Sri Lankan media voices concerns about Rajapakse's pro-China orientation

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A lengthy editorial in the *Sunday Times* in Sri Lanka late last month highlighted the nervousness in the country's political and business circles that President Mahinda Rajapakse is aligning the country too closely to China, with potentially damaging consequences.

The occasion for the editorial was Rajapakse's attendance for the first time at the 15th annual St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF)—commonly referred to as the "Russian Davos." The newspaper's concern was not so much the rather uneventful forum but rather the prospect that Sri Lanka was joining up with a developing anti-Western bloc, centred on China and Russia.

"By President Rajapakse's presence, especially at this time when Western countries are breathing down his neck on allegations of war crimes, he signalled a more than willingness to hedge his bets with this emerging alliance," the editorial stated. Such a move, it opined, "would have serious ramifications on the country's non-aligned status," which had ensured for decades that the country had been "a friend of all and an enemy of none."

The editorial reflects the deepening dilemma posed to ruling elites, not just in Sri Lanka but throughout the region by the economic rise of China, and the relative decline of the United States. Since the Obama administration came to office, the US has aggressively intervened in Asia to try to undermine growing Chinese influence, forcing governments into an increasingly precarious balancing act.

In the case of Sri Lanka, the US and its European allies have exploited "human rights" to put pressure on the Rajapakse government to distance itself from Beijing. Washington's professions of concern for the civilians killed by the Sri Lankan military in the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are utterly cynical. The US backed Rajapakse's war and turned a blind eye to the army's war crimes right up until the final months before the LTTE's defeat in May 2009.

With the LTTE's collapse imminent, Washington's real concern was the growing influence of Beijing, which had provided large quantities of money and arms to Colombo. In return, the Rajapakse government had given China the contract to build a modern new port at Hambantota on the southern tip of the island. The port is strategically located, adjacent to the shipping lanes used by China to ship energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East.

Calls by the US and European powers in 2009 for an international investigation into war crimes in Sri Lanka drove the Rajapakse government to seek diplomatic support from China and Russia to block the move. But Western pressure over "human rights" has continued, carrying with it the threat that Rajapakse and his cronies could be charged with war crimes. For his part, Rajapakse has responded by flatly denying that any civilian deaths occurred and demagogically posturing as a defender of Sri Lanka against the major powers.

The *Sunday Times* backed Rajapakse's war, remained silent on his war crimes and generally backed his bogus campaign to defend Sri Lankan sovereignty from Western interference. However, reflecting broader concern in ruling circles, the editorial questioned the government's turn toward China and Russia. "Has Sri Lanka put all its eggs in one basket by diverting course and jettisoning its time-tested Non-Aligned policies simply because its political leadership is under stress and duress from Western powers?" it asked.

Answering the question, the newspaper declared: "Sri Lanka cannot afford to simply abandon the West immediately without facing some consequences. It just cannot afford to do so."

Pointing to the economic interests at stake, it continued: "Take some simple statistics for example. Sri Lanka's top

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five exporters are the US, Britain, India, Italy and Germany. The US is the largest importer of Sri Lankan goods amounting to 21 percent of the total exports from Sri Lanka. Russia comes 8th with 2.2 percent and China is in the 18th place with a paltry $US76 million worth of imports, not even 1 percent of total exports from Sri Lanka. On the other hand, China exported to Sri Lanka $US1.2 billion worth of goods.

"Sri Lanka has announced great plans to increase tourist arrivals to the country. And who has been coming to Sri Lanka? There were 7,400 from Russia from January to May this year and about the same number from China totaling less than 15,000. The number of tourist arrivals for the same period from Europe was 145,000."

The editorial acknowledged that China had provided $US900 million in cheap credit, but added that such "loans are easy to take, yet they are repayable, and they must be paid with cash earned from trade, tourism and foreign investment."

After noting that Sri Lankan students went overwhelmingly to study in North America, Australia or Europe, rather than China or Russia, the newspaper declared: "There is, therefore, a kind of umbilical cord with the West that cannot be erased off the slate however inconvenient, uncomfortable and unreasonable the Western pressures on this government may be."

Three days later, the *Daily Mirror*, from the same newspaper group, published an editorial entitled "Diplo-muts drag Lanka towards disaster." After referring to the SPIEF gathering, it declared that the "Rajapakse regime appears to be in a foreign policy muddle and drifting away if not damning NAM [Non-Aligned Movement]." The newspaper warned that China and Russia could be just as duplicitous as the West and concluded: "Instead of taking reactive decisions which have dangerous long-term consequences, the government needs to work out a clear-cut foreign policy and remain on the middle path of non-alignment."

The editorials obviously reflect fears in Sri Lankan business circles that the country could pay an economic price for too openly siding with China and Russia. The cynical use of "human rights" has been Washington's diplomatic weapon of choice in justifying economic sanctions, regime change and wars to further its economic and strategic ambitions. The importance of the island to the US was underscored by a Senate Foreign Relations Committee report in 2009, which declared that "the United States cannot afford to lose Sri Lanka."

The *Sunday Times* proposal to stick to the tried and trusted path of the Non-Aligned Movement is, however, increasingly problematic. NAM was a creation of the Cold War, during which countries like Sri Lanka were able to balance between the US and Soviet blocs, securing whatever benefit they could from both sides. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought intensifying rivalry between the major powers for economic and strategic advantage.

Those tensions have been compounded by the staggering economic rise of China, which became the world's second largest economy last year. The prospect of economic aid and investment with no political strings attached has proven attractive not only to Rajapakse but governments in many other countries. As well as constructing the Hambantota port, Chinese corporations are reported to be planning major real estate projects in Colombo.

Rajapakse has attempted to pacify Washington by setting up a Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission on the Sri Lankan civil war—a bogus exercise stacked with the president's appointees. Steady pressure from the US and its European allies over "human rights" has continued, however, with the implicit threat of retribution should the Sri Lankan government move to close to China.

Rajapakse's balancing act reflects the sharpening rivalry between the US and China throughout the region. In the end, as the worried editorials in the Sri Lankan media reflect, countries will be forced to line up with one side or another, and to bear the damaging consequences.

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