

US Senate report proposes a more “robust” policy toward Sri Lanka

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A report published by the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on December 7 called for a significant policy shift toward Sri Lanka, aimed at boosting US influence in Colombo and countering China following the end of the island’s devastating civil war in May.

The bipartisan report entitled “Sri Lanka: Recharting US strategy after the war” underscores the dangers facing the working class amid growing geo-political rivalry throughout the region. The call for stepped-up efforts in Colombo takes place as the Obama administration is escalating the war in Afghanistan, pressing Pakistan to intensify military operations against Islamist insurgents and menacing Iran with sanctions and military threats.

While the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia are central to US strategy, Washington is seeking more broadly to counteract China throughout Asia. The worst global economic crisis since the 1930s has only underscored the waning economic strength of the US and accentuated its concerns over the rising power of China. As the report makes clear, Sri Lanka is a significant arena for these competing interests.

After noting that “US policymakers have tended to underestimate Sri Lanka’s geostrategic importance for American interests,” the document warned that “the United States cannot afford to ‘lose’ Sri Lanka”. It explained that the island is “located at the nexus of crucial maritime trading routes in the Indian Ocean connecting Europe and the Middle East to China and the rest of Asia”. Beyond the sea routes, instability in Sri Lanka impacts on the south of India, which is now a key US strategic partner.

The report’s main concern is with the consequences of Washington’s criticism of the Sri Lankan government’s abuse of basic democratic rights. “As Western countries became increasingly critical of the Sri Lankan government’s handling of the war and human rights record,” it stated, “the [President] Rajapakse leadership cultivated ties with such countries as Burma, China, Iran and Libya. The Chinese have invested billions of dollars in Sri Lanka through military loans, infrastructure loans and port development in Sri Lanka, with none of the strings attached by Western nations.”

US criticisms of the Sri Lankan army’s slaughter of thousands of civilians, the incarceration of a quarter of a millions Tamils, the operation of death squads and other abuses were always limited and hypocritical. Washington backed Rajapakse’s war, continued to supply military intelligence and assistance and called for the unconditional surrender of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). US calls for an international war crimes investigation, along with its delays in approving a much-needed \$US2.6 billion IMF loan, were aimed at boosting US political influence in Colombo at China’s expense.

The Senate report makes clear that this tactic has failed as “Sri Lanka has grown politically and economically isolated from the West”. In a chilling statement, the document declared that “US policy toward Sri Lanka cannot be dominated by a single agenda”—that is, of human rights—shortchanging “US geostrategic interests in the region”. In other words, even the previous limited expressions of concern about the Rajapakse regime’s abuses should be played down.

The report cited a Congressional Research Service (CRS) document detailing China's aims in Sri Lanka and the region more broadly. "Chinese activity in the region appears to be seeking friends like Sri Lanka to secure its sea lines of communication from the Straits of Hormuz and the western reaches of the Indian Ocean region to the Strait of Malacca to facilitate trade and secure China's energy imports," the CRS noted.

The CRS highlighted China's deal with Sri Lanka to develop a deepwater port in the southern town of Hambantota in 2007, providing a \$US1 billion loan in 2008. "In 2009, China was granted an exclusive investment zone in Meerigama, 34 miles from Colombo's port," it stated. The CRS also pointed out that China had forged closer political ties with Rajapakse by blocking "Western-led efforts to impose a truce through the United Nations Security Council" and "continued supplying arms to the Sri Lankan government".

The Senate report noted: "Sri Lanka's strategic importance to the United States, China, and India is viewed by some as a key piece in a larger geopolitical dynamic, what has been referred to as a new 'Great Game'." It cited a Sri Lankan minister who pointed out that his government "was forced to reach out to other countries because the West refused to help Sri Lanka finish the war against the LTTE". The report added: "These calculations—if left unchecked—threaten long-term U.S. strategic interests in the Indian Ocean".

The Senate committee called for "a broader and more robust approach to Sri Lanka that appreciates new political and economic realities in Sri Lanka and US geostrategic interests". The Senate committee advocated a "multi-dimensional" strategy that is not driven "solely by short-term humanitarian concerns". In particular, it called for an expansion of US economic assistance to "all areas of the country, particularly in the [Sinhalese] south and central areas" and an end to the ban on US military training of Sri Lankan officers.

Already a shift in the Obama administration's stance can be seen. During a recent visit, Robert Blake, Assistant Secretary of US State Department for South

and Central Asia, praised the Sri Lankan government for "resettling" Tamil detainees and for the "pretty-good" conditions at Manik Farm—the main detention camp where tens of thousands of Tamil civilians are still being held.

The significance of the Senate Committee report goes well beyond its recommendations. It underscores the fact that the US will not relinquish its vital geo-political interests in Sri Lanka and South Asia to China or any other rival without a struggle. As the wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan make clear, if arm-twisting and economic bribery fail then the US will not hesitate to use military means.

The only social force capable of preventing the slide toward unrestrained rivalry and war is the working class. Workers in Sri Lanka share a common interest with their class brothers and sisters throughout the Indian subcontinent and internationally in abolishing the profit system and the outmoded nation-state system that is the source of war and replacing it with a planned world economy to meet the social needs of mankind. That is the perspective of international socialism advanced by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the present Sri Lankan election.



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