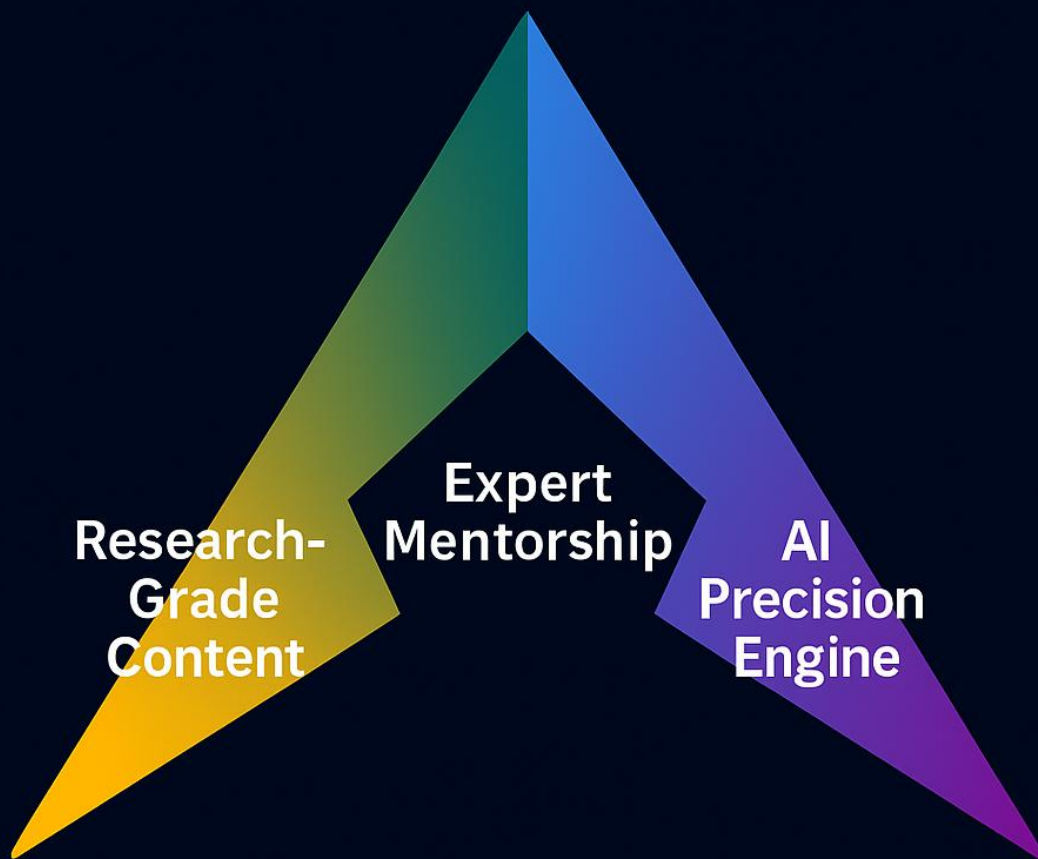


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DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS DATED 10.06.2026

GS Paper II: International Relations

1. New Phase in India–Nepal Relations

a. Introduction

India–Nepal relations occupy a unique place in South Asia. The relationship is shaped by geography, history, culture, religion, migration, trade, security cooperation and an open border. Few bilateral relationships in the region have such deep social foundations. Yet, despite this closeness, India–Nepal ties have periodically faced mistrust, especially over questions of sovereignty, border management, political influence and national dignity.

The recent remarks by Nepal Prime Minister Balendra Shah on the Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura boundary dispute suggest a possible shift in tone. Instead of presenting the issue as entirely one-sided, he indicated that historical facts should be examined objectively and that the dispute should be resolved through diplomatic channels. This marks a potentially important move away from emotional nationalism towards a more pragmatic and institutional approach.

The issue is significant for India because Nepal is not merely a neighbouring country. It is central to India's Himalayan security, sub-regional connectivity, hydropower cooperation, people-to-people linkages and broader neighbourhood policy. Therefore, the management of the boundary dispute must be situated within the larger framework of a historically close but politically changing relationship.

Thus, the present moment may be seen as a possible opening for a more mature, equal and institutionally grounded phase in India–Nepal relations.



b. Background of the Boundary Dispute

- **Areas Under Dispute:** The dispute concerns the areas of Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura, which are claimed by both India and Nepal. Nepal has objected to India–China trade through the Lipulekh Pass, the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra route through Lipulekh, and

India's rejection of Nepal's territorial claims as unjustified and based on unilateral enlargement.

- **India's Position:** India's position is based on the boundary alignment inherited from British India and its long-standing administrative and security arrangements in the region.
- **Nepal's Position:** Nepal, on the other hand, refers to historical records and its interpretation of the origin of the Kali river to support its claim over the disputed areas.
- **Difficulty of Historical Evidence:** The difficulty lies in the nature of historical evidence itself. British-era records are not always uniform, and maps were revised over time as surveying technology improved. A purely archival approach may therefore not easily produce a mutually acceptable answer.

This is why the dispute requires political wisdom along with technical examination.

c. Significance of the Recent Remarks

- **Shift Towards a Sober Tone:** The recent remarks are important because they suggest a more sober diplomatic tone. In South Asia, border disputes often become symbols of national pride, and once they are absorbed into domestic political rhetoric, practical compromise becomes difficult. A willingness to examine historical facts objectively may create space for dialogue.
- **Depth of India-Nepal Relationship:** India-Nepal relations are too deep to be held hostage by one dispute. The two countries share an open border of more than 1,700 kilometres. Millions of people cross this border for work, trade, family ties, pilgrimage, education and daily livelihood.
- **Civilisational and Social Linkages:** There are dense civilisational linkages through Hindu and Buddhist traditions, shared sacred geographies, linguistic connections and long-standing social interactions.
- **Strategic and Military Linkages:** The relationship also includes close military-to-military ties. Gurkha recruitment, defence cooperation, border coordination and security consultations have historically given the relationship a strategic depth.
- **Relationship Beyond Formal Diplomacy:** This makes the India-Nepal relationship different from an ordinary neighbourly relationship. It is not only interstate diplomacy; it is also a lived social relationship across communities.

Therefore, a pragmatic tone on the boundary question can help prevent one issue from overwhelming the wider relationship.

d. Changing Political Tone in Nepal

- **Rise of Sovereignty-Conscious Politics:** Nepal's domestic politics has changed significantly in recent years. A younger generation of leaders and citizens increasingly wants Nepal to be treated not as a junior partner within a "special relationship," but as a sovereign country with equal diplomatic standing.
- **Signs of the New Tone:** This is reflected in Nepal's insistence on protocol parity, reluctance to allow automatic privileged political access to India, stronger objections to trade and religious routes through disputed territory, and a more assertive vocabulary of sovereignty and national dignity.
- **Indian Discomfort with New Assertiveness:** This shift may create discomfort in India because the older model of India-Nepal relations was based on familiarity, informality and a sense of civilisational closeness. However, for many Nepalis, excessive informality is sometimes seen as political intrusion or unequal treatment.
- **Need for Normalised Diplomacy:** The new political tone therefore reflects a broader desire for normalised, respectful and institutionally balanced diplomacy.
- **India's Required Response:** India must understand this change without overreacting to it. Nepal's assertion of sovereignty need not be read as anti-India sentiment in every case. It may also reflect a normal political evolution in a democratic society where citizens expect their leadership to protect national dignity.

Thus, India must adapt from familiarity-based diplomacy to dignity-sensitive diplomacy.

e. Complexity of Boundary Resolution

- **Sensitive Positions on Both Sides:** The Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura dispute is difficult because both sides have strong and sensitive positions.
- **Nepal's Domestic Political Constraint:** Nepal has politically asserted its claim, including through its official map and the printing of its version of the disputed map on currency notes. This has made the dispute part of Nepal's domestic political imagination. Any Nepali government may therefore find it difficult to appear weak on the issue.
- **India's Security Concern:** India, at the same time, has serious security concerns. The disputed area lies close to the India–China–Nepal tri-junction and is strategically significant because of its proximity to the Tibetan region under Chinese control. For India, the status quo is not merely a cartographic question. It is linked with Himalayan defence, military access, surveillance and border management.
- **Need for Political and Technical Handling:** This means that the dispute cannot be resolved through sentimental appeals alone. It requires careful diplomatic handling, technical examination and political accommodation.
- **Risk of Endless Talks:** At the same time, endless expert-level talks without meaningful progress may allow the issue to remain a permanent irritant in bilateral relations.
- **Avoiding Third-Party Involvement:** The involvement of third parties would further complicate the matter. China's stated position that Nepal and India should resolve the dispute bilaterally remains the most practical approach. Bringing China, the United Kingdom or any other external actor into the dispute would likely increase mistrust and reduce flexibility.

Therefore, the boundary dispute requires a bilateral, patient and politically sensitive approach.

f. Diplomatic and Governance Dimension

- **Preventing the Dispute from Overshadowing Relations:** The core diplomatic challenge is to prevent the boundary dispute from overshadowing the wider India–Nepal relationship. Both countries must recognise that rigid legalism and emotional nationalism are insufficient.
- **Need for a Balanced Approach:** A durable approach must combine historical examination, political sensitivity, security realism and respect for sovereignty.
- **India's Responsibility:** India must recognise that Nepal's domestic politics increasingly demands visible equality and protocol dignity. Heavy-handed diplomacy or excessive reliance on old assumptions may deepen resentment.
- **Nepal's Responsibility:** Nepal, on the other hand, must avoid turning every boundary or protocol disagreement into a nationalist confrontation, because long-term national interests are better served by stable and cooperative ties with India.
- **Enlightened Bilateralism:** The relationship requires what may be called enlightened bilateralism. This means a relationship neither trapped in nostalgia about special ties nor poisoned by suspicion. It should be guided by mutual respect, practical cooperation and recognition of each other's core sensitivities.

Thus, the new phase of India–Nepal relations must rest on institutional maturity rather than emotional symbolism.

g. Way Forward

- **Sustain Structured Bilateral Dialogue:** India and Nepal should sustain structured bilateral dialogue on the boundary issue through diplomatic and technical mechanisms. Public escalation should be avoided because it hardens public opinion and narrows the space for compromise.

- **Keep the Dispute Bilateral:** The dispute should remain bilateral. Involving external actors, especially given the sensitive location near China, would make the issue more complex and strategically risky.
- **Explore Interim Practical Arrangements:** Both sides may explore practical interim arrangements while the final settlement remains under discussion. These may include respect for local usage patterns, improved border coordination, pilgrim management, security communication and administrative restraint in sensitive areas.
- **Revive Political Trust:** Political trust must be revived through regular high-level engagement. Diplomatic protocol should be handled carefully so that symbolic irritants do not become substantive disputes.
- **Strengthen Institutional Cooperation:** Institutional cooperation should be strengthened. Military-to-military ties, border management mechanisms, intelligence coordination and local administrative dialogue can reduce misunderstandings and prevent small incidents from becoming major crises.
- **Separate Boundary Dispute from Wider Cooperation:** The boundary dispute should be separated from wider cooperation. Trade, transit, connectivity, tourism, hydropower, education, health, disaster management and people-to-people ties should not be held hostage to territorial disagreement.
- **Respect Mutual Sensitivities:** Finally, both sides must respect each other's sensitivities. India should acknowledge Nepal's sovereignty concerns and need for equal treatment. Nepal should recognise India's security interests near the China border.

A balanced settlement will require dignity for Nepal and strategic assurance for India.

Conclusion

The Kalapani–Lipulekh–Limpiyadhura dispute reflects a deeper challenge in India–Nepal relations: how to manage sovereignty, nationalism and strategic interests within a historically close relationship. The recent pragmatic tone from Nepal's leadership may create an opportunity to reduce emotional confrontation and revive diplomatic engagement.

India and Nepal must avoid both extremes. The relationship cannot be managed through sentimental claims of special friendship alone, nor can it be allowed to deteriorate into suspicion and nationalist rigidity. A durable solution requires diplomatic maturity, patient negotiation, respect for mutual sensitivities and practical arrangements that protect both Nepal's dignity and India's security concerns.

The future of India–Nepal relations will depend on whether both countries can transform a difficult boundary dispute into an opportunity for more equal, mature and trust-based neighbourhood diplomacy.

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