

Dozens die in India-China border clash

By Keith Jones
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The most serious border clash between Indian and Chinese troops since the two countries fought a brief border war in 1962 has reportedly resulted in dozens of fatalities.

Fighting erupted Monday night in the Galwan Valley, one of at least four places along the disputed Sino-Indian border where troops have been arrayed against each other in close quarters for more than a month.

Initial Indian government reports said three Indian army personnel, including a commissioned officer, died in the fighting. But later Tuesday, the fatality figure was dramatically revised, with the Indian Army issuing a statement that said a further “17 Indian troops who were critically injured ... at the standoff location and exposed to sub-zero temperatures in the high altitude terrain have succumbed to their injuries.”

Till now, the Chinese government has not acknowledged any fatalities. But the editor of the Chinese state-aligned *Global Times* indicated in a tweet that at least some Chinese soldiers were killed in the clash, which reportedly lasted for several hours.

The *Times of India* has claimed that Indian intercepts of Chinese communications have revealed that there were at least 43 Chinese casualties, including unspecified numbers of dead and critically injured. *U.S. News and World Report*, meanwhile, reported that “American intelligence believes 35 Chinese troops died,” in the clash, “including one senior officer.”

If news accounts are to be believed, neither side discharged firearms during the clash, adhering to an understanding that to avoid escalation Indian and Chinese troops on border patrol should refrain from carrying guns. Instead, the two sides reportedly attacked each with stones, iron rods, and clubs, some possibly studded with nails or other sharp objects.

While the cold temperatures and inhospitable terrain—the fighting took place in a Himalayan valley that lies more than 14,000 feet above sea level—and the associated difficulties in evacuating the wounded were likely contributing factors, the large number of fatalities attest to the ferocity of the fighting.

In the days prior to Monday night’s clash, New Delhi and Beijing had begun a so-called process of de-escalation of a border crisis that began in early May with two nonlethal clashes between Indian and Chinese troops, at points more than a thousand miles apart. Subsequently, both sides deployed thousands more troops, artillery, and other weaponry to their respective border regions.

Both New Delhi and Beijing continue to insist that the crisis can and will be defused. China’s Vice Foreign Minister, Luo Zhaohui, met Tuesday with India’s ambassador to Beijing.

But each power is adamant that it is the other that bears responsibility for the first fatalities along their disputed border in

45 years and must stand down.

In what could be a further complicating factor in any attempt to dampen down tensions, the *New York Times* is reporting that an Indian commander has told it that dozens of Indian troops are missing and presumed captured.

India’s foreign ministry has blamed the “violent face-off” on “an attempt by (the) Chinese side to unilaterally change (the) status quo” along the Line of Actual Control, the un-demarcated border the two countries have agreed to adhere to pending final resolution of their rival territorial claims. The Chinese Foreign Ministry countered with a statement that said Indian troops had “crossed the border twice to conduct illegal activities and launched provocative attacks against Chinese personnel, leading to a serious physical conflict between troops from both sides.”

Events could easily spin out of control. Indeed, they manifestly have already begun to spin out of control.

The world’s most populous countries, nuclear-armed India and China are rivals for markets, resources and geostrategic influence in South Asia, South-East Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

But it is the enmeshing of the Sino-Indian rivalry with the strategic confrontation between China and US imperialism that makes the border dispute so combustible and incendiary.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Washington, under Republican and Democratic administrations alike, has worked assiduously to harness India to its predatory strategic agenda. The Indian bourgeoisie, in pursuit of its own reactionary great-power ambitions and desperate to secure the favour of Wall Street and Washington has reciprocated.

Building on the “Indo-US global strategic partnership” entered into by its Congress Party-led predecessor, India’s ultra-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has transformed India into a veritable frontline state in Washington’s military-strategic offensive against Beijing. This has included throwing open Indian naval and air bases to US forces, and developing an ever-expanding web of bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral military-strategic ties with the US, and its principal Asian-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

China and Pakistan, India’s historic archrival, have responded to the common threat they perceive in the burgeoning Indo-US alliance, by strengthening their own intimate military-strategic partnership. The Indo-China and Indo-Pakistani borders have thus been transformed into potential trip lines for a global conflagration.

Yesterday, Pakistan, which continues to regularly exchange artillery fire with India across the Line of Control that separates

Indian and Pakistan-held Kashmir, blamed India for the border clash with China. “India should have never built roads and airstrips in a disputed area,” said Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi.

Thursday evening, an unnamed US State Department official made anodyne comments about the India-China clash, saying Washington is “closely monitoring” events and “supports “a peaceful resolution of the current situation”

The Trump administration has dramatically ratcheted up tensions with China in recent weeks. This has included blaming Beijing for the mass loss of life from the COVID-19 pandemic that has been caused by its own negligence and incompetence, and dispatching three aircraft carrier strike groups to the Pacific as a part of its continuing provocative military buildup against China

In keeping with this aggressive posture, Washington has conspicuously intruded into the Sino-India dispute, goading India on in taking a hard line against China. On May 20, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Alice G. Wells accused China of “aggression” against India and linked it to the South China Sea dispute, as proof of a pattern of “disturbing behaviour” by Beijing.

This was followed by repeated provocative interventions by Trump, including a barbed offer to have the US act as mediator or even arbitrate a resolution to the India-China border conflict.

All this is in marked contrast with the public posture of neutrality Washington took in 2017 when Indian and Chinese troops confronted each other for 73-days on the Doklam Plateau, a Himalayan ridge claimed by both China and Bhutan, a tiny kingdom that New Delhi treats almost like a vassal state.

The Trump administration’s guarded response to Monday night’s dramatic escalation of Sino-Indian tensions indicates that it is still evaluating their significance and calculating how best to exploit them.

But whatever its immediate steps, the use of India as a means to exert strategic pressure on China’s southern border and maintain US dominance of the Indian Ocean, whose sea lanes are the conduits of China’s oil imports and its trade with much of the world, remains pivotal to US imperialist strategy. Indeed, to further harness India to US objectives, the Trump administration, to the delight of the BJP government, is publicly pressing US companies to decamp from China and make India their new production-chain hub.

Stretching across the Himalayas, the Sino-Indian border is sparsely populated and largely barren terrain. But under conditions of a systemic breakdown of world capitalism and a consequent surge in inter-imperialist and great-power conflict it has suddenly taken on huge strategic significance.

One of the US strategies for weakening China is to exploit grievances among its ethnic minorities. India borders China’s Tibetan Autonomous Region and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

No less importantly, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), passes through China’s Aksai Chin region, territory claimed by India. The \$60 billion CPEC, which is to be anchored by pipeline, rail and road links between the Pakistan Arabian seaport of Gwadar and China, is an important element in Beijing’s

efforts to counteract US plans to strangle China economically by seizing Indian Ocean and South China Sea chokepoints.

Monday night’s fighting and three of the four areas where Indian and China troops have squared off against each other in recent weeks are along the Line of Actual Control between Indian-held Ladakh and Aksai Chin.

In pursuing its border confrontation with China, India is engaged in a reckless game of brinkmanship. But the Narendra Modi-led BJP government is hugely politically invested in projecting India as a regional hegemon, and in promoting Modi’s illegal 2016 and 2019 “surgical” military strikes on Pakistan, which precipitated weeks-long war crises, as proof of a bold new India. On Sunday, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh vowed India “will not compromise with national pride under any circumstance. India is no longer a weak India.”

Under conditions where its ill-prepared COVID-19 lockdown has resulted in a social disaster—120 million unemployed and a dramatic surge in coronavirus cases across the country—Modi and the BJP will no doubt attempt to use the clash with China as a means to intensify their promotion of a bellicose, communalist-laced Indian nationalism, with the aim of diverting mounting social anger behind reaction and intimidating the working class.

Predictably, the Congress and other opposition parties have rushed to extend their support to the BJP government. “It is time now that the country stands up to these incursions,” bellowed Congress leader and Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh yesterday.

China’s Communist Party regime, which restored capitalism three decades ago and now serves as the political instrument of a new capitalist oligarchy, has no progressive answer to the military-strategic pressure that is being placed on China by the US and other imperialist powers with the support of their Indian bourgeois satraps. Incapable of making an appeal to the international working class, the Beijing regime oscillates between building up its military, while whipping up nationalism, making its own bellicose threats and seeking a deal with the US and other imperialist powers.

The global capitalist crisis is impelling the imperialist and great powers, led by the US, to war and a catastrophic global confrontation. But it is also fueling a global upsurge of the working class. The fight against war is the fight to politically arm this incipient movement with a socialist internationalist program.

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