

Sri Lanka tilts toward the US

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As the Obama administration escalates its diplomatic and strategic moves in Asia to undercut Chinese influence, the Sri Lankan government is shifting course—distancing itself somewhat from Beijing and attempting to draw closer to Washington.

This manoeuvring was evident at the Shangri-la security dialogue in Singapore earlier this month. Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Foreign Minister G. L. Peiris met with the US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, General Martin Dempsey, on the sidelines of the talks on June 5. In response to a Sri Lankan request, Dempsey agreed to provide military assistance, in particular to the Sri Lankan navy.

Few details have been published. But the Sri Lankan Defence Ministry web site noted that the US and India had “responded positively” to Rajapakse’s request for “enhanced training opportunities for capacity building of defence personnel.” Gotabhaya Rajapakse is President Mahinda Rajapakse’s brother.

The report also noted: “As a coastal nation, the meetings recognised the pivotal role that the Sri Lanka Navy could play in strengthening the security of sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and resolved to co-operate closely in drawing on their synergies in combating international terrorism.”

The reference to “combatting international terrorism” simply obscures the real aim of this developing naval collaboration. At the Singapore meeting, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta announced that the US would be building up its naval presence in the Asia Pacific region to 60 percent of its total forces by 2020.

The US focus on naval power is aimed at controlling key sea routes used by China to ship energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa. In the event of a conflict with China, the US navy would be able to

mount an economic blockade by halting vital Chinese imports.

Sri Lanka is strategically positioned at the southern tip of the Indian sub-continent near key routes across the Indian Ocean from the Middle East and Africa. It could play a vital logistical role in any US-China conflict, as it did during World War II for British imperialism. After the fall of Singapore and Burma to Japanese troops, the headquarters of the Allied Southeast Asia Command was relocated to Kandy in the central hills area of Sri Lanka.

President Mahinda Rajapakse relied heavily on China for economic, political and military support in his government’s communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In return, he allowed China to build a major port at Hambantota on the southern tip of the island.

In December 2009, a report by the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, entitled “Sri Lanka: Re-charting US Strategy after the War,” declared that the US could not afford to “lose” Sri Lanka. It called for intensified efforts to bring Colombo into Washington’s orbit.

The Sri Lankan military waged a brutal war, costing the lives of tens of thousands of civilians, before the LTTE was defeated in May 2009. The Obama administration, which backed Colombo’s war, has nevertheless used the threat of war crimes investigations in order to pressure Rajapakse to align more closely with Washington.

In March this year, a US-sponsored resolution was passed at the UN Human Rights Council calling on the Sri Lankan government to ensure “justice, equity, accountability and reconciliation.” The resolution was never intended to defend the democratic rights of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. Rather, it was a warning that the US could intensify the diplomatic pressure on Sri

Lanka.

The Rajapakse government decided to mend its bridges with the US. It dispatched External Affairs Minister Peiris to the US on May 19, nominally to present a report on what the government was doing for post-war reconciliation.

According to media reports, US military chief Dempsey and Indian Defence Minister A. K. Antony expressed their appreciation in Singapore for Peiris's report on the government's "rehabilitation and reconstruction" work in the north and east of Sri Lanka. The US and India turned a blind eye to the fact that these predominantly Tamil areas remain under military occupation. Democratic rights are seriously curtailed and about 17,000 people are still languishing in refugee camps unable to return to their homes.

The Rajapakse government's adaptation to the Obama administration's aggressive intervention into Asia is revealing. Like its counterparts throughout the region, the Sri Lankan ruling class confronts a fundamental dilemma. It continues to rely heavily on China as an export market and source of aid and investment. At the same time, it cannot afford to alienate the world's strongest military power, which also plays a significant role in determining financial assistance from international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

Colombo's room to manoeuvre between Washington and Beijing is vanishing. Rajapakse and his government still continue to cautiously denounce "the international conspiracy" of war crimes accusations against Sri Lanka—as a means of diverting the anger of the masses over deteriorating living standards. Increasingly, however, the tilt is toward the US.



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