

Trump intrudes in China-India border standoff

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US President Donald Trump intruded into the tense border standoff between China and India Wednesday with a spurious offer to mediate and even “arbitrate” “their now raging border dispute.”

Announced in a tweet, Trump’s “offer” was a provocation meant to signal to Beijing that Washington is involving itself ever more directly in Sino-Indian relations, and doing so as part of an across-the-board ratcheting up of its strategic offensive against China.

Hundreds of Chinese and Indian troops are currently arrayed against each other “eyeball to eyeball” in at least four places along their disputed border. Beijing and New Delhi have also deployed additional forces and war materiel to forward bases near the border, both to signal their resolve and to acclimatize their troops to the high-altitude Himalayan terrain.

Each accuses the other of violating the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in three places along their western border, as well as at a fourth place some 2,000 kilometres (1,240 miles) further east. Each insists the other must withdraw if the crisis is to be defused and a further souring of bilateral relations avoided.

The LAC is meant to serve as the de facto border between the world’s two most populous countries pending final resolution of their border dispute. But the LAC is not precisely delineated along much of the 3,400-kilometre (2,100 mile) Sino-Indian border, giving rise to frequent disagreements.

The current conflict, however, goes far beyond such low-level tensions. It began with two incidents in which Indian and Chinese troops jostled one another and exchanged blows with sticks. The first, on May 5, occurred in the west, in the Pangong Tso lake region, where Indian-held Ladakh meets Chinese-held Aksai Chin. The second clash came four days later near Naku La Pass in the border lands of the northeast Indian state Sikkim and China’s Tibet Autonomous Region. In ensuing days, there were further mutual claims of violations of the LAC. These all gave rise, after meetings between local People’s Liberation and Indian army

commanders failed to defuse any of the disputes, to a general state of heightened tension and military mobilization along the entire border.

Media reports are comparing the current dispute to the 2017 Doklam crisis, in which hundreds of Chinese and Indian troops faced off on a small Himalayan ridge claimed by both Beijing and Bhutan, a tiny kingdom that New Delhi has long treated like a protectorate. During the 73-day Doklam standoff, Beijing and New Delhi exchanged threats of a military clash in what was the most serious border crisis since they fought a brief border war in 1962.

On Wednesday, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman claimed that the situation along the border with India is “overall stable and controllable,” and said the two countries have the diplomatic mechanisms and communications channels to resolve the dispute through dialogue. A similar line was taken by China’s ambassador, Sun Weidong, later the same day. He told a webinar with an Indian youth organization that the two countries shouldn’t let differences “shadow” bilateral cooperation, and that the “dragon and elephant dancing together” is “the only right choice” for both countries.

To date, Chinese state media has reportedly paid scant attention to the border tensions with India, unlike in 2017 when the Doklam dispute became a focal point for nationalist flag-waving.

Indian government and military officials have also publicly downplayed the prospect of the current border dispute spiralling into a military clash, studiously avoiding making the type of bellicose threats they routinely hurl at Pakistan.

At the same time, they have taken steps meant to show that they are treating the current crisis with deadly seriousness.

Indian Army Chief General Manoj Naravane visited the army headquarters at Leh, Ladakh’s capital, on May 22 to confer with commanders of India’s border forces. On Tuesday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi convened a meeting with National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, and key members of the top

brass of the Indian military to discuss the border crisis. According to Indian news reports, it is also expected to top the agenda at the three-day biennial Army commanders' conference now underway.

The Indian media, meanwhile, is churning out articles alleging India is a victim of Chinese aggression. More and more frequently, these include calls for India to abandon "strategic autonomy" and formally join a US-led anti-China military-strategic alliance.

The reality is India, which in 2006 entered into a "global strategic partnership" with the US, has been transformed over the past decade and a half, and especially during the past six years under the rule of the far-right Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata (BJP) party government, into a veritable frontline state in the US military-strategic offensive against China.

New Delhi has thrown open its military bases to routine use by American warplanes and warships, parroted the US line on the South China Sea dispute, and expanded military-security cooperation with the US and its closest Asia-Pacific allies, including through the Quad—a "security dialogue" initiated and led by the US, and including Japan, Australia and India.

In so far as New Delhi still makes any pretense of being strategically autonomous, it is largely because of the deep-rooted hostility to US imperialism, its bullying and never-ending wars within the working class.

Trump's tweet declaring the US "ready, willing and able to mediate or arbitrate" the Sino-Indian border dispute is all the more provocative in that Washington, in a significant diplomatic shift, had already publicly sided with India in the current standoff.

In a May 20 Zoom conference with Indian journalists, Acting US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Alice G. Wells, held Beijing responsible for "the flare-ups on the border" and tied them to other purported instances of Chinese aggression. "Whether it's in the South China Sea or whether it's along the border with India," declared Wells, "we continue to see provocations and disturbing behaviour by China that raises questions about how China seeks to use its growing power."

Wells' statement was in sharp contrast with Washington's stance during the 2017 Doklam dispute. While it took a number of steps to underscore its close military-security partnership with India, the US refrained from publicly siding with New Delhi over the competing claims of sovereignty over the Himalayan ridge.

As the WSWs has previously noted, Wells' statement of support appears to have quickly led to a hardening of India's stance in the current border standoff. (See: Washington incites India in tense border dispute with China)

The reality is, Washington's drive to harness India to its strategic offensive against China has dangerously destabilized the entire region. It has driven China and Pakistan to deepen their "all weather" partnership and added an explosive new charge to the Sino-Indian border dispute—threatening to unleash conflicts among nuclear-armed states that would quickly draw in the US and other great powers.

The current ratcheting up of India-China tensions has been fueled both by India's response to the socioeconomic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, and by the steps China, and particularly India, have taken in recent years to strengthen their respective military positions along their common border.

To "revive" the economy, the Modi government has unleashed a new wave of pro-investor "reforms," one of whose principal aims is to attract US companies, under pressure from Washington to pull back from China, to make India an alternate production chain hub. At the same time, India is aggressively courting, again with the Trump administration's support, American arms manufacturers to use India as a cheap-labour platform.

An editorial in the *Hindustan Times*, strongly supportive of India not ceding an inch in the current border standoff and of New Delhi's claim China is the "aggressor," nonetheless points to the major expansion of India's military capabilities along the disputed border with China, a build-up that has been facilitated by access to US high-tech weaponry. It also applauds the Modi government's steps to tighten India's hold over disputed Kashmir by stripping Indian's lone Muslim-majority of its special semi-autonomous status and downgrading Jammu and Kashmir to a Union Territory. These changes also involved separating Ladakh from Jammu and Kashmir, so that the military could have a free rein in using the remote but strategic region as a staging area against China.

"China," wrote the *Times*, "has long sought stability on its southern border as well as the dominance of the terrain. As India has ramped up its infrastructure, a process that has also included the deployment of fighters, new artillery, cruise missiles and, most recently, American helicopters and airlift, its dominance is coming under threat. India's bold moves regarding Kashmir and China's deteriorating geopolitical environment may be leading Beijing to up the ante. If so, it is all the more reason for India to stand firm."



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