

India takes economic reprisals against China as border frictions continue

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New Delhi has responded to the bloodiest border clash between Indian and Chinese soldiers since 1967 by taking economic reprisals against Beijing. The measures, coupled with a military build-up on both sides of the mountainous disputed border region, underscore that the danger of a catastrophic war between the two nuclear-armed rivals remains very real.

The violent clash occurred on June 15 in the Galwan Valley, where Indian-held Ladakh abuts Chinese-controlled Aksai Chin. It left 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of their Chinese counterparts dead.

On June 29, India responded by banning 59 apps made by Chinese-based companies, including several such as TikTok and US Browser with more than 100 million users. The prohibition was justified with claims that the apps were involved in “activities which are prejudicial to [the] sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, the security of the state and public order.”

Emphasizing that the app ban is part of New Delhi’s geopolitical offensive against Beijing, Indian Law, Communications, Electronics and Information Technology Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad characterized it as “a digital strike” against China at a rally held by the ruling Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in West Bengal on July 2. Inciting anti-China chauvinism still further, Prasad warned, “If somebody casts an evil eye on India, we will give a befitting reply.”

The following day, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a “surprise” visit to Ladakh with Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Bipin Rawat and Army Chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane. They met with senior military officers at a forward position in Nimu.

Without directly naming China, Modi used his highly publicized visit to whip up anti-Chinese chauvinism. In an address to troops, he said that the “era of expansionism is over” and “history is witness that such forces have been wiped out, or have been forced to turn around.” Taking an indirect jab at Beijing, he added that the “enemies of India have seen the fire and fury of our forces,” and warned that “India’s commitment to peace should not be seen as its weakness.”

Although several rounds of talks between military and diplomatic personnel have been held, both New Delhi and

Beijing have increased their military presence in the Ladakh/Aksai Chin region and beyond. Thousands of troops, artillery guns, tanks and fighter planes have been deployed at multiple locations along the 3,488 kilometre/2167 mile long disputed border.

A military official told the Hindu yesterday that Indian and Chinese forces have implemented a “disengagement” plan in several places including the Galwan Valley. Chinese troops have retreated 2 kilometres and Indian troops 1.5 kilometres from the June 15 clash site. However, the official warned that this could not serve as a “permanent solution” to the dispute, since India is adamant that the entire Galwan Valley is rightfully hers. In this regard, it is important to remember that the June 15 clash occurred during what was supposed to be a “de-escalation” initiated after a series of violent but non-lethal border clashes dating back to May 5.

The decades-long Sino-Indian border dispute is rooted in the neighbours’ competing geostrategic interests. However, it has taken on vastly greater significance as a result of US imperialism’s ever-escalating drive to strategically encircle China and thwart its emergence as a competitor in high-value-added and high-tech economic sectors—a drive which has been accompanied by aggressive efforts by Washington to harness India to its strategic agenda.

The Indo-US “global strategic partnership” that the previous Congress Party-led government struck with the George W. Bush administration in 2006 has been taken to a qualitatively higher level during the last six years of BJP government. Under Modi, India has emerged as a frontline state in the US military-strategic offensive against China. New Delhi has signed a basing agreement with Washington, throwing open its air and naval bases for the latter’s military, and joined a series of anti-China bilateral and multilateral strategic partnerships and security dialogues with the US and its principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

In return for India’s ever closer integration into the US war drive against China, Washington has granted New Delhi a series of strategic favours, including securing India access to civilian nuclear fuel and technology, enabling it to focus its indigenous nuclear program on developing its arsenal of nuclear weapons. India has also been designated by the US as a

“major defence partner,” which allows New Delhi to purchase high-tech US weapons systems available only to Washington’s closest partners. These developments have encouraged the Indian ruling elite to take a more aggressive stance in its dealings with China and its historic arch-rival, Pakistan.

At the same time, the American political establishment enthusiastically encourages India’s rivalry against China, calculating that an escalation will further integrate India into Washington’s military-strategic offensive.

Whatever the immediate fate of the border dispute and the avowals from both New Delhi and Beijing that they want to de-escalate, the crisis is being exploited by the Indian elite to whip up hostility against China so as to overcome popular opposition to an even closer partnership with US imperialism.

In this, the Congress Party is playing a particularly foul role. Senior party leaders have repeatedly attacked Modi from the right for purportedly failing to stand up firmly enough to Beijing, and the General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee’s International Department, Manesh Tiwari, has called for India to make the Quad—a US-led anti-China grouping—the “nucleus” of a “pan-Asian strategic framework.”

An editorial in the July 2 Hindustan Times titled “The great Indian strategic debate: Chinese aggression has resolved it in favour of India-US ties” argued that China’s border “aggression” has “now answered the question” whether China’s behaviour is a result of India-US proximity, or vice versa. It went on to state, “Whether India desires it or not, it will end up as one of the frontline states which will have to step up to contain Chinese power, not because of a third power, but because its own interests are at stake. This will mean India has no choice but to deepen its partnerships with other countries, particularly the US.”

A remark made by Modi during his visit to Ladakh is highly significant in this regard. According to press accounts, he said, “Indian soldiers had a long history of bravery and competence in global military campaigns, including in the two World Wars.”

Indian soldiers fought in the two imperialist world wars of the 20th century, as part of the British Indian Army and to uphold the interest of the British Empire, including India’s continued subjugation to Britain. That Modi chooses to celebrate this and cite it as evidence of Indian soldiers’ competence in “global military campaigns” underscores the readiness of his government and the Indian bourgeoisie as a whole to serve as satraps for US imperialism as it charts course for a catastrophic war with China.

When border tensions flared between India and China in May, Washington quickly rushed to signal its support for India, denouncing Chinese aggression and tying it to the South China Sea dispute. This has only escalated since the June 15 border clashes, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and other US officials repeatedly railing against Beijing.

Last Wednesday, White House spokesperson Kayleigh

McEnany reported Trump as having said “China’s aggressive stance along the India-China border fits with the larger pattern of Chinese aggression in other parts of the world.”

Pompeo, meanwhile, has applauded India’s ban on Chinese apps, branding them as “appendages of the Chinese Communist Party’s surveillance state.” He added that New Delhi’s “clean app approach will boost India’s sovereignty and boost integrity and national security.”

There is strong bipartisan support within the US ruling elite for the Trump administration using the border crisis to strengthen Washington’s strategic partnership with New Delhi against Beijing. In recent weeks, more than a dozen US Congress members, Republican and Democrat alike, have expressed their support for India resisting purported Chinese “aggression.”

Under conditions of stepped up military and diplomatic provocations by Washington against China, including naval exercises in the South China Sea, Beijing has responded cautiously to India’s economic reprisals. Last Thursday, Chinese Commerce Ministry Spokesman Gao Feng issued a statement on India’s banning of Chinese apps that said, “China has not taken any restrictive and discriminatory measures against Indian products and services,” and accused India of violating World Trade Organization rules.

At the same time, China has moved to assert its territorial claims in the region against Bhutan, a tiny landlocked state that India has traditionally treated as a protectorate. Responding to questions about China’s recent attempt to block the UN Development Program’s Global Environment Facility (GEF) from providing funding for the Sakteng wildlife sanctuary on the grounds that it related to “disputed” territory, a Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry statement said, “The boundary between China and Bhutan has never been delimited. There have been disputes over the eastern, central and western sectors for a long time.”

To appreciate the explosive potential of such an assertion, it is worth recalling the military stand-off that occurred between India and China for over two months in 2017 due to a still unresolved territorial dispute between China and Bhutan over the Doklam plateau, a remote unpopulated Himalayan ridge.



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