

Indian and Chinese militaries dig in for prolonged border standoff, as “de-escalation” efforts flounder

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The latest attempt to defuse the more than five-month-long India-China border dispute and avert a catastrophic military clash between the rival nuclear-armed powers appears to be floundering.

Since their foreign ministers met Sept. 10 on the sidelines of a Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting, Indian and Chinese officials have held just one substantive meeting to discuss pulling back the tens of thousands of troops, tanks, and fighter jets each has “forward” deployed at or near their disputed, 3,470 kilometer-long Himalayan border. Held on Sept. 21, that meeting ended after more than 10 hours of talks, with only an agreement the two sides would meet again at an undetermined future date.

Each side is adamant that the onus is on the other to initiate “de-escalation” by withdrawing troops they claim have crossed over onto their side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the countries’ de facto border.

Encouraged by Washington, India has taken an increasingly belligerent and provocative stance.

Publicly, India continues to depict its troops’ seizure in late August of a series of strategic heights near Pangong Lake, which traverses the junction between Chinese-held Aksai Chin and Indian-held Ladakh, as a defensive action taken to preempt imminent Chinese “aggression.”

However, India’s far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and military have let it be known, through planted media leaks, that the seizure of a half-dozen “tactically vital” Kailash Range mountain-tops was, in fact, planned weeks in advance, and involved several thousand troops.

“The top brass and field officers sat with the drawing board,” a source in the security establishment told the *Indian Express*. “Each and every move, to the last detail, was mapped. And just before the operations, reconnaissance was carried out. It took close to a month to do all this, in complete secrecy. With some luck on our side, it was achieved without too much fuss.”

An Indian intelligence officer elaborated: “There were three forces at our disposal—the Special Frontier Force (SFF), the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) and, of course, the Indian Army. Units were specifically picked to take over particular heights with SFF commandos leading at many places. ... The Chinese continue to dominate Black Top and Helmet Top, but we have surrounded them on heights around it.”

The BJP government’s ordering of this reckless action, which

has been all but universally celebrated by the Indian media and political establishment, attests to its readiness to risk triggering a large-scale armed clash with the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Such a clash, given the fraught character of Sino-Indian relations and the surge in world geopolitical tensions—above all, Washington’s all-sided diplomatic, economic, and military-strategic offensive against Beijing—could easily cascade into all-out war, invariably drawing in other major powers.

With Beijing insisting that India must withdraw from the positions it took on Aug. 29-30 before it will pull back any of its own troops, and New Delhi adamant that it will not relinquish its tactical advantage until China has stood down at multiple border hot-spots, both sides are apparently digging in for a long, tense standoff.

According to Indian news reports, the Indian military is rapidly erecting shelters and other infrastructure that will allow it to sustain its deployments in the coming winter months in what is inhospitable mountainous terrain. These include positions nearly 15,000 feet (4,570 metres) above sea-level.

With the government’s assent, the Indian military has also effectively repudiated a 1996 Sino-Indian agreement barring their troops from resorting to live-fire encounters along the LAC. Indian Army personnel are under orders, reported the *Economic Times* last week, to “shoot” Chinese troops if they attempt to dislodge them using “improvised weapons.”

On the night of June 15, 20 Indian soldiers, including a colonel and an unknown number of PLA troops were killed in a savage clash fought with knives and clubs on a ridge in the Galwan Valley. But neither side violated the agreement not to resort to live-fire.

India also used the official induction on Sept. 10 of the first five of the 36 fifth-generation Rafale fighter jets it has purchased from France to send a message to Beijing.

“The induction of Rafale,” tweeted Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, “is a very important step in light of the security conditions that prevail, or I would say, that have been created along India’s borders.”

Speaking to the press yesterday, the head of India’s air force, Air Chief Marshal R.K.S. Bhadauria boasted about the role the Rafale fighter jets and recently purchased US-made Apache and Chinook helicopters and Globemaster transport planes are playing

in the border conflict.

Emphasizing that the Indian military is in a heightened state of war readiness, the air marshal declared, “The present security scenario along our northern frontiers is at an uneasy no war no peace status. Our defence forces are prepared for any eventuality.”

Like India, Beijing has deployed some 50,000 troops and advanced weaponry along the LAC, and has issued, particularly through the state-owned *Global Times*, its own provocative threats of military action against India.

But there is a striking dichotomy between the importance the India-China border dispute is being accorded by their countries’ respective media outlets, and in the role it is playing in their internal politics.

While Beijing portrays the border dispute as a secondary issue and publicly contends that the differences between India and China over the LAC should not be allowed to define their bilateral relationship, the Indian ruling elite claims Chinese “aggression” constitutes an existential threat.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP government are using the border crisis to divert attention from the health and socioeconomic catastrophe triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Its ill-prepared lockdown, and even more ruinous “reopening” have resulted in a pandemic that is raging across the country, and in mass deprivation. As of yesterday, India had more than 6 million COVID-19 cases and 96,318 deaths, respectively the world’s second and third highest tallies. While there has been a slight rebound from the 23.9 percent GDP contraction India suffered between April and June, tens of millions have lost their livelihood and hundreds of millions have seen their meagre incomes shrink.

By whipping up bellicose nationalism, the far-right BJP government seeks to paint opposition, above all from the working class, as “anti-national,” if not outright seditious, and thereby legitimize its suppression.

With strong support from the dominant sections of India’s ruling elite, the BJP government is also using the border crisis to integrate India still more completely into the US strategic offensive against Beijing.

Recent weeks have seen a flurry of new initiatives to strengthen strategic ties with Washington and its most important Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia. This includes steps to jointly counter China’s Belt and Road Initiative, and to prod US and Japan-based companies to transfer production from China to India, and make India an alternate manufacturing production chain hub.

Yesterday, India announced that the US-led Quad—a “strategic dialogue” between the US, Japan, Australia, and India—will take place when its foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, visits Tokyo next week. The Oct. 6 meeting is expected to announce enhanced intelligence sharing among the four, and explore the possibility of joint military exercises. Recently, India’s Chief of Defence Staff, Bipin Rawat, said the Quad could become the means of ensuring “freedom of navigation” in the Indian Ocean, a statement widely interpreted as an Indian offer to mount joint naval patrols with the US and its closest allies.

During his visit to Japan, Jaishankar will also hold bilateral talks with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and his Japanese and

Australian counterparts, respectively Motegi Toshimitsu and Marise Payne.

Washington demonstratively intruded into the current Indo-Chinese border dispute within days of its eruption last May. In marked contrast from its public professions of neutrality during the 10-week standoff between Indian and Chinese troops on the Doklam Plateau in 2017, Washington labelled China the aggressor.

In the ensuing five months, both the Trump administration and its Democratic opponents have repeatedly drawn parallels between the tensions along India and China’s Himalayan border, and the US-fomented South China dispute.

Desperate to thwart China’s rise, Washington is recklessly inciting India, both to increase pressure on Beijing and so as to harness the Indian bourgeoisie still more tightly to its reckless and incendiary drive for world hegemony, with potentially incalculable consequences for the people of the region and the world.

US National Security Council Director for South and Central Asia, Lisa Curtis, told a Sept. 17 webinar, titled “India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi’s Theater of Opportunity,” the India-China border dispute has “further reinforced the importance of the US-India strategic partnership and it has strengthened the US resolve to work towards building that relationship as a bulwark against Chinese aggression.”

Speaking at the same webinar and in the same vein, Shivshankar Menon, India’s National Security Adviser under the previous Congress Party-led government, said that while formally India is not a treaty ally of the US, it is increasingly ready to act in concert with Washington and do things for US imperialism in the manner of a treaty ally.

Said Menon, “Many more people would accept that idea that we would start doing things with the US, for the US, that actually US allies would do—without an alliance.” ...

“I think,” he continued, “the actual practice of interoperability, of taking on particular roles and of fitting into a larger common strategy—I don’t see that being problematic today.”



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