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By Keith Jones
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US stokes India-China conflict, blames Chinese “aggression” for border clash

In a provocative statement fraught with global geo-strategic implications, a senior US diplomat has framed the China-India border standoff—which erupted last Monday night in a violent clash that left dozens of Indian and Chinese soldiers dead—as a Chinese invasion and part of a pattern of Chinese aggression.

US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell told a press briefing Thursday evening that the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) had “invaded” the “contested area” between India and China.

In May, as border tensions between Beijing and New Delhi rose, Washington visibly intruded into the dispute with denunciations of Chinese “aggression.” However, prior to Thursday, its public response to Monday’s clash, and the subsequent large-scale deployments of Indian and Chinese military forces to their border region, had been guarded.

Now, however, the US is proclaiming its support for India, action that it knows and calculates will encourage New Delhi to take a hardline stance and aggravate China. Moreover, it is doing so under conditions where the Indian media is reporting there is growing pressure within Indian government and military circles for some form of military retaliation against China.

Whatever reservations the Trump administration may have had about stoking a conflict between the world's two most populous countries and rival nuclear powers are now clearly being cast aside.

Stilwell, a retired US Air Force general, was responding to a question from a journalist from the right-wing *Washington Examiner* who suggested the Indo-Chinese border clash was one in a series of Chinese aggressions in South and East Asia. "We're obviously watching the India-China border dispute very closely.... The PLA invaded this contested area deeper and longer, with more people, than ever before historically," Stilwell declared. "Again," Stilwell continued, "whether that was a negotiating tactic or a—just a punch in the nose to demonstrate their superiority, I don't know."

The entire exchange was premised on the false anti-China narrative that Washington has promoted with increasing vehemence over the past decade. The US routinely depicts China as an aggressor disrupting "international order" and "the rule of law," when in reality it is US imperialism that is mounting a relentless and ever-escalating diplomatic, economic, and military-strategic offensive against Beijing, aimed at thwarting its "rise."

In 2011, the Obama administration launched America's anti-China "pivot to Asia," which included plans, now realized, to shift the majority of US military assets to the Asia Pacific. Trump, while eschewing that term, has dramatically intensified the US campaign against Beijing.

The Pentagon has formally designated China a "strategic competitor" in a new era of "great power conflict," and Washington has launched a campaign to cripple China economically, by seeking to block its emergence as a competitor in high-tech industries and now by pressing for US companies to "decouple from" China.

The surge in tensions on the Sino-Indian border is directly tied to the US offensive against China.

First and foremost, India's venal ruling class, seduced by US offers of strategic favours and investment, has leashed itself to Washington's anti-China war drive. Narendra Modi and his ultra-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government have transformed India into a frontline state in the US offensive against China. They have thrown open India's air and naval bases to US warplanes and warships, parroted the American line on the South China Sea dispute, and developed a web of bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral military-security ties with the US and its principal, Indo-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

Second, and flowing from the first, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is meant to counteract US plans to strangle China economically by dominating Indian Ocean and South China Sea “chokepoints,” passes through China’s Aksai Chin region—border territory that India claims is rightfully its.

The significance of Stilwell’s remarks is underscored by his rank—he is the most senior US diplomat for East Asia and the Pacific region. Also he was speaking at a briefing on the outcome of six-hours of talks held between US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Yang Jiechi, the Chinese Communist Party Politburo member charged with overseeing foreign affairs.

The US has said little about the talks held in Honolulu Wednesday, and Stilwell, who participated in them, was far from forthcoming in Thursday’s press briefing. However, what he did say made clear that the US used the talks as an occasion to make a series of provocative demands upon which, Beijing was told, the future of Sino-American relations, including commercial ties, will depend.

Stilwell indicated that the US had sought to berate China over the COVID-19 pandemic, demanding China disclose “all they know about how this pandemic began.”

This is part of a campaign spearheaded by President Trump to deflect blame for the horrific loss of life caused by COVID-19 in the US from the negligent response of his administration and the ruling elite as a whole. It is also aimed at legitimizing further aggression against China.

Other issues on which Stilwell insisted the US needed to see “action” from Beijing included the South China Sea dispute, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Uyghurs. The latter two questions reference Washington’s attempts to use the authoritarian actions of the Chinese state to provide the US with a bogus “human rights” cover for the pursuit of its own predatory interests.

Of course, none of the reporters at the briefing pointed to the absurdity of Washington declaiming against Chinese repression in the aftermath of the massive state attack on the US protests over the police murder of George Floyd and Trump’s attempt to order the military into the streets and establish a military dictatorship. Nor did they breathe a word about Washington’s support for authoritarian and dictatorial regimes around the world.

In a statement that spoke to the tense character of the exchanges at Wednesday’s talks Stilwell said, “The president is not pulling punches anymore. He is basically doing what

he has to do to protect US interests, starting off with obviously the trade deal.” Where Sino-US relations were headed, Stilwell said, he could not say.

Stilwell did claim there are two possible issues where Beijing and Washington might be able to work together. Not surprisingly this proved to be a barbed proposal. Washington wants China’s help in pressuring North Korea, a close ally, to bend to US demands. It is also pushing China to join proposed nuclear talks with Russia, something that Beijing has refused to do, arguing that its nuclear arsenal is only a tiny fraction of the other two powers.

Within this context, the US decision to publicly side with India—which it did not do in 2017 when Indian and Chinese troops faced off against each other on a ridge claimed by both China and Bhutan—and, moreover, to tie it to the South China Sea dispute is inflammatory and reckless.

Washington has made the connection between the Indo-China border dispute and the US strategic confrontation with Beijing explicit. This ensures that it will become still more intractable and explosive, for any outcome, whether in the form of further military clashes and war or an attempted de-escalation, will be judged for its impact on the US-China confrontation as a whole.

Furthermore, the US intervention will and is meant to embolden the most hawkish elements in India’s ruling elite. The Modi government and its Hindu supremacist allies, aided and abetted by a craven opposition, are whipping up anti-Chinese chauvinism and bellicose nationalism.

The BJP’s ruinous, ill-prepared COVID-19 lockdown has produced twin social disasters—an economic collapse that has cost more than a hundred million impoverished workers their jobs, and a pandemic that is now growing exponentially. Under these conditions, it is seizing on the conflict with China as a means of deflecting social anger and promoting reaction.

Underscoring that Washington is now publicly shifting behind India and inciting its confrontation with China, Secretary of State Pompeo and the US ambassador to India have now extended their condolences to India for the 20 of its soldiers killed in Monday’s clash. “Their bravery and courage will not be forgotten,” Ambassador Kenneth Juster tweeted.

In an ominous sign of the dangers that the US is stoking, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell meanwhile told the Senate Thursday: “For the sake of grabbing territory, the

PLA appears to have instigated the most violent clash between China and India since those nations went to war in 1962.” Thousands died or were wounded in that war fought when neither country had a nuclear weapon.

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