

Tensions mount as India deploys 10,000 additional troops along its contested border with China

Rohantha De Silva
1 April 2024

As the India-China border conflict approaches its fifth year, New Delhi has “forward” deployed an additional 10,000 troops along its disputed border with China in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, Indian states that abut western Tibet.

This escalation heightens the risk of an all-out war between the nuclear-armed rivals. It was clearly coordinated with Washington, which Indian officials revealed last summer has pressed New Delhi to detail what support it would provide the Pentagon should the US go to war with China. It comes as the US is inserting itself ever more obtrusively in the India-China border dispute and is intensifying economic, diplomatic and military-strategic pressure on China, through Taiwan and its major treaty allies in Asia, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines.

Since May 2020 tens of thousands of Indian and Chinese troops have been arrayed against each other along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the undefined border between the two countries. On several occasions, Indian and People’s Liberation Army troops have clashed where Chinese-held Aksai Chin meets Indian-held Ladakh, in what is far and away the most significant border conflict between the world’s two most populous countries since they fought a brief border war in 1962. In June 2020, 20 Indian and four Chinese soldiers were killed in hand-to-hand combat. In August of that year several thousand Indian forces captured “strategic heights” unopposed in an action that Indian government officials later conceded could easily have resulted in a major clash with Chinese troops and a rapid escalation to war. After a further skirmish in December 2022, New Delhi boasted that its forces had been able to repel what it claimed was a Chinese advance thanks to “real-time” intelligence from the US.

The situation remains highly volatile. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) government have used the border conflict to dramatically expand India’s bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral military-strategic ties with Washington and its principal Asia-Pacific allies Japan and Australia, thereby further consolidating India’s role as a junior partner and frontline state of US imperialism in its war drive against China.

The new deployment of troops to Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh was announced as External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar was ending a March 5-8 visit to South Korea and Japan, where he emphasized enhanced military collaboration.

The troops are being relocated from the country’s western border with Pakistan, underscoring that New Delhi now views China, not its historic rival Pakistan, as its principal adversary. They are in addition to the 50,000 troops that Indian and China have each forward deployed since 2020 along the border, as well as sizeable numbers of tanks, warplanes and artillery. On both sides, there are continuous efforts to construct new fortifications, airstrips, roads, tunnels, bridges and rail links aimed at facilitating the swift movement of troops and supplies to the inhospitable Himalayan border region.

Despite nearly two-dozen rounds of bilateral talks, the most recent on February 19, the standoff continues, with each side stressing the other must pull back.

China’s response to India’s latest provocation has been relatively muted. Mao Ning, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, stated that it would “not be conducive to easing tensions” and that “China is committed to working with India to safeguard the peace and stability of the border areas.”

Further intensifying tensions, Modi traveled March 9 to Arunachal Pradesh, in northeastern India, to inaugurate a two-lane tunnel constructed at an elevation of 4,000 meters. This tunnel is aimed at facilitating easier access for soldiers and military equipment to the border state and ensuring year-round mobility in the remote area. Additionally, he announced a range of supplementary infrastructure initiatives, including road development and electricity generation.

Modi’s visit led to a series of verbal jousts between China and India over Arunachal Pradesh. Objecting to the visit and India’s development of infrastructure in the area, which is claimed by China as its own territory, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin reiterated March 11 that “the area of Zangnan [the name used by Beijing for Arunachal Pradesh] is Chinese territory” and that it “has never recognized the so-called Arunachal Pradesh.” He insisted that India has “no right to arbitrarily develop the area of Zangnan” and strongly opposed Modi’s visit to the “east section of the China-India boundary.”

India reacted the following day with a statement by External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal, saying, “Indian leaders visit Arunachal Pradesh from time to time, as they visit other states of India” and it “is, and will always be, an integral and inalienable part of India.”

Openly expressing its support for India's border claims, US State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on March 20: "The United States recognizes Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory and we strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to advance territorial claims by incursions or encroachments, military or civilian, across the Line of Actual Control." Protesting Washington's full-throated advocacy of the Indian stance on the border dispute, something which was unheard of before 2020, Beijing declared that the boundary question is a matter between the two countries and has nothing to do with the US.

New Delhi has stepped up its militaristic rhetoric. In comments clearly aimed at China, Defense Minister Rajnath Singh said on March 7: "Whether from land, air, or sea, if anyone attacks India, our forces will respond firmly" and "if anyone bats an eyelid at us, we are in a position to give a befitting reply."

The Indian bourgeoisie aims to become a major player on the global stage. However, the ruling elite's arrogant aspirations do not align with the genuine capabilities of Indian capitalism. Though estimates vary, the Chinese economy is nearly five times larger than that of India, and China eclipses India in most technological domains. Correspondingly, Beijing wields much greater military power than New Delhi.

New Delhi is trying to offset its significant relative weakness compared with Beijing by integrating itself ever more fully into the US strategic offensive against China and by offering India to the imperialist powers as an alternative cheap-labour production chain-hub to China.

At the same time, India is aggressively working to boost its own military prowess. On March 11, India tested an indigenously built, nuclear-capable missile with multiple warheads, whose development is aimed primarily at China. In 2021, India first tested the Agni-5 ICBM, which boasts a range of 5,000 km, making it capable of reaching nearly all areas of China.

New Delhi is also aggressively working to increase its strategic influence throughout South Asia. In recent weeks these efforts have focussed on the small Himalayan state of Bhutan, which India has long considered its protectorate. Concerned about China's moves to develop closer ties with Bhutan, India capitalized on the visit of Bhutan Prime Minister Dasho Tshering Tobgay, from March 14 to 18, to fortify its influence. Modi and Tobgay discussed advancements in infrastructure, connectivity, energy and people-to-people exchanges and reaffirmed their "commitment" to bolster the "unique" and "enduring" friendship between the two countries.

Tobgay's visit was followed by a two-day visit by Modi to Bhutan on March 22-23. In Thimphu, Modi held talks to further develop bilateral ties in a wide range of areas, according to reports. This included bilateral energy cooperation and an announcement of the doubling of Indian aid for Bhutan's five-year plan from 50 billion rupees (US\$600 million) to 100 billion rupees.

New Delhi is concerned by reports that Thimphu and Beijing have made significant progress in reaching a border agreement, since such an agreement would cut across India's efforts to exploit the border dispute between Bhutan and China. In mid-2017, India intervened in the Doklam Plateau border dispute, in the name of supporting Bhutan. India sent its own troops to the Himalayan

ridge, an area claimed by both Bhutan and China, with the aim of maintaining its influence and ensuring Thimphu didn't cede the Doklam to Beijing in exchange for territorial concessions elsewhere.

Indian strategists have long voiced alarm that control over the Doklam would, in the event of a war, place Chinese forces in a position to seize control of the critical Siliguri Corridor, a narrow slice of Indian territory squeezed between Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and China that connects India to its northeastern states.

In addition, New Delhi and Washington are aggressively working to deepen the integration of Sri Lanka and Nepal into their strategic orbit. On March 12-14, the US Department of Defense (DOD) and the US Embassy in Colombo conducted training sessions for the Sri Lanka Air Force, focusing on intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) flight demonstrations to intensify the surveillance of Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean. This is on top of four senior US government officials, including Richard Verma, deputy secretary of state for management and resources, who visited Sri Lanka in February. Bangladesh is also under Indian pressure to loosen its China links.

In late February, as part of New Delhi's broader strategy to bolster its presence in the western Indian Ocean, officials from India and Mauritius inaugurated an airstrip and jetty on the tiny Mauritian island of Agalega, financed by India. Agalega is a crucial strategic outpost in the Indian Ocean, positioned proximate to Africa. Additionally, India has secured logistical access to Oman's Duqm port.

To counter the pro-Chinese government in the Maldives and its recent military pact with Beijing, New Delhi has commissioned a new naval base, INS Jatayu, on the southernmost island of Minicoy in India's Lakshadweep archipelago, which lies off its southwest coast. It will be India's second naval base on the archipelago and is around 800 km from the Maldives. There is a significant decrease in Indian tourist arrivals to Maldives compared to last year, which New Delhi sees as a way of pressuring Male, capital of Maldives, whose main foreign currency earner is tourism.

Initiated under the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and greatly expanded during the 10 years of Modi's BJP regime, the anti-China "Indo-US Global Strategic Partnership" threatens to embroil the masses of India, Asia and the world into a global conflagration and nuclear holocaust. Yet there will be no discussion of this threat during India's election campaign, which will unfold over the next two months. This is because all sections of the political establishment—beginning with the BJP and the Stalinist CPM and CPI-supported, Congress Party-led INDIA opposition electoral bloc—stand four-square behind the Indian bourgeoisie's war alliance with US imperialism.



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