

India-China border conflict enters fourth year as Modi visits Washington

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will begin a four-day visit to the United States Wednesday.

That this visit is being billed by Washington as a “state” visit and that Modi—who was long barred entry to the United States because of his role in instigating and facilitating the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom—will be offered the rare honour of addressing a joint session of Congress underscores the importance that the US political and military establishment attaches to the Indo-US “global strategic partnership.”

Modi’s visit comes as the tense border stand-off between Indian and Chinese troops over their disputed 3,500 kilometre-long Himalayan border enters its fourth year.

Washington has worked throughout to inflame the dispute, with the aim of harnessing India still more tightly to its all-sided diplomatic, economic and military-strategic offensive against China. The Modi government, with the quasi-unanimous support of the Indian ruling class, has for its part used the border standoff to whip up popular hostility to Beijing and justify a vast expansion of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral military-security ties with the US, and its principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

Despite 18 rounds of de-escalation talks over the past three years among corps commanders and higher level diplomatic engagements, including at the ministerial and national security advisor level, both sides continue to have tens of thousands of troops, tanks, and warplanes forward deployed against each other on some of the world’s most inhospitable terrain.

In a development that attests to both how fraught the standoff is and Washington’s growing involvement, India has boasted that it repelled a Chinese troop incursion last December with the help of “real-time” US-provided intelligence.

The current standoff began in May 2020, when People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and Indian troops clashed at multiple places over the location of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between Chinese-held Aksai Chin and Indian-held Ladakh in the western Himalayas. The following month it spiraled into the most serious conflict between Asia’s two most populous countries since the 1962 Sino-Indian border war. In the midst of implementing what was supposed to be a staged de-escalation process, Indian and Chinese soldiers fought each other with rocks and clubs for several hours on the night of June 15, 2020 on a narrow ridge in the Galwan Valley. At least 20 Indian and four Chinese soldiers died in the encounter.

Two-and-a-half months later, several thousand Indian troops captured several nearby Galwan Valley hilltops unopposed in a risky nighttime maneuver that Indian officials later conceded could well have resulted in a direct clash with Chinese troops and the outbreak of

all-out war. Soon thereafter in September 2020, shots were fired along the LAC for the first time since 1975.

Over the past three years, the disputed border has become heavily fortified with both India and China carrying out crash military infrastructure-building drives. New fortifications, airstrips, roads, tunnels, bridges, and rail links to swiftly move troops and supplies are being continuously developed. To fund these projects, the acquisition of new fighter jets, warships, and drones, and the expansion of India’s nuclear triad, New Delhi increased its military spending by 13 percent to 5.94 trillion rupees (\$72.6 billion) in the last budget.

Increased military-strategic cooperation will be at the centre of Modi’s talks with Biden, as will be removing what Washington and Wall Street perceive to be barriers to developing India as a rival global production-chain hub to China.

In preparation for Modi’s visit, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Biden’s National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, made separate visits to New Delhi this month.

Washington has long worked to increase arms sales to India, with the double aim of boosting the US armaments industry and making India dependent on US arms and technology. With the outbreak of the US-NATO instigated war on Russia, Washington has become even more intent on diminishing and ultimately severing the longstanding strategic ties between New Delhi and Moscow.

With that in view, US officials have been talking up the possibility that this week’s Biden-Modi summit will see the announcement of “next level” joint military production and technology transfer agreements. During his June 4-5 visit, Defense Secretary Austin and his Indian counterpart, Rajnath Singh, reportedly agreed to a “new roadmap” for US-India defense industrial collaboration that will expedite co-production and technological cooperation in fields like air combat and ground mobility systems, ammunition, and the undersea domain.

Anxious to show its readiness to further expand its US arms purchases, the Indian government announced last week that it has approved the acquisition of 31 American-made MQ-9B drones at a cost of more than \$3 billion.

Since the turn of the century, US imperialism, under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, has been pursuing a military-strategic alliance with India as a key element in its plans to counter and thwart China’s “rise.” But as Washington has become ever more perturbed and agitated by China’s economic growth and expanding influence, leading to it publicly identifying Beijing as its principal strategic adversary, this has grown ever more reckless.

In a marked contrast with the position that it took in 2017 when Chinese and Indian troops faced off for ten weeks on the Doklam

Plateau (territory claimed by both China and Bhutan), Washington abandoned any posture of neutrality at the very outset of the current Sino-Indian border conflict. It has routinely labelled China the “aggressor” and tied the ongoing Himalayan border dispute to the conflicts it has incited between China and its neighbours in the South China Sea.

Just weeks before the US reportedly provided India with “actionable” real-time satellite intelligence enabling it to repel an alleged Chinese PLA incursion, Indian and US troops held training exercises in mountain warfare less than a 100 kilometres from the contested Sino-Indian border.

The US has also greenlighted Indian “surgical strikes” on nuclear-armed Pakistan and supported the Modi government’s constitutional coup in Indian-held Kashmir that transformed India’s lone Muslim-majority and legally semi-autonomous state into a central government-controlled Union territory.

At least since 2006, when the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government negotiated the “global strategic partnership” agreement with the George W. Bush administration, the Indian bourgeoisie has made closer relations with US imperialism the cornerstone of its foreign policy and geopolitical strategy.

However, under the Modi-led far-right BJP government that came to power in 2014 and especially over the past three years India has dramatically accelerated its integration into the US military-strategic offensive against China, transforming India into a veritable frontline state in Washington’s war preparations.

While the border standoff has served as the pretext, this development has been driven by the immense socio-economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ruinous profits-before-lives response pursued by capitalist governments everywhere, and by the ensuing intensification of global geopolitical conflict.

The Modi government’s COVID “economic recovery” program announced in May 2020 combined the embrace of a “herd immunity,” let-the-virus-rip speedy end to pandemic mitigation measures with a doubling down on the two policies that have been at the centre of the Indian bourgeoisie’s class strategy for the past three decades: pro-investor “reform” and enhanced ties with Washington.

Toward that end, New Delhi signed the last of the three agreements the Pentagon views as “foundational” for joint operations with foreign militaries in October 2020; welcomed Biden’s decision to dramatically expand the US-India-Japan-Australia Quad quasi-military alliance, including by instituting regular heads of government Quad summits; transformed the annual Malabar naval exercise into a Quad event in all but name; and signed bilateral logistics agreements with Japan and Australia, allowing for mutual use of each others’ military bases for resupply and repair.

India is central to US war plans against China. Its size and location give it the potential to control navigation routes in the Indian Ocean while also threatening the “soft underbelly” of China in Tibet. Its nuclear-armed military has the second largest number of active duty troops in the world and is rapidly developing a blue-water navy.

India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which lie at the eastern entrance to the Malacca Strait, are of strategic value with the world’s busiest shipping lanes close at hand, including those that bring oil to China and East Asia. The islands are perfectly situated to keep tabs on traffic through the Malacca Strait, which is a crucial “choke point” that could be used to cut off vital supplies and exports in a conflict with China.

A key element in India’s increased strategic relations with the US is

economic. Despite the BJP government’s boasts about India’s “world-beating growth,” much of its infrastructure—as exemplified by the recent train disaster in Odisha—is dilapidated. By most measures, including per capita GNP, the country remains impoverished.

The Indian bourgeoisie is desperate to take advantage of the geopolitically-driven pullback of Western-based firms from China to transform India into a rival production chain hub, so as to increase its wealth and realize its great-power ambitions. But it also fears that it will otherwise reap the whirlwind of working-class anger over mass joblessness and poverty.

In its pandemic “recovery” strategy, the Modi government announced the ambition that India become a major arms exporter. It hopes to achieve this goal by developing India’s autonomous weapons production capability, but also by significantly expanding India’s role as a US weapons-manufacturing subcontractor.

In its push to further expand military-security ties with the US and its labeling of China rather than Pakistan as India’s principal strategic rival, the Modi government enjoys the overwhelming support of the Indian political establishment and capitalist elite. Insofar as the Congress Party and its leader Rahul Gandhi criticize Modi’s foreign policy, it is for being “too soft” on China.

For both strategic and economic reasons, the Modi government has thus far resisted US-NATO pressure that it label Moscow the “aggressor” in the war in Ukraine and impose economic sanctions against Russia. But this has everything to do with securing the predatory interests of the Indian ruling class.

It has provided pivotal support to Washington in its war drive against China, and to mollify Washington over its Ukraine war stance it is becoming still more accommodating to the Biden administration’s demands it integrate itself still more fully into the US-led campaign against China. And it is doing so, as that campaign reaches a new intensity, with the US repudiating the “one-China” policy in all but name, and as Washington demonstrates by its reckless and relentless escalation of the conflict over Ukraine that it is willing to risk nuclear and world war in pursuit of its mercenary strategic objectives.

India’s confrontational stance, backed up and encouraged by the US, is investing the localized, relatively minor Sino-Indian border conflict with the massive explosive charge arising from the frenzied struggle among the great powers for profits, resources and strategic advantage amid an imperialist drive to repartition the world.

The workers, rural toilers and youth of India and China have nothing to gain and everything to lose from such a conflict, which could quickly escalate into a global conflagration. Rather, they must join together to stop the reckless acceleration towards war, oppose reactionary nationalism, and build a mass international anti-war movement of workers and youth based on socialist internationalism and in opposition to all rival capitalist governments and elites.



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