

Nepal's territorial assertion is mere political posturing

BL [thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/nepals-territorial-assertion-is-mere-political-posturing/article31736850.ece](https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/nepals-territorial-assertion-is-mere-political-posturing/article31736850.ece)

With the domestic power struggle intensifying, PM Sharma Oli is resorting to anti-Indian rhetoric and one-upmanship in the border dispute to fuel nationalism and divert public attention

Power struggle in domestic politics can have critical implications for bilateral relationship. Nepal's recent territorial assertion over an area around Lipu Lek has predictably invited negative reactions from New Delhi. This is nothing but a fallout of domestic power struggle unfolding in the hills of Kathmandu. On May 18, Nepal's cabinet approved a new political map claiming its sovereignty over 335 square km strip which included Kalapani, Limpiyadhura, and Lipu Lek.

Nepal's assertion over the disputed territory has invited uncharitable responses from the Indian media and intelligentsia suggesting that Kathmandu was following Beijing's territorial aggrandisement policy. Its inclusion of disputed territories in the political map, as reports suggest, is guided by three crucial events in India. First, India issued a map in November 2019 during the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir which included Kalapani. Second, on May 8 this year, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh inaugurated a jeep track towards Lipu Lek. Finally, Indian Army Chief General Manoj Mukund Navarane implied China's prodding behind Nepal's protests.

The Indian government has rejected Nepal's claim over the disputed territory. Even though these territories have remained unresolved for a long time it has never tested bilateral relations like now. Limpiyadhura, Kalapani, and Lipu Lek, which are otherwise least known to most scholars and media persons, have suddenly attracted attention in prime-time debates for two main reasons. The issue was picked up by some media houses here soon after the Indian Army Chief hinted at potential Chinese involvement. And in Nepal, the issue has acquired more prominence than the usual protests against Indian activities along the border.

The intra-party dispute between two factions, one led by the incumbent Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and the other led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal (also known as Prachanda) and Madhav Kumar Nepal, of the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) offers a better picture of the present crisis.

Strong opposition

If reports are to be believed, Sharma Oli faces strong opposition within the NCP as the Dahal-Nepal group is seeking to oust him from the government and the party. In this regard, a crucial party meeting was held on May 2 to decide the fate of the incumbent

Prime Minister who is facing serious charges of manipulation of his political power, non-performance, and bringing ordinances to break up the Madheshi political parties to merge them with NCP.

When the new Constitution of Nepal came into force in 2015, Oli was able to form the government with support from the Prachanda's Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). His first term as Prime Minister faced strong protests by the Madheshis that alleged discriminatory and unfair provisions in the new constitution. A defiant Oli succeeded in converting the Madheshi protests to an 'economic blockade' imposed by India and signed a Transit Agreement with China to reduce Nepal's dependence with India in the future. Despite his anti-Indian rhetoric, the government still collapsed in 2016 as Prachanda withdrew its support leading to fresh elections in November-December 2017.

Oli was elected as PM for the second term again with Prachanda's support and passed the no-confidence motion on March 11, 2018. In his second term, Oli has been facing opposition from within the party and outside on various issues. His government has backtracked on several policy decisions and been silent on many others which created suspicion among Nepal's lawmakers. Despite intra-party disputes and criticism from the opposition, Oli's government survived due to the constitutional provision that provides a PM two years of safety from the no-confidence motion from the date of a failed no-confidence.

Power struggle

With PM Oli's two years of political security ending on March 11, 2020, the domestic power struggle has intensified. Already in a quagmire over the border dispute, Oli was under immense pressure and has been avoiding crucial Standing Committee meetings. At a time when his political position is precarious, resorting to anti-Indian rhetoric and one-upmanship in the border dispute to fuel pan-Nepalese nationalism and diverting public attention appear to be only options left for him for political survival.

For decades now, especially since the regime of King Mahendra, anti-India rhetoric has been a useful tool for the Nepalese political elite to further their political career. In this context, the Nepalese cabinet's approval of a new map and PM Oli's appeal to the citizens to celebrate the inclusion of disputed territories with Nepal only highlight his desperation to save the government. Border disputes carry enormous nationalist and populist baggage.

Indian governments have also faced criticisms for exploiting nationalist sentiments in its border disputes with China and Pakistan. The Indian government is perhaps more aware of Nepal's domestic political predicament and has responded in a measured tone without aggravating the situation further. However, strong reactions from a section of the media and the intelligentsia and suggestions of Chinese involvement will only encourage Beijing's interference. Nepal's territorial assertion shouldn't be seen beyond mere posturing of a government that is primarily meant for domestic consumption.

The writer is Associate Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies,
Bengaluru.