

India-China border conflict remains on knife's edge

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The four-month-long standoff between Indian and Chinese troops over disputed areas along their 3,475 kilometre-long border in the Himalayas has escalated dramatically over the past two weeks. The threat that a localized clash could spark a regional war that would drag in the world's major powers is being increased by US imperialism's provocative support for India's right-wing Modi government, and a renewed push by the major European powers to bolster their military-strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific region so as to thwart China's rise.

Alleging a Chinese plot to seize Indian border territory, the Indian military launched what it termed a "pre-emptive" operation on the night of August 29 and 30. Deploying what it has now emerged were several thousand troops, India captured a series of strategic heights in inhospitable mountainous terrain near Pangong Lake along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the countries' contested de facto border. The 134 kilometer-long lake lies at the junction of Indian-held Ladakh and the Chinese-controlled Aksai Chin region.

In reality, the India manoeuvre was a provocative escalation of tensions that has brought heavily-armed Indian troops to within two hundred metres, or "eyeball to eyeball," with their Chinese counterparts.

Last Monday, live ammunition was fired at the border for the first time in more than forty years, violating a bilateral agreement that prohibits soldiers patrolling near the disputed LAC from discharging their firearms. India has claimed that Chinese forces fired into the air during a confrontation, while Beijing has countered that it was in fact Indian troops that opened fire at a Chinese patrol. Nobody was injured in the incident, but it resulted in an escalation of threats on both sides.

Indian sources claim as many as 50,000 Chinese troops have been deployed to the Aksai Chin border region, along with fighter jets and artillery. India, which has similarly made major "forward" deployments to air bases and army camps, has fortified its newly-conquered heights in eastern Ladakh/Aksai Chin with tanks and additional troops.

Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi issued a statement pledging their respective militaries would "quickly disengage, maintain proper distance, and ease tensions," following a two-and-a-half-hour meeting Thursday in Moscow, on the sidelines of a Shanghai Cooperation Organization conclave.

This does not change the fact that the conflict remains on a knife's edge.

The vaguely-worded statement outlines no concrete proposals on how the border standoff and rival claims over where the LAC lies are to be resolved. It needs recalling that the bloodiest clash to date, which occurred in the Galwan Valley on the night of June 15, erupted during

an official period of "de-escalation" following two non-lethal clashes between Indian and Chinese troops in May, at points 1,000 kilometers apart. The June clash, which saw soldiers engage in hand-to-hand combat with rods, blades, and stones, resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese forces.

Although some troop withdrawals took place after the June clash, tensions have escalated in recent weeks, with both sides insisting that the onus is on the other to defuse the crisis. Meanwhile, the number of disputed points along the border has increased. Late last month, Jaishankar declared the possibility of a military confrontation between the rival nuclear-armed powers is the highest since India and China fought a month-long border war in 1962.

Any number of localized clashes, intended or otherwise, could easily blow up into an all-out war. In an ominous development, a senior Indian military official told the *Times of India* earlier this week that local commanders have been granted wide latitude to determine how to respond to Chinese military activities. "Our soldiers on the heights are well-armed and fully-prepared," the unnamed official added.

India's provocative actions at its border with China are motivated by two interrelated factors. First, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his crisis-ridden Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government are using the tensions with Beijing to shift official politics sharply to the right and whip up a bellicose Indian nationalism. By so doing, they hope to overcome popular opposition to aligning India ever more closely with Washington, justify a further massive buildup of India's military might, and divert attention away from the disastrous health and social crisis triggered by the government's ruinous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondly, Modi and the entire Indian ruling elite—including the opposition Congress Party, which during the current crisis has repeatedly taunted the BJP government for not being sufficiently aggressive against Beijing—know that they enjoy the full backing of US imperialism in the conflict with China. Almost immediately after the border dispute erupted in May, Washington demonstratively inserted itself into the conflict, denounced China as the aggressor, and directly tied it to the US-incited South China Sea dispute.

This is part of a bipartisan policy, pursued by Republican and Democratic administrations alike for two decades, to cultivate close military-strategic ties with India so as to transform it into a bulwark against an increasingly economic and geopolitically powerful China.

The irreconcilable conflict between US imperialism and China, now the world's second largest and by some measures biggest economy, was summed up by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in a late July speech in which he repudiated the five-decade-old US policy of "engagement" with China. Pompeo unveiled a comprehensive

strategy of diplomatic, economic, and military pressure against China, making clear that the US is now determined to bring about regime change in Beijing (see: “US adopts policy of regime-change in Beijing”).

The India-China border dispute is made all the more explosive because it is becoming ever more enmeshed with Washington’s aggressive diplomatic-military offensive against Beijing. Despite the remote and almost uninhabitable character of the disputed territories, including some peaks that rise to 5,100 meters (17,000 feet) above sea level, they are of growing strategic significance.

The \$60 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is a key plank of Beijing’s broader Belt and Road Initiative to develop economic ties with the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, runs near the disputed border, and through Chinese and Pakistani-held territory claimed by India. Moreover, Aksai Chin provides the only road link between China’s Tibetan and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regions, where US imperialism and its allies have sought to exploit ethnic grievances to weaken the Beijing regime.

US imperialism’s incendiary role all but ensures that if a war erupts over the India-China border, it will take on global dimensions. Central to US strategy, beginning with Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” and further underlined by the Pentagon’s 2018 declaration of a new era of great-power “strategic competition,” has been to transform India into a US frontline state against China.

As part of its ever more aggressive stance towards China, leading US officials have begun to publicly call for the creation of a NATO-style alliance in the Indo-Pacific region to challenge China. They are pressing for the Quad—a four-country, US-led strategic dialogue revived in 2017 that includes India, and Washington’s two principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia—to serve as the basis for such an alliance. India is set to host a Quad ministerial meeting in October, where the prospects for deepening military-security cooperation among its members and adding additional member states, like South Korea or New Zealand, will reportedly be discussed.

While US imperialism, as always, plays the most provocative and destabilizing role, its European and Japanese competitors are not far behind. Outgoing Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe unveiled more than \$2 billion in subsidies earlier this week to encourage Japanese companies to relocate their production facilities from China to India. At a meeting on Thursday, Abe and Modi also announced a bilateral logistics and military base-sharing agreement, patterned after that reached in 2016 between the US and India, which allows US warships and warplanes to make routine use of Indian ports and bases for maintenance and resupply.

Two days earlier, India, France, and Australia held their inaugural trilateral dialogue, an annual meeting that will focus on strategic and economic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. India is particularly interested in securing access to French military bases in Reunion and Madagascar, which it hopes will enable it to combat the expansion of China’s naval presence in the Indian Ocean through a recently established base in Djibouti and what the Pentagon claims is an undeclared based in Gwadar, Pakistan. Following the dialogue, French Defence Minister Florence Parly travelled to India for Thursday’s induction of five Rafale fighter jets into the Indian Air Force, which is the first stage of a \$7.8 billion agreement between the two countries for 36 fighter jets. Parly also held talks with her Indian counterpart, Rajnath Singh, on expanding industrial and logistical cooperation within the framework of Modi’s “Make in India” campaign.

Not to be left out, Germany’s cabinet adopted late last month a new

strategic doctrine for the Indo-Pacific that commits Europe’s largest economy to engage strategically and militarily across the region. In keeping with the German ruling elite’s systematic drive to revive militarism and an imperialist “world-power” foreign policy, the 80-page document declares that Berlin’s role “could comprise participating in security policy forums, participating in military exercises in the region, planning joint evacuations, sending liaison officers, as well as various forms of naval presence.”

In a statement announcing the publication of the document, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas underscored the predatory interests behind the plan, asserting, “The Himalayas and Straits of Malacca may seem far away. But our prosperity and geopolitical influence in the decades to come depend precisely on how we cooperate with the states of the Indo-Pacific.”

The hotly-contested Indian Ocean, which accounts for more than 40 percent of global maritime trade and is relied upon by China for oil imports as well as much of its export trade, is rapidly emerging as one of the world’s most volatile flashpoints.

The great power rivalries, which have been enormously exacerbated by the global economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, pose an immense danger to the working class of the region and the entire world.

Working people in India, China, throughout the region and internationally cannot stop the mounting danger of a war, fought between nuclear powers, in the Indo-Pacific by appealing to any of the powers involved. While it is the target of aggression by the imperialist powers and their Indian bourgeois satraps, the Stalinist regime in Beijing, which is the guardian of the vast wealth of China’s rapidly growing oligarchy of billionaires, has no progressive answer. China has responded to India’s provocations at their shared border with reactionary nationalist appeals of its own, and pledges to obliterate the Indian military with China’s superior armed forces should a military conflict with New Delhi erupt.

What is required is the building of a global, working-class-led, anti-war movement to stop the mad drive of the imperialist and great powers towards a catastrophic military conflagration. This movement must be based on the recognition that war can be fought only by taking up a struggle against its source, the capitalist profit system, on the basis of a socialist programme.



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