Amid tense India-China border stand-off, US and India boost military-security partnership

Deepal Jayasekera, Keith Jones
29 October 2020

Amid the ongoing tense border stand-off between tens of thousands of Indian and Chinese troops, India and the United States held the third edition of their 2+2 dialogue, a summit between their foreign and defence ministers, on Tuesday in New Delhi. The main aim of the meeting, which was attended by US Secretaries of State and Defence Mike Pompeo and Mark Esper and their Indian counterparts, respectively Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Rajnath Singh, was to boost their countries' military-strategic partnership—which is aimed above all at China.

India's government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has exploited the border dispute, which erupted last May, to further integrate New Delhi into Washington's military-strategic offensive against Beijing. The Trump administration has been more than willing to reciprocate, since in response to the further decline in the world position of US imperialism triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is dramatically intensifying its campaign of diplomatic, economic and strategic pressure on China and accelerating its plans for war with its nuclear-armed rival.

This is a bipartisan policy of American imperialism that will continue irrespective of the outcome of next week's presidential election.

The conflict between India and China over their disputed Himalayan border continues to percolate. Both sides have mobilised upwards of 50,000 troops, and forward deployed warplanes, missile and anti-missile batteries near the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the undefined boundary which separates the world's two most populous countries. The border conflict is currently focused in the east, where Indian-controlled Ladakh adjoins Chinese-held Aksai Chin.

From its outset, Washington has provocatively intruded in the current dispute, denouncing Chinese "aggression" and egging India on in adopting a hard-line stance. In so doing, it has greatly heightened the risk that the conflict—which has already resulted in dozens of fatalities—could spiral into all-out war. Washington' stance is in striking contrast with the public pose of neutrality it adopted in 2017, when Indian and Chinese troops confronted each other for 73 days on the Doklam Plateau, territory claimed by both China and Bhutan, a Himalayan state New Delhi has long treated like a protectorate.

Underscoring the change in the US stance, American officials have repeatedly linked Chinese "aggression" against India to its actions in the South China Sea, where the US has incited territorial disputes between China and its neighbours and mounted a series of naval and military provocations against Beijing.

The visit by Pompeo and Esper succeeded in further integrating India into Washington's war plans against China. Washington and New Delhi signed the long-negotiated Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) on October 27. It will allow sharing of high-end military technology and classified satellite and other data between the two countries. Finalization of the BECA will open the door to India acquiring armed US-made Predator drones and the sharing between Washington and New Delhi of geospatial information necessary for accurate missile and drone targeting.

The two sides also reportedly discussed a wide range of weapons deals and arms development projects, including the production of small drones that would be used in drone swarm attacks. Press reports suggested that India made an urgent request for extreme-winter fighting gear so it can sustain its deployment of troops in inhospitable Himalayan terrain, including on remote mountain ridges on its border with China that were captured during a provocative operation involving thousands of troops in late August.

Following the talks, Pompeo said that the United States and India were "taking steps for cooperation against all manners of threats" from "the Chinese Communist Party … Our leaders and our citizens see with increasing clarity the CCP is no friend to democracy, the rule of law, transparency, the freedom of navigation [which is] the foundation of a free and prosperous Indo-Pacific."

Pompeo went on to declare that "The United States will stand with the people of India as they face threats to their sovereignty and their liberty," and, in a further barb aimed at Beijing, noted that he had visited the National War Memorial, where he had honoured the 20 Indian soldiers "killed by the PLA (the Chinese People's Liberation Army) in the Galwan Valley" on the evening of June 15.

Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar said that the 2+2 discussions had a "political military" content. Explaining that India's growing partnership with US imperialism has a global reach, he added: "Our national security convergences have obviously grown in a more multipolar world. We meet today to not only advance our own interests but to ensure that our bilateral cooperation makes a positive contribution in the world arena."

The central importance the US attaches to the Indian Ocean in its strategic offensive against China is a key factor behind Washington's push for an ever closer military-strategic partnership with India. Sea routes vital for China's export trade and its imports of oil and other raw materials pass through the Indian Ocean.

In recent weeks, India has taken an important initial step toward mounting joint Indian Ocean naval patrols with the US, a longstanding Washington ambition, by organizing two impromptu exercises with US aircraft carrier battle groups passing through the Indian Ocean.

Signalling India's further integration into the US-led security alliance against China in the Asia-Pacific, New Delhi last week

© World Socialist Web Site

invited Australia to participate in the annual Malabar naval exercise, to be held next month.

This will be the first joint military exercise bringing India together with the US and its two main Asia-Pacific treaty allies, Japan and Australia. It is widely viewed as opening the door for the US-led Quad—a security dialogue bringing together the same four powers—becoming a NATO-style military alliance. India had previously been reluctant to invite Australia to join the Malabar exercise for fear of antagonizing China.

Referring to the wider reach of India-US military cooperation throughout the Asia-Pacific region, Esper said: "Our focus now must be on institutionalising and regularising our cooperation to meet the challenges of the day and uphold the principles of a free and open Indo-Pacific well into the future." As part of these growing military ties, Washington is pushing New Delhi to purchase more weaponry from US firms instead of Russia. India has purchased $21 billion of US-made military equipment since 2007.

Confronting a mounting socioeconomic crisis that has been greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and growing social opposition, the Modi government is doubling down on "pro-market," neo-liberal "reform" and on the pursuit of ever-closer relations with US imperialism—that is on the strategic orientation pursued by the Indian bourgeoisie and every one of its governments since 1991.

Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government have initiated a "quantum jump" in pro-investor reforms, including the gutting of labour laws, a fire sale of public assets, and measures to boost agribusiness at the expense of small famers. At the same time, in pursuit of the Indian bourgeoisie's predatory great-power ambitions and so as to strengthen its hand against a rebellious working class at home, the Modi government is cementing India's role as a junior partner of US imperialism and anti-China frontline state.

Washington has pledged to assist India in pressing American and western-based companies to make India an alternate production-chain hub to China. Significantly, both New Delhi and Washington see armaments production as a key element in this plan. Washington is eager to exploit Indian cheap labour, but also to use expanded investments as a further mechanism to harness India to its predatory strategic agenda.

The BECA is the last of four "foundational" agreements Washington has pressed India to sign so as to create the framework for close Indo-US military cooperation and joint action. The first foundational agreement, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), was signed in 2002. It ensured security standards for the safeguarding of critical information shared by the US with India. In 2016, the US designated India as a "Major Defence Partner," allowing India to purchase technologically-advanced US weapon systems limited to Washington's closest NATO and non-NATO treaty allies like Australia.

In 2016, Washington and New Delhi signed a second foundational agreement, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), that grants Pentagon warplanes and warships access to Indian bases and vice versa. And in 2018, they signed a third foundational agreement, the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) that provides for interoperability between the two militaries and the sale of high end technology from the US to India.

In a major shift in January 2015, eight months after Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP came to power, India adopted the US line on the South China Sea dispute and has parroted it ever since. The Joint Statement issued at the conclusion of the Pompeo-Esper visit predictably raised this issue.

In a clear strategic favour to India, the Joint Statement also included warnings against Pakistan, India's historic rival and on whom New Delhi places all blame for the mass disaffection of the Muslim population in Indian-held Kashmir and the continuing Islamist separatist insurgency there. The statement denounced "the use of terrorist proxies and strongly condemned cross-border terrorism in all its forms." It urged Pakistan to take "immediate, sustained and irreversible action" to ensure that "no territory under its control is used for terrorist attacks," and to "expeditiously bring to justice the perpetrators and planners of all such attacks, including 26/11 Mumbai, Uri, and Pathankot."

The entire Indian ruling elite is backing New Delhi's growing military-strategic partnership with the US and aggressive stance against China. The main opposition Congress Party has repeatedly attacked Modi from the right, alleging his government has not done enough to counter "Chinese aggression." While claiming to oppose the India-US alliance, the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, is deepening its alliance with the Congress, which it trumpets as a "democratic, secular" alternative to the BJP. It was the Congress-led UPA government, which held office for a decade prior to Modi's election in May 2014, that first forged a "global strategic partnership" with the US under George W. Bush.

The Pompeo-Esper visit to India is part of a broader US drive to integrate the countries of South Asia into its war drive against China and make the Indian Ocean and, in particular, various Indian Ocean chokepoints, a key arena in any economic blockade or war with China.

Pompeo flew to Sri Lanka from India on Tuesday evening and engaged in talks with Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena on Wednesday. From there he flew to the Maldives, a tiny, thousand-island-chain state that, like Sri Lanka, lies close to the main Indian Ocean sea lanes. In September, Washington announced a defence agreement with the Maldives. India, which in the past had sought to deter the US from gaining a strategic foothold in what it considers its backyard, immediately voiced its strong support for the pact, few details of which have been publicly disclosed.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site