the time of British India and now post-independence India, Nepal holds a precarious position in the wider geostrategic rivalry between China and India. Since the Himalayan kingdoms were indispensable to India from national security point of view, the changed status of Tibet significantly increased its strategic significance as a buffer state in the context of Indian geopolitical considerations. The forced occupation of Tibet by China increased Indian concerns. It not only marked the increasing Chinese presence in the region but also challenged the pivotal position of India in the subcontinent. The Chinese claims over the undefined or unsettled borders to the south of Tibet over the Indian territories, as they had passed to independent India as a legacy, further complicated the things. Mao's assertion of "Tibet as a palm and Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and NEFA as its five fingers"⁴ belonging to China placed the two large neighbours into a permanent state of conflict. Therefore, it not only challenged the Indian objective to prevent any outside entity from establishing a presence in South Asia but pushed the region into a permanent state of tension.

India and Nepal share a long history of common culture and customs and have been associated with each other for a long time. This socio-cultural convergence is also represented in the idea of "soft border," which permits the unfettered movement of both people and things with little limits (Tripathi, 2019, p. 187). Because India is the source of almost all of Nepal's raw material, foodgrain, medicine, oil, technology and fabric supplies, India is Nepal's most important commercial partner. The vast majority of Nepal's international investments and trade in goods and services are handled by India. India is also one of the largest trade partners of Nepal. Nepal is also greatly dependent on India for transportation, remittances, and development funding, particularly in vital areas such as health, education, and connectivity.

In recent years, China has intensified its engagement with Nepal to counter the influence of India and Western countries, leveraging infrastructure projects, trade agreements, and investments as key tools (Nayak, 2014, p. 176). Chinese investments in Nepal have primarily focused on infrastructure, including roads, railways, and energy sectors. A significant example is the proposed development of the Trans-Himalayan railway, which could provide Nepal with opportunities to gradually reduce its reliance on India (Murton & Lord, 2020; Bhattarai, 2022, p. 102). In 2017, Nepal joined the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the shared goal of achieving middle-income status by 2030. Further cementing these ties, Nepal has accepted Chinese investment in key projects, such as the development of the Lumbini and Pokhara airports, underscoring China's emerging role as a significant investment partner (Singh & Shah, 2016, pp. 58-59).

Additionally, on September 7, 2018, the Protocol of Transit Transport Agreement with China was finalized, completing Nepal's attempts to secure an alternate transit route. In order to facilitate trade with third countries and lessen Nepal's reliance on India, China legally agreed to grant Nepal access to seven transit locations under this agreement: three land ports (Lanzhou, Lhasa, Xigatse) and four seaports (Tianjin, Shenzhen, Lianyungang, Zhanjiang) (Nayak, 2018, September 27). It reflects a shift in its foreign policy towards balancing relations between its two powerful neighbours (Singh & Shah, 2016). China's growing ability and readiness to expand its influence in the region, coupled with India's resistance to significant external involvement in Nepal, have created a competitive dynamic in this buffer state. China has increasingly employed material resources to court Nepal, aiming to ensure stability in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), while India, under the BJP-led government, has also taken proactive steps to secure its strategic position in Nepal (Chand, 2016, p. 108). This shift complicates India's security and strategic interests, as it sees Nepal's tilt toward China as a challenge to its influence in South Asian region. New Delhi is already concerned about losing its conventional area of influence as a result of Kathmandu's support for Beijing's extraordinary participation in Nepal (Bhattarai, 2022, p. 62).

The new political maps of India and Nepal and the rising tension

The Kalapani region, situated at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, possesses significant strategic and military importance for India. From a security standpoint, Kalapani holds significant strategic position for India's defense, serving as a vantage point to monitor Chinese military activities along Nepal's border with Tibet (Bhattarai, 2022, p. 5). This has become increasingly important in the light of recent tensions along the Sino-Indian border, particularly the Doklam incident in June 2017 and the deadly combat at Galwan Valley in June 2020, which resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and at least four Chinese military leaders. During the standoff, Wang Wenli, the Deputy Director General of the Boundary and Ocean Affairs

Department of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reportedly posed a question to an Indian media delegation in Beijing, asking, "What New Delhi would do if China enters the Kalapani region". This statement attracted the attention of Nepali foreign policy experts and security analysts, who speculated that Kalapani could emerge as a new Doklam (Bhattarai, 2022, p. 13).

Additionally, the Lipulekh Pass is strategically important for India since it facilitates easy travel for pilgrims to Kailash Mansarovar in Tibet and serves as a vital transit point for troops and supplies to the northwest section of the Indo-Tibetan border (Muni, 2020). Lipulekh has historically been a key route for Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims, as well as tourists, traveling to Kailash Mansarovar. Among the numerous Himalayan passes linking the Gangetic plains with the Tibetan plateau, Lipulekh holds strategic importance due to its proximity to India's core regions, including the National Capital Region. This location makes it particularly significant in the context of potential armed conflict with China. (Bhattacharjee, 2020).

The strategic significance of Himalayan passes connecting to the Tibetan plateau became evident during the 1962 war. In that conflict, Chinese forces utilized the Se La pass in Tawang to advance into the Brahmaputra plains in the east. The military setback in the eastern sector exposed the vulnerability of inadequately defended passes, highlighting a critical weakness in India's military preparedness against China. Unlike the relatively fortified Se La, Lipulekh was even more exposed and defenseless (Bhattacharjee, 2020). The strategic importance of Kalapani and Lipulekh is underscored by the Doklam standoff 2017 and the Galwan Valley clashes of June 2020, which heightened India's security concerns (Bhattarai, 2022). For Nepal, the growing Sino-Indian competition raises fears of being entangled in broader geopolitical conflicts.

In November 2019, India's release of a new political map, which included the disputed Kalapani region within its borders, provoked a diplomatic protest from Nepal (The Kathmandu Post, 2019). This unilateral action heightened existing tensions between the two nations, as both assert claims over Kalapani. Nepal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed concern, emphasizing that such moves could adversely impact bilateral relations (Budhathoki, 2019). The inclusion of Kalapani in India's map ignited strong nationalistic sentiments in Nepal, leading to widespread public protests and an upsurge in anti-India rhetoric, which strained historically close ties between the neighbours.

For Nepal, Kalapani holds both symbolic and territorial significance, integral to its sovereignty. This sentiment culminated in the release of Nepal's own revised political map on May 20, 2020, which incorporated Kalapani into its territory. The map received Presidential assent on June 18, 2020, reflecting the nation's assertion of territorial integrity and national pride (Rae, 2021, p. 105). The Mahakali River, flowing through this contested region, is vital for local communities, providing water for irrigation and other essential activities. The river's significance dates back to 1928, when the British constructed the Sarada Barrage near Banbasa, enabling India to irrigate land in Uttar Pradesh using its waters (Jha, 2013, p. 225). Furthermore, the river powers the Lohia Power House, generating approximately 41 megawatts of electricity for India (Bagale & Adhikar, 2020). Nepal, however, derives limited benefits, such as 460 cusecs of water granted in return for permitting the British to construct the barrage (Jha, 2013, p. 225). Consequently, Nepal's claims to Kalapani extend beyond territorial concerns, encompassing water rights and regional security. Any assertion of authority over this region directly impacts Nepal's access to critical resources and its sense of sovereignty.

The Kalapani dispute has emerged as a symbol of national pride and question sovereignty for both India and Nepal. Nepal's claim to the region is rooted in the Article 5 of the Treaty of Sugauli (1815). This reads:

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 there of (Rae, 2021, p. 107).

Thus, in the far west of Nepal, the Kali River effectively served as the border between India and Nepal, with Indian territory to the west and Nepalese territory to the east (Rae, 2021, p. 107). While India acknowledges this position, its claim stems from ambiguities in the treaty regarding the Kali River's identification and source. India asserts that the river originates from Lipulekh, subsequently merging with other streams to form the Mahakali. Conversely, Nepal argues that the Kali River originates from Limpiyadhura, with the stream from Lipulekh being called Lipu Khola. This discrepancy leads to the dispute, with the contested area between these two streams known as Kalapani (Muni, 2020, May 22; Koirala, 2020).

For Nepal, the Kalapani dispute has emerged as a significant issue tied to national pride and identity. Political leaders, academics, and the media in Nepal frequently characterize India's presence in Kalapani as an infringement on Nepal's sovereignty and an instance of border encroachment. This issue has rekindled memories of Nepal's defeat in the Anglo-Nepal War, which led to the relinquishment of a significant section of its land to British India. Historical issues have exacerbated anti-India sentiments among specific groups of the Nepalese populace. The issuance of a new map by Nepal in 2020, showing Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura as part of its territory (Rae, 2021; Mohan, 2020), was not only a legal assertion but also a symbolic act of reclaiming sovereignty. The move was celebrated domestically as a reflection of Nepal's resolve to defend its territorial integrity.

India, on the other hand, sees its control over Kalapani as essential for maintaining territorial and national security, particularly in relation to its northern borders (Shukla, 2006). Historical narratives in India emphasize the significance of the region for safeguarding its Himalayan frontier. The Indian government has rejected Nepal's new map and official spokesperson Mr. Anurag Srivastava asserting that;

The Government of Nepal has released a revised official map of Nepal today that includes parts of Indian territory. This unilateral act is not based on historical facts and evidence. It is contrary to the bilateral understanding to resolve the outstanding boundary issues through diplomatic dialogue. Such artificial enlargement of territorial claims will not be accepted

by India. Nepal is well aware of India's consistent position on this matter and we urge the Government of Nepal to refrain from such unjustified cartographic assertion and respect India's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We hope that the Nepalese leadership will create a positive atmosphere for diplomatic dialogue to resolve the outstanding boundary issues (Srivastava cited in MEA, 2020).

Political narratives and media portrayals in both countries have played a significant role in shaping public perceptions (Aryal & Bharti, 2022). In India, the dispute is often downplayed as a minor border disagreement, though its military importance is acknowledged. These contrasting narratives have contributed to a hardening of positions, reducing the scope for bilateral resolution (Nayak, 2020; Xavier, 2020).

Diplomatic implications for India-Nepal Relations

The Kalapani dispute has profoundly impacted the bilateral relationship of the two states. After the 2020 map of Nepal there has been a nadir in bilateral relations eliciting sharp reactions from both nations. Nepal's move followed India's inauguration of a new road to Lipulekh, which Kathmandu perceived as an infringement on its territorial sovereignty (Rae, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2020). This episode has deepened mutual distrust, with Nepal increasingly challenging India's perceived "big brother" approach. Criticism has centred on India's publication of a new political map after the reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir and its construction of a road connecting to the China border in 2020, actions that Nepal viewed as unilateral and dismissive of its concerns (Kumar, 2021, p. 97). Conversely, India has attributed Nepal's actions to domestic political pressures and external influences, particularly from China.

Domestically, Nepal's then-Prime Minister, Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, faced widespread criticism for his governance. His administration's ineffective response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying economic challenges drew significant public and political dissatisfaction. Oli's leadership style, often perceived as autocratic, exacerbated tensions within his government. His failure to consult with other leaders, including his co-chair Prachanda, and his violation of prior agreements further undermined his position. Additionally, Oli's unsuccessful legislative attempt to facilitate the division of political parties fueled further discord (Rae, 2021, p. 123). These domestic challenges are widely seen as contributing to Nepal's assertive stance in the Kalapani dispute, with the issue serving as a rallying point for nationalism and political consolidation. Nepal's decision to unveil a new map in 2020, following India's consistent disregard for Kathmandu's calls to resolve border disputes through diplomatic dialogue, was perceived by Indian defense officials, security analysts, and media as being influenced by external pressure, particularly from China (Bhattarai, 2022, p. 66). Reflecting this perception, Indian Army Chief General M.M. Naravane commented:

I don't know what they are actually agitating about. There has never been any problem in this Corps in the past. There is a reason to believe that they might have raised this problem at the behest of someone else, and that is very much a possibility (Naravane, as cited in Singh, 2020).

Diplomatic initiatives to address the border dispute have yielded limited progress. During their summit on April 2, 2022, Prime Ministers Sher Bahadur Deuba of Nepal and Narendra Modi of India engaged in discussions regarding the issue, with Deuba emphasizing the need to resolve the matter through established bilateral mechanisms.

Trade relations between India and Nepal have also been indirectly affected. India remains Nepal's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade exceeding USD 11 billion in Financial Year 2022 and is a key supplier of essential goods, including nearly 100% of Nepal's petroleum needs (Embassy of India, (b), n.d.). However, border tensions have occasionally disrupted trade flows, impacting both countries' economies. The ongoing territorial dispute has also influenced defense cooperation between India and Nepal. Traditionally, the two nations have maintained strong defense ties, exemplified by the recruitment of Nepalese Gurkha soldiers into the Indian Army. This practice originated from an agreement between Kajeer Ummar Singh Thapa and Major General David Ochterlony on May 15, 1815 (Rae, 2021, p. 131). Subsequently, Gurkha recruitment into the British Army was formalized through the Treaty of 1885 between British India and Nepal (Muni, 2018, p. 19). In recent years, the recruitment of Gurkha soldiers in the Indian Army has garnered significant attention as Nepal has opposed India's Agniveer policy⁵ of recruitment and objects the recruitment of its citizens to in Indian army.

The China factor

China's expanding influence in the region has significantly impacted the Kalapani dispute, altering the bilateral dynamics between India and Nepal. In the early years of the first decade of 21st century, China's investment in Nepal was relatively limited compared to India. However, beginning in 2008, Chinese investments in Nepal experienced significant growth, surpassing India for the first time in terms of total investment in 2014. During the 2015-16 periods, China accounted for 42% of Nepal's total Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). A similar trend is evident in Chinese Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), where China surpassed Indian aid contributions in 2015. China's aid grew progressively from \$19 million in 2010-11 to \$38 million in 2014-15 (Bhatia et al., 2016).

China's proximity to the Kalapani region and its strategic interest in the Himalayan frontiers has intensified Sino-Indian competition. China's influence in Nepal is often viewed by India as a challenge to its traditional sphere of influence. Nepal's increasing ties with China provide it with greater diplomatic leverage in its dealings with India (Bhattarai, 2022, pp. 53, 62), enabling it to take a stronger stance on disputes like Kalapani. However, this strategy also raises concerns about Nepal's over-dependence on China for grants and infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which could compromise its sovereignty and risk falling into China's debt trap. As Kamal Dev Bhattarai remarks, "Nepal prefers aid or grants, but China favours loans" (Jose, 2020).

Nepal has strategically sought to balance its relations with India and China to avoid entanglement in the broader regional power dynamics between the two major powers. By maintaining equidistance, Nepal has adopted a flexible approach to fostering positive ties with both nations without compromising its independence, identity, or sovereignty (Singh & Shah, 2016, p. 53). China's expanding economic and diplomatic initiatives, particularly through investments and infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have strengthened Nepal's bargaining position, enabling it to assert its territorial claims more confidently, including those over the Kalapani region. India has viewed this shift with apprehension, especially given Nepal's growing alignment with China. This engagement aligns with Beijing's broader strategy to encircle India, raising concerns about the erosion of India's traditional sphere of influence. Nepal's delicate balancing act highlights its efforts to navigate foreign relations while leveraging opportunities provided by both neighbors.

The Kalapani dispute, located at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, exemplifies the geostrategic complexities of the region (Muni, 2020, May 22). Nepal's territorial claims over Kalapani, formalized through a constitutional amendment in 2020, were primarily directed at India but also align with efforts to secure greater support from China (Xavier, 2020). This alignment underscores the region's geostrategic importance, intersecting with China's broader ambitions and India's security concerns within South Asia (Bhattarai, 2022, p. 62). The dispute has deepened tensions between India and Nepal, complicating economic ties, cross-border security, and regional dynamics, while offering China a strategic advantage in its contest with India (Nayak, 2020, p. 1). Resolving the Kalapani dispute is critical for ensuring regional stability and reducing the potential for escalating tensions among India, Nepal, and China. A resolution grounded in innovative approaches, such as co-management or shared sovereignty, could provide a pathway to de-escalation and mutual cooperation (Xavier, 2020). Such an outcome would not only strengthen bilateral relations between India and Nepal but also contribute to maintaining peace and equilibrium in South Asia.

Conclusion

The Kalapani dispute represents a critical flashpoint in India-Nepal relations, encapsulating complex issues of sovereignty, strategic geography, and regional geopolitics. This analysis reveals that the conflict transcends mere territorial claims, encompassing historical legacies, national identity, and broader geopolitical considerations. Originating from contested interpretations of the Treaty of Sugauli (1815), the disagreement over the source of the Mahakali River has evolved into a multifaceted conflict encompassing strategic dimensions such as water security, border management, and military positioning.

The strategic importance of the Kalapani region is substantial. Located at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, the area serves as a pivotal frontier for India's northern defense infrastructure and a key point for military surveillance and control. For Nepal, asserting sovereignty over Kalapani symbolizes its commitment to safeguarding territorial integrity and national identity. The issue is further complicated by China's expanding influence in the region, as Nepal navigates the delicate balance between its historical ties with India and economic engagement with China through infrastructure projects and investments. In the broader context of South Asia's shifting power dynamics, Nepal's strategic positioning amplifies the complexities of the Kalapani dispute, intertwining it with the larger Sino-Indian competition. The diplomatic ramifications of this dispute are profound. Nepal's issuance of a new political map in 2020, incorporating Kalapani, highlighted the growing erosion of trust between the two neighbours. This unilateral action, coupled with India's earlier cartographic initiatives, has strained bilateral relations, with adverse effects on trade, border management, and defense cooperation. Moreover, the dispute underscores the intersection of hydro-politics and geopolitics, as rivers increasingly serve as both natural demarcations and instruments of sovereign assertion. Resolving the Kalapani dispute necessitates a nuanced approach informed by historical context, mutual respect, and pragmatic diplomacy. Confidence-building measures, such as joint boundary surveys, structured bilateral negotiations, and potential frameworks for co-management or shared sovereignty, could pave the way for a sustainable resolution. Such efforts would not only rebuild trust between India and Nepal but also enhance regional stability in South Asia amid rising geopolitical tensions. Furthermore, adopting a cooperative framework for managing shared resources like trans-boundary rivers could establish a foundation for long-term regional integration and sustainable diplomacy, serving as a model for addressing broader cross-border challenges in the Himalayan region.

Notes

1. The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) is a provincial-level autonomous region in the southwest of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Established in 1965, TAR encompasses much of the historical region of Tibet, known for its distinct cultural, religious, and linguistic identity. Its capital, Lhasa, is home to iconic sites like the Potala Palace and Jokhang Temple, reflecting Tibet's deep-rooted Buddhist traditions. TAR is strategically significant, sharing international borders with India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar, and serves as a vital geopolitical zone for China. The region's location near the Himalayan watershed underscores its importance for water resources, as many of Asia's major rivers originate in Tibet, including the Brahmaputra, Mekong, and Yangtze.
2. Depicting a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala, a *thangka* is a Tibetan Buddhist painting that is typically made on cotton or silk appliqué. The term 'thangka' comes from the Nepali language. Traditionally, thangkas are not framed and are rolled up when they are not being displayed. They are mounted on a textile backing that is somewhat similar to the composition of Chinese scroll paintings, and they have an additional silk cover on the front.
3. The Qinghai-Tibet Railway, also known as the Tibet Railway, is a remarkable feat of engineering and a symbol of China's infrastructural ambition. Completed in 2006, it connects Xining in Qinghai Province to Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Spanning approximately 1,956 kilometers, it includes the highest railway in the world, with parts of the track rising over 5,000 meters above sea level.

4. Mao Zedong speeches of the 1940s articulated the metaphor of Tibet as the "palm" and the surrounding regions of Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh as its "five fingers" during the early years of the PRC. This idea was rooted in his vision of consolidating China's territorial claims and extending influence across the Himalayan region, viewing Tibet as central to China's strategic control.

5. The Agniveer Policy, launched by the Government of India in 2022 as part of the Agnipath Scheme, is a revolutionary recruitment program for the Indian Armed Forces. It seeks to modernize the military by recruiting youth aged 17.5 to 21 years for a short-term contract of four years. Participants enlisted under this program are referred to as Agniveers. The initiative aims to cultivate a younger, more vibrant workforce while offering opportunity for kids to contribute to the nation. Upon conclusion of their tenure, roughly 25% of Agniveers may be integrated into regular duty contingent upon merit, while the remainder will get a cash package, the Seva Nidhi, to aid their transition into civilian life.

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