Indian government doubles down on support for US war drive against China

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India is doubling down on its participation in US imperialism's all-rounded economic, diplomatic and military-strategic offensive against China throughout the Indo-Pacific. And it is doing so, even as Washington has demonstrated by inciting and waging war with Russia over Ukraine that it is ready to risk a nuclear conflagration to achieve its predatory objectives.

In recent weeks, New Delhi has participated in two provocative military exercises with US forces aimed at preparing for war with China. The first, a major naval exercise, was within the framework of the "Quad"—the Washington-led, quasi formal military-security alliance between India, the US, and its principal Pacific allies, Japan and Australia. The second saw Indian and US troops train for "high altitude warfare" in the Himalayas a hundred kilometres (just over 60 miles) from the disputed and increasingly heavily-armed Indo-China border.

Although not officially a Quad initiative, this year's edition of the Malabar naval exercise brought together significant naval forces from the four countries. It was held from November 8 to 15 off the coast of Japan.

The annual Malabar exercise began in 1992 as a bilateral Indo-US initiative. In 2015 Japan became a permanent member. Australia has participated since 2020.

While Washington is recklessly escalating NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine, American imperialism is simultaneously preparing for war with nuclear-armed China. Continuing in the vein of the Trump administration, the Democratic-led Biden White House is employing a series of pretexts to ratchet up military, diplomatic, and economic pressure on Beijing. Chief among them in recent months has been the incitement of tensions with Beijing over Taiwan. But the US has also stepped up its bogus "human rights" campaign against China, including with lurid allegations Beijing is committing genocide against its Uighur minority and denunciations of its Zero COVID policy as inhumane.

In addition to overthrowing in all but name its "One-China" policy, Washington is stoking a series of regional border disputes, any one of which could trigger a war between the US and China. These include disputes over territorial claims in the South China Sea, as well as the Indo-China border dispute, which Washington has repeatedly trumpeted along with the conflicts in the South China Sea as examples of Chinese "aggression."

Under these conditions, the participation of the four major Indo-Pacific powers in the Malabar exercises near Japan was a deliberate provocation aimed at China.

India enthusiastically participated in the exercise with its multi-role stealth frigate INS Shivalik, anti-submarine corvette INS Kamorta and a P-8I long-range maritime patrol aircraft. According to the US Navy website, a variety of high-end tactical training events, submarine integration, anti-submarine warfare training, air defense exercises, and joint war fighting planning scenarios were included in the exercise.

The Malabar exercise took place as India's ongoing border dispute with China enters its third winter, with Delhi and Beijing once again arraying vast military forces against each other under some of the world's most inhospitable conditions in the Himalayas. The current dispute—far and away the most serious since the two countries fought a brief border war in 1962—began in May 2020 and erupted into violent conflict in June 2020, leading to the deaths of at least 20 Indian and four Chinese soldiers. In August of 2020, with US intelligence support, thousands of Indian troops captured several mountain tops unopposed, in a high-risk operation that Indian officials later admitted could well have resulted in major casualties on both sides and an all-out war.

Throughout the coming winter, both India and China intend to keep more than 50,000 troops "forward deployed" near their disputed border, along with war planes and heavy artillery. In the past two-and-a-half years, both New Delhi and Beijing have rushed to build military infrastructure along their disputed border. India has repeatedly said that the relationship between the two countries cannot be normalized until the current border conflict is resolved on its terms.

On November 15, shortly after the conclusion of the Malabar exercises, India hosted its annual bilateral military exercise with the US, known as "Yudh Abhyas." In what was a first—one that Beijing was quick to denounce when it was first revealed last August—the war game took place in close proximity to the disputed Indo-China border and was designed to prepare troops to fight in the high altitude conditions they would encounter in the Himalayas, that is to say in virtually no other place in the world. According to official releases, the exercise was aimed at enhancing interoperability and operational readiness between US and Indian forces.

The Modi government has seized on the border standoff to ratchet up tensions with Beijing and justify New Delhi's ever-closer military and economic cooperation with Washington.

By assuming the role of a frontline state in Washington's military-strategic confrontation with China, the Indian ruling class hopes to further its own reactionary great-power ambitions, including asserting itself as the regional hegemon in South Asia. It is also gambling that it can benefit from the economic "decoupling" of the US and its allies from China, exploiting its role as the overlord of a vast, super-exploited cheap-labor workforce to make India an alternate global production chain-hub.

Modi and US president Joe Biden had a bilateral meeting on

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November 15 on the sidelines of the G-20 Summit held in Bali in Indonesia. There they "reviewed the continuing deepening of the India-US Strategic partnership including cooperation in future oriented sectors like critical and emerging technologies, advanced computing, artificial intelligence etc.," according to a statement issued by the Indian External Affairs Ministry. Pointing to the expanding cooperation between New Delhi and Washington in the entire Indo-Pacific region, including Africa and the Middle East, the statement added that the "Leaders appreciated the continuing deepening of the India-US Strategic Partnership and close cooperation in groups like Quad, I2U2 (a quadrilateral alliance involving India, Israel, the US and United Arab Emirates) etc."

India is strategically located between the eastern and western parts of the Asian continent and is a "resident Indian Ocean power." This advantageous maritime geography, which makes India an ideal vantage point for controlling the Indian Ocean, has played a major role in Washington's efforts to harness India to its diplomatic, military, and economic offensive against China. Over the last two decades, Washington has concluded a series of military and strategic agreements with India to provide it access to advanced nuclear technology, US-made high-tech weapons, and assist it in the development of its "blue water" navy—i.e., one capable of functioning on the high seas.

The 2022 National Defense strategy released by Washington in October committed to enhancing America's military-strategic alliance with the specific aim of increasing India's capacity to resist China on land and at sea. The strategy noted: "The [Defense] Department will advance our Major Defense Partnership with India to enhance its ability to deter PRC [People's Republic of China] aggression and ensure free and open access to the Indian Ocean region."

The report stressed that China will be the most significant strategic competitor to the US in the coming decades. This underscores that Washington's preparations for war with China are at an advanced stage. The eruption of a war between the two nuclear-armed powers would pose a grave threat to the survival of humanity under conditions in which the ongoing war against Russia already threatens to produce a catastrophic nuclear exchange.

The US-India relationship is not without its frictions. India has refused to condemn Russia over the war in Ukraine despite US pressure to do so. Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar travelled to Russia for a two-day visit on November 8, contrary to the expectations of Washington. This visit was mainly focused on commerce and investment deals and using the rupee and ruble for trading purposes so as to bypass US sanctions on Russia. Jaishankar, who also discussed future projects in the energy sector, held talks with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov and other Russian leaders. During the visit, he reiterated India's intentions to continue its close ties with Russia despite US pressure to break them. Jaishankar said: "As the third-largest consumer of oil and gas and where incomes are not very high, we need to look for affordable sources, so the India-Russia relationship works to our advantage. We will keep it going."

After an initial public outburst of anger last March over India's refusal to toe the US line on Russia, Washington has to some extent chosen to look the other way. This is in large measure due to the Indian ruling elite's efforts to placate US imperialism by intensifying still further its support for Washington's offensive against China.

New Delhi relies on Russia at present not only for military hardware but also for oil, under conditions of international economic turmoil and a mounting domestic social crisis. Though Iraq and Saudi Arabia used to be India's main oil suppliers, Russian energy imports have surged since the Ukraine war. Having lowered oil and gas prices for countries prepared to buy its petroleum products in defiance of western sanctions, Moscow recently surpassed Iraq and Saudi Arabia as India's largest supplier of oil.

Nonetheless, the war in Ukraine is making India's precarious balancing act between its strategic partnership with the US and its long-standing relationship with Russia as a major supplier of defense equipment going back to the Soviet era ever more precarious.

Quoting Modi's remarks during his talks with Russian President Putin in Uzbekistan in September that "this is not an era of war," Jaishankar stated during his Russia visit that India strongly advises a return to dialogue between Russia and Ukraine. He also offered to mediate between the two countries.

Washington, which has armed its Ukrainian proxy to the teeth with the support of its NATO allies, has no intention of countenancing a "diplomatic settlement" to the conflict that does not include Moscow's complete capitulation to the its drive to subjugate the country and seize control of its natural resources. Moreover, US imperialism views the conflict with Russia as an initial stage in its preparation for war with its more serious rival, China.

Notwithstanding India's reservations over the US/NATO war on Russia, New Delhi has emerged as a major partner of Washington in its path to seek unchallenged global domination. The only way to stop the reckless acceleration towards world war is to build a mass international anti-war movement of the working class and youth based on a socialist program. The Modi government's enthusiastic line up with the US in its war preparations against China is increasingly dragging the entire South Asian region into a disastrous conflagration that would be fought with nuclear weapons. Under these dangerous conditions, workers and young people throughout South Asia should participate in the webinar on Saturday, December 10, to discuss the building of a mass movement to stop the Ukraine war hosted by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

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