

# Japanese PM pressures Sri Lanka to weaken ties with China

W.A. Sunil

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Shinzo Abe's two-day visit to Sri Lanka was bound up with a broader drive to secure Japanese influence in South Asia, at the expense of China.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe spent two days in Sri Lanka on September 7–8 as part of his government's aggressive moves to counter China's influence in South Asia. It was the first visit by a Japanese prime minister in 24 years. Abe was accompanied by CEOs from companies such as Hitachi, Sumitomo, Mitsubishi, Tomo Digi, Onomichi Dockyard and Noritake.

Over the past year, the Japanese government has intensified its provocations against China over the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. Abe has lined up with the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" policy of militarily encircling China, by forging closer strategic ties with the US and Australia. While pursuing these alliances, Japan is seeking to advance its own imperialist interests in the region.

For now, Japan's agenda in Sri Lanka coincides with that of the US, which is pressuring Colombo to distance itself from Beijing. Beijing increased its influence in Sri Lanka during the past five years by providing military and economic support, particularly during the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Since 2009 China surpassed Japan as the main donor to Sri Lanka. It has invested in key areas like the Hambantota port and infrastructure developments, including highways and electricity. China has also financed and built a Colombo port terminal.

Washington backed successive Colombo governments against the LTTE. However, since the LTTE's defeat in 2009, it has cynically used the war crimes committed by President Mahinda Rajapakse's administration as a lever to push it to line up behind US

policy against China.

For his part, Rajapakse is keen to develop close relations with Japan, calculating that it might soften US pressure on his government. In March, Tokyo abstained from voting for a US-sponsored UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution that proposed an international investigation into the Sri Lankan human rights abuses.

Japan, however, is manoeuvring for closer ties with Colombo to pursue its own strategic interests, not out of any sympathy for the Rajapakse government. For public relations purposes, Abe said he "appreciated" Sri Lanka's "reconciliation" process—which has consisted of whitewashing the killing of tens of thousands of Tamils—and the government's supposed engagement with "the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms."

A five-page joint statement issued by Abe and Rajapakse pointed to the underlying calculations involved. It stated that the two leaders had decided to elevate Sri Lanka-Japan relations into "a new partnership between maritime countries" to "play significant role in the stability of the Pacific and Indian Ocean region."

Noting Sri Lanka's geographical location in the middle of the Indian Ocean and the "importance of ensuring freedom of navigation in the region," the two leaders decided to establish a "Sri Lanka-Japan Dialogue on Maritime Security and Oceanic Issues." Enhanced naval cooperation was also discussed, and Japan promised to provide patrol vessels.

On Japan's part, these proposals are aimed at wrapping Sri Lanka into Japan's strategic agenda. The Indian Ocean is crucial for Japan's needs, as much as it is for China's. Japan imports 80 percent of its oil and gas supplies from the Middle East via the Strait of

Malacca, making Sri Lanka's proximity to the Indian Ocean's sea lanes of vital importance to it.

Naval dominance in the Indian Ocean provides US and Japanese imperialism with crucial capacity to block China's equally much-needed energy and resources imports.

The joint statement also expressed concern about China's ally North Korea. "The two leaders reiterated their call for North Korea to address the concern of the international community and they also urged North Korea to refrain from any provocative actions including ballistic missile launches."

Last December, the Rajapakse government issued a statement for the first time voicing concern about North Korea launching a missile. By now joining Japan in making a further statement, Rajapakse is sending another signal of his readiness to align with the US and Japan, and against China.

In return, Abe promised considerable aid, mainly concessionary loans to the cash-strapped Rajapakse government. Last year, Japan pledged to provide development assistance funds totaling 43.8 billion yen [\$US480 million]. This time, Abe signed several agreements, including providing \$US330 million to expand the international airport and \$130 million for broadcasting and telecommunications infrastructure based on Japan's Terrestrial Integrated Services Digital Broadcasting system.

Abe's visit was bound up with a broader drive for influence in South Asia. Before arriving in Sri Lanka, Abe visited Bangladesh, where Beijing has also developed close ties in recent years, including by providing aid for various projects. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina decided to withdraw her country's candidacy for a non-permanent member's seat on the UN Security Council, instead backing Japan's bid for the same spot. Abe pledged \$6 billion to Bangladesh for various development schemes, while Hasina promised to set up special industrial parks for Japanese investors.

Two weeks ago, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi concluded a five-day visit to Japan, which was hailed as establishing a "special global strategic partnership." Modi signed agreements with Abe for military cooperation, including continued defence summits, trilateral naval exercises involving the US, Japan and India and the sale of armaments to India.

Abe's visit to Sri Lanka took place in the broader context of the strategic and military preparations being made by Japan and the US against China. Rajapakse's warm welcome to the Japanese prime minister sent a message that he is willing to toe the line of the US and its current ally, Japan.



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