TRUMP SIDES WITH INDIA AGAINST CHINA

As India and China confront each other across the Himalayas, it also clearly appears to have driven India and the United States closer. The two have conducted joint military exercises and seem to have been in regular contact, including regarding the Sino-Indian confrontation.

What is more surprising is a series of high-profile statements from senior U.S. officials and lawmakers supporting India. In contrast to the present tensions, during the 2017 Doklam confrontation, there were no standalone statements, although U.S. government spokespeople and unnamed officials did comment on it in a manner that fit Indian objectives. It is likely that India may not have wanted public expressions of U.S. support at the time, viewing them as potentially complicating its negotiations with China.

Doklam is the border triangle in the Himalayas where China, India, and Bhutan meet:

This time in Galwan on the other Western side of the Himalayas, the situation appears different.

The consultations between the two sides are much more open, and the United States has publicly and repeatedly supported India. Even prior to the Galwan clash on June 15 that resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian Army personnel, senior Indian and U.S. officials appear to have been in contact.

In one of the first conversations amid the border stand-off, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper spoke on the phone on May 29. The two sides discussed the state of bilateral defense ties and agreed to keep up with their efforts "for a strong and enduring U.S.-India defense partnership."

The readouts of the call did not mention China specifically but the statements issued by the U.S. Department of Defense and the Indian Ministry of Defense said that the two discussed regional security issues, which suggest they talked about the border stand-off. In mid-July as well, Singh and Esper held a telephone conversation where they talked about bilateral defense cooperation and issues of mutual interest, which would likely have included China and the continuing border stand-off.

A few days later, on June 2, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President Donald Trump had a telephone call. The readout of the call stated that the two leaders talked about the Sino-Indian border tensions as well as World Health Organization reforms (in May India became the new head of the WHO's executive board).

Trump also talked about the possibility of expanding the G-7 to include countries like Australia, India, South Korea, and maybe Russia, too. It is noteworthy that China is not part of the G-7 grouping or the expansion Trump floated.

An even more stark indicator of the growth in ties is the flurry of statements from U.S. officials in support of India, unlike during the Doklam standoff. Just this week, while speaking at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London, Esper criticized China for engaging in "systematic rule-breaking, coercion and other malign activities."

To a question on the Sino-Indian border situation, he said that the U.S. is "monitoring it very closely and what's happening along the Line of Actual Control (LAC)." Esper later retweeted a media story reporting his remarks that the U.S. was following the situation "very closely," adding the comment, "Very closely indeed."

This followed a steady stream of comments from senior U.S. officials condemning the Chinese aggression while extending support to India. In one of the first statements, days after the June 15 clash, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted,

"We extend our deepest condolences to the people of India for the lives lost as a result of the recent confrontation with China. We will remember the soldiers' families, loved ones, and communities as they grieve."

Barely a week after that, Pompeo was speaking to the German Marshall Fund's Brussels Forum where he once again reiterated criticism of China's habit of breaking international commitments and bullying its neighbors – India, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

With these threats from the Chinese Communist Party, he said, *"We're going to make sure we're postured appropriately to counter the PLA [China's military]. We think that's the challenge of our time, and we're going to make sure we have resources in place to do that."*

Just a week ago, Pompeo said, "*India has been a great partner. They are an important partner of ours. I have a great relationship with my foreign minister counterpart. We talk frequently about a broad range of issues. We talked about the conflict they had along their border with China*."

In the context of the Indian decision to ban 59 Chinese Internet apps, Pompeo said, *"We've talked about the risk that emanates from China, Chinese telecommunications infrastructure there, you've seen the decision they made to ban some several dozen Chinese software firms from operating inside of the country on phones of people operating inside of India."*

He emphasized that the "*whole world is coalescing around the challenge that we face*," saying that "*Democracies, free nations of the world, will push back on these challenges together. I'm very confident of that*."

This week while doing a joint press briefing along with the British foreign secretary, Pompeo once again slammed China, saying, "*You can't go make claims for maritime regions that you have no lawful claim to. You can't threaten countries and bully them in the Himalayas. You can't engage in cover-ups and co-opt international institutions like the World Health Organization*."

Lower level officials have taken up the refrain. In mid-July while speaking at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), David Stilwel, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, compared Chinese behavior in the Himalayas with similar actions elsewhere:

> *"When Beijing uses coercion, empty promises, disinformation, contempt for rules, bad-faith diplomacy, and other underhanded tactics in the South China Sea, it is drawing on a playbook that it uses worldwide. We see it in the East China Sea and around Taiwan, where Beijing has expanded its maritime provocations and threatening sorties. We see it in the Himalayas, where Beijing recently took aggressive action on its frontiers with India."*

Even earlier, in May, outgoing U.S. Secretary for South and Central Asia Alice Wells, referring to the Sino-Indian border stand-off, said that it is a "reminder of the threat by China."

Senior lawmakers have also come out strongly in support of India. On the floor of the Senate, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said, "*for the sake of grabbing territory, the [People's Liberation Army] appears to have instigated the most violent clash between China and India since those nations went to war in 1962*."

Senator Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican, also tweeted that he had spoken to Indian

Ambassador in the U.S. Taranjit Singh Sandhu "*to express our solidarity with the people of India as they firmly confront unwarranted & lawless armed aggression by the Communist Party of China. India has made it clear, they will not be bullied by Beijing*."

Around the same time, Senator Tom Cotton, a Republican from Arkansas, characterized the Chinese action as an invasion of India, "an ally of ours."

In the other chamber of the U.S. Congress, Representative Lance Gooden of Texas tweeted that, "*As more news comes out about the deadly conflict between China and India, once again CHINA appears to be an aggressive bad actor. The #CCP cannot be taken at their word, EVER.*"

Reflecting bipartisan support for India, Democrat lawmakers have also come out slamming China and supporting India.

Even prior to the Galwan clash, the House Foreign Affairs Committee chairman, Democrat Eliot Engel, called out Chinese aggression, saying, "*I am extremely concerned by the ongoing Chinese aggression along the Line of Actual Control on the India-China border. China is demonstrating once again that it is willing to bully its neighbors rather than resolve conflicts according to international law*."

After the clash, others Democrats including Ami Bera, chair of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Asia, tweeted concern about "continued Chinese aggression along its border with India." The Indian decision to ban the Chinese apps also received support from some U.S. lawmakers such as Republican Representative Jim Banks of Indiana.

Clearly, this time around, there has been much larger visible and open U.S. support for India compared to the Doklam confrontation. It is possible that this has the tacit approval of New Delhi, which would be one more indicator that the two sides are getting much more comfortable in their partnership.

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