



India–Nepal Border Dispute after Political Change: Continuity and Change in Nepal’s Approach to Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura

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ABSTRACT

The Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura dispute represents one of the most persistent and politically sensitive territorial disagreements between India and Nepal. Although its origins lie in the nineteenth-century Treaty of Sugauli, the dispute acquired renewed salience after India published a new political map in 2019 and inaugurated a road toward Lipulekh in 2020, followed by Nepal's publication and constitutional recognition of a revised political map incorporating Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura. Existing scholarship has primarily examined the dispute through historical, cartographic, legal, nationalist and geopolitical perspectives. This article extends that literature by examining the dispute in the context of Nepal's political transition following the 2025 youth-led protests and the emergence of Balendra Shah's government in 2026. It asks whether the political transition has produced a substantive change in Nepal's border policy or merely changed the diplomatic strategy through which Kathmandu continues to pursue its territorial claims. Using a qualitative case-study methodology, process tracing and discourse analysis of official statements, diplomatic developments and existing scholarship, the article argues that the political transition has not

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fundamentally altered Nepal's territorial position. Instead, it has introduced a more pragmatic combination of sovereignty-based nationalism, diplomatic engagement and strategic autonomy. The 2026 Lipulekh controversy demonstrates that territorial claims remain politically salient, but the new government's simultaneous emphasis on dialogue and relations with India suggests an attempt to separate the border dispute from the broader bilateral relationship. The article concludes that the future of the dispute will depend less on unilateral cartographic assertions and more on whether India and Nepal can revive substantive boundary negotiations while insulating wider bilateral cooperation from territorial disagreement.

1. Introduction

Territorial disputes remain among the most persistent sources of tension in international politics because they combine questions of sovereignty, national identity, security and political legitimacy. The India–Nepal boundary dispute over Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura is a particularly significant example. Unlike many international borders, the India–Nepal boundary exists within a relationship characterized simultaneously by extensive social interaction, economic interdependence, open-border arrangements, military cooperation and political contestation. The persistence of the Kalapani dispute therefore presents a puzzle: why has a territorial disagreement between two states with historically close social and political relations remained unresolved for decades?

The contemporary dispute concerns the interpretation of the western boundary established after the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814–1816 and formalized through the Treaty of Sugauli. At the centre of the disagreement is the identification of the source of the Kali River, which the treaty used as a boundary reference. Nepal identifies the river's source with the Limpiyadhura area, thereby placing Kalapani and Lipulekh to the east of the river and within Nepal's claimed territory. India disputes this interpretation and has maintained administrative and physical control over the area. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that the ambiguity surrounding the river's origin, combined with competing historical maps and subsequent administrative practices, lies at the core of the dispute. The dispute entered a new phase in 2019–2020. India's 2019 political map and its subsequent road construction toward Lipulekh generated strong protests from Nepal. Kathmandu subsequently issued a new political map incorporating Kalapani, Lipulekh and



Limpiyadhura and amended its constitutional schedules to reflect the revised map. The episode transformed a relatively contained boundary disagreement into a major issue of Nepali territorial nationalism and bilateral diplomacy. Scholarship has demonstrated that, after 2019, the dispute became increasingly connected with nationalism and wider South Asian geopolitics.

The political context changed significantly in Nepal in 2025–2026. Youth-led protests against corruption, political instability and the established political order forced Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli from office. Parliamentary elections followed in March 2026, and Balendra Shah, a former mayor of Kathmandu and leader of the Rastriya Swatantra Party, became prime minister. The transition represented a major change in Nepal's political leadership and party system.

This transition raises a new question for the study of India–Nepal relations. Has the political transformation in Kathmandu altered Nepal's approach to the Kalapani dispute? Or has it merely produced a different diplomatic style while leaving the underlying territorial claim unchanged?

This article addresses this question through the following central research question: How has Nepal's political transition after 2025 affected the diplomatic and political management of the Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura dispute with India?

Three subsidiary questions guide the analysis:

1. What historical, legal and geopolitical factors explain the persistence of the dispute?
2. How did the 2019–2020 crisis transform the dispute into an issue of nationalism and security?
3. Does the post-2025 political leadership represent a substantive change in Nepal's border policy or a change in diplomatic strategy?

The article advances three arguments. First, Nepal's territorial claim has remained substantially continuous despite political change. Second, the new political leadership appears to combine sovereignty-based nationalism with greater emphasis on dialogue and diplomatic engagement. Third, the dispute cannot be understood independently of the India–China strategic environment because Lipulekh is located within a strategically sensitive Himalayan frontier.

The paper makes three contributions. Empirically, it brings the analysis of the dispute into the post-2025 political context and incorporates developments through August 2026. Theoretically, it connects border politics with small-state strategic autonomy and securitization. Conceptually, it distinguishes between policy



continuity—the continued territorial claim—and strategic change—the means through which that claim is pursued.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical and legal approaches

The first major body of scholarship examines the dispute through the history of the India–Nepal boundary and the Treaty of Sugauli. These studies emphasize the importance of determining what the treaty meant by the Kali River and where its source should be located

The fundamental difficulty is that the treaty established the Kali River as a boundary but did not resolve the precise source of the river in a manner that eliminates later disagreement. Nepal's position identifies Limpiyadhura as the source, while India relies on a different interpretation of the river system and historical administrative evidence. Contemporary scholarship therefore identifies the river-source question as a central reason why the dispute has remained unresolved. Legal scholarship also examines the relevance of historical administrative control, inherited colonial boundaries and principles of international law. The legal debate demonstrates that neither historical cartography nor contemporary administration can be considered in isolation. The dispute involves competing interpretations of treaty language, maps, river geography and subsequent state practice.

The legal literature is important but has two limitations. First, it often concentrates on which state's legal interpretation is stronger rather than on how territorial claims become politically constructed. Second, it gives relatively limited attention to the relationship between domestic political change and the diplomatic management of territorial disputes.

2.2 Cartography and the politics of maps

A second body of literature focuses on maps. Maps are not simply technical representations of territory; they can become political instruments through which states visualize and communicate sovereignty.

The 2019 Indian map and the 2020 Nepali map demonstrate this clearly. Nepal's new map incorporated Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura, while India rejected the claim. Consequently, cartography became part of the diplomatic conflict itself.

The political importance of maps became particularly pronounced because the dispute was already embedded within a nationalist political environment. The map provided a visible representation of territorial



sovereignty and became an instrument through which political actors could demonstrate commitment to national territory.

2.3 Nationalism and the India–Nepal relationship

A third body of literature places nationalism at the centre of the dispute. Aryal and Pulami argue that after 2019 the Kalapani issue became more than a bilateral territorial disagreement: it became intertwined with nationalism in both India and Nepal and with the broader geopolitics of South Asia.

Behera, Nayak and P. similarly demonstrate that territorial nationalism has significant implications for India–Nepal relations. Their analysis is particularly useful because it emphasizes that nationalism in Nepal is not a single, homogeneous phenomenon. Different social and political groups construct Nepalese identity in different ways, while the "India factor" has become particularly important in territorial nationalist discourse.

This literature suggests that territorial disputes can become politically valuable because governments and opposition groups can use them to demonstrate commitment to sovereignty. Consequently, even when diplomatic negotiations might be rational from a foreign-policy perspective, domestic political incentives may make compromise difficult.

2.4 Securitization and border politics

A fourth strand uses securitization theory. Sharma's study of the Kalapani escalation applies the Copenhagen School framework to demonstrate how a territorial issue can be transformed into a security question. The study emphasizes that the Kalapani dispute is not merely about a line on a map but also involves political discourse, security narratives and borderland populations.

Securitization theory is particularly useful for understanding why territorial disagreements become difficult to resolve. Once a territorial claim is presented as an existential issue concerning national sovereignty, compromise may be represented domestically as weakness or betrayal.

This framework also helps explain why military and strategic considerations have become associated with the dispute. Kalapani is situated in a strategically sensitive region near the India–China frontier. Research on Himalayan water and security politics similarly demonstrates how territorial and resource questions can become securitized through the involvement of diplomatic, military and bureaucratic institutions.



2.5 Geopolitical approaches

The fifth body of literature places the dispute within India–China competition. Lipulekh is strategically significant because it lies in a region connecting India, Nepal and Tibet/China. The location has implications for border security, connectivity, pilgrimage and trade.

From India's perspective, the area has strategic significance because of its proximity to China. From Nepal's perspective, the same geography creates an opportunity and a constraint: Nepal can use its strategic position to pursue autonomy, but it must simultaneously manage relations with two much larger neighbours.

The geopolitical literature therefore helps explain why the dispute has consequences beyond bilateral India–Nepal relations.

3. Research Gap and Theoretical Framework

3.1 Research gap

Existing scholarship provides substantial explanations of the Kalapani dispute through history, international law, cartography, nationalism, securitization and geopolitics. However, there is comparatively less analysis of how a major political transition within Nepal changes the management of the dispute.

Most studies examining the contemporary escalation concentrate on the 2019–2020 period. Aryal and Pulami, for example, identify the post-2019 relationship between territorial disputes, nationalism and geopolitics. Sharma's work similarly concentrates on the escalation around Kalapani and its securitization.

The present study extends these approaches by asking whether Nepal's post-2025 political transition has altered the relationship between territorial nationalism and diplomacy.

The research gap can therefore be expressed as follows:

The existing literature explains why the Kalapani dispute intensified, but provides limited analysis of whether Nepal's post-2025 political transition has changed the strategy through which Kathmandu manages the dispute.

3.2 Small-state strategic autonomy

The primary theoretical framework employed in this study is small-state strategic autonomy.



Nepal's foreign-policy environment is shaped by its geographical location between India and China. It cannot exercise the same material power as either neighbour and therefore has incentives to diversify external relationships and preserve decision-making autonomy.

Strategic autonomy does not necessarily mean neutrality. Rather, it can involve maintaining relationships with competing powers without becoming excessively dependent upon either.

The Kalapani dispute therefore provides a useful case through which to examine whether Nepal uses territorial diplomacy as part of a broader strategy of autonomy.

3.3 Securitization theory

Securitization provides a complementary framework.

The central proposition is that political actors can transform an issue into a security threat through political discourse. In the Kalapani case, territorial sovereignty can be framed as an existential national concern.

The securitization process can be represented as:

Territorial ambiguity → political discourse → sovereignty threat → nationalist mobilisation → diplomatic escalation

The reverse process—desecuritization—would involve moving the issue from emergency politics back into ordinary diplomatic negotiation.

This framework is useful for evaluating whether the post-2025 government is attempting to maintain the territorial claim while reducing the intensity of securitized confrontation.

4. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative single-case-study design.

Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura is selected as the case because it represents the intersection of territorial sovereignty, nationalism, security and India–China geopolitics.

The study covers the period 2019–2026. The year 2019 is selected as the starting point because the publication of India's new political map generated renewed political attention, while 2020 witnessed the Lipulekh road controversy and Nepal's revised political map. The period after 2025 is examined separately because Nepal experienced a major political transition and a new government under Balendra Shah.



The study uses two categories of evidence.

Primary sources

These include:

- statements of the Nepalese Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
- statements of India's Ministry of External Affairs;
- official diplomatic communications;
- government statements;
- parliamentary statements;
- Boundary Working Group documents;
- official maps and treaty documents.

For example, the Nepal–India Boundary Working Group met in July 2025 and agreed on updated procedures for boundary-pillar inspection, repair and maintenance and the use of new survey and mapping technologies.

Secondary sources

These include:

- peer-reviewed journal articles;
- books;
- academic research;
- think-tank studies;
- high-quality contemporary reporting.

The study employs process tracing to identify changes between the 2019–2020 period and the post-2025 period. It also uses qualitative discourse analysis to examine how sovereignty, nationalism, negotiation and strategic autonomy are articulated by political actors.



5. Historical Foundations of the Dispute

5.1 Treaty of Sugauli

The origins of the dispute lie in the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814–1816 and the subsequent Treaty of Sugauli.

The treaty established the Kali River as a major reference point for the western boundary of Nepal. However, it did not settle the precise geographical origin of the river in a way that prevented later disagreement.

This ambiguity became increasingly consequential as the political geography of the Himalayas changed.

5.2 The Kali River question

The central geographical question is:

Which stream constitutes the source of the Kali/Mahakali River?

Nepal's interpretation places the source at Limpiyadhura. Under this interpretation, Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura fall within Nepal.

India's interpretation identifies a different source and emphasizes historical administrative evidence and effective control.

The disagreement therefore involves two different forms of evidence:

Nepal: treaty interpretation + historical maps + river source

India: alternative river interpretation + administrative records + effective control

6. The result is a classic problem of boundary ambiguity The 2019–2020 Crisis

6.1 The 2019 Indian political map

The dispute entered a more visible phase in 2019 when India published a new political map following the reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir. Nepal objected to the inclusion of territory that it regarded as belonging to Nepal.

Although India maintained that the map accurately reflected its territorial boundaries, Nepal interpreted the development as confirmation of an Indian territorial claim.



6.2 Lipulekh road controversy

In May 2020, India inaugurated a road toward Lipulekh. Nepal protested, arguing that the road passed through territory claimed by Nepal.

The episode produced an immediate diplomatic escalation.

6.3 Nepal's revised political map

Nepal subsequently published a new map incorporating Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura.

The political importance of the map extended beyond geography. The territorial claim became a highly visible symbol of national sovereignty.

The dispute therefore moved from a relatively technical boundary disagreement into domestic political discourse.

Aryal and Pulami's analysis is especially relevant here: they show that after 2019 the dispute became intertwined with nationalism and wider geopolitical competition. In which historical documents and contemporary state practice point toward competing interpretations

6.4 Securitization

The dispute also became securitized.

Political discourse increasingly framed the issue as a question of territorial occupation and national sovereignty rather than simply an unresolved boundary question.

This development reduced the political space for compromise because any perceived concession could be represented as surrendering national territory

Sharma's securitization analysis demonstrates how the Kalapani dispute escalated through precisely this transformation of territorial politics into security politics.

Nepal's Political Transition, 2025–2026

The domestic context changed dramatically in 2025.

Youth-led protests against corruption, political instability and the established political order contributed to the fall of K. P. Sharma Oli's government. The subsequent March 2026 election produced a major political



realignment, with Balendra Shah and the Rastriya Swatantra Party emerging as the dominant political force. Shah was sworn in as prime minister on 27 March 2026.

This transition is important for foreign-policy analysis because Shah represents a political generation and political formation different from the established parties that dominated Nepalese politics for decades.

However, it would be analytically incorrect to assume that a change of government automatically produces a change in foreign policy.

Instead, the relevant question is whether the new government changes:

1. Nepal's territorial objectives;
2. diplomatic instruments;
3. relationship with India;
4. relationship with China;
5. nationalist discourse.

7. Border Politics under the Shah Government

7.1 Continuity of the territorial claim

The strongest evidence suggests that political transition has not eliminated Nepal's territorial claim.

In August 2025, before Shah took office, Nepal's Foreign Ministry reiterated that Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh and Kalapani were part of Nepal according to its official map.

The political transition therefore should not be interpreted as a renunciation of Nepal's territorial position. Instead, the important change concerns how the issue is articulated and managed.

7.2 The 2026 Lipulekh controversy

In May 2026, Nepal objected to the resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage through Lipulekh.

India rejected Nepal's territorial claim and stated that Nepal's position was not supported by historical facts and evidence. India also emphasized the longstanding use of the Lipulekh route.

The episode demonstrates that the territorial disagreement survived the political transition.



At the same time, the dispute occurred alongside continued efforts to maintain broader bilateral relations. This distinction is important:

Territorial disagreement did not become equivalent to complete bilateral

confrontation.

8. Balendra Shah and a Possible Diplomatic Reorientation

One of the most significant developments after the political transition was Prime Minister Shah's public discussion of the border issue.

In May–June 2026, Shah stated that Nepal and India should address border issues through dialogue. His comments also referred to alleged encroachments in both directions, rather than presenting the relationship exclusively through a narrative of unilateral Indian encroachment.

This is analytically important.

The Shah government's position can be interpreted as combining two seemingly contradictory approaches:

Sovereignty assertion and diplomatic pragmatism.

On the one hand, Nepal continues to maintain its claim over Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura.

On the other hand, the government has indicated an interest in dialogue and wider bilateral engagement.

This supports the argument that the political transition may have produced strategic rather than substantive change.

9. India–Nepal Relations beyond the Border Dispute

A major finding of this study is that the territorial dispute exists within a much larger relationship. India and Nepal maintain extensive links in:

- trade;
- employment and migration;
- energy;
- defence;



- infrastructure;
- culture;
- religion;
- education;
- people-to-people relations.

Consequently, neither side has strong incentives to allow the Kalapani issue to destroy the entire bilateral relationship.

The 2025 Boundary Working Group provides evidence of institutional continuity. The two sides agreed to updated procedures for boundary-pillar maintenance and greater use of modern surveying and mapping technology.

This demonstrates an important distinction between:

unresolved disputed sectors and the functioning of the broader boundary-management system.

The existence of the dispute does not mean that every aspect of border management has collapsed.

10. The China Factor

The India–China dimension is essential to understanding Lipulekh.

The disputed region lies close to the India–China frontier and is strategically important for connectivity, trade, pilgrimage and military considerations.

For India, the Himalayan frontier is closely connected to national security and its relationship with China. For Nepal, relations with China provide an important means of diversifying external partnerships.

This produces a strategic dilemma.

If Nepal moves too close to India, it risks reducing its strategic autonomy.

If Nepal moves too close to China, it risks damaging its relationship with its most important economic and social partner.



Therefore, Nepal has incentives to pursue hedging or strategic autonomy. The Kalapani dispute can consequently serve two functions simultaneously:

1. a sovereignty issue within Nepal's domestic politics;
2. a bargaining and strategic issue within Nepal's relations with India and China.

However, it would be an analytical mistake to assume that Nepal's territorial claim is simply a Chinese proxy strategy. Nepal's territorial concerns have historical and domestic political roots that predate contemporary China–India competition.

11. Discussion

11.1 Has regime change changed Nepal's territorial policy?

The evidence suggests limited change. Nepal continues to claim:

- Kalapani;
- Lipulekh;
- Limpiyadhura.

Therefore, the core territorial objective has remained stable. This supports the first proposition of the study:

Regime change has not fundamentally transformed Nepal's territorial position.

11.2 Has regime change changed diplomatic strategy?

Here the evidence is more suggestive of change.

The new political leadership has emphasized:

- dialogue;
- pragmatic relations;
- broader bilateral engagement;
- strategic autonomy.

The distinction can therefore be expressed as:



Policy objective: continuity Diplomatic strategy: potential change

This distinction is central to understanding post-2025 India–Nepal relations.

11.3 Nationalism remains a constraint

Political change does not automatically eliminate nationalist expectations.

The Kalapani dispute has become embedded within Nepalese territorial nationalism. Scholarship demonstrates that territorial nationalism has significant consequences for Nepal's relationship with India.

A government that attempted to abandon the territorial claim could therefore face domestic political costs.

Consequently, the Shah government has incentives to maintain the claim while simultaneously avoiding permanent confrontation.

This creates a classic small-state foreign-policy dilemma.

11.4 Strategic autonomy and balancing

Nepal's position can be interpreted as an attempt to preserve strategic autonomy. The government needs:

India for:

trade, connectivity, energy, employment and geographical access.

China for:

economic diversification, infrastructure and strategic balancing. The result is not necessarily a choice between India and China.

It is better understood as:

strategic diversification without abandoning either major neighbour.

The border dispute therefore becomes one component of a larger strategy of managing asymmetric relationships.

12. Findings

The study generates five principal findings.



Finding 1: The territorial claim has remained continuous

Political change has not removed Nepal's claim over Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura.

Finding 2: The diplomatic style may be changing

The post-2025 leadership has demonstrated greater interest in dialogue while continuing to defend Nepal's territorial position.

Finding 3: Nationalism remains powerful

Any government in Kathmandu faces domestic political constraints against appearing to compromise on territory.

Finding 4: The dispute is securitized

The issue is not merely technical cartography. It has become associated with sovereignty, national security and identity.

Finding 5: India–China competition magnifies the dispute

Lipulekh's strategic location ensures that the dispute has significance beyond India–Nepal bilateral relations.

13. Theoretical Implications

The case contributes to small-state theory in two ways.

First, Nepal demonstrates that strategic autonomy does not necessarily require neutrality.

A small state can simultaneously defend territorial claims against a powerful neighbour while maintaining economic, diplomatic and security cooperation with that same state.

Second, the case demonstrates the importance of domestic politics in small-state foreign policy.

The government cannot simply calculate foreign-policy interests. It must also respond to nationalist expectations and public perceptions of sovereignty.

Securitization theory further demonstrates why diplomatic resolution is difficult.



Once a border becomes a symbol of national identity, the political costs of compromise increase. Thus:

The persistence of the dispute is produced not only by territorial ambiguity but by the

domestic political meaning attached to territory.

14. Policy Implications

14.1 Resume substantive boundary negotiations

India and Nepal should separate the disputed sectors from technical boundary-management cooperation.

The existence of functioning mechanisms such as the Boundary Working Group provides an institutional foundation for continued engagement.

14.2 Establish a joint historical and cartographic mechanism

Both sides could establish a joint expert group consisting of:

- historians;
- cartographers;
- geographers;
- hydrologists;
- international-law experts.

Its purpose would be to establish a jointly examined evidentiary record.

14.3 Avoid unilateral actions in disputed areas

Infrastructure development, mapping exercises or symbolic political actions in disputed territory can increase nationalist mobilisation.

Both sides therefore have an interest in prior diplomatic consultation.



14.4 Separate border disputes from wider bilateral cooperation

Trade, energy, connectivity and cultural relations should not become hostages to the territorial dispute.

14.5 Encourage desecuritization

Political leaders should avoid presenting every disagreement as an existential threat. The issue should gradually move from:

national security politics

toward:

institutionalized diplomatic negotiation.

15. Conclusion

The Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura dispute represents a complex intersection of history, geography, international law, nationalism, security and geopolitics. Its persistence cannot be explained by the ambiguity of the Treaty of Sugauli alone. Historical ambiguity created the foundation of the dispute, but subsequent administrative practices, competing maps, strategic concerns and domestic nationalism have transformed it into a durable political conflict.

The 2019–2020 crisis represented a major turning point. India's political map and the Lipulekh road controversy generated strong reactions in Nepal, while Nepal's subsequent map incorporating Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura elevated the issue within Nepalese territorial nationalism. Existing scholarship appropriately identifies the connection between territorial dispute, nationalism and geopolitics, while securitization research demonstrates how the issue became framed as a security question.

The political transition of 2025–2026 introduces a new dimension. The rise of

Balendra Shah following youth-led protests and the 2026 election represented a major transformation of Nepal's political leadership. Yet the evidence examined in this article does not demonstrate a fundamental abandonment of Nepal's territorial claims.

Instead, the evidence points toward continuity in objectives and possible change in strategy.

The Shah government has continued to confront the Lipulekh question while simultaneously emphasizing dialogue and broader bilateral engagement. The 2026 Lipulekh controversy illustrates the continuing



salience of territorial sovereignty, while the continuation of bilateral institutional mechanisms demonstrates that the wider India–Nepal relationship remains functional.

The central conclusion is therefore that Nepal's political transition should not be interpreted as a straightforward shift from an anti-India to a pro-India foreign policy, nor as a simple continuation of the previous government's approach. Instead, the emerging policy appears to combine territorial nationalism, diplomatic pragmatism and strategic autonomy.

This finding has broader implications for the study of small states. Nepal's experience demonstrates that small states do not necessarily resolve asymmetric relationships by choosing one powerful neighbour over another. They may instead attempt to maximize autonomy through diversification, negotiation and selective contestation.

For India, the implication is that treating the Kalapani issue exclusively as a bilateral territorial challenge may overlook its domestic political significance in Nepal. For Nepal, the challenge is to defend its sovereignty claims without allowing the dispute to undermine its broader economic and social relationship with India.

Ultimately, the sustainable resolution of the Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura dispute is unlikely to come through competing maps, unilateral infrastructure or nationalist rhetoric. It will require sustained diplomatic engagement, joint examination of historical and geographical evidence, and political willingness on both sides to distinguish legitimate sovereignty concerns from broader bilateral cooperation.

The dispute therefore remains unresolved, but the post-2025 political transition creates an opportunity to ask a different question: not simply who owns the territory, but whether a new generation of political leadership can transform the way the dispute is managed.

That question provides an important direction for future research on India–Nepal relations, Himalayan geopolitics and small-state strategic autonomy.

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