

The Nepal-Tibet War (1788-1792): A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

The Nepal-Tibet War (1788–1792), also known as the Sino-Nepalese War, was a defining conflict in the history of the Himalayan region, involving the Gorkha Kingdom of Nepal, the Tibetan government under the suzerainty of the Qing Dynasty of China, and indirectly the interests of the British East India Company. This research article provides a comprehensive, multi-perspective examination of the war's causes, progression, and consequences. The study employs a qualitative historical methodology that integrates primary Nepali court chronicles, Tibetan monastic records, Qing imperial edicts, and the observations of contemporary European traders and diplomats. The analysis situates the conflict within the broader geopolitical transformations of the late 18th century, including the expansionist policies of Nepal following its unification, the economic importance of trans-Himalayan trade routes, and Qing China's frontier defense strategy. The war began with Nepal's incursion into Tibet in 1788 over coinage and trade disputes, escalated with the Qing military intervention in 1791, and concluded with the Treaty of Betrawati in 1792, which established a tributary relationship between Nepal and China. The findings demonstrate that the war was not only a product of immediate disputes but also a manifestation of structural economic rivalries, political ambitions, and cultural interactions. Its long-term impact included shifts in regional trade patterns, changes in military strategy, and enduring diplomatic precedents in Sino-Nepalese relations.

Keywords: Nepal-Tibet War, Sino-Nepalese War, Qing Dynasty, Himalayan history, Betrawati Treaty

Introduction

The Nepal-Tibet War (1788–1792) stands as one of the most strategically significant conflicts in the Himalayan region during the late eighteenth century. It was not a mere border skirmish, but a complex geopolitical episode involving the Kingdom of Nepal, the Tibetan government under Qing suzerainty, and the direct intervention of the Qing Dynasty itself. At the heart of the conflict lay disputes over trade rights, coinage quality, and territorial sovereignty—issues that were intertwined with the shifting political landscapes of South Asia and East Asia at the time.

Nepal, having only recently completed a remarkable political unification under the leadership of King Prithvi Narayan Shah (r. 1743–1775) and his successors, emerged as a dynamic power in the Himalayan corridor. The Gorkha state's strategic position between the Tibetan plateau and the fertile

plains of northern India allowed it to act as both a conduit and a gatekeeper for trade. This position endowed Nepal with economic leverage but also exposed it to competing pressures from its neighbors. In the decades following unification, Nepal's rulers sought to consolidate their hold over the lucrative trans-Himalayan trade routes that carried salt, wool, gold, and other commodities. These ambitions inevitably brought them into friction with Tibet, which had long been the principal intermediary for trade between China and South Asia.

Tibet, while politically subordinate to the Qing Dynasty since the early eighteenth century, retained significant autonomy in its internal governance. Its control over key passes and markets made it an indispensable partner—and occasional rival—for Nepal. By the 1780s, however, the relationship between Kathmandu and Lhasa had deteriorated sharply. The immediate spark for conflict was a monetary dispute: Nepalese silver coins, which were widely used in Tibetan markets, were alleged to have been debased in silver content, prompting Tibetan authorities to reject them or demand higher exchange rates. For the Gorkha rulers, these measures were perceived as an affront to their economic sovereignty and a deliberate attempt to weaken their influence over regional trade.

The situation was further complicated by the Qing court's broader strategic concerns. Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735–1796) viewed Tibet not only as a religiously significant protectorate but also as a vital buffer zone against potential threats from the west and south. Any instability in Tibet was thus seen as a potential security risk for China's western frontier. The Nepalese incursion into Tibet in 1788 was interpreted in Beijing as an act of aggression that required a decisive imperial response, both to uphold Qing authority and to deter future incursions by other neighbors.

The British East India Company also observed these developments with interest. While the Company was not a direct participant in the Nepal-Tibet War, it recognized the potential implications for trade and diplomacy in the Himalayan region. A strong Nepal under Gorkha leadership could become either a valuable ally or a formidable obstacle to British expansion in northern India. Similarly, any weakening of Qing influence in Tibet could open new opportunities for British commercial and political engagement. This complex web of interests meant that the Nepal-Tibet War resonated far beyond the mountain passes where it was fought.

The war unfolded in two principal phases. In the first phase (1788–1789), Nepalese forces under the regency of Bahadur Shah achieved rapid successes, occupying key trading towns such as Kuti and Kerong. The Kerung Treaty of 1789 temporarily halted hostilities, requiring Tibet to pay annual tribute to Nepal. However, Tibet's failure to meet these obligations reignited tensions, leading to the second phase (1791–1792), in which the Qing launched a major military intervention. General Fuk'anggan's forces advanced into Nepalese territory, compelling the Gorkha rulers to negotiate. The resulting Treaty of Betrawati in 1792 formalized a tributary relationship between Nepal and China, obligating the former to send quinquennial missions to the Qing court in Beijing.

The significance of the Nepal-Tibet War extends well beyond its immediate military outcomes. It marked the beginning of over a century of structured diplomatic contact between Nepal and China, reshaped the economic landscape of trans-Himalayan trade, and influenced the strategic calculations of British India. It also highlighted the limitations of Nepal's military capacity when confronted by a large, organized, and well-supplied imperial force.

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This paper aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the Nepal-Tibet War from multiple perspectives—Nepali, Tibetan, Chinese, and Western—drawing upon a wide range of primary and secondary sources. It will explore the historical context that led to the conflict, analyze its causes in detail, reconstruct the sequence of military operations, and assess the war's political, economic, and cultural consequences. By doing so, the study seeks to illuminate not only the specific dynamics of the war but also the broader patterns of Himalayan geopolitics in the late eighteenth century.

Objective of the Research

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a comprehensive historical analysis of the Nepal-Tibet War (1788–1792) with the aim of uncovering the complex interplay of political, economic, military, and cultural factors that shaped the conflict and its outcomes. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Examine the historical context in which the Nepal-Tibet War emerged, including the geopolitical environment of the Himalayan region in the late eighteenth century and the influence of neighboring powers such as the Qing Dynasty and the British East India Company.
2. Identify and analyze the underlying causes of the war, with particular emphasis on trade disputes, monetary controversies, territorial ambitions, and diplomatic tensions between Nepal, Tibet, and China.
3. Reconstruct the chronology and military strategies employed by both the Nepalese and Qing forces, highlighting key battles, leadership decisions, logistical challenges, and the role of terrain in shaping the conflict's progression.
4. Evaluate the political, economic, and cultural consequences of the war, including its impact on Nepal's sovereignty, the establishment of tributary relations with China, and the restructuring of trans-Himalayan trade routes.
5. Assess the long-term historical significance of the Nepal-Tibet War in shaping regional diplomacy, frontier policies, and the strategic calculations of Himalayan states in subsequent centuries.
6. Contribute to existing historiography by integrating perspectives from Nepali, Tibetan, Chinese, and Western sources, thereby offering a more balanced and multi-perspective understanding of the conflict.

Through this multifaceted approach, the research aims not only to deepen academic understanding of the Nepal-Tibet War but also to shed light on the enduring geopolitical patterns and diplomatic lessons that remain relevant to the Himalayan region today.

Historical Context

The Nepal-Tibet War (1788–1792) unfolded within a broader geopolitical environment shaped by the rise of the Gorkha Kingdom, the complex political status of Tibet under Qing suzerainty, and the strategic calculations of other regional powers such as the British East India Company. Understanding the historical context requires examining the economic, political, and cultural developments in the Himalayan region during the late eighteenth century, as well as the pre-existing relationships between Nepal, Tibet, and China.

The Rise of the Gorkha Kingdom

The unification of Nepal under King Prithvi Narayan Shah (r. 1743–1775) and his successors fundamentally altered the political map of the central Himalayas. Through a combination of military conquest, diplomatic alliances, and strategic marriages, the Gorkha monarchy consolidated control over numerous small principalities, creating a unified state with significant military capabilities (Regmi, 1999; Stiller, 1973). This unification not only provided political stability but also gave Nepal the capacity to pursue an expansionist foreign policy aimed at controlling key mountain passes and lucrative trade routes.

Tibet Under Qing Suzerainty

Since the early eighteenth century, Tibet had been under the political protection of the Qing Dynasty, following the Dzungar–Qing Wars and the subsequent installation of Qing officials in Lhasa (Peteet, 1950). Despite this suzerainty, Tibet retained considerable autonomy in internal governance, particularly in religious and monastic affairs. Economically, Tibet acted as a critical intermediary in trans-Himalayan trade, facilitating the movement of goods such as salt, wool, and gold between China and South Asia. Its strategic position and religious significance made Tibet a focal point for both political and spiritual diplomacy in the region (Shakabpa, 1967).

Economic Interdependence and Tensions

By the late eighteenth century, Nepal and Tibet were deeply economically interdependent. Nepalese merchants operated extensively in Tibetan markets, and the Nepalese silver *mohar* circulated widely in Tibetan trade. However, disputes arose over the alleged debasement of these coins, which Tibetan authorities claimed contained less silver than agreed upon. This monetary dispute disrupted established trade patterns and became a flashpoint for broader political tensions (Ahmad, 1970).

Geopolitical Pressures

The Qing court under Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735–1796) viewed Tibet as a vital buffer zone against potential threats from the west and south. Any instability in Tibet risked undermining Qing influence in the Himalayan frontier. Nepal's growing military assertiveness, combined with Tibet's perceived inability to defend its borders, drew the Qing into closer scrutiny of the region's affairs (Rose, 1971). At the same time, the British East India Company, expanding its control in northern India, monitored events closely, recognizing that shifts in Himalayan power dynamics could affect its own strategic and commercial interests.

Figure 1

Map of the Himalayan region showing Nepal, Tibet, and key passes (Kuti, Kerong, Shigatse) relevant to the 1788–1792 war. Adapted from Rose (1971) and Shakabpa (1967).

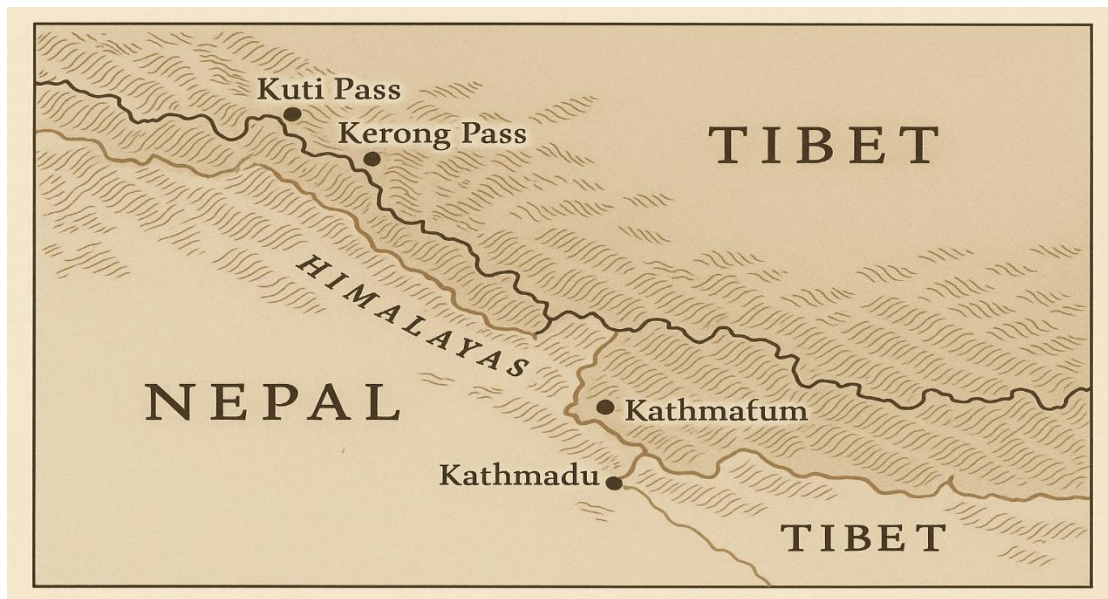


Table 1

Key Economic and Political Factors in the Pre-War Period (1780–1788)

Factor	Nepalese Perspective	Tibetan Perspective	Qing Perspective
Coinage Dispute	Rejection of debasement accusations; viewed as economic sovereignty	Viewed debased coins as undermining market stability	Saw dispute as a threat to Tibetan stability, potentially requiring intervention
Trade Route Control	Strategic objective to dominate Kerong, Kuti, and Shigatse routes	Desire to maintain autonomy over internal trade regulations	Maintain stable frontier trade under Qing oversight
Political Sovereignty	Assertion of Nepal’s independence and regional dominance	Preservation of Tibetan autonomy under Qing suzerainty	Reinforce Qing authority over Tibet
Military Capability	Confident in mountain warfare experience	Dependent on Qing for large-scale defense	Mobilization capacity for frontier expeditions

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design aimed at producing a multi-perspective analysis of the Nepal-Tibet War (1788–1792). The methodology integrates archival research, textual analysis, and historiographical synthesis to reconstruct the events, causes, and consequences of the conflict. The approach is grounded in the principles of critical historiography, which emphasize the triangulation of sources and the contextualization of evidence.

Research Design

The research design is primarily descriptive and interpretive, seeking to reconstruct historical events while also analyzing their broader geopolitical, economic, and cultural implications. The descriptive component focuses on documenting the sequence of events, major actors, and treaty outcomes. The interpretive component evaluates the motivations of the parties involved and the long-term consequences of the war.

Sources of Data

Data for this research were collected from both **primary** and **secondary** sources:

1. Primary Sources

- Nepali Court Chronicles (Vamsavali, royal decrees, and correspondence) preserved in the National Archives of Nepal.
- Tibetan Monastic Chronicles documenting the war and its impact on religious institutions.
- Qing Imperial Records from the Qing Shilu (Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty) and military dispatches.
- Contemporary European Accounts from traders and missionaries active in the Himalayan region during the late eighteenth century.

2. Secondary Sources

- Scholarly monographs and journal articles by historians such as Petech (1950), Rose (1971), Shakabpa (1967), and Stiller (1973).
- Economic history studies focusing on Himalayan trade (Ahmad, 1970; McKay, 2003).
- Military history analyses of Qing frontier campaigns and Nepalese warfare.

Data Collection Methods

Archival materials were accessed through **on-site visits** to the National Archives of Nepal and the Tibetan and Himalayan Library, as well as through digital repositories such as JSTOR and Google Scholar. Historical maps were obtained from open-access collections for the purpose of creating visual representations of the conflict's geographic scope.

Analytical Framework

The analysis followed a triangulation method to ensure accuracy and balance:

- **Source Cross-Verification:** Comparing multiple accounts of the same event to identify consistencies and discrepancies.
- **Contextual Analysis:** Situating events within the broader geopolitical and economic landscape of the late eighteenth century.
- **Thematic Coding:** Categorizing information into themes such as economic causes, military strategies, and diplomatic outcomes.

Limitations of the Study

While the study strives for comprehensiveness, certain limitations remain:

- **Source Bias:** Many primary sources reflect the political perspectives of their originators (e.g., Qing imperial triumphalism or Nepali nationalism).
- **Gaps in Records:** Some battle details and diplomatic negotiations are poorly documented or lost.
- **Translation Challenges:** Primary documents in Classical Chinese, Tibetan, and old Nepali were accessed through scholarly translations, which may introduce interpretive variations.

Results and Discussion

Causes of the War — Economic, Political, and Cultural Dimensions

Economic Drivers

The most immediate and contentious economic cause of the Nepal-Tibet War was the dispute over the quality of Nepalese silver coinage. By the late eighteenth century, the *mohar*, a silver coin minted in Nepal, was the dominant medium of exchange in Tibetan markets (Ahmad, 1970; Stiller, 1973). Tibetan authorities accused Nepalese mints of debasing the coin by reducing its silver content, thereby diminishing its intrinsic value. In response, Tibetan merchants began refusing Nepalese coins or demanding additional silver in exchange for goods.

From Nepal's perspective, the rejection of its currency constituted an attack on its economic sovereignty and a direct threat to its position in the trans-Himalayan trade network. The Gorkha leadership saw the dispute not simply as a monetary issue, but as part of a larger struggle over who controlled the flow of commerce along the Kerong, Kuti, and Shigatse trade corridors.

Table 2
Economic Causes of the Nepal-Tibet War (1788–1792)

Economic Factor	Nepalese Perspective	Tibetan Perspective	Qing Perspective
Silver Coinage Dispute	Attack on sovereignty; seen as deliberate economic sabotage	Protection of domestic markets from debased currency	Potential destabilization of frontier economy
Control of Trade Routes	Essential to state revenue and strategic dominance	Preservation of Tibetan authority over key markets	Maintenance of stable, regulated frontier trade
Tariff and Tax Policies	Objected to Tibetan-imposed trade levies	Viewed tariffs as legitimate sovereign right	Preferred predictable, low-conflict customs arrangements

Political and Territorial Ambitions

The unification of Nepal had given the Gorkha monarchy both the means and the confidence to pursue expansionist policies (Regmi, 1999). Control over Tibetan passes would enhance Nepal's regional prestige and provide leverage against emerging powers like the British East India Company.

For Tibet, resisting Gorkha incursions was not merely about safeguarding territory; it was about maintaining the stability of the Qing-backed political order in Lhasa. Any Nepalese military success could embolden other frontier regions to challenge Qing authority.

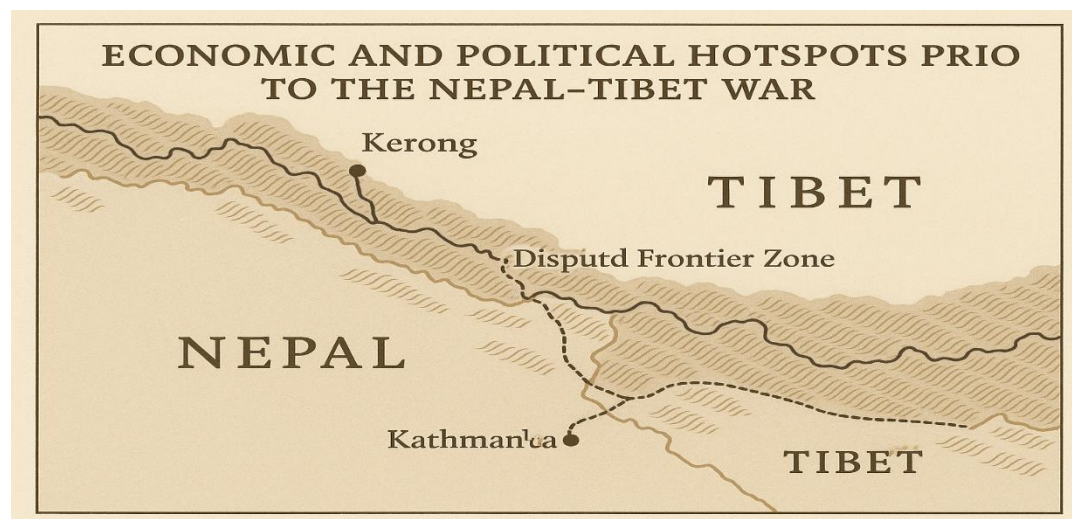
Cultural and Religious Dimensions

Although economic and political issues predominated, cultural and religious factors also influenced the war. Nepal and Tibet had a long history of religious exchange, with Newar artisans contributing significantly to Tibetan Buddhist art. However, the war strained these cultural ties, as religious sanctuaries became militarized zones and pilgrimage routes were disrupted (Shakabpa, 1967).

Figure 2

Map of Economic and Political Hotspots Prior to the Nepal-Tibet War.

Note: This map identifies key trade towns (Kuti, Kerong, Shigatse), disputed frontier zones, and principal caravan routes linking Nepal to Tibet and China. Adapted from Rose (1971) and Shakabpa (1967).



Course of the War — Military Campaigns, Strategies, and Key Battles

The war progressed in two distinct phases, each with different military dynamics and political consequences.

Phase One (1788–1789): Nepalese Offensive

In the first phase, Nepalese forces, led by Regent Bahadur Shah, launched a swift and coordinated invasion of Tibet, targeting the Kerong and Kuti valleys. The Gorkha troops employed high-altitude warfare techniques, moving rapidly through mountain passes and overwhelming Tibetan garrisons.

The campaign's success culminated in the Kerung Treaty of 1789, which required Tibet to pay annual tribute to Nepal in silver and goods. However, Tibet's subsequent failure to meet these obligations led directly to renewed hostilities.

Phase Two (1791–1792): Qing Intervention

The second phase began when Tibet, unable to repel renewed Nepalese incursions, appealed to the Qing court. Emperor Qianlong dispatched an expeditionary force under General Fuk'anggan. The Qing army, estimated at 70,000 troops, advanced from Tibet into Nepalese territory, employing both conventional and siege warfare.

Table 3
Major Military Engagements of the Nepal-Tibet War

Date	Location	Forces Involved	Outcome
1788 (May)	Kerong Pass	Nepalese vanguard vs. Tibetan garrison	Nepalese victory; opened route to Shigatse
1789 (Jan)	Kuti	Nepalese main force vs. Tibetan militia	Nepalese victory; led to Kerung Treaty
1791 (Nov)	Digarcha	Nepalese army vs. Qing-Tibetan alliance	Qing recapture of Digarcha
1792 (May)	Nuwakot	Qing expedition vs. Nepalese defenders	Qing advance halted by Treaty of Betrawati

Tactical Analysis

Nepal's early successes can be attributed to its mastery of mountain warfare, small-unit mobility, and ability to exploit surprise. However, the Qing army's logistical superiority, heavy artillery, and numerical advantage shifted the balance during the second phase.

Role of Terrain and Climate

High-altitude terrain, unpredictable weather, and logistical challenges significantly shaped the war. Both sides suffered supply shortages, frostbite, and disease. For the Qing forces, maintaining supply lines over thousands of kilometers was a major achievement and a testament to imperial military organization.

Treaty Outcomes — Terms, Enforcement, and Political Implications

The Treaty of Betrawati (1792) formally ended the war. Its main terms included:

- Nepal would send tribute missions to Beijing every five years.
- Tibet would remain under Qing protection, with no Nepalese military presence.
- Trade would resume under Qing supervision.

Table 4
Key Provisions of the Treaty of Betrawati (1792)

Provision	Practical Impact on Nepal	Impact on Tibet	Qing Strategic Gain
Tribute missions every five years	Established semi-formal tributary relationship	Maintained security under Qing oversight	Reinforced imperial prestige in frontier diplomacy
Trade regulation by Qing	Reduced Nepalese control over tariffs	Protected Tibetan market from coin disputes	Gave Qing economic oversight in the Himalayas
No Nepalese troops in Tibet	Limited military influence beyond border	Secured frontier from repeated incursions	Prevented destabilization of Tibetan administration

The treaty symbolized a diplomatic compromise: Nepal retained sovereignty but accepted a tributary role, Tibet preserved Qing protection, and the Qing reasserted their authority in the Himalayan frontier.

Long-Term Impacts — Economic, Military, and Cultural

Economic Impact

The re-opening of trade under Qing supervision reduced Nepal's leverage over Tibetan markets. While tribute missions provided symbolic prestige, they did little to offset the loss of autonomous tariff-setting.

Military Lessons

For Nepal, the war underscored the importance of modernizing military logistics and artillery. For the Qing, the campaign demonstrated the logistical feasibility of large-scale Himalayan expeditions.

Cultural Exchange

Despite the war's destructiveness, it led to renewed cultural exchanges through tribute missions, which often carried artisans, religious objects, and manuscripts.

Comparative and Historiographical Insights

Comparisons with other 18th-century frontier wars, such as the Qing-Dzungar conflicts, show similar patterns of imperial intervention to maintain buffer zones. Historiographically, Nepali, Tibetan, Chinese, and Western accounts diverge sharply in assessing the war's outcome, reflecting nationalist narratives and archival biases.

Conclusion

The Nepal-Tibet War was far more than a brief military episode; it was a pivotal moment in the reconfiguration of Himalayan geopolitics at the close of the eighteenth century. Rooted in economic rivalry, political ambition, and the strategic imperatives of the Qing frontier system, the conflict reshaped the balance of power in the region.

The war's two phases demonstrate the volatility of frontier disputes in an interconnected economic system. Nepal's initial victories were a testament to its tactical adaptability in mountain warfare, yet the Qing counteroffensive underscored the limitations of small-state militaries when confronted by imperial-scale logistics and resources. The Treaty of Betrawati formalized a diplomatic arrangement that both preserved Nepal's sovereignty and embedded it within the Qing tributary framework — a balance of autonomy and subordination that persisted for over a century.

From a broader historical perspective, the Nepal-Tibet War illustrates how local disputes can draw in larger powers, resulting in settlements that extend beyond the original points of contention. It also shows that military outcomes are inseparable from economic and diplomatic contexts, particularly in regions where trade routes serve as both economic lifelines and strategic vulnerabilities.

Recommendations

1. For Historical Scholarship

- Integrative Research: Future studies should combine economic history, environmental history, and cultural analysis to produce more holistic narratives of Himalayan conflicts.
- Archival Collaboration: Joint scholarly projects between Nepalese, Tibetan, and Chinese historians could reconcile conflicting accounts through shared source analysis.

2. For Geopolitical Understanding

- Lessons for Modern Frontier Diplomacy: The war highlights the need for structured communication channels and treaty enforcement mechanisms in contested border regions.
- Economic Interdependence as a Stabilizing Force: Encouraging cross-border trade under mutually agreed frameworks can reduce the likelihood of disputes escalating into armed conflict.

3. For Cultural Preservation

- Protection of Cultural Routes: Historical pilgrimage and trade paths disrupted during the war hold significant cultural value and could be revitalized as heritage corridors.
- Documentation of Shared Heritage: Joint cultural projects can strengthen ties between communities historically divided by conflict.

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