

Trump confers with Modi over explosive India-China border dispute

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Washington continues to intrude in the tense weeks-long border standoff between Indian and Chinese troops at four points along their contested 3,488 kilometre (2,167 mile) border.

Although Beijing and India publicly insist the standoff will be resolved peacefully, they have both rushed troops, planes and war materiel to the border region, which is comprised of remote, inhospitable Himalayan terrain.

US President Donald Trump conferred with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi about the border crisis during a 25-minute phone call last Tuesday. No details of Modi and Trump's exchange on the border standoff have been released. However, Washington has publicly accused China of "aggression" and has linked the dispute to the South China Sea, where the US and allied navies routinely carry out provocative "freedom of navigation" exercises to assert Washington's right to maintain an armada menacingly off China's shores.

The ostensible purpose of the Trump-initiated June 2 call was to invite Modi to participate in the next G-7 leaders' summit, which is to be hosted by the US president at an undetermined date, and to discuss the president's proposal to make India a permanent member of an expanded G-7. According to the readout from New Delhi, they also spoke about the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to "reform" the World Health Organization (WHO), and the "situation on the India-China border."

Trump has sought to cripple the WHO by withdrawing all US funding from the UN body, thereby jeopardizing its support to impoverished countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America in fighting the pandemic, as well as a host of other deadly diseases. Now he is looking to India to assist Washington in using the WHO as a platform to attack China based on the lie Beijing failed to inform the world about the emergence of the novel coronavirus and is therefore "responsible" for the more than 100,000 American COVID-19 deaths.

Last month, Dr. Harsh Vardan, the Health Minister in Modi's ultra-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, began a three-year stint as chairman of the WHO's executive board, giving New Delhi a major role in determining the agenda of WHO meetings.

In comments following their Tuesday call, Modi hailed his "good friend" Trump and commended his "creative and far-sighted approach." An Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement exuded, "The exceptional warmth and candour of the conversation reflected the special nature of the Indo-US ties, as well as the friendship and mutual esteem between both leaders."

Modi has repeatedly genuflected before Trump. But his lavish praise of the fascist billionaire takes on new significance under conditions where Trump is inciting military-police violence, has threatened to deploy the US military across the country to suppress mass protests,

and is attempting to overthrow the US Constitution and establish a presidential dictatorship.

Modi is not just "returning the favour" to Trump—who on a visit to India in February lauded the Hindu supremacist prime minister's leadership and commitment to amity among all people even as deadly anti-Muslim riots, incited and organized by the BJP and its RSS allies, were convulsing India's capital. For Modi and his chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, Trump's actions lend legitimacy and encouragement to their own far-advanced plans to break with democratic-constitutional rule.

Mounting tensions

Washington maintained a public posture of neutrality in 2017 when Indian and Chinese troops confronted each other for 73-days on the Doklam Plateau, a Himalayan ridge claimed by both China and Bhutan, a tiny kingdom that New Delhi treats almost like a vassal state.

Today, in a development that both expresses and intensifies the escalating US strategic offensive against China, the Trump administration has publicly sided with India, and is manifestly goading New Delhi on in its confrontation with Beijing. Trump has himself issued a series of provocative tweets and comments. This includes telling a reporter in late May that Modi had told him in a phone call that "he's not in a good mood about what's going on with China." New Delhi has denied any call ever took place.

Underscoring the bipartisan character of US imperialism's incendiary campaign of diplomatic, economic and military pressure on China, the Democratic Party's position on the India-China border standoff is one and the same as that of the White House and State Department.

The chairman of the US House committee on foreign affairs, Democrat Eliot Engel of New York, said in a statement last week, "I am extremely concerned by the ongoing Chinese aggression along the Line of Actual Control. China is demonstrating once again that it is willing to bully its neighbors rather than resolve conflicts according to international law"

The Line of Actual Control (LAC) is the largely un-demarcated boundary that India and China, who fought a brief border war in 1962, have agreed to accept as their common border, pending final resolution of their overlapping territorial claims.

The current border tensions can be traced back to an incident on

May 5, when Indian and Chinese troops scuffled with each other at an altitude of 4,200 meters (14,000 feet) on the shores of Pangong Tso Lake where Indian-held Ladakh meets Chinese-held Aksai Chin in the western portion of their border.

Over the next several days there with three other encounters between Indian and Chinese troops, two in other areas along the border between Ladakh and Aksai China and another more than 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles) to the east in the border lands of the northeast Indian state Sikkim and China's Tibet Autonomous Region.

Beijing and New Delhi have each accused the other of provoking the standoff by violating the LAC.

In recent years, both China and India have dramatically increased their military spending. In 2019, they had the world's second and third largest defence expenditures, spending respectively \$261 billion and \$71 billion, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. In both cases this is only a small fraction of US military spending, which totaled \$732 billion in 2019.

New Delhi, which has justified its development of ballistic nuclear missiles with a range of more than 11,000 kilometers (7,000 miles) with the claim that it must have the ability to obliterate any part of China, has been engaged in a major push to expand its military capacities along its northern border with China since at least 2010.

This has included the development of an extensive network of roads and railways, the reactivation and rebuilding of airfields, the creation of two new Mountain Divisions, each with 15,000 troops, and the formation of a mountain strike corps to conduct "quick reaction ground offensive" operations against Chinese forces.

India says these moves are only aimed at restoring rough military equivalence along the border, in response to previous steps by China to increase its own capabilities.

The incendiary role of US imperialism

Whatever the truth both about the immediate accusations of incursions across the LAC and the longer-term military build-up along the border, certain things are manifestly evident.

First, the key factor driving the heightened tensions between China and India is American imperialism's push to harness India to its predatory strategic agenda and to transform South Asia and the Indian Ocean—the conduit for much of Beijing's oil imports and of its exports to the Middle East, Africa and Europe—into a central arena in its drive to thwart's China's "rise." Toward this end, Washington under Democratic and Republican administrations alike has lavished strategic "favours" on New Delhi. This has included giving it access to advanced weapons and "normalizing" India's status as a nuclear-armed state, while drawing India into a network of security-dialogues and joint military exercises with the Pentagon and Washington's most important Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

Second, in response to the global economic collapse and social crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Modi government and India's ruling elite are doubling down on their reactionary "global-strategic alliance" with US imperialism. Central to Modi's "economic recovery" plan is to take advantage of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's offer to help India exploit its abundant cheap labour to become an alternate production-chain hub for American companies under pressure from Washington to relocate manufacturing from

China.

On Thursday, India and Australia announced they have signed a military basing agreement—patterned after one in force between India and the US since 2016—that allows each country to use the other's naval and air force bases for routine resupply and maintenance. A similar agreement is currently being negotiated between India and Japan.

Third, India and China's remote border regions have suddenly acquired great geo-political significance. One of the US strategies for weakening China is to exploit grievances among its ethnic minorities. India borders China's Tibetan Autonomous Region and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Even more critically, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a \$60 billion program of infrastructure projects, of which the development of pipeline, road, and rail links between western China and the Pakistan Arabian seaport of Gwadar is the centerpiece—passes through Aksai Chin and Pakistan-held Gilgit-Baltistan.

India claims sovereignty over both Aksai Chin and Gilgit-Baltistan, and pointedly reiterated these claims last August when the BJP government illegally stripped Jammu and Kashmir, hitherto India's only Muslim-majority state, of its semi-autonomous status. This was part of a power play directed at strengthening central government control over the contested Kashmir region and taking a more aggressive diplomatic and strategic stance against both Pakistan and China.

India objects to the \$60 billion CPEC because it strengthens economic and strategic ties between China and Pakistan, its arch-rival since the 1947 communal partition of South Asia. Washington is no less adamantly opposed to the CPEC, because a major purpose of it and Beijing's One Belt Initiative, of which it is a part, is to lessen China's dependence on Indian Ocean trade, and the ability of the US to cripple China economically by seizing Indian Ocean and South China Sea chokepoints like the Straits of Malacca.

Fourth, China's Communist Party regime, which restored capitalism three decades ago and now serves as the political instrument of a new capitalist oligarchy, has no progressive answer to the military-strategic pressure that is being placed on China by the US and other imperialist powers with the support of their Indian bourgeois satraps. Incapable of making an appeal to the international working class, the Beijing regime oscillates between building up its military, while whipping up nationalism and making its own bellicose threats, and seeking a deal with the US and other imperialist powers.

Under conditions of an economic collapse without precedent since the Great Depression, surging global geopolitical tensions, and an impending confrontation between a US president intent on establishing a dictatorial regime and the working class, the border confrontation between India and China could yet spin out of control. But whatever its immediate outcome, it is yet another sign that unless stopped through the revolutionary intervention of the international working class, crisis-ridden imperialism is dragging humanity toward a catastrophic global conflagration.



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