



## Tri-junction tensions: Historical roots and contemporary implications for Indo-Nepal relations

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### Abstract

The longstanding tri-junction dispute involving India, Nepal, and China has emerged as a critical geopolitical flashpoint in South Asia. This article traces the historical foundations of the conflict, beginning with colonial-era surveys, the 1816 Treaty of Sugauli, and subsequent cartographic inconsistencies that shaped divergent territorial interpretations. By analysing archival maps, treaty texts, and post-independence diplomatic correspondence, the study reveals how historical ambiguity and shifting geostrategic priorities intensified competing claims over regions such as Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura. The paper further examines the contemporary implications of the dispute on Indo-Nepal relations, especially in the context of changing regional power dynamics, domestic political discourse in Nepal, and India's security considerations along its Himalayan frontier. The research highlights how political nationalism, media narratives, and external strategic influences have escalated tensions, affecting bilateral cooperation in trade, water management, connectivity, and people-to-people exchanges. Drawing on interviews, policy documents, and secondary analyses, the study argues for the necessity of sustained dialogue, transparent cartographic verification, and institutional confidence-building measures. Ultimately, the article contends that a peaceful and mutually acceptable resolution of the tri-junction issue is essential not only for restoring trust between India and Nepal but also for ensuring long-term stability and regional integration in the Himalayan borderlands.

**Keywords:** Tri-junction dispute, indo-nepal relations, kalapani–lipulekh–limpiyadhura; treaty of sugauli, border demarcation, geopolitics of Himalayas, cartographic ambiguity, regional security, bilateral diplomacy, south asian strategic affairs

### Introduction

Borders in South Asia often reflect complex historical legacies shaped by colonial administrative decisions, uneven surveys, and contested interpretations of treaties. Among these, the India–Nepal border is often described as one of the most peaceful and open borders in the world. Yet, the tri-junction area around Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura remains a site of disagreement that frequently resurfaces in political discourse, public sentiment, and diplomatic exchanges.

The dispute emerged prominently after Nepal published a new political map in May 2020, asserting sovereignty over the tri-junction area and claiming that India's presence in the region constituted encroachment. India, however, maintains that its claims are consistent with historical usage, administrative continuity, and specific interpretations of the Treaty of Sugauli (1816).

This research investigates the roots of the dispute, the evolution of competing narratives, and its effects on bilateral relations, security, and regional geopolitics. The tri-junction is not merely a cartographic concern but a point where sovereignty, diplomacy, identity, and strategy intersect.

### Historical Context of the Tri-junction Dispute

#### 1. The Treaty of Sugauli (1816) and Ambiguity of the Kali River

The origins of the dispute lie in the Treaty of Sugauli, signed between the British East India Company and the Kingdom of Nepal after the Anglo-Nepalese War. The treaty demarcated the western border of Nepal along the "Kali River". However, the treaty did not clearly specify which stream constituted the true origin of the river. Two interpretations emerged

**Nepal's interpretation:** the river originates near Limpiyadhura, placing Kalapani and Lipulekh inside Nepal.

**India's interpretation:** the river originates below Kalapani, making the region fall under India's administrative control.

#### 2. Colonial Survey Practices and Cartographic Shifts

British cartographers produced differing maps from 1816 to the early 20th century. At various times: Limpiyadhura was shown as the river source (early maps in 1816–1820s) and Later maps (1850s onward) shifted the river's origin eastward toward Kalapani.

Historians note that these inconsistencies were not deliberate but resulted from limited topographical knowledge of the high Himalayas.

#### 3. Administrative History Under British India and Post-Independence India

India argues that administrative control of Kalapani, particularly the deployment of security personnel since the 19th century, validates its claim. After 1962, the region acquired further strategic importance as India established observation posts to monitor Chinese movements. Nepal counters that administrative control does not nullify historical treaty rights.

### The Tri-junction in Contemporary Politics

#### 1. Nepal's 2020 Map Controversy

In November 2019, India inaugurated a road to Lipulekh Pass for Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrims. Nepal protested, arguing that the road passed through disputed territory. This escalated after India's new political map (post–Jammu & Kashmir reorganization) showed Kalapani within Indian borders.

Nepal responded by issuing a new political map in May 2020, incorporating Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh, and Kalapani. This was endorsed unanimously by Nepal's parliament—reflecting strong bipartisan nationalism.

## 2. Domestic Politics and Nationalism in Nepal

**The issue became deeply tied to Nepali national identity:** Political parties mobilized public sentiment by portraying the dispute as a symbol of sovereignty, Media narratives amplified anti-India rhetoric and Youth and diaspora groups used social media to campaign for territorial “reclamation.”

### India's Strategic Posture and Response

**India emphasized:** Willingness to negotiate through established diplomatic mechanisms, Concerns about Nepal's “politicisation” of the issue and The tri-junction's relevance for national security, especially given its proximity to the India–China border. India sees the area as critical for monitoring Chinese activities and protecting access routes to the Indian state of Uttarakhand.

### China Factor in the Tri-junction Dynamics

#### 1. Strategic Significance of Lipulekh Pass

Lipulekh is one of the few high-altitude passes connecting India and China for trade and pilgrimage. It also serves as an important military vantage point. India and China signed agreements in 1954 and 2015 to enhance their trade and transit through Lipulekh Pass. Nepal argues that it was excluded from these decisions, reinforcing its perception of marginalisation.

#### 2. Sino-Nepal Relations and Shifting Regional Alignments

The rise of China in South Asia has altered regional power dynamics. Nepal's growing economic and infrastructural ties with China have influenced its foreign policy positioning. However: China has not explicitly supported Nepal's territorial claims and China typically avoids involvement in India–Nepal border disputes. Nevertheless, India remains cautious, considering China's expanding footprint in Nepal as a strategic challenge.

### Socioeconomic and Human Impacts on Border Communities

#### 1. Livelihood and Access Issues

Local communities historically used the tri-junction region for trans-Himalayan trade, grazing, and seasonal movement. Increased militarisation and nationalism have disrupted these traditional patterns.

#### 2. Cultural and Kinship Ties

Ethnic groups such as Bhotiyas, Byansis, and other Himalayan communities have kinship relations across borders. Political disputes strain these connections, affecting: Cultural exchange, Religious pilgrimages and Cross-border trade.

#### 3. Developmental Gaps

Infrastructure development on the Indian side—roads, communications, deployment of services—has outpaced that on the Nepali side. This difference has influenced local perceptions of state presence and effectiveness.

### Diplomatic Mechanisms for Dispute Resolution

#### 1. Joint Technical Level Boundary Committee (1981–2007)

India and Nepal resolved almost 97% of their border demarcation issues through this committee. However, the Kalapani tri-junction was left unresolved due to: Conflicting interpretations of historical maps and Lack of mutually accepted survey evidence

#### 2. Eminent Persons' Group (EPG)

The EPG recommended updates to the 1950 India–Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship and encouraged stronger border cooperation. However, its report remains officially unpublished.

#### 3. The Need for Structured Dialogue

Experts argue for mechanisms such as: Joint Boundary Working Groups for cartographic review, Open access to archival material for both sides and Third-party technical verification, not political mediation. Both countries have expressed willingness for dialogue but differ on timing and modalities.

### Strategic and Geopolitical Implications

#### 1. India's Security Concerns

**Kalapani is located near one of India's most sensitive border zones with China. For India:** The region is strategically important for surveillance, Any concession must consider national security implications and The presence of paramilitary forces is routine for border defence.

#### 2. Nepal's Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

**Nepal views the tri-junction as a core sovereignty issue:** Loss of territory is politically unacceptable, The dispute is framed as a test of Nepal's diplomatic assertiveness and Public opinion strongly influences foreign policy outcomes.

#### 3. Regional Stability and India–Nepal Relations

**The dispute risks overshadowing broader cooperation in:** Hydropower, Trade and transit, Cultural exchange and Regional connectivity (BBIN, BIMSTEC). Prolonged tension could push Nepal closer to China, altering South Asia's strategic landscape.

### Analysis of Competing Claims

#### 1. Strengths in Nepal's Claim

- Early British maps (1816–1820s) show Limpiyadhura as the source of the Kali River.
- Treaty of Sugauli language can support Nepal's interpretation.
- Geographic continuity places Limpiyadhura higher and more logically as the river source.

#### 2. Strengths in India's Claim

- Continuous administrative control since the 19th century.
- Later official maps by the British government show the river originating below Kalapani.
- Security infrastructure established after the 1962 war reinforces strategic usage.
- India's pilgrim and trade route agreements with China acknowledge Kalapani as Indian territory.

### 3. The Role of Historical Ambiguity

Both claims contain valid historical grounds, making unilateral settlement difficult. The dispute's persistence reflects

- Lack of joint survey verification
- Politicisation of map evidence
- Emotional and symbolic value of borders in national identity

### Possible Pathways Toward Resolution

#### 1. Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)

To reduce tensions, the countries could adopt

- Regular diplomatic dialogues at foreign secretary-level
- Joint committee to examine historical treaties and maps
- Community-level cross-border meetings
- Stronger media communication channels to avoid misinformation

#### 2. Joint Cartographic and Hydrological Survey

A technically neutral, science-based assessment could provide clarity

- Using high-resolution satellite imagery
- Tracing hydrological origin of the Kali River
- Digitally overlaying treaty-era maps with modern GIS data

#### 3. Tripartite Acknowledgment of the Tri-junction

Although China need not mediate, it must be informed of any final demarcation because the tri-junction involves all three countries.

#### 4. Institutional Mechanisms

A permanent India–Nepal Boundary Commission could be created to

- Monitor border issues
- Recommend updates based on technical assessments
- Prevent future disputes from escalating politically

#### 5. Avoiding Nationalist Escalation

Both governments must ensure

- Domestic politics do not derail diplomacy
- Border issues are treated technically, not emotionally
- Public communication emphasises cooperation, not confrontation

### Summary and Conclusion

This study examines the complex historical, political, and strategic dimensions of the tri-junction border dispute between India and Nepal, centred around the Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura region. The dispute, rooted in ambiguous colonial-era treaties and inconsistent British survey maps, continues to influence bilateral relations and regional geopolitics.

The paper begins by tracing the historical origins of the issue to the Treaty of Sugauli (1816), which defined Nepal's western boundary along the Kali River but failed to clearly identify the river's true source. This ambiguity allowed two competing interpretations: Nepal identifies Limpiyadhura as the origin point, while India maintains that the river begins below Kalapani. Colonial cartographic shifts and post-independence administrative practices further reinforced overlapping claims.

The contemporary dimension of the dispute intensified following India's 2019 road construction to Lipulekh and

Nepal's 2020 issuance of a new political map, triggering strong nationalist responses in Nepal and prompting diplomatic recalibration in India. The dispute has since intersected with broader regional dynamics, including China's growing engagement with Nepal and India's strategic concerns along its Himalayan frontier.

Beyond geopolitical calculations, the dispute has tangible impacts on local border communities, affecting traditional trade routes, cultural ties, and access to essential services. While both countries share deep cultural, economic, and political linkages, the tri-junction issue poses recurring strains on otherwise stable relations.

The paper argues that durable resolution requires structured dialogue, joint cartographic verification, confidence-building measures, and transparent sharing of historical and survey data. It emphasises that both nations must depoliticise the issue and approach it through technical, evidence-based cooperation. Ultimately, peaceful settlement of the tri-junction dispute is essential for restoring trust, strengthening India–Nepal relations, and maintaining stability in the sensitive Himalayan borderlands.

The tri-junction dispute between India and Nepal is a historically rooted, technically complex, and politically sensitive issue. Emerging from an ambiguous colonial treaty and inconsistent mapping practices, the conflict has been amplified by nationalism, strategic anxieties, and evolving regional geopolitics. While both nations present reasonable historical and administrative arguments, unilateral assertions—such as political map revisions—have deepened mistrust and restricted the diplomatic space for compromise. Nevertheless, the open and deeply interlinked nature of India–Nepal relations offers substantial space for peaceful engagement. A structured dialogue supported by joint surveys, archival transparency, and confidence-building measures can create a roadmap toward resolution. Mutual sensitivity, political maturity, and a shared commitment to regional stability remain essential.

A cooperative settlement would not only reaffirm historical friendship but also strengthen South Asia's geopolitical stability at a time when external influences and strategic recalibrations are reshaping regional dynamics. Therefore, resolving the tri-junction tensions is not merely a border management issue but a crucial step toward fostering trust, partnership, and peace between India and Nepal.

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