

Washington incites India in tense border dispute with China

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Tensions between India and China and India and Nepal over their disputed Himalayan borders have flared in recent weeks.

Yesterday, they reached a new high, with New Delhi angrily dismissing a Chinese claim that Indian troops had crossed over the Line of Actual Control (LAC) into territory that India concedes is under Chinese control, pending final resolution of their border dispute.

“Any suggestion that Indian troops had undertaken activity across the LAC in the Western Sector or the Sikkim Sector is not accurate,” said Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Anurag Srivastava. “In fact, it is the Chinese side that has recently undertaken activity hindering India’s normal patrolling patterns.”

Underscoring the sharpening of the conflict, Srivastava said “peace and tranquility in border areas” is an “essential prerequisite” for developing Sino-Indian relations.

The world’s two most populous countries are now reported to be stepping up deployments of additional troops and weapons along their more than 3,000 kilometer (2,000 mile) contested border.

Until this week, Indian government and military officials had played down the significance of the border tensions, which have included mutual charges the other is not respecting the LAC in at least four places, and a scuffle between Indian and Chinese troops on May 5 in which soldiers exchanged blows with fists and sticks and threw stones at each other.

But on Tuesday talks between local LAC military commanders failed to resolve the dispute, after which China’s Foreign Affairs Ministry issued a statement accusing Indian forces of attempting to “unilaterally change” the LAC by “blocking” Chinese border patrols.

Then on Wednesday, Washington obtrusively intervened in the dispute. Acting US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Alice G. Wells accused China of “aggression” against India, claimed this was part of a pattern of “disturbing behaviour” by Beijing, and vaunted India’s burgeoning military-strategic cooperation with the US and its principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

“The flare-ups on the border,” Wells told a Zoom press conference with select Indian journalists, “... are a reminder that Chinese aggression is not always rhetorical and whether it’s in

the South China Sea or whether it’s along the border with India, we continue to see provocations and disturbing behaviour by China that raises questions about how China seeks to use its growing power.”

Wells did not make a direct pledge of US military support should the India-China border dispute trigger a clash or all-out war between the rival nuclear powers. But she did so implicitly, with her claim that Chinese “aggression” was causing “like-minded nations” to join forces in strategic initiatives such as the “Trilateral” between the US, Japan and India, and the “Quad.” The latter grouping, which Washington aims to transform into a NATO-style anti-China alliance, unites the US, Japan, Australia and India.

Washington’s vocal intervention in support of New Delhi is in marked contrast with the stance it took during the 2017 Doklam dispute. For 73 days in the summer of 2017, Beijing and New Delhi exchanged bellicose threats, while hundreds of Indian and Chinese troops faced off on the Doklam Plateau, a Himalayan ridge claimed by both China and Bhutan, a tiny kingdom New Delhi has long treated like an Indian protectorate.

As the confrontation dragged on, the Trump administration took a series of actions aimed at highlighting the strength of the Indo-US “global strategic partnership,” but it maintained a position of “neutrality” on the Doklam dispute.

Washington’s aggressive intervention in the current flare-up is part of a massive escalation of US imperialism’s strategic offensive against China that enjoys bipartisan Democratic and Republican support. This escalation can be dated back at least to the fall of 2018. It has seen the Trump administration launch a drive to throttle Chinese tech giant Huawei as part of a broader campaign to thwart China’s emergence as a competitor in high-tech industries; intensify US “freedom of navigation” exercises in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait; and move to deploy previously banned nuclear-capable intermediate missiles against China.

In recent weeks, President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have thrown the anti-China campaign into a still higher gear in response to the crisis and economic collapse triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. This had included baseless claims Beijing is responsible for the massive loss of life in the

US—Trump has gone as far as to suggest the pandemic was a “sneak attack”—and demands that China be “held to account.”

In the three years since the Doklam crisis, India has further integrated itself into the US military-strategic offensive against China, including by aligning with Washington and its principal Asia-Pacific allies through the Quad, and by establishing in 2018 an Indo-US “2+2 Defence and Foreign Affairs Minister dialogue.”

Washington has reciprocated by offering India high-tech weaponry sold only to its closest allies and by green-lighting India’s February 2019 “surgical strike” air attack on Pakistan—a violation of international law that brought the nuclear-armed rivals the closest they have been to all-out war since the third Indo-Pakistani war of 1971.

As part of Washington’s latest volleys against China, Pompeo is urging US companies to pull production out of China and touting India as an alternate cheap-labour producer. For its part, India’s Narendra Modi-led far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has placed making India an alternate production-chain hub to China, through still closer collaboration with Washington and a “quantum jump” in pro-investor “reforms,” at the heart of its COVID-19 economic “recovery” strategy.

Beijing, not surprisingly, has reacted angrily to Washington’s intervention in the Sino-Indian border dispute and virtual incitement of India. Speaking Thursday at a regularly scheduled press briefing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Zhao Lijian called Wells’ provocative remarks “nonsense.” “China’s position on the China-India boundary issue is consistent and clear,” he added. “China’s border troops firmly safeguard(ed) China’s territorial sovereignty and security and firmly dealt with the Indian side’s crossover and infringement activities.”

According to Indian sources, since May 5 there have been “scuffles” between Indian and Chinese forces near Pangong Tso (lake), which divides Indian-held Ladakh from the Chinese Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), and far to the east along the LAC between the Indian state of Sikkim and TAR. There have also been standoffs between Indian and Chinese troops at two other places that India claims are part of its Ladakh Union Territory and China claims are part of TAR or its Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—Demchok and Galwan Nalah.

China has objected to India’s attempt to build a road to facilitate troop movements near the confluence of the Shyok and Galwan rivers, claiming that it intrudes on territory that falls on its side of the LAC.

Last August, the Modi government illegally abrogated the semi-autonomous constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir, India’s only Muslim-majority state, and subsequently bifurcated it, creating two central government-controlled Union Territories—Jammu and Kashmir; and Ladakh.

The spinning off of Ladakh, which, under the new constitutional arrangement, does not even have an elected

legislature, was to give the military free rein in using the large but sparsely populated region as a base of military operations against China.

Tensions have also erupted between India and Nepal over the inauguration by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on May 8 of a new 80 kilometer (50 mile) road across part of Uttarakhand to the Line of Actual Control between India and China at the Lipulekh Pass. Nepal, which currently exerts state sovereignty over territory near the Himalayan pass, claims that the Indian road passes through territory that historically and rightfully belongs to it.

On Wednesday, Nepal’s government gave added weight to its longstanding territorial dispute with India by publishing a new political and administrative map showing about 330 square kilometers (115 square miles) of territory currently held by India, adjacent to China and including Lipulekh, as within Nepal.

Nepal’s Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli, who has vowed to ensure the territory is returned to Nepal, has used the dispute with India to whip up nationalism and deflect criticism over his government’s mishandling of the COVID-19 crisis.

Landlocked Nepal has traditionally been dominated by India. In 2015-16, New Delhi imposed a quasi-blockade on the country, in an attempt to force through constitutional changes that it believed would enable it to more effectively wield political influence. But the gambit, while causing great suffering in Nepal, failed.

As across South Asia, there is an increasingly fierce struggle in Nepal between India and the US on the one hand and China on the other for economic and geopolitical influence.

Speaking at an online conference May 15, Indian Army Chief General M.M. Naravane all but accused China of orchestrating Nepal’s protest over the new road to the Lipulekh Pass, saying there was good “reason to believe” Kathmandu was acting “at the behest of someone else.”



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