

India-China border tensions flare anew, posing threat of catastrophic military conflict

By Deepal Jayasekera
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The four-month-old border crisis between nuclear-armed India and China has escalated sharply in recent days, posing the danger of a military conflict that could have catastrophic consequences for the people of Asia and the world.

New Delhi and Beijing have accused each other of violating their de facto border, the Line of Actual Control (LAC), on the night of August 29–30, in the remote Himalayan region where Indian-held Ladakh meets Chinese-held Aksai Chin.

India's Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, which is presiding over a COVID-19-triggered health and socioeconomic disaster, has been especially bellicose. Shortly before last weekend's confrontation on the shores of Pangong Tso lake, India's Chief of Defence Staff, General Bipin Rawat, declared that India had a viable "military option to deal with transgressions by the Chinese Army in Ladakh ... if talks at the military and the diplomatic level fail."

India's increasingly aggressive stance against China has been encouraged at every point by Washington, which is working to exploit the geopolitical rivalry between India and China to further integrate New Delhi into its military-strategic offensive against Beijing.

Even before the border dispute erupted into a violent clash in the Galwan Valley on the night of June 15, which left dozens of Indian and Chinese soldiers dead, the Trump White House and senior Congressional Democrats had demonstratively intruded into the dispute, labelling Beijing the "aggressor."

Since then, Washington has repeatedly tied the Indo-Chinese border dispute to the US-incited South China Sea conflict, citing both as examples of Chinese aggression and key reasons why it must dramatically escalate its anti-China offensive.

Both India and China now have tens of thousands of troops, warplanes and tanks forward deployed at bases and camps near the LAC, whose exact location is itself in dispute at numerous points along their roughly 3,480-kilometer (2,160-mile) border.

Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar recently called the tense situation at the border "surely the most serious situation" since the month-long 1962 Sino-Indian border war. In making this assessment, Jaishankar noted that "the quantum of forces currently deployed by both sides at the LAC is ... unprecedented."

According to media reports, India has deployed three additional army divisions, comprising about 60,000-70,000 troops, in eastern Ladakh (which borders Aksai Chin), raising its total troop strength in the region to 80,000-90,000. More than 120 main battle tanks have also been positioned at strategic points. Newly purchased US-made lightweight howitzers, as well as various missile batteries, have also been deployed. China has similarly poured large numbers of troops, artillery, planes and missiles into the border area.

In a statement issued last Monday, India's Ministry of Defence asserted that "pre-emptive" action by its troops on the southern bank of the Pangong Tso lake on the night of August 29 had prevented Chinese troops from securing a strategic position on the Indian side of the LAC. Its statement went on to repeat New Delhi's position that the onus is on Beijing to deescalate the months-long crisis.

Underscoring that a military clash between India and China could rapidly involve other regional and great powers, New Delhi has accused Pakistan, a close ally of Beijing, of taking advantage of the war tensions with China, to escalate pressure on Indian-held Kashmir.

Yesterday, Chief of Defence Staff Rawat vowed that India is prepared for the possibility of a "two-front" war against China along its northern border and Pakistan in the northwest.

"Should any threat develop along our northern borders," Rawat told a meeting of the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum (USISPF), "Pakistan could take advantage of that ... and therefore we have taken adequate precautions to ensure that any such misadventure by Pakistan is thwarted... In fact, they may suffer heavy losses." Pakistan, against which India has fought three declared wars and the Modi government

has twice ordered provocative and illegal “surgical strikes,” is also a nuclear-weapons state.

Beijing has angrily rejected New Delhi’s claims that its troops violated the LAC last weekend and has accused India of responsibility for the ratcheting up of the border crisis and war tensions.

A Chinese Foreign Minister spokesperson told a press conference Wednesday, that India’s claim that it “pre-empted” Chinese aggression is in fact evidence that it was the one who had violated the LAC. “In China,” said Hua Chunying, “we have a saying about a guilty mind protesting conspicuously he’s innocent. That is what India did. It shows that the Indian troops illegally crossed the line in provocation and unilaterally changed the status quo and broke the two sides’ agreement and consensus.”

Meanwhile, the state-owned *Global Times* issued a stern, threatening warning to New Delhi in an editorial published Wednesday. “China,” it declared, “is an immovable neighbour and much stronger than India. The two countries are suitable to be partners in seeking common development. But if New Delhi wants to label Beijing its long-term strategic rival, it needs to be prepared to pay a huge cost. In the meantime, it will never manage to get one more inch of land at China-India border areas.”

The reference to “strategic rival” is a pointed reference to US imperialism’s drive to harness New Delhi to its strategic agenda and transform India into a “frontline” state in its reckless, incendiary confrontation with Beijing.

Speaking at the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum conclave the same day that New Delhi levelled its latest charge of Chinese “aggression,” US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun called for a NATO-style Indo-Pacific alliance to counter China, adding that India is critical to US domination of the region. “So as important as I’d like to think the United States is to this strategy,” said Biegun, “it’s not going to be successful for us without India also standing side by side.”

Publicly, Foreign Minister Jaishankar and the BJP government maintain that India will not become a treaty ally of Washington so as to preserve its “strategic autonomy.”

The reality, however, is that Modi—continuing on the path blazed by the previous Congress Party-led government, which forged an Indo-US “global strategic partnership” in 2005—has integrated India ever more completely into the US strategic offensive against China, in pursuit of the Indian ruling elite’s own predatory ambitions.

This has included opening Indian air bases and ports to routine use by US warplanes and warships, and establishing a web of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral military-security partnerships with the US and its most important Indo-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

According to Indian government sources, India will join the other members of the Quad—a US-led military security “dialogue” consisting of India, Japan and Australia—in signing a new intelligence-sharing agreement at a forthcoming meeting of the Quad. That meeting, likely later this month, will reportedly be timed to coincide with the annual joint meeting of the US and Indian foreign and defence ministers. New Delhi is also expected to invite Australia to join the US and Japan as a regular participant in the annual Indian-sponsored international naval exercise, Malabar.

In what was an unprecedented message to Beijing from Washington and New Delhi as to the closeness of their ties, they arranged an impromptu naval “passage” exercise when a US naval battle group led by the USS Nimitz, the Pentagon’s biggest aircraft carrier, passed near India on July 20–21. Highlighting the exercise’s significance, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper tweeted, “The strength of US navy aircraft carriers includes the friendships they build.”

The Modi government, abetted by the corporate media and the opposition parties, is using the border crisis with China to whip up a bellicose atmosphere so as to divert attention away from the catastrophic social crisis—India is now leading the world in new COVID 19 cases, and its economy contracted by 23.9 percent between April and June—and so as to push politics further right.

In this the Congress Party is playing a particularly foul role. Throughout the current border crisis, it has attacked Modi and the BJP from the right, accusing them of failing to aggressively oppose China. In a statement issued on Monday, Congress spokesman Randip Surjewala said: “Every few days there are attempts on India’s sovereignty and news of China’s aggression is coming to the fore. They are attacking on our country and capturing our land, but where is the Modi government?”

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