

Insane Hostility with China

With little or no hope of us support, will Modi quietly withdraw Indian troops?

On the very day (26 June) that Indian troops crossed over the Sikkim section of India's border with China to block the construction of a road on the Chinese side in the Doklam or Donglang Plateau, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was in Washington DC nervously downplaying New Delhi's differences with the Donald Trump administration on its "America First" policies. Not only Modi and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, but even India's big media seemed to be tense about a possible downgrading of the Indo-us strategic alliance, a "global strategic partnership" that the Indian ruling elite considers vital to the process of India realising its "great power" ambitions. A brainchild of Hindutvavadi right-hand men of the Prime Minister, the scheme to create a third point of conflict on the border with China—the earlier two concerning the McMahon Line in the North East and India's claim to Aksai Chin in the North West—has perhaps been devised to cement the anti-China alliance with us imperialism. But will this devious line of action work?

Since mid-2014, when the Modi government assumed office, the Barack Obama administration took full advantage of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's ideological proclivities to get New Delhi geared to assume the role of a "frontline" state in America's confrontation with China. Specifically, designating India as a "Major Defence Partner" which entitles it to defence technology sharing at a "level commensurate with that of ... (the us's) closest allies and partners" in return for a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement under which the us military can "forward deploy" at Indian military bases, has enabled Washington to rope India in. Indeed, when in early December 2016, president-elect Trump indicated that he will not be bound by the us's "One China" policy—which recognises Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all China and has been the foundation of Sino-American diplomacy over the last 45 years—and even hinted that his adherence to this code would be subject to the Chinese government caving in on all other contentious bilateral issues, Modi's advisors seemed assured that the Trump administration would be willing to back all the territorial claims of India vis-à-vis China.

While New Delhi continues "talks" with China over the two border disputes, it refuses to "negotiate," something that will entail coming down from its all-encompassing claim to

Aksai Chin and its arrogant assertion of the legality of the McMahon Line. All this even when all of China's other contiguous neighbouring countries, with the exception of Bhutan (as it remains de facto an Indian protectorate), have been able to arrive at harmonious settlements of their border disputes with China. In fact, China appears ready, more or less, to accept the borderlines with which history has left it. Therefore, in any negotiated settlement, India will retain the territory up to the so-called McMahon Line, even though the Chinese know that much of the territory lost was seized by the British colonial power in its last expansionist phase.

Why then is India apparently bent upon provoking hostilities, making itself an enemy of China? The army chief General Bipin Rawat has irresponsibly boasted that India is prepared to fight a two-and-a-half front war against China, Pakistan and Indian rebel insurgents simultaneously. Both South Block, Indian big media, and most self-styled security experts are suggesting that China is bent upon pushing the Sino-Indian-Bhutanese border further south so that in the event of war, it will be better placed to "grab" the Siliguri corridor—the so-called "Chicken's neck"—linking West Bengal and the rest of India to the seven north-eastern states, and thereby cut off the only in-country direct land link with those states. That this far-fetched eventuality justifies incursion into territory claimed by China as its own, and under Chinese control, is a reflection of the extent of the build-up of hostility towards China over the last three years and the abandonment of the "strategic autonomy" New Delhi has been claiming to exercise in its "global strategic partnership" with Washington.

To the dismay of Modi's advisors, however, Trump seems to have been obliged to take a more accommodating line on China in a bid to persuade it to reduce its huge trade surplus with the us and to get Beijing to pressure Pyongyang to meet Washington's demands on North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles. Significantly, at least so far, neither Washington nor Tokyo has come out openly in favour of New Delhi in the latter's recently manufactured third point of conflict in its border dispute with China. With little hope of support from Washington, will Modi then quietly withdraw Indian troops from the territory under Chinese control in Doklam?