

# India-China border clash highlights simmering war danger in Himalayas

By our reporter  
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A clash erupted December 9 between Indian and Chinese troops along the two countries' disputed Himalayan border, known as the "Line of Actual Control" (LAC). Although no troops were killed in the incident, the reported involvement of hundreds of soldiers in violent hand-to-hand combat underscores how rapidly tensions between the two nuclear-armed powers could escalate into all-out war, especially with US imperialism egging on New Delhi to adopt an ever-more belligerent stance against Beijing.

Reports on the fighting are murky, but it appears that hundreds of troops fought each other with batons and canes for several hours in the early hours of December 9.

India has blamed China for initiating the fighting, claiming that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) crossed the LAC into the Twang sector of Arunchal Pradesh in India's northeast.

The area where the fighting occurred is one of several along the 3,440 kilometre (2,100 mile) disputed India-China border over which New Delhi and Beijing disagree even as to where the LAC lies.

India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh told parliament Tuesday that Indian army personnel had pushed back a PLA incursion attempt. "Our Army with great bravery stopped the PLA incursion," said Singh, "and forced them to return to their post." Senior Indian defence sources also let it be known that the clash followed several recent incidents in which fighter jets had to be scrambled to prevent Chinese aircraft from crossing into northeast India.

Later Tuesday, Defence Minister Singh held a high-level meeting with India's Chief of Defence Staff, General Anil Chauhan, the heads of the army, navy and air force and foreign affairs minister S. Jaishankar.

For the past two-and-a-half-years, tensions along the India-China border have been their highest since the two countries fought a short border war in 1962. For a third successive winter, both countries are planning to continue to "forward" deploy tens of thousands of troops, heavy artillery, tanks and warplanes along their respective Himalayan borders, one of the world's most inhospitable regions.

China has rejected New Delhi's portrayal of the latest incident. In a statement Senior Colonel Long Shaohua, spokesperson for the PLA's Western Theater Command, said, "A regular patrol in the Dongzhang area" on "the Chinese side of the LAC" was "blocked by the Indian Army illegally crossing" the line. "We ask the Indian side," he continued, "to strictly control and restrain front-line forces and work with the Chinese side to maintain peace and tranquility on the border."

As has as often been the case during the two-and-a-half year border standoff, a Chinese Foreign Minister spokesperson played down the significance of the latest incident. This, however, has not stopped Beijing from matching India's forward military deployments and joining it in a race to develop new military infrastructure along the border.

Wang Wenbin told a daily foreign ministry briefing Tuesday that the "current border situation between China and India is generally stable" and "both sides have maintained unimpeded communication on border-related issues through diplomatic and military channels."

The December 9 clash is the latest flare-up of a standoff between Indian and Chinese forces along the LAC that began in May 2020 far to the west. The following month, and as the two sides were supposed to be disengaging, a major clash erupted in the Galwan Valley that claimed the lives of 20 Indian and at least four Chinese soldiers.

The Galwan Valley is part of the disputed region between India and China where Indian-controlled Ladakh and Chinese-held Aksai Chin abut. Askai Chin is part of China's autonomous Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, and site of crucial transport links between it and Tibet.

The border conflict is made all the more explosive due to the role American imperialism is playing in inciting India to take a harder line against China. First under Trump and now Biden, Washington has stepped up an all-sided diplomatic, economic, and military-strategic offensive against China to prevent Beijing from challenging US imperialism's global dominance, including if necessary through all-out war.

Washington has sought to enflame the India-China border dispute. Following the initial May 2020 clash, Washington obtrusively intervened into the conflict to encourage Indian belligerence. This marked a significant departure from the public stance of neutrality Washington took when Indian and Chinese troops faced off against each other in 2017 on the Doklam Plateau, a ridge claimed both by China and Bhutan, which India has long treated like a protectorate.

Whereas in 2017, Washington counselled both sides to de-escalate, it now routinely compares Chinese “aggression” over its border with India with its actions in the South China Sea, where Washington has sought to incite and inflame territorial disputes between China and its neighbours.

American imperialism’s highly provocative role in the India-China border dispute is part of its push to harness India—with its long land border with China, large nuclear-equipped military, and unique vantage point from which to dominate the Indian Ocean—to its war preparations against China.

Desperate for any leg up in the global struggle for markets, resources and strategic advantage, the Indian bourgeoisie, first under Congress Party-led governments and now under Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP, has seized on Washington’s offers of military-strategic support and help in making India an alternate production chain hub to China.

The border conflict has been used by the Modi government with all but unanimous support from the ostensible opposition parties to dramatically expand India’s bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral military-security ties with the US and its principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia. This includes participation in the Quadrilateral Dialogue, a quasi-military-strategic alliance.

Under these conditions, a seemingly minor clash between India and China on their disputed border, like the one which erupted last Friday, could rapidly develop into a world conflict. Underscoring how the Indian Ocean has become an arena of intense geopolitical conflict between US imperialism and China, Sri Lankan president Ranil Wickremesinghe said in a speech at the graduation ceremony of the Kothalawala Defence University in Colombo on November 11, “You are living in a different world ... When we were born, there was no tussle for the Indian Ocean. At one stage no one wanted it. Today it is not so... In the 70s, when I became a minister... Most people were not focusing on the Indian Ocean, but on the Pacific and the Atlantic. Today it is not so. Today the total competition in the world has gone from US and Russia to US and China.”

There is no question that the Beijing ruling elite is working on its own reactionary agenda to safeguard its interests, but it is New Delhi that is acting as the main provocateur at the

instigation of Washington. India recently concluded bilateral military exercises with the US, Yudh Abhyas, which were focused on surveillance, mountain-warfare skills, casualty evacuation, and combat medical aid in adverse terrain and climatic conditions caused by high-altitude warfare. The joint exercises from November 16 to December 3 took place in Auli in the hill state of Uttarakhand less than 100 miles from the disputed border with China. China denounced the exercise for violating the 1993-1996 bilateral border agreements. India replied by telling Beijing to think about its own breach of these agreements.

Vijay Gokhale, a former foreign secretary and Indian ambassador to China, warned in an essay Tuesday of the “potential for strategic miscalculation” by Beijing. Noting New Delhi’s “change in strategic thinking” since 2020, he said that China’s actions are now seen as “adversarial,” nor is India any longer reluctant to form alliances against the “coercer.”

Underscoring India’s readiness to risk provoking an all-out conflict, he referred to the August 2020 seizure of strategic mountain peaks by thousands of Indian troops with US intelligence support in an operation Indian officials later conceded could have provoked a major clash, even war, with China. “(T)he idea of strategic restraint has been redefined,” he wrote. “This has involved a change in risk-taking appetite among the political class, as a result of which the Snow Leopard counter-operation at Rezang La/Rechin La was carried out in August 2020.”

The 2022 US National Defense Strategy reasserted Washington’s commitment to strengthening its military-strategic alliance with India, and increasing India’s capabilities to combat China on land and at sea.

In response to the 2020 clashes in the Galwan Valley, India moved six army divisions from its northern front, where it shares a border with Pakistan, to northern Ladakh. The present clash will undoubtedly prompt the deployment of more security forces. Modi will use this to further develop India’s military-strategic partnership with the US against China, heightening the danger of a catastrophic war fought with nuclear weapons. The only way to stop the reckless acceleration toward world war is to build a mass international anti-war movement of the working class, oppressed and youth based on a socialist program.



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