

Geopolitical Importance of Sikkim in the Eastern Himalayas

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Abstract

Sikkim's distinctive geography has influenced its geopolitics and cultural interactions in the Eastern Himalayas. This article outlines Sikkim's transition from a Himalayan kingdom under the Namgyal dynasty to its full integration into India in 1975. It emphasises key geostrategic shifts, including Tibet's annexation, border tensions with China, and the strategic importance of the Siliguri Corridor. The paper also explores India's defence developments in Sikkim, given its proximity to sensitive border areas. Furthermore, it discusses Sikkim's cultural diversity, shaped by Tibetan religious and political influence, and its socio-linguistic ties with Nepal and Bhutan. The study concludes with an overview of geographic and fiscal challenges, such as dependence on National Highway 10 (NH10) for access to mainland India, issues along the Nathula trade route, and the closure of alternative passes. Overall, this work characterises Sikkim as a complex frontier where security, cultural diplomacy, and economic progress converge, highlighting its importance within India's Himalayan strategic framework.

Keywords: Sikkim, Eastern Himalayas, Geopolitics, Cultural affinity, Trade Security.

Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative research using secondary sources, such as books, journals, reports, news articles, unpublished dissertations, and online articles. A descriptive and analytical research design has been applied, and the information has been analysed through contextual and comparative methods. The existing literature on Sikkim's development in the Eastern Himalayan region, its historical transformation, and its geopolitics, culture, and economy was reviewed to gain a broad perspective. The study uses geopolitical, cultural, and economic lenses to analyse Sikkim's strategic importance in the Eastern Himalayan region. This paper has been checked using Grammarly.

Introduction

Sikkim, the erstwhile independent kingdom and since 1975 the second-smallest state of India, lies in the foothills of the Himalayas, bordered by China (Tibet Autonomous Region) to the north and north-east, Nepal to the west, and Bhutan to the east. Its southern part connects to India through the vital Siliguri Corridor in West Bengal. It is a strategically important hill state in the northeastern Himalayan region of India, covering 7,096 sq. km., approximately 0.2% of the country's total geographical area. Sikkim ranks among the smallest states in India in terms of both geographical extent and population (Department of Information and Technology, 2022). According to the Census of India (2011), Sikkim's population is 6,10,577, ranking 32nd among the 35 states and union territories.

Despite its small geographical size, Sikkim holds a strategically significant position in maintaining India's geopolitics in the South Asian region. Sikkim's frontier runs approximately 220 km along the border with China, 99 km (approx) with Nepal, and 73 km (approx) with Bhutan (Ministry of Home Affairs [MHA], 2017). This position places Sikkim at the intersection of regional political, economic, and security dynamics.

Sikkim served as an important geopolitical buffer zone between British India and China. Due to the complicated diplomatic relationship between British India and Nepal, Sikkim emerged as an alternative trade route with Tibet and for further access to Central Asia. The British administration, understanding the strategic importance of Sikkim, actively invested in the kingdom's infrastructure to protect its interests (Rao, 1972; Basnet, 1974; Haris, 2013).

Following Sikkim's accession to India in 1975, the state was integrated as India's 22nd state. The India-China border has become a vital frontier amid evolving geopolitical dynamics between the two nations. As regional rivalries intensified during the 20th and early 21st centuries, Sikkim evolved from a traditional buffer into a major geopolitical asset for India, strengthening border security, strategic preparedness, and regional peace (Government of Sikkim, 2025).

Historical Growth of Sikkim's Geostrategic Importance

Sikkim was a Himalayan kingdom administered by Lepcha leaders (Bhutia, 2023). In 1642, the Namgyal dynasty was established and ruled for 333 years (Chhetri, 2014). Before its merger with India, Sikkim had asymmetric power relations with its neighbours: Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal and British India (Sinha, 2014).

The Namgyal dynasty maintained deep religious, matrimonial and cultural ties with Tibet. The Chogyals (Kings) were of Tibetan descent, and the state framework was built on the Lamaist system of Tibetan Buddhism. Inter-marriage between Sikkimese and Tibetan aristocratic families was common (Chawla, 2024). Tibet was also a political, cultural and religious anchor for Sikkim. Throughout centuries of political upheaval, the Chogyals relied on Tibet as an administrative anchor and a place of refuge when regional pressure threatened them (Mullard, 2011; Sinha, 2014).

Unlike Sikkim's relationship with Tibet, which was predominantly cooperative and protective, relations with Bhutan were volatile, despite their shared cultural roots and matrimonial ties (Sinha, 2014). Bhutan launched several aggressive territorial invasions into Sikkim during the 18th century. After the death of Tensung Namgyal in 1700, the minor heir Chakdor Namgyal was next in line to the throne, but his half-sister Pendi Ongmu disputed his right to the throne. Through her maternal lineage, she sought help from Bhutan and formed an alliance with Deb Naku Zidar to assassinate Chakdor Namgyal. The capital, Rabdentse, was captured, and the young prince fled to Tibet for refuge. Later, through diplomatic mediation in Lhasa, Bhutan was forced to withdraw its forces and allow Chakdor Namgyal to return to his throne. However, Bhutan refused to relinquish control over the Kalimpong region and the adjoining Haa valley, permanently altering the geopolitical situation (Risley, 1894).

Kathmandu viewed the deep matrimonial, cultural, and religious ties between Sikkim and Tibet not as an independent neighbour but as an extension of Tibetan influence. In the 18th century, the Gorkha rulers unified Nepal under a militaristic state framework and sought to control trans-Himalayan trade. Control of the passes in Sikkim (Nathula and Jelep) was crucial to securing trade corridors and neutralising Tibet. Hence, in 1788, during the reign of Chogyal Tenzing Namgyal, the Gorkha forces overran the Sikkim capital, Rabdentse, and annexed all territories west of the Teesta River. The destruction of the capital and the encroachment of the Gorkha armies forced Chogyal Tenzing Namgyal to take refuge in Tibet. Later, his son Tshphud Namgyal returned in 1793 with joint Sino-Tibetan military backing to clear out the occupying forces. He successfully acquired Sikkim and relocated the capital from Rabandtse to Tumlong (Sinha, 2014).

Before the British presence in neighbouring India, the major power play in the eastern Himalayas was among Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim. However, the expansion of the British East India Company altered the power relations in the Himalayan region. Both Nepal and British India pursued aggressive expansion policies that triggered a feud between the two, culminating in the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-1816). On the other hand, Sikkim was highly vulnerable due to repeated military invasions from Nepal. The presence of a powerful new actor, sharing a common enemy, ultimately drove Sikkim to seek an alliance with British India (Upadhyay, 2014).

The Anglo-Nepalese War ended with the Treaty of Sugauli (1816), which forced Nepal to surrender its conquered territory and withdraw from Sikkim (Rose, 1971). The British handed over the lost lands to the Chogyal by signing the Treaty of Titalia (1817) (Arora, 2008). The treaty restored Sikkim's lands and guaranteed protection against Nepalese and Bhutanese invasions, but it gradually curtailed the kingdom's independence (Risley, 1894). This process began by stripping the kingdom of foreign policy independence, extracting Darjeeling, and annexing the Morang plains, and eventually culminated in Sikkim becoming a formal British protectorate under the Treaty of Tumlong in 1861 (Mullard, 2011; McKay, 2021).

After India's independence in 1947, Sikkim remained a monarchy under the Chogyal but became a protectorate under the Indo-Sikkim Treaty of 1950. Under the treaty, the Chogyal was permitted only internal autonomy (domestic governance) and was strictly prohibited from engaging in direct diplomatic dealings with any foreign power, while Delhi retained the unilateral right to station troops anywhere within the kingdom and to take any measures deemed necessary for regional security (Grover, 1974).

Following independence in 1947, India prioritised establishing stable diplomatic ties with its neighbours. A keystone of this policy was the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement (Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence), signed between India and China, under which India formally recognised Tibet as part of China (Maxwell, 1970; Garver, 2001). Despite this initial diplomatic goodwill, the agreement collapsed, leading to the Sino-Indian war in 1962. The conflict arose from three major issues: (i) China's non-acceptance of the McMahon Line (Lamb, 1966), (ii) India granting political asylum to the

14th Dalai Lama of Tibet in 1959 (Hoffmann, 1990), and (iii) infrastructure development in the Aksai Chin region, claimed by India as part of Ladakh (Fravel, 2008).

In 1967, two further conflicts between India and China in Sikkim, known as the Nathu La and Chola Clashes, or the Second Sino-Indian War, occurred. Indian engineers began constructing an iron fence along the border at Nathula to demarcate the frontier and reduce routine skirmishes. An altercation between the two sides at Nathula escalated into a full-fledged armed conflict on 11-14th September 1967, involving heavy artillery and small-arms fire. India defeated the Chinese, but there were very heavy casualties on both sides. As estimated, India lost 200 soldiers, and China lost 300 soldiers. Two months later, on 1st October 1967, the Chinese launched a secondary attack on Chola, a strategic pass located north of Nathula. Once again, Indian forces decisively repelled the Chinese attack, securing the border (Pathak, 2023; Yadav and Rana, 2020).

China's People's Liberation Army's annexation of Tibet in 1950 made Delhi more proactive in Sikkim, as Tibet no longer served as a geopolitical buffer for India. Sikkim's critical location and the vulnerability of the Siliguri corridor made the defence of Sikkim mandatory for Delhi (Das, 2011). Internally, Sikkim was experiencing severe political friction. The Sikkim State Congress mobilised mass demands for democratic reforms and outright accession to India. The movement was backed by the kingdom's ethnic Nepali majority (Sinha, 1975). Internal political disturbances and India's vital security needs in the region led to the collapse of the Namgyal dynasty, which had brought Sikkim into the Indian Union as the 22nd state in 1975 (Kazi, 2020). This institutional transition fundamentally redefined the regional security situation by transforming a protectorate border into a direct sovereign frontier. India's post-independence border relations with Nepal and Bhutan have been free of territorial friction. Instead, the contemporary reality of military altercations in the Sikkim sector remains confined to the China frontier.

Geo-political Significance of Sikkim in Eastern Himalayas

To understand the geopolitical relevance of Sikkim, it can be discussed under three broad categories: (i) Strategic Geography, (ii) Cultural Affinity, and (iii) Economic and Trade Security.

- **Strategic Geography**

Sikkim's physical landscape makes it one of the most strategically important military locations in the Eastern Himalayas. Situated in the Eastern Himalayas, at the convergence of three nations, this small state is a strategic asset for India yet vulnerable. It serves as both a defensive shield for India and a practical observation post for Chinese movements. The area includes:

- a. **Siliguri Corridor**

The most critical geopolitical function of Sikkim is its proximity to the Siliguri Corridor, often referred to as the 'Chicken Neck'. The Siliguri Corridor is a narrow 22-kilometre stretch of land in West Bengal that links mainland India to the northeastern part of the country (Farhan, 2021). The corridor is sandwiched between Nepal to the west and Bangladesh to the south, and is very close to Bhutan and China (Das, 2025). Strategically, it's a vital yet vulnerable position for India, given its connections to all the Northeastern states and its access to East Asia. The Siliguri Corridor is about 130 km from the Sikkim border (Brethouwer et al., 2022). To the northeast of this corridor, Tibet's Chumbi Valley is a piece of Chinese territory wedged between Sikkim and Bhutan (Datta, 2015). If China were to attack through the Chumbi Valley and sever the Siliguri Corridor, it would choke off supplies and control of the North Eastern part of India (Ghosh, 2016). Hence, Sikkim has been acting as a fortified wall to prevent China from taking an offensive step towards the Siliguri Corridor.

- b. **Dongkya Range**

The Dongkya range in Sikkim runs from north to south, forming a political boundary between India and China. The geographical topography favours India. On the Indian side (Sikkim), the terrain is manageable and well-fortified, whereas on the Chinese side (the Chumbi Valley of Tibet), it is narrow and offers limited access. The Indian Army's position in Sikkim dominates the high-altitude terrain, overlooking the Chumbi Valley, especially along the range, including the strategically vital passes of Nathula, Jelep La (Kumar, 2021), and Cho La. India holds line-of-sight dominance in this region, overlooking any particular army movements in the Chumbi Valley (ibid). The range also has two of the most heavily militarised passes in the world, Nathula and Jelep La (Dasgupta, 2020).

Nathula lies at an elevation of 14140 ft and features a narrow pass flanked by steep peaks. The Indian army's position in this pass helps it monitor any movement down the hill, and if an offensive force attempts to advance, defensive crossfire is easy to manage given its tactical placement. This was demonstrated during the 1967 Nathula clash, when India's high-ground advantage successfully repelled a Chinese infiltration attempt (Sitaraman, 2020).

Jeblepla is elevated at 14390 ft and is the second vital pass after Nathula in the Dongkya range. It is historically significant because it offers a more direct descent into the Chumbi valley than Nathula (Dasgupta, 2020). By maintaining an iron-fenced defensive posture at Jeblepla, India secures the western shoulder of this vital pass. This position allows the Indian force to hold the crest, as it prevents an adversary from safely utilising the pass, which is easy to control from above.

Chola Pass, at an elevation of 14760 ft, is the third critical strategic post in eastern Sikkim, located just 6.4 kilometres (4 miles) northwest of Nathula. The 1967 clash between Indian forces and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) occurred at both Nathula and Chola Pass. During the clash, the Chinese army was forced to withdraw, establishing the current line of actual control along the range (Kumar, 2020). Chola Pass serves as an anchor for Nathula and also functions as a checkpoint to prevent infiltration from across the border.

As long as the Indian Army retains control over the Nathula, Jeblepla, and Cho La passes, the Chumbi Valley remains checked from any offensive moves, as its heights play a key role in maintaining dominance in this range (Kumar, 2021). The trio of passes forms the bottleneck of the Chumbi Valley.

c. Doklam Standoff

The Doklam conflict took place in 2017. An area of 100 sq km lies at the tri-junction of India (East Sikkim), Bhutan (Ha Valley), and China (Chumbi Valley in Tibet). Indian troops observed Chinese road construction near Bhutan in an area perceived as no-man's land. The Chinese were building a road southward from the Dokla pass towards the Jampheri Ridge, an elevated landform in Bhutan. If China had extended its road network onto the ridge, it could have provided a direct downhill view into the Siliguri corridor. India effectively halted the Chinese road construction. The standoff between India and China, with the Royal Bhutan Army, lasted 73 days from 16 June to 28 August 2017. Finally, the Chinese withdrew from the area (Pathak, 2023). Though Doklam is recognised as Bhutanese territory, it is an area shared by India and Sikkim on the border. China's control of the ridge could also have circumvented Sikkim's natural defence.

d. Diplomatic Relations and Buffer Management

The border of Sikkim not only touches China but also forms complex tri-junctions with Nepal and Bhutan. Sikkim's border with China remains militarised and volatile, while the frontiers with Bhutan and Nepal remain entirely peaceful (Datta, 2015). This has led the Indian Army to focus fully on the northern frontier. Bhutan is a strategic ally of India but lacks the conventional military power to resist China (Timalsina, 2023). Sikkim provides India with immediate geographic access to deploy and support Bhutan if any intrusion or attack emerges from the Chinese side.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has initiated infrastructure development in Nepal's border areas, making India wary due to the high presence of Chinese on Nepal's soil. On the other hand, the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship has led to a porous border between the two countries (ibid). This has enabled free border crossings, allowing people to reside and work without passports or visas, but it has also raised security concerns. The easy access can be a ground for the movement of transnational criminals, human traffickers and terrorist groups.

Previous governments in Nepal, especially the communist coalitions led by former Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, had closer ties with China. Under these regimes, Beijing secured unprecedented access by signing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework agreements, proposing cross-border trans-Himalayan railways, and actively influencing Kathmandu's internal politics (Pulipaka, 2024). The formation of a new government by the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) in 2026, under the Prime Ministership of Balendra 'Balen' Shah, has made it clear that the RSP has no inclination towards its neighbouring countries, India and China, and has claimed that its state would remain nonaligned and not act as a buffer between them (Pathak, 2026). This gives India control over China's rapid political and military footprint on its northern border. Nepal's policy of sovereign neutrality provides distinct strategic merits to New Delhi.

Indi-Nepal territorial disputes centre on the Kalapani-Lipulekh-Limpiyadhura trijunction. The dispute between India and Nepal has persisted since the signing of the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816 (Verma, 2026). Fresh insights from the Prime Minister of Nepal have surfaced, advocating an objective approach—dialogue, historical archives, geographical surveys, and data-driven diplomacy—to resolve the territorial disputes between India and Nepal (Shamim, 2026). While the Kalapani and Susta disputes are complex (Shrestha, Thapa, et al., 2020), the overall relationship between India and

Nepal remains deeply cordial and peaceful. The Sikkim (India) - Nepal side of the border is entirely peaceful, clearly demarcated, and free of territorial disputes at present.

- **Cultural Affinity**

Sikkim's unique geography and history as a former independent kingdom have deep ethnic, linguistic, spiritual and social bonds with China (especially the Tibet Autonomous Region), Bhutan and Nepal. Sikkim encompasses three main ethnic communities - the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalis - creating direct links with all three neighbouring regions.

a. Cultural Affinity with China/Tibet Autonomous Region

Before Sikkim's merger with India in 1975, it was a Buddhist kingdom administered by the Namgyal dynasty, which originated in the Kham region of Tibet and was established in the 17th century (Chettri, 2013). This has left a Tibetan imprint on Sikkim's culture, traditions, and religion. Tibetan Buddhism was the state-supported religion in Sikkim (Thapa and Inbanathan, 2022), strictly following the spiritual authority, scriptures, and monastic discipline of Lhasa. Monastic institutions across Sikkim adhered to the Nyingma (Pemayangtse and Tashiding monasteries) and Kagyu (Rumtek monastery) lineages of Tibet (Vandenhelsken, 2002). The architectural layout of the monasteries (gompas) directly replicated that of the fortress-like Dzongs on the Tibetan plateau (Sharma, 2022).

Kailash Mansarovar in China (Tibet Autonomous Region) is considered one of the holy sites and pilgrimage destinations for Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, and followers of the Bon faith (Ten News, 2026). The yatra via Nathula Pass opened in 2015; prior to that, the Lipulekh Pass in Uttarakhand had been open since 1981 (Singh, 2025). The route to Mount Kailash and Mansarovar Lake via Nathula is considered the most comfortable and physically accessible for pilgrims travelling from India, especially elderly devotees, as it offers a more accessible alternative to the Lipulekh route. Devotees can reach this site via motorable roads rather than multi-day foot treks. The route was halted in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Chhetri, 2020) and geostrategic tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) (Singh, 2025). On 20th June 2025, the pilgrimage was officially resumed through diplomatic talks between New Delhi and Beijing, accommodating 451 pilgrims distributed across 10 batches (TOI, 2025).

The Bhutia community migrated from Tibet to Sikkim between the 13th and 16th centuries. They speak Sikkimese (Bhutia or Drenjongke), a language classified within the Tibeto-Burman family as a Southern Tibetan dialect, and write in the classical Tibetan Uchen script (Guillemot, 2019).

The iconic cultural expressions of Sikkim, including Thangka paintings, Cham dances (masked ritual dances), and the celebration of Losar (the Tibetan New Year), are closely linked to Tibetan culture. The food habits of the Sikkimese share a core baseline with those of Tibet due to shared climatic conditions and historical trade routes. Staple foods such as Tsampa (roasted barley flour), Suja (salted butter tea), Momo (steamed dumplings), and Thukpa (noodle soup) reflect adaptation and culinary continuity that remain central to Bhutia identity.

b. Cultural Affinity with Bhutan

Bhutan and Sikkim share a similar historical background, a synthesis of indigenous tribes and Tibetans (Ardussi, 2009). Bhutan adopted the Drukpa Kagyu school of Buddhism (Seiji, 2022), while Sikkim leaned towards the Nyingmapa tradition (Denjongpa, 2022). Both Bhutan and Sikkim also revere Guru Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), who, according to Buddhist traditions, is believed to have visited and blessed numerous sacred sites across both regions (Mullard, 2011).

The indigenous tribe of Sikkim, the Lepchas, also lived in small numbers in southwestern Bhutan, thereby establishing pre-Buddhist cultural ties between the two states (Faulkner and Mohan, 2021).

Matrimonial alliances between members of the Namgyal royal house of Sikkim and Bhutanese aristocratic families forged enduring political and dynastic ties between the two Himalayan kingdoms (Mullard, 2011).

c. Cultural Affinity with Nepal

Historically, Chogyal Tensung Namgyal (1670-1700) is believed to have married Princess Thungwamukma from the Limbu region or Limbuwan (present-day Eastern Nepal). According to local traditions, this alliance facilitated the movement of people and cultural transmission from the Limbu region into Sikkim. It is believed that the modern-day name of Sikkim derives from the Limbu word "Su-Khim", meaning "new place" or "new house", attributed to the same princess, although the etymology remains debated among scholars (ibid). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, large-scale migration from Nepal substantially changed Sikkim's demographic makeup, resulting in 75% of the

population being Nepali (Lama, 2001). Nepali culture has been deeply embedded in Sikkim's society, to the point that it has become the most widely spoken language in the state, used by all communities. It has not only gained official language status in the state but also, on 20th August 1992, was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution by the Parliament of India, recognising it as one of the 22 official languages in the country (Government of India, 1992). The majority of Sikkim's population practices Hinduism, which closely mirrors practices in Nepal. Festivals like Dashain (Durga Puja), Tihar (Diwali), and Teej (Festival of Sisterhood) are celebrated with identical customs in both Sikkim and Nepal. The food habits of Sikkim and Nepal are also very similar; fermented foods like Gundruk (fermented, sun-dried leafy greens), sinki (fermented radish), and Kinema (fermented soybeans) are common in both places (Lama, 2001).

Many of Sikkim's Nepali population trace their ancestry to Nepal, and many aspects of food culture, customary dress, and religious practices are rooted in Nepali society (Subba 1992; Lama 2001). The long-standing relationship between India and Nepal, often described as 'roti-beti' (bread and daughter) since time immemorial, is also characterised by a culture of interstate marriage between Sikkim and Nepal (Subba, 1992). Furthermore, Nepal continues to hold religious significance for many people in Sikkim, serving as an important destination for Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimage. These linguistic, religious, and social ties have nurtured a strong cultural affinity between the two regions (Lama, 2001; Mullard, 2011).

- **Economic and Trade Security**

Before Sikkim's merger with India, China's expansion and the growth of global trade routes made Sikkim a vital passage for trade between British India and Tibet (Mullard, 2011). However, geopolitical changes, including China's annexation of Tibet, the closure of traditional trans-Himalayan trade routes, and the emergence of alternative transportation corridors under globalisation, reduced Sikkim's historical role as an important transit zone. Although cross-border trade through the Nathula pass was reopened in 2006, its volume remained lower than that of other trade routes in the region (Singh, 2012). Other trade routes to India through Sikkim have not yet been established.

Sikkim's economic security depends solely on National Highway 10 (NH10) for connectivity to mainland India. Almost 100% of the state's essential commodities pass through this land route, which traverses the volatile terrain of northern West Bengal along the Teesta River basin and connects Sikkim directly to the Siliguri Corridor. The linkage between Sikkim and mainland India is volatile and vulnerable due to difficult terrain and security concerns (Lama 2001; MHA 2013).

- a. Sikkim's trade connectivity with China**

The trade corridor between India and China through Sikkim centres on Nathula Pass in East Sikkim. Trade through this pass is historically significant, as it was an important part of the ancient Silk Road, connecting the towns of Gangtok (Sikkim) and Kalimpong (West Bengal) directly to the Chumbi Valley in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) (Ministry of Commerce & Industries, 2024).

The Sino-Indian War (1962) led to the closure of trade through the Nathula pass, which was not officially reopened until July 2006 under an agreement designed to strengthen cross-border economic ties between India and China (N.A, 2013). However, trade operations through the pass were entirely disrupted in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Chhetri, 2020) and subsequent military standoffs along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) (Singh, 2025). High-level engagements between New Delhi and Beijing are likely to normalise official trade through the Nathula pass in 2026. To enhance trade through Nathula, infrastructure development in the Himalayan region is underway. The Sevoke-Rangpo Railway link, with broad-gauge rail connectivity and an advanced network of tunnels and bridges, is being built to reduce the vulnerabilities of NH10 (Information & Public Relations Department, 2025).

- b. Sikkim's trade connectivity with Bhutan**

Before international borders in the Himalayan region became rigid, the Jelep Pass (Sikkim) was the primary link on the South-West Silk Route in the nineteenth century, facilitating trade from Sikkim (India) to the Ha valley (Bhutan) and the Chuumbi valley (Tibet) (Mullard, 2011). This route played a key role in regional trade and cultural interaction before geopolitical changes in the eastern Himalayas altered cross-border connectivity (Datta, 2015). Like Nathula Pass, the Jelep route was closed after the Sino-Indian War of 1962, leading to the suspension of major trans-Himalayan trade corridors (Datta, 2015). Nathula reopened in 2006 as part of bilateral trade arrangements between India and China (Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2006), but Jelep has remained closed since then due to security concerns (Datta,

2015). Today, this circuit is restricted and primarily considered a scenic tourism corridor due to its landscape and heritage (Mullard, 2011).

Trade between India and Bhutan operates through the Jaigaon-Phuentsholing Corridor under the India-Bhutan Agreement on Trade, Commerce and Transit (Ministry of Commerce & Industry, 2006). The corridor links Jaigaon in West Bengal (India) with Phuntsholing (Bhutan), forming one of the most important formal trade gateways between the two countries (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2006). Goods moving to and from Sikkim and Bhutan must travel through National Highway 10 (NH10) and the Dooars region of West Bengal, as there is no alternative all-weather connectivity in the eastern Himalayan corridor. Reliance on a single transport mode makes the region strategically important but also vulnerable to disruptions caused by weather conditions and infrastructure constraints (Datta, 2015).

c. Sikkim's trade connectivity with Nepal

Sikkim shares a roughly 100 km international border with Nepal to the west, adjoining the Taplejung, Panchthar, and Ilam districts. Historically, this frontier was fluid, with informal cross-border trade and movement shaping local economies and livelihoods (Sinha, 2012). In modern times, following the signing of the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship (1950), formal trade and transit relations between India and Nepal expanded significantly, with key transit routes developing through Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal (Chaudhary, 2023). By contrast, trade through Sikkim lacked formal infrastructure.

The recent infrastructure development at Chiwabhanjyang Pass, located at an elevation of 10,299 feet in West Sikkim (India), has been a major focus of regional transit plans. The Government of Sikkim's construction of the 18-kilometre Uttarey-Chiwabhanjyang road, along with the extension of Nepal's Pushpalal (Mid-Hill) Highway, is creating the possibility of vehicular transit between Sikkim (India) and eastern Nepal (Gurung, 2026; Gautam & Lal, 2023). The passage suggests the possibility of trade in the region if the Government of India formalises it as an international trade corridor, subject to political and infrastructural considerations (Kumar 2013).

Conclusion

Sikkim has undergone a major transformation from a vulnerable Himalayan kingdom into a keystone of India's forward Himalayan defence architecture in the eastern Himalayas (Datta, 2015). For centuries, the Namgyal (Chogyal) dynasty navigated the asymmetrical regional power dynamics in the Eastern Himalayas, upholding cultural and political ties with Tibet while managing pressures from Bhutan and Nepal (Mullard, 2011). British India's intervention temporarily restored Sikkim's territorial power through the Treaties of Sugauli (1816) and Titalia (1817), but it ultimately led to Sikkim becoming a protectorate state in 1861 (Datta, 2015).

Sikkim's geostrategic importance cannot be understood solely through a strategic lens; its cultural and economic dimensions are equally central to shaping India's foreign policy and regional engagement in the eastern Himalayas. Historically, Sikkim was influenced not only by Tibet but also by Nepal and Bhutan, maintaining enduring cultural linkages. The legacy of the Namgyal dynasty, the prominence of Nyingma and Kagyu monastic practices, the use of the Uchen script, and the firmly established presence of Tibetan Buddhism collectively reflect Sikkim's historical integration into the wider Himalayan cultural sphere (Mullard, 2011).

These historical and religious linkages continue to have present-day geopolitical relevance, particularly in the context of trans-Himalayan mobility and pilgrimage routes such as the Kailash Mansarovar route, which have periodically shaped India-China cultural diplomacy (Pandey & Sonal, 2026). While Bhutan shares strong historical, religious, and military affinities, Nepal's influence has grown significantly through sustained migration, leading to important sociolinguistic and demographic transformations (Sinha, 2012).

Sikkim's topographical constraints and security considerations have shaped its economic growth path. Dependence on National Highway 10 (NH10) as the primary connectivity route has created strategic and infrastructural vulnerabilities, while the Siliguri Corridor continues to influence development priorities, including the Sevoke-Rangpo railway project and trade corridors through Nathula and Chiwabhanjyang, reflecting efforts towards regional integration and economic development.

Overall, Sikkim is an exceptional convergence of strategic geography, cultural pluralism, and growing economic connectivity. Its position in the eastern Himalayas creates a critical space where India's security interests, regional diplomacy, and connectivity shape broader linkages across South and Southeast Asia.

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