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THE KALAPANI TERRITORIAL DISPUTE: IMPLICATIONS ON INDIA-NEPAL BILATERAL RELATIONS AND REGIONAL STABILITY

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Abstract

The Kalapani territorial dispute, a long-standing yet intermittently prominent issue between India and Nepal, has in recent years re-emerged as a critical flashpoint in South Asian geopolitics. Located at the tri junction of India, Nepal, and China, the Kalapani region—encompassing Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura, and Kalapani—has become emblematic of broader questions concerning historical cartography, national identity, and regional power dynamics. This paper examines the historical roots of the dispute which can be traced back to differing interpretations of the 1816 Sugauli Treaty signed between the British East India Company and the Kingdom of Nepal. The ambiguity surrounding the origin of the Kali River, which serves as the basis for the boundary delineation, has fueled overlapping territorial claims that persist in post-colonial contexts.

The study explores how recent developments, including the publication of updated political maps by both India (2019) and Nepal (2020), have intensified nationalist sentiments and political rhetoric in both countries, straining traditionally close ties. The paper argues that while the dispute has not escalated into open conflict, it has significantly eroded diplomatic goodwill, delayed joint developmental projects, and contributed to public distrust—especially among younger demographics in Nepal. Furthermore, the dispute has broader implications for regional stability, as both countries are critical stakeholders in South Asian connectivity, trade, and hydropower cooperation.

Through an analysis of primary treaties, government statements, media narratives, and scholarly assessments, the paper highlights the underlying factors—ranging from geopolitical positioning to domestic political leverage—that sustain the impasse. The role of external actors, particularly China's strategic presence in the Himalayas, is also considered in shaping the diplomatic contours of the dispute. Ultimately, the paper contends that only through institutionalized dialogue mechanisms, historical reconciliation, and people-centric diplomacy can the Kalapani dispute be de-escalated. Such a resolution would not only restore bilateral trust but also strengthen regional frameworks for cooperation and conflict resolution in South Asia. The Kalapani case serves as a microcosm of the challenges facing territorial negotiations in postcolonial regions, where historical legacies intersect with evolving national aspirations and geopolitical realities.

Keywords: Kalapani, Sangauli, Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh, Trijunction, Cross border

1. Introduction

The Kalapani dispute is a long-standing territorial dispute between India and Nepal, centered on a 35-square-kilometer area located in the northwestern Himalayas at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China. The dispute stems from differing interpretations of the source of the Kali River, which demarcates the border between the two countries. Its origins trace back to the 1815 Treaty of Sugauli, signed between the British East India Company and the Kingdom of Nepal, which designated the Kali River as the boundary between British India and Nepal. However, ambiguities in identifying the river's precise origin have led to conflicting territorial claims. Nepal asserts that the river's source lies west of Kalapani at Limpiyadhura, making the region part of its Darchula District. Conversely, India contends that the river originates east of Kalapani, asserting its inclusion within Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh District. This dispute gained renewed prominence in 2019 when India published a political map showing Kalapani within its territory, triggering strong protests from Nepal. In response, Nepal released a revised map in 2020, incorporating Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura as part of its sovereign territory. Beyond historical and political complexities, Kalapani holds significant strategic importance. Its location near the Lipulekh Pass, a key trade route connecting India and Tibet, underscores its value for border security and regional trade.



These factors make the Kalapani dispute a contentious and critical issue in India-Nepal relations, with broader implications for regional stability in South Asia.

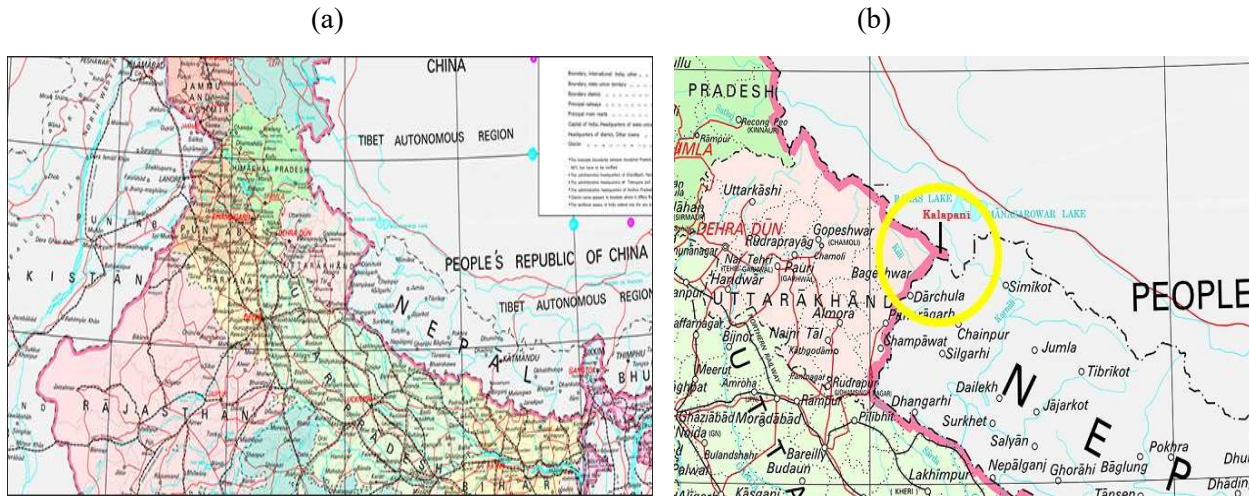


Figure1: Map (a) Presents India, Nepal and China Trijunction and (b) Represents the Kalapani highlighted in yellow circle [Source: Press Information Bureau]

The geographical importance of Kalapani adds complexity to the dispute. Strategically located at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China, the region is vital for security and trade. It serves as a key transit route to the Lipulekh Pass, which connects India and Tibet. Moreover, the region's rugged terrain and proximity to sensitive border areas make it a crucial asset in the broader geopolitical landscape of South Asia.

2. Why the Dispute Matters?

The Kalapani dispute holds significant implications for India-Nepal relations and South Asian regional stability. Historically, India and Nepal have shared strong ties rooted in cultural, economic, and political cooperation.

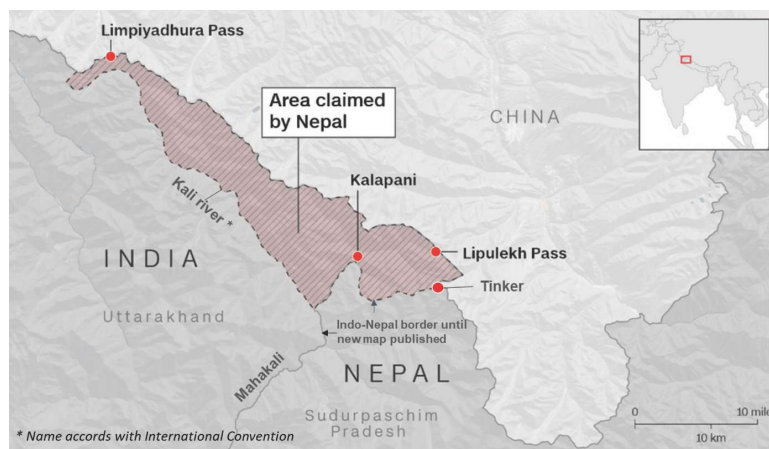


Figure 2: Map representing the disputed territory between India and Nepal

[Source: <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2020/06/04/limpiyadhura-kalapani-lipulekh-dispute>]



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However, the dispute has eroded mutual trust and strained diplomatic relations, hindering efforts to deepen collaboration. Nepal's publication of a revised map in 2020, asserting its claim over Kalapani, and India's strategic infrastructure projects in the area have exacerbated tensions. At a regional level, the dispute impacts South Asia's geopolitical balance. It provides external powers like China an opportunity to influence Nepal, potentially altering the strategic equation in the region. Furthermore, unresolved territorial conflicts like Kalapani undermine multilateral initiatives such as SAARC and BIMSTEC, hindering economic integration and regional cooperation. Addressing this dispute is essential not only for bilateral harmony but also for fostering stability and development across South Asia.

3. Literature Review: Importance of India-Nepal Relations

India and Nepal share an intricate and multifaceted relationship that is deeply rooted in history, culture, and geography. This bilateral relationship is underscored by economic interdependence, shared cultural heritage, and strategic significance, making it a critical component of South Asian geopolitics. The historical ties between India and Nepal date back centuries, with both countries sharing a common heritage of religion, culture, and open borders. Hinduism and Buddhism serve as significant cultural bridges, with sites like Lumbini in Nepal and Varanasi in India being pivotal in fostering people-to-people connections. Scholars like Singh (2017) argue that this cultural affinity creates a unique bilateral relationship unparalleled in South Asia. Furthermore, the 1950 India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship institutionalized these historical ties, allowing for mutual migration and economic engagement (Sharma, 2018). Economically, India is Nepal's largest trading partner, accounting for a significant share of its exports and imports. Indian investments in Nepal, particularly in energy and infrastructure, are critical for Nepal's development. Thapa (2020) highlights the role of joint ventures in hydropower projects, which leverage Nepal's vast water resources while addressing India's growing energy demands. Additionally, cross-border connectivity initiatives, such as railway links and integrated check-posts, are transforming trade dynamics, fostering greater economic interdependence (Pandey, 2021).

Nepal's strategic location between India and China amplifies its importance in regional geopolitics. According to Pant (2019), Nepal serves as a buffer state and plays a crucial role in maintaining the balance of power in South Asia. India's interest in Nepal is further reinforced by concerns over China's growing influence, as reflected in infrastructure investments under China's Belt and Road Initiative (Bhattarai, 2020). Scholars emphasize the need for India to strengthen its engagement with Nepal to counterbalance China's strategic advances and maintain its own influence in the region (Kumar, 2021). India-Nepal relations also play a vital role in regional cooperation frameworks such as SAARC and BIMSTEC. Both countries' participation in these multilateral platforms highlights their shared interests in regional integration and development. However, unresolved disputes like the Kalapani issue have occasionally hindered their ability to collaborate effectively within these frameworks (Rai, 2020).

Despite these strong ties, challenges such as border disputes, trade imbalances, and nationalist rhetoric have strained relations in recent years. Gupta (2022) notes that periodic blockades and political disagreements have underscored the fragility of this relationship. Nonetheless, opportunities for strengthening bilateral ties remain vast, particularly through joint development projects, enhanced people-to-people interactions, and diplomatic engagements. The India-Nepal relationship is a cornerstone of South Asian stability, encompassing historical, cultural, economic, and strategic dimensions. While challenges persist, the opportunities for collaboration far outweigh the differences. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics, as reflected in existing literature, underscores the importance of sustained efforts to enhance this bilateral relationship for mutual benefit and regional stability.

Recent studies highlight the interplay between territorial disputes, nationalism, and geopolitics. For instance, a 2023 article in *India Quarterly* examines how the Kalapani dispute has fueled nationalist narratives in Nepal, influencing its foreign policy towards India.



The Kalapani dispute has broader implications for regional stability. Unresolved border issues can hinder regional cooperation initiatives such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Moreover, the strategic significance of the area attracts interest from neighboring China, adding another layer to the geopolitical dynamics.

Additionally, a 2024 study in the *Journal of Development Review* discusses how political disputes like Kalapani exacerbate economic disparities and disrupt bilateral cooperation. The Kalapani territorial dispute remains a complex issue affecting India-Nepal bilateral relations and regional stability in South Asia. Historical ambiguities, strategic considerations, and rising nationalist sentiments contribute to the dispute's persistence. Recent scholarly works emphasize the need for diplomatic dialogue and mutual respect for sovereignty to resolve the issue and enhance regional cooperation.

4. Impact on India-Nepal Bilateral Relations:

4.1 Trust Deficit

The area of Kalapani is of strategic significance between India and Nepal as it serves as a tri-junction between India, China and Nepal. Nepal is a “buffer state” between India and Nepal and both countries are great-power aspirations of great power in the region—the Kalapani dispute has important ramifications on the relations between the three. The Kalapani territorial dispute has had profound and multifaceted effects on India-Nepal bilateral relations, disrupting historical goodwill and creating challenges across diplomatic, economic, and political domains. The dispute has amplified mistrust, undermined development cooperation, and inflamed nationalist sentiments, thereby complicating efforts to sustain and strengthen the traditionally close ties between the two nations. The dispute has significantly eroded the foundation of trust that has long underpinned India-Nepal relations. Historically, the relationship has been characterized by open borders, deep cultural ties, and mutual economic interdependence. However, the publication of India's new political map in 2019, which included Kalapani as part of Uttarakhand, followed by Nepal's issuance of a revised map in 2020 incorporating Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura, marked a turning point. These actions, viewed as unilateral assertions by both sides, fueled accusations of territorial encroachment and intensified diplomatic tensions.



Figure 3: Map representing the disputed territory claimed by Nepal
(Source: Buddhi Narayan Shrestha, ‘[Authenticity of Lipulekh border pass](#)’, June 2015)



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Nepal's constitutional amendment to legitimize its claim over the disputed territories was perceived by India as a politically motivated move, while Nepal criticized India's infrastructure development in the area as a violation of its sovereignty. These events have deepened the mistrust between the two governments, complicating diplomatic efforts to address not only the Kalapani issue but also broader areas of cooperation such as border management and regional security. The trust deficit has also had a cascading effect on people-to-people relationships, leading to increased skepticism about each other's intentions, which were historically harmonious.

4.2 Economic and Developmental Implications

The economic dimension of India-Nepal relations, which has historically been robust, has suffered due to the ongoing dispute. Cross-border trade, a vital lifeline for Nepal given its landlocked geography, has been disrupted as tensions escalate. India is one of Nepal's largest trading partners, and disputes like Kalapani create uncertainties that hinder the seamless flow of goods, services, and investment. In the give figure it is shown the volume of trade between India and Nepal for the year 2022.

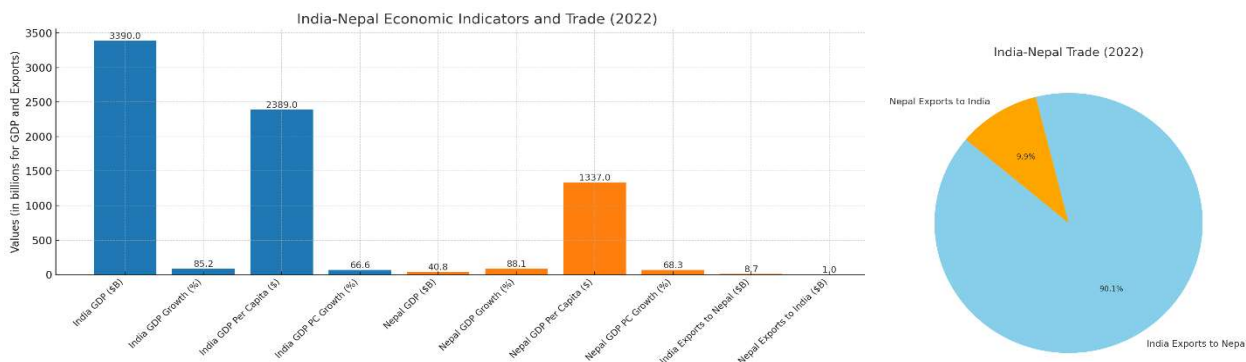


Figure 3: Graph show trade between India and Nepal in 2022
 [Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) <https://oec.world/en>]

Moreover, connectivity projects critical to regional integration, such as the BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) Motor Vehicle Agreement, have faced delays due to the deteriorating diplomatic climate. These delays undermine efforts to improve regional trade and economic linkages, depriving both nations of the economic benefits that could arise from stronger integration. Development cooperation has also been affected. Joint initiatives in hydropower development, such as projects aimed at harnessing Nepal's vast water resources for mutual benefit, have encountered setbacks. Cross-border energy trade, which could significantly contribute to Nepal's economic growth and help meet India's energy demands, has been similarly stalled. The Kalapani dispute exacerbates these challenges, as trust is a prerequisite for successful economic partnerships.

4.3 Political Ramifications

The dispute has had a profound impact on the domestic political landscapes of both countries, fueling the rise of nationalist rhetoric and influencing policy-making. In Nepal, the government's strong stance on the Kalapani issue has been leveraged to consolidate political legitimacy and rally public support. The publication of Nepal's revised map was celebrated



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domestically as a bold assertion of sovereignty, helping the ruling parties strengthen their political positions. However, this stance has also constrained Nepal's diplomatic flexibility, as any concession on Kalapani could be viewed as a betrayal of national interests. In India, the dispute has similarly become entangled with nationalist sentiments. Emphasizing territorial integrity and sovereignty, Indian political leaders have taken a firm stance, reflecting public opinion shaped by nationalistic narratives. This politicization of the dispute limits the space for diplomatic compromise, as leaders in both countries face significant domestic pressure to maintain uncompromising positions. The escalation of nationalist sentiments has further complicated bilateral relations, as it creates a climate of zero-sum politics, where any gain for one country is perceived as a loss for the other. This dynamic not only hinders pragmatic conflict resolution but also risks turning public opinion against broader bilateral cooperation in areas of mutual interest. Its effects extend beyond the immediate territorial disagreement, influencing broader aspects of bilateral engagement and undermining opportunities for sustainable partnership.

5. Regional Implications of the Kalapani Dispute

The Kalapani territorial dispute between India and Nepal extends beyond bilateral tensions, influencing geopolitical dynamics, regional cooperation frameworks, and security concerns. Its strategic location at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China amplifies its significance, turning a localized territorial disagreement into a potential regional flashpoint with broader implications for South Asia's stability.

5.1 Geopolitical Dynamics

The dispute has provided an opportunity for external powers, particularly China, to leverage the tensions for its strategic advantage. China has historically sought to expand its influence in Nepal as part of its broader South Asia strategy. By deepening economic and political ties with Nepal, such as through investments in infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has positioned itself as a counterbalance to India's traditional influence in the region. The Kalapani dispute has furthered Nepal's engagement with China, as it seeks alternative alliances to counterbalance its reliance on India.

China's involvement adds complexity to the dispute. Any perceived alignment between Nepal and China on territorial issues could heighten India's strategic concerns, given its existing tensions with China along the Himalayan borders. These dynamic risks escalating the Kalapani dispute into a broader geopolitical confrontation, potentially drawing in other regional and global players, further destabilizing the region.

5.2 Regional Cooperation

The dispute also poses challenges to regional cooperation through multilateral frameworks like SAARC and BIMSTEC. Both organizations are pivotal for fostering economic integration, connectivity, and collaborative problem-solving in South Asia. However, unresolved bilateral disputes like Kalapani hinder their effectiveness.

In the case of SAARC, the organization has long been stymied by bilateral tensions among its member states, particularly between India and Pakistan. The Kalapani dispute adds another layer of friction, further undermining SAARC's ability to promote regional integration. Nepal's insistence on raising territorial issues in multilateral forums could polarize member states, shifting focus away from developmental priorities and cooperative agendas.

BIMSTEC, which excludes Pakistan and focuses on economic and technical cooperation, offers a more promising platform for regional engagement. However, the Kalapani dispute risks spilling over into BIMSTEC discussions, particularly when connectivity projects, such as the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement, are affected by India-Nepal tensions. Disputes like Kalapani undermine trust among member states, which is essential for advancing shared goals.



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5.3 Security Concerns

Kalapani's strategic location and proximity to sensitive border areas make it a potential site for militarization and broader regional instability. India maintains a significant military presence in the region, citing its importance for national security and its role as a transit point to the Lipulekh Pass. Nepal's objections to this presence, combined with its increasing engagement with China, have heightened security concerns.

The dispute also risks escalating into an armed confrontation if diplomatic engagements fail and nationalist sentiments in both countries continue to rise. Militarization of the region could provoke retaliatory measures, intensifying border tensions. Furthermore, the strategic location of Kalapani near the India-China border adds an additional layer of complexity, with any escalation potentially intersecting with the broader India-China rivalry in the Himalayas. The Kalapani dispute's regional implications highlight its significance beyond India-Nepal relations. It underscores the need for de-escalation, enhanced dialogue, and cooperative frameworks to manage not only the immediate territorial disagreements but also the broader geopolitical and security risks. A resolution would not only restore bilateral trust but also contribute to regional stability, strengthening the potential for collective growth and integration in South Asia.

6. Recommendations and policy impactions for Resolving the Kalapani Dispute

To address the long-standing Kalapani territorial dispute and its broader implications for India-Nepal relations and South Asian stability, a multi-pronged approach is essential. This approach should include diplomatic strategies, confidence-building measures, leveraging regional platforms, and promoting mutual benefits.

6.1 Diplomatic Strategies

The cornerstone of resolving the Kalapani dispute lies in sustained diplomatic engagement. Both India and Nepal should prioritize enhancing dialogue at the highest levels, emphasizing transparency and mutual respect. Establishing a bilateral task force comprising experts, historians, and cartographers could help bridge differences in interpreting historical documents like the Treaty of Sugauli. Joint surveys of the Kalapani region, conducted under mutually agreed terms, would provide a factual basis for negotiations, reducing the scope for misinterpretation and fostering trust. Regular diplomatic consultations, free from domestic political pressures, are critical for maintaining momentum toward resolution.

6.2 Confidence-Building Measures

Strengthening economic and cultural ties is vital for reducing tensions and creating a conducive environment for dispute resolution. Economic collaboration, particularly in cross-border trade and infrastructure development, can reinforce interdependence and highlight the mutual benefits of cooperation. Projects such as hydropower development and energy trade could be expanded to demonstrate shared economic gains.

Cultural initiatives, including exchange programs, joint celebrations of shared traditions, and people-to-people interactions, can help rebuild trust and emphasize the deep historical connections between the two nations. These measures can also counteract the nationalist rhetoric that has exacerbated tensions, fostering goodwill at both the governmental and grassroots levels.

6.3 Leveraging Regional Platforms

Multilateral organizations like SAARC and BIMSTEC offer opportunities for mediating the dispute within a regional framework. While SAARC has historically struggled with internal divisions, it remains a platform for dialogue on issues affecting South Asia. Engaging SAARC in discussions about broader regional stability could indirectly support bilateral negotiations on Kalapani. BIMSTEC, with its focus on technical and economic cooperation, provides a less politically charged platform for fostering collaboration. India and Nepal could use BIMSTEC to advance shared regional goals,



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demonstrating their ability to work together despite bilateral disputes. Mediation efforts through these platforms, involving neutral third-party facilitators, could also be explored to break deadlocks and promote understanding.

6.4 Promoting Mutual Benefits

A focus on win-win solutions is crucial for ensuring that both India and Nepal derive tangible benefits from resolving the dispute. Joint management of the region's resources, such as water from the Kali River, could be proposed, allowing both nations to share the economic and ecological advantages. Collaborative efforts to enhance connectivity via the Lipulekh Pass for trade and pilgrimage could further underscore the practical gains of a negotiated settlement.

By framing the resolution as a pathway to shared prosperity and stability, both countries can reduce public resistance and foster domestic support for a mutually acceptable outcome. This approach aligns with broader goals of regional integration and development, demonstrating the value of cooperative problem-solving in South Asia.

6.5 Policy Implications

The Kalapani dispute offers broader lessons for managing territorial conflicts in South Asia. First, it underscores the importance of clearly defined borders and accurate cartographic documentation to prevent ambiguities that can lead to disputes. Second, it highlights the value of multilateral platforms in fostering regional dialogue and cooperation, even amid bilateral tensions. Finally, the dispute demonstrates the necessity of balancing nationalist sentiments with diplomatic pragmatism to avoid escalation.

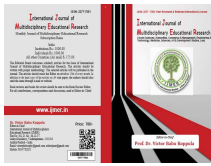
Addressing the Kalapani dispute effectively can serve as a model for resolving other territorial disagreements in the region. By adopting a collaborative and mutually beneficial approach, South Asian nations can strengthen regional stability, enhance integration, and promote sustainable development. The lessons drawn from this case can contribute to a more cohesive and cooperative South Asia, capable of navigating complex geopolitical challenges.

Summary of Findings

The Kalapani territorial dispute between India and Nepal has far-reaching implications for both bilateral relations and regional stability in South Asia. At the bilateral level, the dispute has deepened mistrust, disrupted economic cooperation, and fueled nationalist rhetoric in both countries, complicating diplomatic engagements. At the regional level, it has highlighted vulnerabilities in multilateral frameworks like SAARC and BIMSTEC, which struggle to mediate conflicts amid rising geopolitical tensions. The involvement of external powers, particularly China, further exacerbates the situation, potentially destabilizing the strategic balance in the region. These findings underscore the critical importance of addressing the dispute to preserve the historical goodwill between India and Nepal and maintain stability in South Asia.

Conclusion and Future Outlook

Resolving the Kalapani dispute requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach that balances historical grievances with forward-looking solutions. By pursuing enhanced dialogue, confidence-building measures, multilateral engagement, and mutual benefits, India and Nepal can not only address the territorial issue but also strengthen their bilateral relationship and contribute to regional stability. The resolution of the Kalapani dispute demands sustained and constructive efforts. A focus on dialogue, joint initiatives, and mutual respect is essential for de-escalating tensions and rebuilding trust. Both nations must prioritize regular diplomatic engagements free from domestic political pressures to create an environment conducive to compromise. Joint surveys and collaborative mechanisms for resource management can pave the way for pragmatic solutions. Moreover, adopting a forward-looking perspective that emphasizes shared benefits rather than zero-sum outcomes will be key to achieving an amicable resolution.



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India and Nepal must chalk out their borders in a formal and friendly manner, to avoid other disputes such as the one over the Kalapani area. India should also move beyond its insecurities related to China. Although the Nepali Parliament has taken up the issue seriously, the two governments should fill the communication gap as a matter of urgency.

Both India and Nepal must invest in negotiating new border management agreements to take into consideration recent events. After all, the demands of the times have changed since the time the Kalapani border dispute first emerged. In the process, the people of both countries should be prioritised.

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