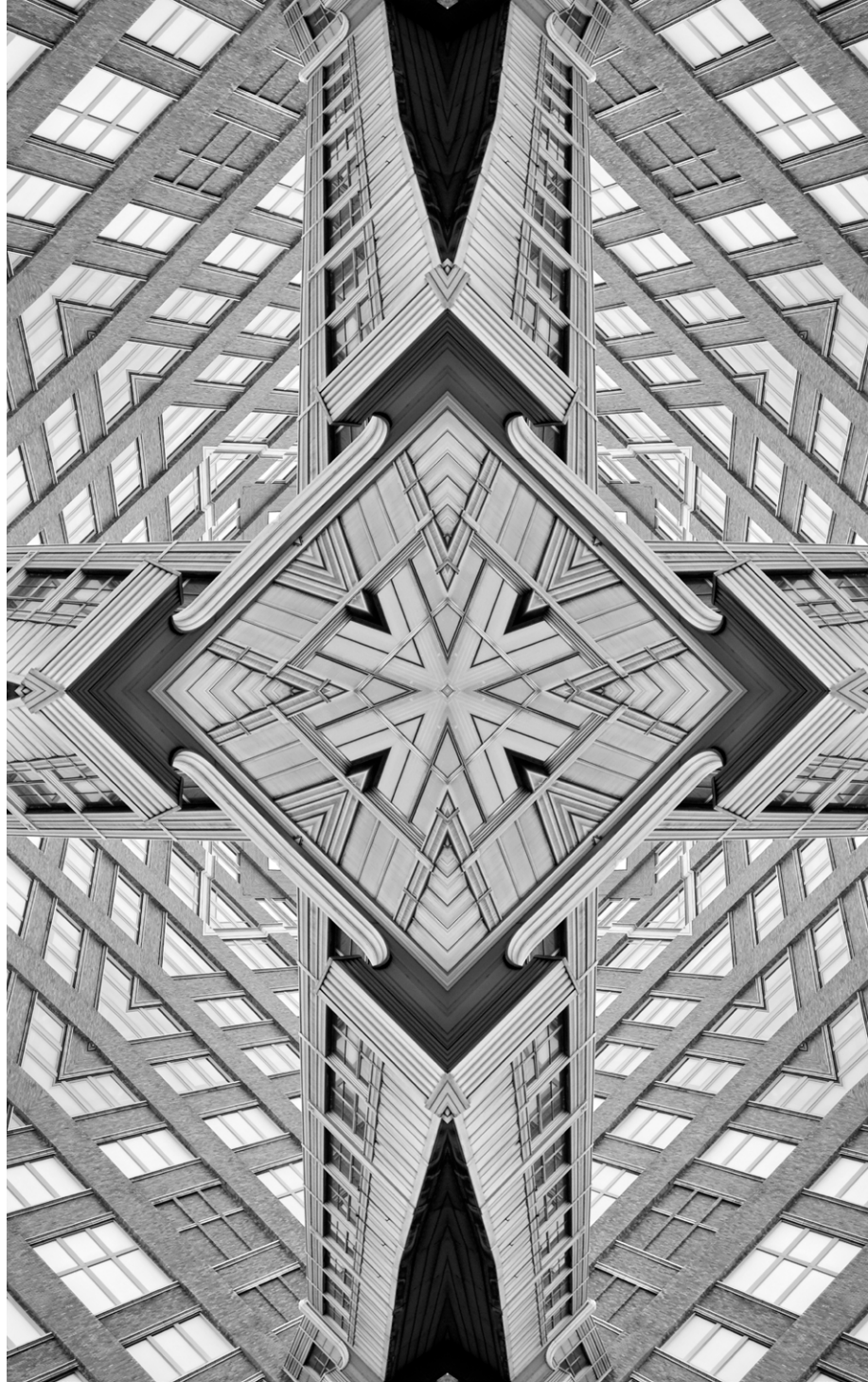


Issue

Brief

ISSUE NO. 633
APRIL 2023



Finding an End to Border Disputes: The India-Nepal Imperative

Saroj Aryal and Manish Jung Pulami

Abstract

India and Nepal have a long history of bilateral ties founded on connections of history, culture and religion, but their relationship is also beset by border conflicts. Although the two have managed to maintain their amiable relationship despite these differences, they both would benefit from finding a sustainable resolution. This brief highlights the efforts of both India and Nepal to resolve their border disputes. It recommends crucial policy imperatives, including promoting respect for both countries' sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence; and pursuing collaborative initiatives to solve specific challenges such as cross-border crime. A more pragmatic border management strategy, and the development of cross-border infrastructures, would also be key.

India and Nepal share a long relationship based on historical, cultural, and geographic ties. They have an open border and deep people-to-people connections. However, the relationship has also been marked by occasional tensions and disagreements, primarily related to borders and water sharing.¹ While India has historically been Nepal's largest trading partner, aid provider and investor, Nepal also often accuses it of interfering in its domestic affairs.² Over the years, Nepal has sought to balance its relations with both India, and its rival, China.³ With India, Nepal's relationship has remained important foremost due to their geographic proximity and shared cultural and economic ties.⁴ Nepal's growing engagement with China in recent years, and in that context, India's regional strategic concerns, have added complexity to the relationship.⁵

Border tensions between India and Nepal have also increased in the past several years, particularly in the context of Nepal's new Constitution and India's alleged interference in Nepali politics. In 2015, India imposed an unofficial economic embargo on Nepal to show its discontent over the newly promulgated Constitution of Nepal—this severely affected the country's economy and led to a strain in their relationship.⁶ Indian authorities assert that the obstruction of movement of vehicles happened because of the protests at the transit points by Nepalese ethnic minorities who were not agreeable to the new Constitution.⁷ Some years later, in 2020, a territorial dispute erupted between the two countries over the Kalapani-Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh tri-junction area;⁸ both are claiming ownership of the territory.⁹ While the dispute did not escalate following successful diplomatic discussions, it highlighted the fragility of the relationship and the need for continued engagement and cooperation between the two.¹⁰

There are massive challenges to solving border tensions between India and Nepal, one of which is lack of trust.¹¹ Compounding the tensions is India's perceived interference in Nepal's domestic affairs, and Nepal's growing relationship with China. Moreover, the open border between the two countries has resulted in issues such as illegal migration and smuggling.¹²

Border Disputes: Historical Overview

The border between Nepal and India is over 1,700 kilometres long and has a complex history that spans several centuries.¹³ The border is primarily based on the 1816 Sugauli Treaty signed between the British East India Company and the Kingdom of Nepal, which ended the Anglo-Nepal War.¹⁴ The treaty defined the border between the two countries, and subsequent treaties and agreements further delineated the boundary.¹⁵ Article 5 of the Sugauli Treaty mentions Mahakali River (or River *Kalee* as mentioned in the Treaty) as the western boundary.¹⁶ Although the Treaty does not indicate the origin of the Mahakali River, the hydrographic study shows Limpiyadhura as its origin, making it the trilateral junction between India, Nepal, and China.¹⁷ The two countries continue to contest this border.

To be sure, India and Nepal are not the only countries in South Asia that continue to face border disputes with their neighbours.¹⁸ Changes in the concepts of ‘sovereignty’ and ‘territory’ with the advent of colonial rule in the region, have contributed to border disputes; so has border delineation altering the region from a ‘fluid cultural organism’ to one defined by frontiers.¹⁹ The reengineering of South Asia for strategic and administrative purposes has had a long legacy that influence these contemporary disputes.²⁰ The border disputes between India and Pakistan, for example, and those between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and India China, are rooted in the colonial period.²¹ Likewise, the border disputes between Nepal and India dates back to the 19th century when the British East India Company, seeking to expand its territory, signed the Sugauli Treaty with Nepal in 1816.²² The treaty defined Nepal’s western boundary with India, but Nepal raised the issue of the treaty’s “ambiguity” and “vagueness”, leading to disputes over the exact demarcation of the boundary.²³ The British later unilaterally demarcated and delineated the border.²⁴

The border disputes between Nepal and India are primarily concentrated in the western and eastern regions of Nepal.²⁵ In the west, the disputed area is the Kalapani-Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh tri-junction.²⁶ Nepal has accused India of “cartographic assertion”;²⁷ India argues that the area is part of its own territory and has maintained a military presence there since the 1960s.²⁸ In the east, there is a dispute over the Susta area, located in the southern part of Nepal’s Nawalparasi district.²⁹ The area, claimed by both India and Nepal, has been the site of occasional skirmishes between border forces.^{30,31}

There have also been sporadic disputes over other borders, such as in the Mechi River and Kali River regions.³² These disputes are related to issues of encroachment, land use, and cross-border crime.

Border Disputes: Historical Overview

Water-sharing has been another source of disputes between Nepal and India. The two countries share several rivers, including the Koshi, Gandaki, and Mahakali, and have signed several agreements on sharing water resources.³³ However, they disagree on the interpretation of these agreements and the manner of their implementation, particularly regarding hydroelectric power projects and the diversion of water from these rivers.³⁴ Nepal accuses India of withholding water during the dry season, while India is concerned over the impact of Nepal's hydroelectric projects on downstream communities.³⁵ Resolving these issues will require continued dialogue and cooperation between the two countries and a commitment to finding mutually acceptable solutions that consider both their interests.

Furthermore, border encroachment has been a recurring issue in India-Nepal relations. Nepal accuses India of encroaching on Nepalese territory, particularly in the border areas where the demarcation is unclear.³⁶ This has resulted in occasional skirmishes between the border forces of the two countries. In Nepal, there have been concerns over Indian nationals acquiring land and property in border areas, fuelling anti-Indian sentiments, while in India, there are concerns over the movement of Nepali nationals across the border. Nepalese analysts also say that due to Indian-built dams and embankments in different places such as Laxmanpur, Rasiyawall-Khurlotan, Mahalisagar, Kohalawas, and Kunauli, these lands have been suffering massive floodings in the monsoon season every year.³⁷ Floods are seasonal problem for both countries, however.³⁸

Compounding the differences is the matter of missing border pillars. The border between the two countries has over 8,000 boundary pillars, but many of them have gone missing due to natural disasters and human activities.³⁹ In disputed border areas like Susta, Arra, Nala, and Tal Bagonda, for example, the border pillars are nowhere to be found.⁴⁰ This has made it difficult to accurately determine the boundary between the two countries, resulting in disputes over the ownership of land and property in those areas, and occasional skirmishes between the border forces of the two sides. Efforts are underway to replace the missing border pillars but progress has been slow.⁴¹

In addition, places like Lalbojhi and Bhajani in Kailali, Chaugurji of Gulariya in Bardiya, Parasan Paratal in Kanchanpur, 1.5 km of Koshi embankment towards the east-west highway, Shreeantu Guphapatal in Ilam, Someshwor in Chitwan, Jhitkaiya in Bara, and the 10 yards (Dashgaja) area of Koilawas in Dang have problems of border encroachments.⁴² Of the 26 districts of Nepal sharing the border with India, 21 districts, in 54 places, are alleging violation of territory by India.⁴³ Nepalese analysts allege that more than 60,000 hectares of land in Nepal have been encroached by the Indian side.⁴⁴ India has told visiting Nepalese officials that these allegations would be looked into and resolved in a diplomatic manner.

Border Disputes: Historical Overview

At the same time, political instability and continuous power struggles within Nepal have contributed to the repeated pattern of re-emergence of these territorial disputes. Nepal's political parties—eager to win public support—have politicised the country's border disputes with India.^{45,46} Amidst their persistent power struggles, the Nepalese political elite have sought to create an 'Other' in the form of India; they provoke anti-Indian sentiments, play the 'China card', and appeal to popular nationalism (and its chauvinistic manifestation) among the Nepalese people.

“Nepal's political elite
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Past Efforts to Find a Resolution

India and Nepal have held several rounds of talks in the past many years to attempt an acceptable resolution to their border disputes, but progress has been slow and sporadic. In 1981, the two countries formed a Joint Technical Level Boundary Committee⁴⁷ that was tasked to conduct surveys and map the border areas to clarify the location of the boundary.⁴⁸ There have also been many bilateral talks at the level of the foreign ministers; high-level visits whose agenda included discussing a diplomatic resolution to the border disputes; and efforts to develop infrastructure at the borderlands. These initiatives, however, have failed in resolving the border disputes.

The Boundary Committee's work has been complicated by India's and Nepal's different interpretations of the border, with both sides claiming historical and cultural justifications; there have also been administrative obstacles to the committee's work.⁴⁹ Between 1981 and 2007, the Boundary Committee demarcated 1,233 km as land boundary and 647 km as river boundary. It was unable to resolve the disputes at the Kalapani and Susta regions because of the irreconcilable claims by the two sides.⁵⁰ The Committee prepared 182 strip-maps signed jointly by the Surveyor General of India and the Director General of the Survey Department of Nepal, delineated 8,553 boundary pillars.⁵¹

In 1987, the two sides created the India-Nepal Joint Commission, a high-level bilateral mechanism mandated to address various issues of mutual interest, including the resolution of border disputes.⁵² The Joint Commission sought to serve as a mechanism for resolving the border disputes, and it allowed both sides to engage in constructive dialogue and negotiate in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding.⁵³ For some years it met periodically to review progress and discuss outstanding issues, but it achieved little and eventually became inactive. It was revived in 2014 after a two-decade hiatus, and held its eighth meeting in August 2020 where both sides discussed various issues, including the border disputes.⁵⁴

In 1996, the two countries signed the Mahakali Treaty, which was aimed at sharing water from the Mahakali River and included a provision (Article 9) for resolving the border disputes.⁵⁵ The treaty attempted to do this by establishing a Joint Committee for Water Resources (JCWR) and a Joint Technical Level Boundary (JTTLB),⁵⁶ but there has been no visible result.

Aside from the creation of these committees, the two sides have attempted to pave the way for a resolution to their disputes through a number of high-level visits. These have included Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Nepal in 2018, and Nepalese Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's visit to India in 2020.⁵⁷ Various negotiations have also been held between the two

Past Efforts to Find a Resolution

countries, including the Joint Technical Level Boundary Committee meetings, and meetings between the two governments' Foreign Secretaries and Home Ministers.⁵⁸

A notable mechanism is the Eminent Persons Group (EPG), a high-level body established by the two in 2016 to provide recommendations on resolving outstanding issues, specifically regarding the 1950 Peace and Friendship Treaty and the border disputes.⁵⁹ The group comprised four eminent persons from each side, and its mandate was to examine all aspects of the bilateral relationship and to provide recommendations for its future.⁶⁰ Now dysfunctional, the EPG finalised its report in July 2018 but has yet to submit its report to the prime ministers of the two countries.⁶¹

While the report does not seem to lead to an immediate resolution of the border disputes, it could be a significant step.⁶² However, neither India nor Nepal has officially accepted the report from the EPG, citing their own reasons.^{63,64}

Similarly, several infrastructure projects have been jointly proposed, such as the Kathmandu-Raxaul Railway, the Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project, and the construction of new border check posts, which could help resolve the border disputes by building better connectivity. Indeed, the two countries have engaged in infrastructure development in the border areas. In 2018, Nepal and India inaugurated a cross-border petroleum pipeline, which is expected to enhance economic cooperation and reduce dependence on third countries for fuel.⁶⁵ However, obstacles have impeded the implementation of these projects, including funding issues, bureaucratic hurdles, and concerns over environmental impacts.⁶⁶

At present, all the efforts discussed in the previous paragraphs have failed to result in a more optimistic outcome for both countries and the reasons are many.

First, there continues to be a lack of clearly defined boundaries.⁶⁷ Both countries have differing claims, counterclaims, and interpretations of the border.⁶⁸ Without clearly defined borders, it is difficult to monitor and control illegal cross-border activities, such as illegal trafficking and migration, which worsen the situation.⁶⁹ Second, the leaders of both countries do not appear to have enough political will and commitment to work towards acceptable and sustainable solutions.⁷⁰ Despite several rounds of talks and agreements, progress has been slow and inadequate due to the absence of a sustained effort from both sides.

Past Efforts to Find a Resolution

Compounding the challenge is the rampant incidence of cross-border crimes and illegal activities. The porous and poorly regulated border has facilitated the movement of criminal elements who engage in activities such as smuggling and human and drug trafficking. This has created more tension between the two countries, with both sides blaming the other.⁷¹

The lack of a legal framework for border governance has also been an obstacle.⁷² Without clear guidelines and regulations for cross-border activities, regulating movement across the border and managing disputes has been difficult. A proper legal framework could help clarify boundaries, delineate cross-border activities, and establish mechanisms for dispute resolution. Furthermore, the involvement of external actors and interests, including regional and global powers, can complicate efforts to resolve the Nepal-India border disputes.⁷³ Such actors may have agendas and interests that could influence negotiations and make it more difficult to reach a mutually beneficial agreement. External involvement can also heighten tensions and exacerbate the situation rather than facilitate a resolution.⁷⁴ The political instability and power struggle in Nepal have added difficulties for both the countries.

“The porous and poorly regulated border has facilitated the movement of criminal elements who engage in activities such as smuggling and human and drug trafficking.”

India and Nepal should continue working towards finding a mutually acceptable solution to their border disputes that respects each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Resolving these differences would not only benefit Nepal and India themselves but also contribute to regional stability and cooperation. For these negotiations to succeed, they should be informed by historical evidence, maps, and other relevant documents.

In the long term, India and Nepal can resolve their border disputes by implementing a comprehensive border management system, which includes joint boundary surveys, border demarcation, and border monitoring. Additionally, both countries can work towards enhancing people-to-people contacts, cultural exchanges, and economic cooperation to build mutual trust and understanding, which can in turn contribute to border dispute resolution.

This brief reiterates the following principles as India and Nepal seek pathways to resolving their border disputes.

1. Respect for Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and Independence

Respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence are essential elements and both countries must acknowledge each other's legitimate claims over the disputed territory and work towards finding a mutually acceptable solution.⁷⁵ Any resolution to the disputes should be based on both, a fair and objective assessment of historical pieces of evidence, and provisions of international law. Mutual understanding and respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity can prevent any potential escalation of the conflict, which can impact the stability and security of the region.⁷⁶ Ultimately, a lasting resolution to the border disputes between India and Nepal can only be achieved by upholding the principles of mutual respect, peaceful co-existence, and cooperation.

2. Negotiated Settlement of Border Disputes

A negotiated and diplomatic settlement would be key.⁷⁷ Diplomacy can nudge both countries to come to the negotiating table, acknowledge each other's concerns and interests, and find mutually acceptable solutions. Through negotiation, both countries can define a clear boundary, demarcate the disputed areas, and create a mechanism for effective border management.⁷⁸ A negotiated settlement can also address other important issues such as cross-border trade, tourism, and cultural exchanges, all of which can be mutually beneficial.

3. Commitment to Pursue Border Delimitation and Demarcation

Border delimitation and demarcation means establishing an unambiguous boundary between the two countries.⁷⁹ This process would involve a joint boundary survey, preparing maps and other relevant documents, and the installation of boundary markers.⁸⁰ By committing to border delimitation and demarcation, both countries can demonstrate respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity. This process would help clarify the disputed area's status and prevent future misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the border.

Furthermore, border delimitation and demarcation can create a mechanism for effective border management, promoting peaceful and stable relations between the two countries.⁸¹ This can also facilitate cross-border trade, tourism, and cultural exchanges, benefiting both countries economically and socially.

4. Collaborative Efforts to Solve Cross-Border Crime

Cross-border crimes are a significant challenge for both—these include human trafficking, drug smuggling, and the illegal movement of firearms and ammunition.⁸² Additionally, the porous nature of the border makes it vulnerable to illegal activities such as smuggling of contraband goods and cattle, counterfeiting, and money laundering.⁸³ These crimes often involve organised syndicates operating across the border, making them difficult to detect and prevent. Cooperation can include joint patrols, intelligence-sharing, and establishing cross-border security mechanisms,⁸⁴ which can help build trust and promote cooperation. By addressing cross-border crime and other challenges, both countries can benefit economically and socially, contributing to the overall stability and development of the region.

5. Pragmatic Border Management

Practical solutions to managing the border effectively can help resolve the disputes. Measures can include establishing checkpoints, introducing modern surveillance technology, and enhancing border security forces' capabilities.⁸⁵ It also involves promoting economic activities in the border region, such as cross-border trade, which can strengthen the economic ties between the two countries and reduce tensions.⁸⁶ Pragmatic border management requires both countries to collaborate and coordinate their efforts to ensure smooth and efficient border management. The two can enhance their border security, prevent cross-border

crime, and promote peaceful relations by implementing pragmatic measures. Pragmatic border management can also facilitate the resolution of the border dispute by creating a conducive environment for constructive dialogue and negotiations.

Additionally, implementing infrastructure projects to improve the border infrastructure, such as constructing roads and border posts, can enhance border management and reduce illegal cross-border activities.


6. Development of Cross-Border Infrastructures

Cross-border infrastructure development can help resolve the border disputes by increasing interconnectedness and interdependencies between the two countries.⁸⁷ The development of infrastructure such as roads, bridges, railways, and other transportation links, can facilitate cross-border trade and people-to-people exchanges.⁸⁸ It can also increase economic opportunities, which can help reduce poverty and improve the standard of living for people in the borderlands. The increased interconnectedness and interdependencies resulting from infrastructural development can help build trust and strengthen relationships between the two sides, creating a conducive environment for resolving disputes.⁸⁹ This can foster cooperation and collaboration in areas such as border management and joint infrastructure development, which can further deepen economic and social ties between the two countries.

7. Legal Framework for Border Governance

A well-defined legal framework for border governance can contribute to resolving the border disputes between India and Nepal.⁹⁰ Such a framework can provide clear guidelines for cross-border activities, including trade, migration, and joint infrastructure projects, as well as mechanisms for dispute resolution.⁹¹ The legal framework can help reduce cross-border crimes and illegal activities by creating effective cross-border law enforcement mechanisms.⁹² Additionally, it can enhance cooperation and coordination between the two countries, thus incrementally increasing interconnectedness and interdependencies. This will increase mutual trust and understanding, ultimately leading to more effective border management and dispute resolution. Moreover, a legal framework can provide greater certainty to investors and private sectors to invest in cross-border infrastructure projects, boosting economic growth and development in the border regions.

The border disputes between India and Nepal revolve around the ambiguity in the demarcation of their boundary, particularly in the Kalapani-Lipulekh area, and have led to occasional tensions and diplomatic strain. These border disputes can be traced back to the colonial era and various historical agreements, which have resulted in ambiguity in the exact demarcation of the border between the two. Over the years, efforts to resolve the border disputes have included diplomatic negotiations, high-level talks, and the establishment of technical committees. The progress has been sporadic and the issues remain unresolved, leading to tensions and disagreements between the two countries.

Overall, respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence is critical in resolving the border disputes between India and Nepal. Both countries must acknowledge and respect each other's territorial sovereignty and integrity while upholding their national interests. Diplomatic settlement of disputes through dialogue and negotiations is necessary, with both countries engaging in constructive discussions to find mutually acceptable solutions. Commitment to pursuing border delimitation and demarcation, and collaboration to solve cross-border crime, are essential to prevent future disputes and promote sustainable peace. Pragmatic border management, emphasising practical solutions, can ensure effective border management and prevent tensions from escalating. 

Saroj Aryal is a PhD Researcher at the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland.

Manish Jung Pulami is a Research Scholar at the Department of International Relations, South Asian University in New Delhi, India.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org