

India's opposition parties back Modi's bellicose stand in border conflict with China

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
30 June 2020

With tensions between India and China at their most acute in decades following a June 15 military clash along their disputed border, India's opposition parties have rushed to endorse the Narendra Modi-led government's hardline anti-China stance.

Both the Congress Party and the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), have pledged support to India's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, even as the Congress Party accuses Modi of "weakness" in countering China.

The clashes on a ridge in the Galwan Valley, which lies at the junction of Indian-held Ladakh and China's Aksai Chin region, reportedly resulted in dozens of deaths on both sides. Immediately after the clash, Prime Minister Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP vowed to give a "befitting response" to China. Modi added threateningly, "the supreme sacrifice made while protecting our motherland ... will not go in vain."

Modi's bellicose declarations and military threats are aimed not only at China, but also at pushing through a sharp shift to the right in domestic politics. With tens of millions of Indians newly-unemployed and the economy in free fall due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's ruinous ill-conceived lockdown, Modi has pledged to "revive" the economy by implementing a premature return-to-work and a "quantum leap" in pro-investor reforms.

The BJP's vociferous attacks on China serve to whip up a reactionary chauvinist atmosphere that can and will be used to intimidate the working class and brand opposition to its class-war agenda as "anti-national." By stoking tensions with Beijing, the Modi government also seeks to overcome popular opposition to harnessing India even more fully to Washington's military-strategic offensive against China.

Modi convened a virtual "all party meeting" on June 19 to rally the opposition parties behind his government's denunciations of Chinese "aggression" and the rushing of additional troops and war materiel to the disputed border. The meeting was attended by the leaders of Congress, the CPI and CPM, and more than 15 regional and casteist parties. Modi told the gathering, "All of us stand united with the soldiers defending our borders and repose full faith in their courage and bravery."

According to the official statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office after the meeting, all parties "reposed faith in the leadership of the Prime Minister in this hour of need and expressed commitment to stand united with the government."

None of the parties present have challenged the veracity of this open declaration of the unity of India's political establishment, which stretches from the Hindu supremacist BJP to the Stalinists. This is because all of the parties, their minor tactical differences notwithstanding, are committed to upholding the interests of the Indian capitalist class at home and abroad.

According to accounts of the "all-party" meeting supplied by the participants, Sonia Gandhi, the "interim" Congress Party leaders, spoke to pay "homage" to the armed forces and "assure support" to the BJP government. However, she declared that the government "should have come sooner and immediately" to seek the opposition parties' support following an alleged Chinese incursion across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) into Ladakh on May 5. Congress would have backed a more aggressive response at that stage, according to Gandhi, who added, "The entire nation would have stood together like a rock and fully supported the government of the day in the steps required to defend the territorial integrity of the country."

She urged Modi to regularize consultations with the opposition parties, "so that we may present to the world a picture of unity and solidarity."

The Congress Working Committee, which met on June 23, issued a statement reiterating the Party's "unwavering solidarity" with the armed forces. The Committee also "assure[d] support to the Government for steps taken to safeguard national security and India's territorial integrity."

To the extent that Congress, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's principal party of government, has made any criticism of Modi, it has been from the right.

Modi claimed at the all-party meeting that there was "no intrusion, no occupation and no capture of our posts" by Chinese forces. Although Modi apparently meant this as praise for the military's defence of the "motherland," Congress seized on it to attack what they claimed amounted to a concession to the Chinese government's version of events, which was that People's Liberation Army soldiers never violated the LAC in the Galwan Valley. A Congress statement declared that if Chinese forces had not crossed the LAC, as Modi was suggesting, Beijing would use it "as a vindication of their position" that it did not make "transgressions into our territory...." The Congress statement concluded by asserting, "India's territorial integrity is non-negotiable."

The reactionary character of the Congress' attacks on the

government over its handling of the border dispute was epitomized in a tweet from Rahul Gandhi, Sonia's son and the party's prime ministerial candidate in the 2019 national election. "Narendra Modi," said Rahul Gandhi, should instead be called "Surrender Modi."

Congress' bellicose criticisms of Modi only serve to accelerate the rightward lurch of official politics as the Indian bourgeoisie's two main parties seek to outdo each other in professions of support for the military and the "unity and integrity" of the "motherland," and in denunciations of China.

At the same time, Congress is promoting itself as a more capable vehicle for upholding the Indian bourgeoisie's great-power ambitions. In an opinion piece for *ThePrint* website, Manish Tewari, a senior Congress leader and the head of its Foreign Affairs Department, bemoaned a purported "lost decade" in which India failed to take steps with its allies to block China's rise. Advocating the transformation of the so-called "Quad"—a strategic dialogue led by the US and including India, and Washington's principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia—into a full-fledged military alliance, Tewari wrote that it could "emerge as the nucleus" for "a pan-Asian strategic framework" that could have a "salutary impact" on Beijing.

It was Congress Party-led governments that for many years spearheaded the expansion of Indo-US military-strategic ties, including the launching of an "Indo-US global strategic partnership" in 2006. Under Modi, who came to power in 2014, India has increasingly been transformed into a frontline state in Washington's drive to strategically encircle and threaten China. India has thrown open its bases to routine use by US warplanes and warships, lined up with the US in the South China Sea dispute, and developed an ever-expanding web of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral military-security ties with the US, Japan, and Australia.

The twin Stalinist parties, the CPI and CPM, are no less committed to the defence of the Indian state and the Indian bourgeoisie.

The CPI issued a statement two days after the clashes declaring that the "sacrifice" of the twenty Indian Army soldiers who died "protecting our borders" would "never be forgotten."

At the all-party meeting, CPM General-Secretary Sitaram Yechury underscored the Stalinists' craven support for the Indian military and state when he expressed "condolences at the death of our army officers and soldiers" in the clash with China.

He demanded the initiation of "high level talks, so that steps are taken, including clear demarcation of the LAC, to maintain peace and tranquility on the border." He also "called" on the Hindu supremacist, viciously anti-working class and pro-US Modi "government to work for peace."

Behind its appeals for "talks" and "peace," the CPM's demand for a "clear demarcation of the LAC" leaves no doubt about where the Stalinists' allegiance lies. They fully endorse the reactionary demands of the Indian bourgeoisie to secure its territorial claims in the region, which can only lead to a further escalation of rivalry and conflict with China.

Parrotting the Congress' attacks on Modi, the Stalinists have also accused him of making concessions to China. In a statement

issued on June 21, the Political Bureau of the CPM said that if there was "no intrusion, no occupation and no capture of our posts," then, "why the conflict [between Indian and Chinese border forces]? Why the martyrdom of our brave soldiers?"

The statement continued, "The PM's remarks came as a major setback to the legitimacy of the act of heroism of our brave soldiers. Further, this undermines the strength of our diplomatic efforts to resolve the dispute."

These statements speak volumes about the Stalinists' support for the Indian state. From 1989 through 2008, the Stalinists supported a succession of right-wing governments, most of them Congress Party-led, that implemented neo-liberal reforms and pursued closer ties with Washington. But whether voting with or against India's government in parliament, the Stalinists have supported the massive expansion of India's military over the past two decades, to the point that its budget is the fourth largest of any military in the world. The CPI and CPM have also staunchly supported the Indian ruling class in its reactionary conflict with Pakistan, including endorsing the reckless and patently illegal "surgical strikes" Modi ordered on Pakistan in September 2016 and February 2019.

All the other regional and casteist parties that participated in the all-party meeting emphasised their support for the Modi government's actions in asserting India's border claims against China.

The unanimous support of the opposition for confrontation with China has emboldened the BJP government. It recently declared that it has given the armed forces in the border region the power to "freely" decide how to respond to any further Chinese "transgressions" of the LAC, has placed India's armed forces along the border on high alert, and has deployed warplanes to forward bases.

Last Thursday, Indian media claimed that China has opened another front at Depsang in Indian-held Ladakh. Reports claimed this was a response by China to "India's strong stand on several fronts."

These developments only serve to underline the very real threat that the border dispute between India and China could escalate into a major war between these rival nuclear-armed states, one moreover that could draw in the US and other regional and great powers. The rallying of the opposition parties behind Modi increases the danger of such a conflict, which would have catastrophic consequences for millions of workers and toilers in the region and beyond.

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