

India-Nepal Tensions: The Issue of Lipulekh

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Summary

For the second time in seven months, India and Nepal have been drawn into a diplomatic standoff over their Himalayan border. The roots of India-Nepal border tensions lay in the Sugauli Treaty of 1816 and a number of successive maps produced in British India. The current tension sparked off after India's Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, inaugurated a newly-completed road link from Dharchula to Lipulekh via video-conferencing. While Nepal has accused India of "encroachment" into its territory, India has refuted the charge and is ready to schedule foreign secretary-level talks after the COVID-19 pandemic subsides.

Introduction

In May 2020, India and Nepal have, once again, been drawn into a diplomatic standoff over their border in the far Himalayas. Earlier, Nepal raised objections when, in an updated map published on 2 November 2019, India included Kalapani as a part of Pithoragarh district of the Indian state of Uttarakhand. Nepal fumed as it considers Kalapani as part of its territory. To settle their territory-related differences, the two countries decided to hold a foreign secretary-level meeting. However, this meeting could not take place due to the outbreak of the COVID-19. This paper examines the reasons for the India-Nepal tensions over Lipulekh. In his analysis, the author has made references to his earlier paper on the India-Nepal border row over Kalapani.¹

Tensions over Lipulekh

Lipulekh is a strip of land on India's border with Nepal and China in the far Himalayas. For India and China, it is mainly a tri-junction between the three countries. However, Nepal does not recognise it as a tri-junction and claims its sovereignty over the southern part of the Lipulekh pass.²

On 8 May 2020, India's Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, inaugurated a road link from Dharchula (Uttarakhand) to Lipulekh (China Border) via video-conferencing. Once in full operation, this road link will reduce travel time to Kailash-Manasarovar, a pilgrimage sacred to religious groups such as the Hindus, Buddhists and Jains, to a week, down from the two

¹ Amit Ranjan, "India-Nepal Row over the Updated Map of India", *ISAS Working Paper 321*. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Working-paper-India-Nepal-Border-Amit-Ranjan-061219-JV-HS.pdf>. 7 December 2019.

² Tilak R Pradhan, "Ruling party leaders call for action on Indian encroachment of Lipulekh", *The Kathmandu Post*, 10 May 2020. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/05/10/ruling-party-leaders-call-for-action-on-indian-encroachment-of-lipulekh>. Accessed on 12 May 2020.

to three weeks if they travelled through Sikkim or Nepal.³ The road link originates from Ghatiabagarh and ends at Lipulekh Pass. This road is 80 kilometres long.⁴ The last section of about four kilometres remains to be completed.⁵

Nepal strongly objected to the opening of this road link. Recording its official protest, in a press release on 9 May 2020, the Nepal Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated:

“The Government of Nepal has learnt with regret about the ‘inauguration’ yesterday by India of ‘Link Road’ connecting to Lipu Lekh (Nepal), which passes through Nepali territory...This unilateral act runs against the understanding reached between the two countries including at the level of Prime Ministers that a solution to boundary issues would be sought through negotiation. The Government of Nepal remains committed to seek diplomatic solution to boundary issues on the basis of the historical treaty, documents, facts and maps in keeping with the spirit of close and friendly ties between the two countries.”⁶

Nepal’s Foreign Minister, Pradeep Gyawali, said that while building the road link, India had encroached upon around 19 kilometres of Nepali territory.⁷

On the other hand, in a response to media queries on the road link, Anurag Srivastava, official spokesperson for India’s Ministry of External Affairs, stated:

“India and Nepal have established mechanism to deal with all boundary matters. The boundary delineation exercise with Nepal is ongoing. India is committed to resolving outstanding boundary issues through diplomatic dialogue and in the spirit of our close and friendly bilateral relations with Nepal.

Both sides are also in the process of scheduling Foreign Secretary-level talks which will be held once the dates are finalised between the two sides after the two societies and governments have successfully dealt with the challenge of COVID 19 emergency.”⁸

³ “Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh inaugurates 80 km long road curtailing Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage time”, *Press Information Bureau*, 8 May 2020. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetailm.aspx?PRID=1622091>. Accessed on 15 May 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nirupama Subramanian, “Explained: The new Indian road to Lipu Lekh, Nepal’s protests, and the strategic importance of the area”, *The Indian Express*, 17 May 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/the-new-indian-road-to-lipu-lekh-nepals-protests-and-the-strategic-importance-of-the-area-6413914/>. Accessed on 17 May 2020.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal, Press Release. <https://mofa.gov.np/press-release-regarding-lipu-lekh/>. Accessed on 18 May 2020.

⁷ Tilak R Pradhan, op cit.

⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Official Spokesperson’s response to media queries on inauguration of road on 8th May in Pithoragarh district, Uttarakhand”. https://mea.gov.in/response-to-queries.htm?dtl/32677/Official_Spokespersons_response_to_media_queries_on_inauguration_of_road_on_8th_May_in_Pithoragarh_district_Uttarakhand. Accessed on 9 May 2020.

Amidst this border row with India, Gyawali was summoned by the Nepali Parliament's International Relations Committee to discuss the issue.⁹ He confirmed that Nepal was well aware of the construction works on the road link which began in 2008.¹⁰ He informed the committee that, from now onwards, border posts such as the one at Sitapul would be guarded by Nepal's paramilitary – Armed Police Force.¹¹ Nepal has also decided to increase the number of border outposts with India and deploy more personnel from the Armed Police Force to guard them. At present, Nepal has approximately 120 border outposts with India.¹²

Following the meeting with the International Relations Committee, the Lipulekh issue was also discussed during the meeting of Nepal's Parliamentary State Affairs and Good Governance Committee. In this committee, some members were of opinion that the Nepal's government should approach the International Court of Justice to resolve its boundary dispute with India.¹³ This was, however, rejected by both Gyawali and the Chairman of the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who felt it was not time to take such a measure.¹⁴

Later, Gyawali summoned the Indian Ambassador to Nepal, Vinay Mohan Kwatra, for a meeting and handed over a diplomatic note that "conveyed the Government of Nepal's position on boundary issues."¹⁵ Kwatra stated India's position and handed over a copy of India's response on Lipulekh to Gyawali.¹⁶

A statement from the NCP, the ruling political party of Nepal, signed by Nepal's Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli and Dahal, said that India's latest move has undermined Nepal's sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁷ "The Nepal Communist Party believes in good neighbourly relations between Nepal and India based on the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, mutual respect and benefit", it reads.¹⁸

As protests over Lipulekh grew, Nepal's government decided to publish a new map of the country. Addressing the opening of the Parliament's budget session, Nepal's President,

⁹ "Nepal Foreign Minister Summons Indian Ambassador Over Lipulekh Boundary Issue", *The Wire*, 11 May 2020. <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/india-nepal-lipulekh-boundary-issue>. Accessed on 17 May 2020.

¹⁰ Anil Giri, "Boundary issues with India require a lasting solution that addresses all disputes, say analysts", *The Kathmandu Post*, 11 May 2020. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/05/11/boundary-issues-with-india-require-a-lasting-solution-that-addresses-all-disputes-say-analysts>. Accessed on 12 May 2020.

¹¹ Nepal Foreign Minister Summons Indian Ambassador Over Lipulekh Boundary Issue, op cit.

¹² Kallol Bhattacharjee, "Kalapani row: Nepal to deploy more forces on India border, says Foreign Minister Gyawali", *The Hindu*, 10 May 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kalapani-row-nepal-to-deploy-more-forces-on-india-border-says-foreign-minister-gyawali/article31552350.ece>. Accessed on 12 May 2020.

¹³ Nepal Foreign Minister Summons Indian Ambassador Over Lipulekh Boundary Issue", op cit.

¹⁴ Anil Giri, op. cit.

¹⁵ Nepal Foreign Minister Summons Indian Ambassador Over Lipulekh Boundary Issue", op cit.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Ruling NCP deplores India's unilateral road construction through Nepali territory Lipulekh (with statement)", *my Republica*, 9 May 2020. <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/ruling-np-deplores-india-s-unilateral-road-construction-through-nepali-territory-lipulekh-with-statement/>. Accessed on 16 May 2020.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Bidhya Devi Bhandari, said that Nepal would issue a new map that would incorporate all of “its territories”, including Limpiyadhura, Kalapani and Lipulekh.¹⁹ On 18 May 2020, the Nepalese cabinet endorsed the updated map. From then onwards, as its government had decided, this new political map would be used by government institutions and agencies, and in school textbooks.²⁰

India has expressed and conveyed its displeasure over the new map of Nepal. Reacting to the release of the new map by Nepal, the spokesperson for India’s Ministry of External Affairs said:

“...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...”²¹

Why these tensions over India-Nepal Border?

The root of all border-related tensions lay in the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816, which ended the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-16), also known as the Gorkha War. That treaty demarcated the border between the British East India Company (EIC) and the then Nepali kingdom. Under the provisions of article III of the Sugauli Treaty, Nepal ceded territory to the EIC, Northwest to India. Under Article V of the Sugauli Treaty, Nepal had to renounce “all claim to or connection with the countries lying to the west of the River Kali...”²² Some of the regions in Garhwal and Kumaon in Uttarakhand, which Gorkha/Gurkha king surrendered under Sugauli Treaty were annexed by them before.²³

¹⁹ “Nepal to issue new political map incorporating Lipulekh, Kalapani, Limpiyadhura; claims its territories” ANI, 15 May 2020. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/nepal-to-issue-new-political-map-incorporating-lipulekh-kalapani-limpiyadhura-claims-its-territories20200515223046/>. Accessed on 18 May 2020.

²⁰ Raman Paudel, Nepal Cabinet Approves New Map Showing Land Disputed With India as Nepali Territory” *The Wire*, 19 May 2020. <https://thewire.in/south-asia/nepal-cabinet-approves-new-map-showing-land-disputed-with-india-as-nepali-territory>. Accessed on 19 May 2020.

²¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Official Spokesperson’s response to media queries on the revised map of Nepal released today by Government of Nepal”. https://mea.gov.in/response-to-queries.htm?dtl/32697/Official_Spokespersons_response_to_media_queries_on_the_revised_map_of_Nepal_released_today_by_Government_of_Nepal. Accessed on 21 May 2020.

²² “Sugauli Treaty of 1816: Full Text”. <http://nepaldevelopment.pbworks.com/w/page/34197552/Sughauli%20Treaty%20of%201815%3A%20Full%20Text#MemorandumfortheapprovalandacceptanceoftheRajaofNipal>. Accessed on 9 November 2019.

²³ S D Muni, “Lipu Lekh: The past, present and future of the Nepal-India stand-off”, *Hindustan Times*, 20 May 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/lipu-lekh-the-past-present-and-future-of-the-nepal-india-stand-off-analysis/story-wy30vSD0G0nkxtGQTOlp2l.html>. Accessed on 23 May 2020.

While demarcating the boundary line, the Sugauli Treaty did not clearly define the place of origin of River Kali, a demarcation point between India and Nepal in the Himalayas. This point of origin is being contested by both the countries. Nepal claims that River Kali originates from Parbatikund in Limpiyadhura while, for India, it has its origin in the East of Limpiyadhura in Kalapani.²⁴ More confusing than the Sugauli Treaty are a number of maps produced by the EIC and the British colonial rulers in India. Nepal uses the EIC's maps and surveys from 1816 to 1860 to substantiate its claims, but almost all of those drawn afterwards validate India's position. Post-1860 maps and surveys show Kalapani and Navidhang as Indian territories.²⁵ In 1860, another treaty between British India and Nepal was signed to re-adjust some of their border areas which remained unresolved after Sugauli Treaty.²⁶

About such differences over maps, Kanak Mani Dixit and Tika P Dhakal observe that after British colonial rulers of India realised the value of Lipulekh "for trade with Tibet and understood it to be the main pilgrimage route to Kailash-Manasarovar from the Ganga plains, it seems to have got acquisitive. After producing successive maps identifying the Kali as the river course going up to the Limpiyadhura heights, maps published by the Company after 1860 suddenly began to identify Kali as the rivulet (Lipu Khola) that came down from Lipu Lek."²⁷ After independence of India in 1947, Dixit and Dhakal write that nobody knew what the understanding was between India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Nepal's King Mahendra that "the Limpiyadhura triangle remained in limbo, in the northwest corner of Nepal."²⁸ During Panchayat rule from 1969 to 1990, Narayanhiti Palace was the power centre. It decided, as Dixit and Dhakal believe, to remain quiet over the issue of north-western boundary with India.²⁹ One cannot completely agree with the two authors on this as King Mahendra did take many decisions which annoyed India. Hence, a question arises – If King Mahendra knew, why did he decide to remain quiet? In the absence of an answer, it is being comfortably maintained that, only after the 1990s when the archives were opened, did Nepali bureaucrats come to know about the old maps.³⁰

Second, after the protests erupted against the updated Indian map showing Kalapani as its territory, India pointed at "vested interests" and said that they are "out there to create some differences between the two countries."³¹ In the case of Lipulekh, the Indian Chief of Army Staff, General M M Naravane, said that Nepal was doing this at the behest of

²⁴ Gaurab Shumsher Thapa, "Nepal and India must talk and resolve the Kalapani issue amicably", *South Asia Monitor*, 20 November 2019. <https://southasiamonitor.org/news/nepal-and-india-must-talk-and-resolve-the-kalapani-issue-amicably/sl/31231>. Accessed on 22 November 2019.

²⁵ Arun Budhathoki, "India's Updated Political Map Sparks Controversy in Nepal", *The Diplomat*, 11 November 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/indias-updated-political-map-sparks-controversy-in-nepal/>. Accessed on 11 November 2019.

²⁶ "Sugauli Treaty of 1816: Full Text", op cit.

²⁷ Kanak Mani Dixit & Tika P Dhakal, "Territoriality amidst Covid-19: A primer to the Lipu Lek conflict between India and Nepal", *Scroll.in*, 19 May 2020. <https://scroll.in/article/962226/territoriality-amidst-covid-19-a-primer-to-the-lipu-lek-conflict-between-india-and-nepal>. Accessed on 20 May 2020.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by Official Spokesperson", 7 November 2019. https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/32019/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_Official_Spokesperson_November_7_2019. Accessed on 12 November 2019.

“someone else”.³² The Nepali cabinet expressed serious reservations over General Naravane’s statement.³³

By alluding to China for the protests against India in Nepal, India cannot dismissively shrug its own responsibility for widening the distance between Kathmandu and New Delhi. In 1950s many Nepalis did not like Nehru’s use of term “special relationship” between India and Nepal.³⁴ Years after, knowingly or unknowingly, in 1969, Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, Dinesh Singh, during his visit to Kathmandu, again emphasised on the “special relationship” between India and Nepal.³⁵ The Chinese media sensed the Nepali’s dislike for this term and made it an issue. In its 28 June 1969 issue, Chinese news agency, *Hsinhua*, called this “special relationship” a part of India’s expansionist policy.³⁶ At that time a sizeable number of Nepalis believed in such interpretation of “special relationship” and protested against the presence of Indian check posts in the northwestern border with Nepal. Even after four decades, despite Nepal’s dislike, the term “special relationship” is being used by many in India to describe the country’s relationships with Nepal.

After the economic blockade of 2015-16, which the government of India does not accept, Nepal appraised its relations with India and entered into a number of agreements with China on trade, transport and to explore alternative supply routes. In 2017, Nepal also signed a memorandum of understanding with China to become a party to the Belt and Road Initiative. China even opened an academy to train the Armed Police Force and the Nepali paramilitary force deployed mainly to guard the Nepal-Tibet border from possible infiltration of “Free Tibet” activists into Nepal.³⁷ Their armies also participated in joint military exercises in 2017 and 2018.

Third, there has been an absence or long gap in India-Nepal dialogues over boundary demarcation differences. In response to the escalation of border-related tensions, India and Nepal agreed to set up a technical level Joint Nepal-India Boundary Committee in December 1980.³⁸ In 1981, Nepal demanded a scientific delineation of the India-Nepal border.³⁹ In the 1980s, the Committee demarcated everything except the problem area in Susta.⁴⁰ In 1988, India and Nepal agreed on the principle of “fixed border” while determining their border.⁴¹

³² Rajat Pandit, “Army Chief hints at China’s hand behind Nepal’s protest against the Link road to Lipulekh”, *The Times of India*, 15 May 2020. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/army-chief-hints-at-chinese-hand-behind-nepals-protest-against-the-link-road-to-lipulekh-pass/articleshow/75760911.cms>. Accessed on 18 May 2020.

³³ Tilak R Pradhan & Anil Giri, “Cabinet endorses new political map that includes all territories that Nepal claims”, *The Kathmandu Post*, 18 May 2020. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/05/18/cabinet-endorses-new-political-map-that-includes-all-territories-that-nepal-claims>. Accessed on 18 May 2020.

³⁴ Bhasin, Avtar Singh (2005), *Nepal-India, Nepal China Relations: Documents 1947-June 2005 Volume 1*. New Delhi: Geetika Publications.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 523.

³⁷ Biswas Baral, “After the ‘Blockade’: China’s Push into Nepal”, *The Diplomat*, 1 February 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/02/after-the-blockade-chinas-push-into-nepal/>. Accessed on 28 February 2018.

³⁸ Bhasin, Avtar Singh, op cit, p. 711.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Nirupama Subramanian, op. cit.

⁴¹ Kallol Bhattacharjee, op cit.

In 1997, Nepal's then Deputy Prime Minister Bamdev Gautam raised the issue of Kalapani with Indian Prime Minister, Inder Kumar Gujral, when the latter visited Kathmandu. In a joint statement, Gujral and Gautam agreed to refer the Kalapani issue to the Joint Technical Level Boundary Committee, headed by the surveyor-generals of India and Nepal.⁴² It was the first time the issue was politically raised by Nepal with India. In 2000, India's Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and his Nepalese counterpart, B P Koirala, agreed to demarcate their outstanding areas by 2002.⁴³ Later, in 2001, Nepali Prime Minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, and Vajpayee reiterated that, in case the Joint Technical Level Boundary Committee was unable to reach at a mutually acceptable agreement on certain specific segments of the boundary, detailed reports on these pockets, including a compilation of the available evidence, would be submitted to the two governments for their consideration.⁴⁴ This has not happened.⁴⁵

In 2014, after a gap of 23 years, India and Nepal held a third joint commission meeting led by the foreign ministers from the two countries. In that meeting the foreign secretaries of the respective countries were directed to resolve its bilateral issues. The last meeting of joint commission led by the foreign ministers from the two countries was held in August 2019 in Kathmandu. At present, Nepal is "extremely upset"⁴⁶ because India has not held foreign secretary-level talks on their boundary issues, to which the sides agreed as far back as 2014.⁴⁷

Fourth, in the 1954 Peaceful Co-Existence Agreement, India and China accepted Lipulekh as one of cultural and commercial transit points.⁴⁸ Trade between India and China through Lipulekh pass was resumed in 1992. This route helps traders from the border region of Uttarakhand to trade with Tibetan traders in the Taklakot region of western Tibetan district of China. Such trade takes place from June to September each year.⁴⁹ In 2014, India and China discussed using it as an additional meeting point for the border personnel from the two countries. In 2015, in their joint statement, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping mentioned Lipulekh as a bilateral trade route between the two countries. This reference was then opposed by the Nepal's government which said that it was against the provisions of the 1816 Sugauli Treaty signed between Nepal and British

⁴² Jaideep Mazumdar, "Explained: How the Dispute with Nepal Over Kalapani Is a Legacy of I K Gujral's Misplaced Altruism", *Swarajya*, 20 May 2020, <https://swarajyamag.com/politics/explained-how-the-dispute-with-nepal-over-kalapani-is-a-legacy-of-i-k-gujrals-misplaced-altruism>. Accessed on 20 May 2020; and Ramananda Sengupta and Akhilesh Upadhayay, "In Dark Waters", *Outlook*, 20 July 1998. <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/in-dark-waters/205875>. Accessed on 20 May 2020.

⁴³ Nirupama Subramanian, op cit.

⁴⁴ Bhasin, Avtar Singh, op cit.

⁴⁵ Nirupama Subramanian, op cit.

⁴⁶ Nayanima Basu & Amrita Nayak Dutta, "Nepal wants India to settle Lipulekh border issue before talks on new Kailash Mansarovar road", *The Print*, 11 May 2020, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/nepal-wants-india-to-settle-lipulekh-border-issue-before-talks-on-new-kailash-mansarovar-road/418720/>. Accessed on 17 May 2020.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ S D Muni, op cit.

⁴⁹ "Border trade between India, China through Lipulekh concludes", *Financial Express*, 31 October 2017. <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/border-trade-between-india-china-through-lipulekh-concludes/914371/>. Accessed on 21 November 2019.

India.⁵⁰ Gyawali stated, “The Nepal government does not accept Lipulekh as tri-junction between Nepal, India and China. It will be finalised only after Nepal and India agree to demarcation.”⁵¹

Since then, no steps have been taken to resolve the issue. Even after the Kalapani row, Nepal had first sought foreign secretary-level talks. On 8 November 2019, Nepali Ambassador to India, Nilamber Acharya, met Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhle and communicated Nepal’s request for the talks.⁵² However, the meeting was not finalised, as India was waiting for a new foreign secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, to take charge of the office on 29 January 2020, after which the COVID-19 crisis erupted.⁵³

Fifth, in 2016, the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) was formed with members from both countries to look at gamut of bilateral issues, including their border disputes. After a detailed study, the EPG submitted its report in 2018.⁵⁴ Nepal has been pushing India to “seriously consider” the EPG report.⁵⁵ In its press release on Lipulekh, Nepal has expressed the belief that the EPG report will help the two countries address the issues left by history.⁵⁶ India has to clear its stand on the EPG report. Besides, there is a need to make the report public.

Sixth, public statements by officials and political leaders often complicate India-Nepal relations. For example, in 1998, the Indian Ambassador to Nepal, K V Rajan, made a statement which stressed that the successive British-Indian and Nepali governments had acknowledged Indian sovereignty over Kalapani.⁵⁷ There were agitations led by the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist). Nepal’s Prime Minister, Girija Prasad Koirala, also publicly expressed his displeasure over it. The matter became silent after Rajan came out with some clarification saying his statement was “misinterpreted”.⁵⁸

As tensions between India and Nepal escalated over the border issue, Oli did not help matters when he made a politically offensive statement, “Those who are coming from India through illegal channels are spreading the virus in the country and some local representatives and party leaders are responsible for bringing in people from India without proper testing...Indian virus looks more lethal than Chinese and Italian now. More are

⁵⁰ “Kalapani Nepali territory: Govt”, *The Himalayan*, 7 November 2019. <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/kalapani-nepali-territory-government/>. Accessed on 8 November 2019.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Anil Giri, “No progress on initiating talks with India on Kalapani issue”, *The Kathmandu Post*, 5 December 2019. <https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2019/12/05/no-progress-on-initiating-talks-with-india-on-kalapani-issue>. Accessed on 28 December 2019.

⁵³ “Nepal Foreign Minister Summons Indian Ambassador Over Lipulekh Boundary Issue”, op cit.

⁵⁴ Kamaldev Bhattarai, “Nepal Fumes Over Kalapani in New Indian Road Map; ‘Accurate,’ Says MEA”, *The Wire*, 7 November 2019. <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/nepal-india>. Accessed on 8 November 2019.

⁵⁵ Nayanima Basu, “Lipulekh row deepens, Nepal summons Indian envoy and hands over ‘diplomatic note’”, *The Print*, 11 May 2020. <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/lipulekh-row-deepens-nepal-summons-indian-envoy-and-hands-over-diplomatic-note/419051/>. Accessed on 17 May 2020.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal Press Release, op cit.

⁵⁷ Ramananda Sengupta and Akhilesh Upadhyay, op cit.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

getting infected.”⁵⁹ Oli was speaking on the Coronavirus situation in his country but the statement cannot be read in isolation without linking it with the ongoing border rift between India and Nepal.

Finally, more than often, Nepali leaders use confrontational issues with India as political rhetoric and rarely show keen interest in formal engagement over them. One such issue is the India-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950 about which Former Foreign Secretary of India, Shyam Saran, who was also the Indian Ambassador to Nepal, writes, “The Indian side agreed in 2001 to hold talks at the foreign secretary level to come up with a revised treaty – one that, in the Nepali eyes, would be more “equal” with reciprocal obligations and entitlements. Only one such round of talks has taken place.”⁶⁰ Then, in 2003, India was all ready to discuss the revision of friendship treaty but the Nepali side dropped it from the agenda. The purpose of raising such issues in Nepal, as Saran also indicates, is, largely, to show that it is taking up the matter seriously with India.⁶¹

The current protests in Nepal against India over Lipulekh is also looked at as an attempt by the Oli government to please his domestic constituency along with a “foreign country”, as Naravane hinted. Since 2015 China has been very supportive to Oli. A recent example of this is when, in an intra-party power row, senior NCP leaders like Dahal, Madhav Kumar Nepal and Jhala Nath Khanal called for Oli’s resignation,⁶² it was reported that the Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, Hou Yanqi, held a series of meetings with these senior leaders⁶³ and eventually managed to save Oli’s position.

Conclusion

Plans to build road near the Line of Actual Control was first conceptualised by India in the late 1990s and construction of roads began by 1999.⁶⁴ Since then, many deadlines were ignored before the 73-day military stand-off at Doklam in Bhutan occurred between the Indian and Chinese armies in 2017. After the stand-off, when the Indian government took stock of road projects, to its shock, it found that, of many planned, only 22 projects had been completed. To accelerate the road construction, in 2019, a higher budget was allocated to the Border Road Organisation.⁶⁵ Road link at Lipulkekh tri-junction is an important project of the BRO.

⁵⁹ Nidhi Razdan, “Indian Virus Looks More Lethal Than Chinese, Italian”: Nepal PM’s Attack”, *NDTV*, 20 May 2020. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-nepal-pms-attack-indian-virus-looks-more-lethal-than-chinese-italian-2232041>. Accessed on 20 May 2020.

⁶⁰ Shyam Saran, “India, Nepal must seek mutually acceptable solutions to controversy over new map”, *The Indian Express*, 27 November 2019. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-nepal-border-map-kalapani-6138381/>. Accessed on 21 May 2020.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Anil Giri, “In a series of meetings, Chinese envoy calls for unity among ruling party members”, *The Kathmandu Post*, 2 May 2020. <https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2020/05/02/in-a-series-of-meetings-chinese-envoy-calls-for-unity-among-ruling-party-members>. Accessed on 12 May 2020.

⁶³ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “China interferes in Nepal to save Communist Party government”, *The Economic Times*, 2 May 2020. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-interferes-in-nepal-to-save-communist-party-government/articleshow/75501921.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on 4 May 2020.

⁶⁴ Nirupama Subramanian, op cit.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

India and Nepal share about 1,800 kilometres of border. Of the total, the two countries have managed to settle about 98 per cent, which is reflected in the 182 strip maps initialled by them.⁶⁶ There are more than 8,500 boundary pillars installed that reflect the agreed alignment.⁶⁷ Differences over the remaining two per cent of the border issues often create unpleasant situations.

Unless protests take place and diplomatic stand-off occur, the boundary issues between India and Nepal are largely ignored by the two countries. Even then, many in India do not consider it as serious issue. For example, Ranjit Rae, India's former Ambassador to Nepal, stated that the Lipulekh row is not "such a big issue".⁶⁸ It may not be a big issue for India but Nepal takes it seriously. Diplomatic tensions over Lipulekh provide the opportunity for both sides to resolve all their boundary demarcation issues once and for all. Frequent tensions over them harm bilateral relations between the two neighbours.

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⁶⁶ Shyam Saran, op cit.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Nayanima Basu & Amrita Nayak, op cit.