

COLD NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON INDIA-NEPAL TIES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Nepal

India and Nepal have reached a flashpoint over the [Kalapani territorial issue](#) that appears to threaten the basis of their special relationship, which has nurtured open borders and the free movement of people. Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli took New Delhi by surprise this month with an aggressive posture on the issue, especially over the [inauguration of a motorable road](#) to the Lipulekh pass, near the disputed Kalapani area, which is used by Indian pilgrims to Kailash Mansarovar. For India, the Lipulekh pass has always been part of the road to Tibet, and was mentioned as one of the border passes for trade in a 1954 agreement with China, which was also reaffirmed in another trade agreement in 2015. Since 1981, when China re-opened the Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage route for Indians, they have also used the pass to walk into Tibet. The road built now follows the same alignment, and would essentially cut down their travel time by three days each way. As a result, the government has been even angered by Nepal's strong protests, followed by fiery speeches by Mr. Oli and Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali, threatening to send more forces to the India-Nepal border. The Nepali cabinet's decision to adopt a [new political map](#) that claims not only Lipulekh but other areas that are in Indian territory that have been claimed by Nepal [invoking the 1816 Sugauli treaty](#) with the British, was described by India's MEA as "artificial", "unilateral" and "unacceptable". Tensions have also been fuelled by Mr. Oli's jibe that the "Indian virus looks more lethal than the one from China" and the Indian Army Chief's contention that Nepal raised the dispute at the "behest of an external force", namely China.

Boundary disputes are common ground for countries that have an ancient history and shared borders, and the Kalapani issue is one such dispute that India and Nepal have resolved to sort out. It is unfortunate that the respective Foreign Secretaries, tasked by Prime Minister Modi and then Nepal leader Sushil Koirala in 2014 to discuss the matter, have failed to find an acceptable date for a meeting since then. India must concede it has dragged its feet on the issue: even two weeks ago, when matters came to a boil in Kathmandu, the MEA's response that it would convene the meeting after the pandemic had been dealt with, was unnecessarily dismissive of an issue important to Kathmandu. Mr. Oli's government had raised it last November as well; its offer to send a political envoy to New Delhi was rebuffed. It is clear that the struggle within the ruling Nepal Communist Party has spurred Mr. Oli's more combative posture. Given the importance of ties with Nepal, often romanticised as one of "*roti-beti*" (food and marriage), India must not delay dealing with the matter, and at a time when it already has its hands full with the pandemic and a faceoff with China in Ladakh and Sikkim.

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