

India: BJP PM candidate Modi makes provocative anti-China speech

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Narendra Modi—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Chief Minister of Gujarat and reputed front-runner in the race to be India’s next prime minister—made provocative remarks against China in his first campaign speech focusing on foreign policy.

Addressing an election rally in Pasighat in the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh last Saturday, Modi said China “should shed its expansionist policy.”

“Arunachal Pradesh,” continued Modi, “is an integral part of India and will always remain so. No power can snatch it from us... I swear in the name of this soil that I will never allow the state to disappear,” “breakdown,” or “bow down.”

India and China have a decades-long dispute over the demarcation of their 4,000-kilometer-long border. Sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh, which China calls South Tibet, is one of the two most contentious issues in dispute. A 90,000-square-kilometer territory, Indian-controlled Arunachal Pradesh borders China and Burma and has a very ethno-linguistically diverse population of about 1.4 million.

In April-May 2013, India and China had a three-week-long military standoff over where the Line of Actual Control between India and China falls in Ladakh/Askai Chin, an area far removed from Arunachal Pradesh. However, there has been no actual fighting or cross-border firing between the two countries for decades.

Nevertheless, Modi’s speech bristled with military references. He lauded the “brave” people of Arunachal Pradesh for the “befitting reply” they gave to Chinese troops during the brief 1962 Indo-Chinese border war. “The people here,” said the BJP prime ministerial candidate, “are real patriots as they salute their counterparts with ‘Jai Hind’ (Victory to India) and are zealously protecting the state’s territory.”

With his bellicose anti-China speech, Modi was

seeking to whip up Indian chauvinism and burnish his image as a Hindu nationalist “strongman.” The BJP routinely attacks the Congress Party, the dominant partner in India’s United Progressive Alliance government, for “appeasing” Pakistan—India’s historic rival and a close ally of China—and for being insufficiently supportive of the armed forces. In May 1998, just weeks after a BJP-led coalition government came to power, India staged nuclear weapons tests and officially proclaimed itself a nuclear weapons state. It justified this action on the grounds that India needed to level the strategic playing field with China.

Modi’s remarks, however, were aimed at more than a domestic audience. They were a signal to the US and Japan that a BJP-led government will ally India even more openly and completely with their drive to strategically isolate China and prepare to militarily thwart its rise.

Modi lashed out against China—and in a visit to one of India’s remotest and smallest states—little more than a week after he had met with the US ambassador to India, Nancy Powell. The meeting ended an almost decade-long US government boycott of Modi—a boycott imposed because of his role in instigating, facilitating and protecting the perpetrators of the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat. (See: US ready to do business with Hindu supremacist candidate for Indian PM)

Beijing has responded cautiously to Modi’s remarks, while rejecting his charge of Chinese “expansionism.” Talking to reporters on Monday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said, “We would like to develop good neighbourliness and friendly relations with our neighbours and resolve relevant disputes and differences through dialogue and consultations.” Noting the decades-long absence of any border clashes with India, he added, “There is very

strong evidence that we have the capability to maintain peace there. This is very good for the future development of the bilateral relations.”

While ceding no ground on its border dispute with India, Beijing has for years been trying to downplay it and otherwise pursue closer economic and political ties with New Delhi. Modi was himself given a warm reception by the Chinese government when he visited the country in 2011 to drum up investment. Beijing is acutely aware that Washington is determined to harness India to its anti-China geopolitical-military strategy and in the hopes of preventing this has sought to befriend New Delhi.

Also last Saturday, Modi delivered a communally provocative speech in Silchar, in the state of Assam, in which he voiced his reactionary Hindu supremacist view that India is first and foremost the land of the Hindus.

In his Silchar speech, the BJP leader denounced the Congress-led government for its attitude towards the large number of Bangladeshis who, fleeing poverty and political persecution, have crossed over the reactionary border established through the communal partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and migrated to India.

Modi castigated the current government both for allowing “an influx of (Muslim) migrants from Bangladesh” and for refusing to greet Hindus who migrate to India from Bangladesh as Indian citizens.

India, asserted Modi, has “responsibility toward Hindus who are harassed and suffer in other countries.” Needless to say, the Gujarat Chief Minister has raged against Pakistan whenever it has criticized his government’s mistreatment of the state’s Muslim minority.

Making still further explicit the BJP’s reactionary communalist categorization of Bangladeshi migrants, Modi declared, “Two sets of people come from Bangladesh—one under a conspiracy to outnumber locals and the other that are forced to flee. The latter are Bengali Hindus, who the Congress targets by marking them as D (i.e. dubious) voters.”

Modi’s remarks open the door for both state persecution and mob violence against Muslims and other minorities living in the India’s northeast.

The Congress Party did not respond to Modi’s anti-China speech. While inflammatory and clearly meant as a signal to Washington, his remarks were not

qualitatively different from those made by the current government. Over China’s objections, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Arunachal Pradesh in 2009 and when Indian President Pranab Mukherjee, for decades a Congress insider, traveled there last November, he proclaimed it “an integral part of India,” leading to an angry riposte from China.

While claiming to uphold India’s “strategic autonomy,” the Congress-led government has dramatically expanded military cooperation with Washington as part of “a global strategic” Indo-US partnership. And over the past year, India has dramatically expanded its economic and military-strategic ties with Japan. Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe was the chief guest at India’s Republic Day celebrations on January 26. Under Abe’s leadership, Japan is both seeking to integrate India into the current trilateral US-led, anti-Chinese alliance of the US, Japan and Australia and develop an Indo-Japanese partnership that would enable Tokyo to lessen its military-strategic dependence on Washington.



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