

India's boycott of China's Belt and Road summit highlights deepening tensions

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India's decision to boycott the May 14-15 One Belt, One Road (OBOR) forum in Beijing underscores the escalating geo-political frictions between India and China, mostly bound up with New Delhi's growing relations with Washington.

The forum was the international launch of the OBOR project initiated by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. Invoking the history of the Silk Road of medieval times, OBOR envisages the construction of ports, railway lines, roads, pipelines and power plants connecting the major economic centres of China and Europe.

Under the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has increasingly lined up with the US military-strategic offensive against China.

By opening India's air bases and ports for use by US warplanes and battleships last August, the Modi regime transformed India into a veritable "frontline state" in the US war preparations against China. Ships of the US Seventh Fleet, the armada at the centre of US war plans against China, will be serviced at an Indian shipyard.

Washington also designated India as a major defence partner, allowing New Delhi to purchase advanced US weapons systems, on a par with Washington's most trusted allies.

This closer relationship between India and the US has caused deep fissures between India and China, and India and Pakistan, India's historical arch-rival. In response to the US "strategic favours" to New Delhi: Beijing and Islamabad have strengthened their own strategic ties.

The \$US50 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a flagship OBOR initiative. Rail, road and pipeline links will connect western China with Gwadar, Pakistan's newly-built Arabian Sea port in

southwestern Baluchistan. India has maintained its opposition to the project, citing "sovereignty issues" because it passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which New Delhi claims is part of India.

Just hours before the Beijing forum started, Indian external affairs spokesman Gopal Baglay stated: "No country accepts a project that ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity."

To legitimise India's stance, the statement raised suspicion over China's mega-project, claiming it violated "international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality." Allegedly, it would "create an unsustainable debt burden for communities," breach "balanced ecological and environmental protection and preservation standards" and lack a "transparent assessment of project costs."

New Delhi's real concerns are that the CPEC will boost Pakistan's beleaguered economy and allow China to substantially boost its strategic influence in South Asia, which the Indian capitalist class views as its own region of hegemony and exploitation.

At the same time, India is acting on behalf of Washington, which sees the CPEC as a means for China to circumvent US plans to blockade China's economy by seizing Indian Ocean and South China Sea "chokepoints" in the event of a war or crisis.

US Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Scott Swift visited India on May 5 amid China's attempts to get India to participate at the Beijing forum. There is little doubt that Swift discussed the forum issue with Indian officials. He said both countries want to counter China's "increasing presence" in the Indian Ocean.

After meeting with civilian and military leaders, Swift publicly questioned the intent of OBOR. Complaining that Chinese warships were making an "OBOR tour" in the Pacific Ocean, he declared: "Right

now there are more questions than answers.”

Swift claimed Chinese actions were adding a sense of “anxiety” to the region, with uncertainty about the goals of the OBOR being raised “in every country I visit.” Swift said his discussions with Indian officials covered what India and the US could do to provide “stability” in the region.

Talking about the annual US-Japan-India Malabar naval exercises, Swift added, “There would be a deepening of our understanding on how to operate those platforms on anti-submarine warfare.” This emphasis on anti-submarine warfare obviously targets China’s increased naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

On March 13, the *South China Morning Post* reported that China’s People’s Liberation Army will increase its fighting force to 100,000 personnel, allowing for deployment at Gwadar in Pakistan and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. On March 16, the *Hindu* reported that Masood Khalid, Pakistani ambassador to China, said Pakistan had deployed more than 15,000 troops to protect the CPEC, as well as a naval contingent for the protection of Gwadar Port.

US National Security Advisor Lieutenant General Herbert McMaster met with Prime Minister Modi on April 18—Modi’s first meeting with a senior member of the Trump administration. According to the *India Strategic* web site, McMaster “shared his perspective” with Modi on “the security situation across Asia and in the extended region, including in Afghanistan, West Asia and North Korea.”

Confronted by India’s intensifying alignment with Washington, Pakistan’s reactionary bourgeois elite, which for decades served as a satrap for US imperialism, is today tightly holding China’s hand. At the same time, cross-border firings between India and Pakistan, both of which have nuclear weapons, point to the danger of a confrontation that would have grave consequences for millions of people across the Indian sub-continent.

India has been at loggerheads with China on three other fronts. One is India’s bid to secure membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which regulates the global nuclear trade. While the US has backed India’s bid, China has objected that India is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Secondly, New Delhi has demanded China end its opposition to the Indian government’s attempt to add

someone to the UN international terrorism “blacklist”—Masood Azhar, the chief of Jaish-e-Mohammed, a Pakistan-based Islamist insurgent group active in Indian Kashmir.

Thirdly, India continually promotes the exiled Tibetan “spiritual” leader Dalai Lama, whom China regards as a “dangerous separatist.” Fresh tensions arose in April when India invited him to visit disputed Arunachal Pradesh, which Beijing calls southern Tibet. The US further stoked the conflict when a congressional delegation led by House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi visited the Dalai Lama on May 9.

A significant layer of the Indian ruling elite seem worried by India’s failure to participate in OBOR. Jayshree Sengupta from the Observer Research Foundation, an Indian think tank, published an opinion column titled “Missing OBOR a big mistake” on May 20. “The main thing is that the Chinese, and not Indian, firms will become more prominent in the neighborhood, cashing in on their willingness and urgency to join OBOR,” he wrote.

Nevertheless, New Delhi, acting in concert with the US, is aggressively seeking to block China’s activities, sending unmistakeable signals of escalating tensions.

On May 22, Reuters noted: “The failure of China’s efforts to bring India on board, details which have not been previously reported, shows the depths to which relations between the two countries have fallen over territorial disputes and Beijing’s support of Pakistan.”



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