

India and Australia sign military pact amid tense border conflict with China

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Under conditions where hundreds of Chinese and Indian troops are being mobilised against each other along the disputed border between the two countries, the governments of India and Australia last week signed a series of deals that include reciprocal access to each other's military bases.

An online "virtual summit" between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Australian counterpart, Scott Morrison, raised the relationship between the two countries to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" with definite military implications, clearly directed against China.

Although the originally scheduled face-to-face meeting had been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the timing of the event became bound up with the Indian government's frontline role in the escalating confrontation by the Trump administration against China.

The one-hour June 4 "summit" occurred just two days after a phone call between Modi and Donald Trump, in which the US president reiterated his support for India's conflict with China. According to Indian media reports, Modi's government has begun moving soldiers from other sectors, including those facing Pakistan, toward the contested "Line of Actual Control" that separates India and China in Ladakh.

Earlier, in a May 27 tweet, Trump provocatively intruded into the border conflict, offering to "arbitrate" the "now raging border dispute." Then on May 29, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh spoke on the phone, vowing to bolster a "strong and enduring US-India defense partnership."

The official readout of the June 4 Trump-Modi conversation specifically stated that they discussed the Sino-Indian border standoff and the supposed need to

reform the World Health Organisation (WHO). The Trump administration has withdrawn funding from the WHO, accusing it of being aligned with China, as part of its totally unsubstantiated efforts to blame Beijing for the worsening global pandemic.

Trump's call to Modi also came amid a social explosion in the US, triggered by the brutal police killing of George Floyd. Trump had just threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807 and deploy federal troops to establish martial law.

Shortly after the Trump-Modi call, China's foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian objected to the US interference, saying there was "no need for any third party to intervene" in the border dispute.

It was in this highly-charged context that Modi and Morrison proceeded with their "summit," clearly making it part of the US offensive against China. They concluded nine agreements, featuring a "Mutual Logistics Support Agreement," and issued a "Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific."

In addition to allowing Indian and Australian warships and aircraft to refuel and use logistical facilities at each other's bases, the military "logistics" pact clears the way for more military exchanges and exercises across the Indo-Pacific region and greater interoperability between the two armed forces.

A joint statement issued by Modi and Morrison did not explicitly name China as its target, but the language echoed Washington's anti-China propaganda. It said the two countries "share a vision of a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific region to support the freedom of navigation."

Such language has been employed to justify incendiary "freedom of navigation operations" by US warships and planes within the territorial waters of islets occupied by China in the South China Sea.

India, which in 2006 entered into a “global strategic partnership” with the US, has been transformed, especially during the past six years under Modi’s rule, into a frontier state in the US military-strategic offensive against China.

At their “summit,” in his opening public remarks to Morrison, Modi, who heads the Hindu communalist Bharatiya Janata Party, invoked religious fervour as a basis for the anti-China alliance. It was a “sacred responsibility” to uphold values such as “democracy,” “rule of law” and “freedom,” he said.

Morrison, in response, thanked Modi “for your leadership, not just within India, but more broadly throughout the G20, the Indo-Pacific and the stabilising and constructive and very positive role that you have played in these very difficult times.”

Once again, with virtually no publicity, the Australian government has placed the country’s population on the frontline against China. In a barely reported media release, Morrison said: “Our Partnership is in line with India’s increasing engagement in the Indo-Pacific region through her Indo-Pacific vision and Australia’s Indo-Pacific approach and its Pacific Step-Up for the South Pacific.”

Both the Indian and Australian ruling classes are seeking to assert their hegemony over swathes of the Indo-Pacific region, while backing the US drive against China. That is the content of Canberra’s “Pacific Step-Up” to reinforce Australian imperialism’s dominance in the South West Pacific and cut across Chinese investment and aid in the region’s island states.

There has been overwhelming support within Australia’s corporate, political and media elite for the alignment with India and the US, despite qualms over the impact on the many billions of dollars at stake annually in revenues from China.

The opposition Labor Party spearheaded this orientation when it was last in office. The Gillard Labor government signed up to the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” in 2011 and agreed to station US marines in Darwin. This was in line with the conclusions drawn by American strategists that US imperialism could halt the emergence of China as a rival power only through military might and, when necessary, war.

To further seek to isolate China, Trump has invited Modi and Morrison to join this year’s G7 summit, due

to be held in the US, probably in September, just two months before the US presidential election. South Korea, another US ally against China, has been invited too, along with Russia. Trump is proposing to include them all in a revamped G11, to the exclusion of China, the world’s second biggest economy.

“Indian defence sources” told the *Hindu* India was now open to including Australia in the trilateral Malabar military exercises involving the US and Japan. This would shift the “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue” (the Quad) from being a high-level ministerial dialogue in 2019 further towards a military alliance. Japan and the US first proposed the Quad in 2007 but it was stalled by a decade by concerns in Indian and Australian ruling circles at being too openly aligned against China and with US imperialism.

As part of the US drive, the Australian ruling class is trying also to open up new markets in India to offset its reliance on commodity exports to China. Modi and Morrison agreed to “recommence” talks over an India-Australia trade agreement, suspended since 2015, after nine inconclusive rounds of negotiations.



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