

China-India border impasse enters sixth week

Keith Jones
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The Chinese government is sending strong signals to India that it must unilaterally withdraw its troops from a Himalayan ridge claimed by both China and Bhutan or face a sharp deterioration in bilateral relations, even war.

More than five weeks ago, Indian troops interceded on the Doklam or Donglang Plateau to prevent Chinese construction workers from expanding a road in the disputed area. Since then, Beijing and New Delhi have exchanged bellicose threats and taunts and rushed thousands of troops to the remote region where the borders of China, India, and Bhutan intersect.

Beijing, according to Tuesday's *Indian Express*, briefed foreign diplomats late last week and emphasized that India's intervention against China—on territory New Delhi does not even claim to be its own—is unprecedented; that there can be no substantive talks until the Indian troops withdraw; and that China's patience is being sorely tested.

"Our colleagues," said a diplomat only identified by the *Express* as from one of the five permanent UN Security Council states, "attended the briefing and were given the impression that the Chinese side will not be waiting for an indefinite period. This is quite worrying, and we have conveyed it to our Indian colleagues in Beijing and Bhutanese colleagues in Delhi."

Initially Beijing refused comment on the *Indian Express* report. Later Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang conceded China had made its views on the border dispute known to other countries, saying "Some foreign diplomats in China, feeling shocked and confounded, reached us for facts through diplomatic channels."

With the obvious intent of underlining the warnings Beijing has made in private, the *PLA Daily*, the official mouthpiece of China's People's Liberation Army, reported Monday that its forces had carried out a "live fire" exercise in southern Tibet near to the site of the current border standoff. The report said a key element of the exercise was to test and enhance rapid troop deployments and noted the PLA brigade that conducted it has previously mounted "frontline combat missions."

As New Delhi and Beijing have traded charges of "illegal" border incursions over the past month, the *Global Times*, another Chinese government-owned daily, has made frequent veiled and not-so-veiled threats of military action against India, including through repeated references to the month-long border war the two countries fought in 1962.

Global Times yesterday published a bellicose article titled "Military conflicts to escalate if India refuses to withdraw troops." It began by denouncing a speech Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj gave to India's parliament Thursday, in which she claimed China's road-building in the Doklam is "a direct challenge to our security" and vowed India would withdraw its troops only when China does.

The *Global Times* urged India to "abandon the fantasy of a long-term standoff at Doklam," warning that otherwise China may opt to "resolve the conflict through non-diplomatic means." Following boasts about China's military prowess and its ability to bring more force to bear at the remote site of the current dispute because of its greater "mobility and logistics capability," the editorial concluded: the "later India withdraws (its) troops, the greater the risk that it will face from a military counteraction and the more clout it will lose politically."

The Doklam Plateau border dispute both expresses, and represents a new stage in, the deterioration of relations between Beijing and New Delhi. While the elites of India and China are competitors for resources and investment, this deterioration has been principally driven by India's ever deeper integration into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China.

Under Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, India has emerged as a veritable frontline state in American imperialism's drive to encircle and militarily pressure China. India has opened its military bases and ports to routine use by US warplanes and battleships, parroted the provocative US stance on the South China Sea dispute, and greatly expanded bilateral and trilateral ties with Washington's principal allies in the Asia-Pacific, Japan and Australia.

Earlier this month, the US, Japan and India conducted what they boasted was the largest ever Indian Ocean naval exercise.

Keenly aware of Washington's plans to use India to thwart China's rise, Beijing long sought closer relations with New Delhi and responded relatively benignly to actions by India it deemed hostile or provocative. But over the past two years, Beijing has begun to push back aggressively.

A key element in this has been the strengthening of China's strategic partnership with India's arch-rival, Pakistan, as exemplified by the central role Beijing has given Pakistan in its trillion-dollar One Belt, One Road infrastructure-building scheme.

Emboldened by Washington's military-strategic support,

India, under Modi, has adopted an aggressive stance against Pakistan. But its attempt to rewrite the rules of Indo-Pakistani relations have been undercut by Beijing's continued and expanding support for Islamabad.

This has frustrated and angered India's ruling elite. Last fall, shortly after the BJP government ordered Indian Army Special Forces to mount cross-border raids inside Pakistan and proclaimed the end of India's purported policy of "strategic restraint" vis a vis Islamabad, Hindu right organizations with close ties to the BJP sought to initiate a boycott of Chinese goods to protest Beijing's support of "terrorist" Pakistan.

The head of India's Army, General Bipin Rawat, has, for his part, repeatedly boasted that India's military is ready to fight a two-front war against China and Pakistan.

While Beijing has been the more vocal in the current dispute, both China and India are adamant that they cannot back down from the stand they have taken on the Doklam Plateau.

Beijing claims that it cannot accept India violating its "national sovereignty" in the name of a third country, Bhutan.

India claims that Chinese control over the contested Doklam would position it, in the event of war, to seize the Siliguri corridor—a narrow slice of Indian territory, squeezed between Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, that links West Bengal and the rest of India with its seven northeastern states.

The Siliguri Corridor is in fact some 50 kilometers away from where Indian and Chinese troops are arrayed against each other. Moreover, India dominates the strategic high-ground surrounding the Chinese-held Chumbi Valley. This has led some commentators to argue that New Delhi's real concern is not so much with the Siliguri Corridor, but that China is seeking to break India's "special relationship" with Bhutan.

The tiny Himalayan kingdom is effectively an Indian protectorate. It does not have diplomatic relations with China or most other major powers, including the US. India claims its military interceded on Bhutan's behalf and at its request, but it was not until some two weeks later that Bhutan's government officially protested the alleged presence of Chinese construction workers on its soil.

In response to the current border stand-off, a chorus of retired generals and think-tank fellows are calling for New Delhi to strengthen strategic ties with Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop discussed the Doklam border standoff in separate talks with Modi, Indian Defence Minister Arun Jaitley, and Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj during a visit to Delhi this week. Indian government sources claimed this was the first time India's government had discussed the border dispute with a foreign leader.

Bishop urged a peaceful resolution of the dispute, and warned a further escalation could lead to a dangerous "miscalculation" or "misjudgment," but she also made it abundantly clear that Australia is intent on deepening ties with India as part of a US-led anti-China bloc. She hailed the supposed convergence of

strategic interests and "values" between India and Australia, touted the "rules-based order" imposed by US imperialism in the Indo-Pacific region, and expressed hope that Australia would soon become a partner in the Malabar Exercise, the annual Indo-US-Japanese naval war game.

Washington has remained almost totally mum about the standoff between India and China. In response to a question at a regular US State Department briefing this week, spokeswoman Heather Nauert made a pro forma call for "direct dialogue aimed at reducing tensions."

However, there is no question that it is American imperialism's reckless military-strategic offensive against China that is playing the principal role in the surge in tensions between India and China and the perilous enmeshing of the Indo-Pakistani and Sino-Indian strategic conflicts.

India's National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval is to travel to Beijing for a July 27-28 meeting of the NSAs of the five BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.) While reiterating that prior to "meaningful" negotiations India must withdraw its troops from the Doklam Plateau, a Chinese government spokesman said Doval could engage in talks over the border dispute with his Chinese counterpart, State Councilor Yang Jiechi. The two also double as their countries' "special representatives," i.e., lead negotiators, in the long-stalled Sino-Indian border negotiations.



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