

India criticises Chinese submarine visits to Colombo

Wasantha Rupasinghe
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According to Indian media reports, the docking of two nuclear powered Chinese submarines at Colombo harbour over the past month triggered notifications by India to the Sri Lankan government over its “security concerns.”

The Chinese submarine Changzheng-2 and the warship Chang Xing Dao arrived at Colombo on a five-day visit from October 31. This followed another visit by a submarine of a similar type in mid-September.

India has previously expressed security concerns about Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) movements in the northern Himalayas, where the two countries share a common border. Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to office in May, these criticisms have been extended to Chinese naval movements in the Indian Ocean.

The Indian objections to the submarine visits also came in the wake of a visit to India in August by US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel to sign two military agreements. Both the Defence Framework Agreement and the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative Agreement were to integrate India further into the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” aimed at aggressively confronting China.

The Sri Lankan government dismissed India’s concerns, declaring that the Chinese vessel visits were “usual practice.” Sri Lankan navy spokesman Kosala Warnakulasuriya told the media: “Since 2010, 230 warships have called at Colombo port from various countries on goodwill visits and for refueling and crew refreshment.”

Likewise, the Defence Ministry in Beijing emphasised: “It is an international common practice for navy submarine[s] to stop for refueling and crew refreshment at an overseas port.” The submarines were docked in Colombo, “during its escort missions in the

Gulf of Aden and off Somalia, where the PLAN [People’s Liberation Army Navy] is engaged in “anti-piracy escort missions.”

Although Chinese officials reportedly conveyed this message to their Indian counterparts, the latter refused to accept Beijing’s explanation.

According to a report published on November 3 by the *Times of India*, Sri Lanka “allowed the docking despite [Indian] National Security Adviser Ajit Doval’s warning to Lankan Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse that any presence of a Chinese submarine in Sri Lanka would be unacceptable to India.”

The *Times of India* continued: “The government is now left with no option but to look upon Lanka’s defiance as ‘inimical’ to India’s interests.” The report emphasised that the submarines visits were “sparking enormous concerns within the government.”

Adding fuel to the tense situation, R. Hariharan, a retired Indian army colonel and an associate at the Chennai Centre for China Studies, told Reuters: “For the first time, Chinese submarines are being made part of the PLA in the Indian Ocean Region fleet operation in the Gulf of Aden on anti-piracy, which is not a common practice.”

Strategic analyst Brahma Chellaney noted: “At a time when India is facing increasing Chinese strategic pressure from the north, a new military challenge is opening from the south. The weakening of India’s strategic clout over the past decade has emboldened [Sri Lankan] President Rajapakse’s hostile action in granting access to Chinese submarines.”

The *Times of India* noted that the first Chinese submarine and a warship docked in Colombo the day before Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s visit to the city. Since taking office, Abe’s government, with Washington’s backing, has escalated a territorial

dispute with China in the East China Sea. The vessels anchored inside the Chinese-built Colombo International Container Terminal from September 7 to 13.

When this took place, Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, was called by Indian Defence Minister Arun Jaitley and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval to a high-level meeting. The *Hindu* newspaper quoted a senior Indian official saying the meeting was held "to raise the issue of a Chinese submarine calling at a Sri Lankan port last month. It is a serious concern to India's national security."

Following this meeting, Sri Lanka's Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Jayantha Perera, was invited to talks by his Indian counterpart, Admiral R.K. Dhowan. At the discussion, Perera assured Dhowan: "We will never compromise the national security of India. India's security is our security." Perera's assertion was a clear damage control exercise on the part of Rajapakse's government.

A section of Sri Lanka's ruling elite has also intensified its warnings to Rajapakse about his close relations with China. The Colombo *Sunday Times* editorial on November 2, titled, "Enter the Dragon," stated: "We have repeatedly cautioned against earning the wrath of New Delhi by persisting with zero-sum games, the likes of which the Government is playing." Complaining that agreements signed between Sri Lanka and China are "shrouded in secrecy," it lamented: "Sri Lanka is exercising its pro-China policy in a manner that distances the country from numerous others."

The conflict over Chinese submarine visits is not an accidental episode. It flows from the regional strategic interests of the Indian bourgeoisie, encouraged by the US aggressive policy toward China. Both countries see Rajapakse's close relations with China as inimical to their interests.

On July 11, India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj raised with her Sri Lankan counterpart G.L. Peiris the issue of permitting the China National Aero-Technology Import-Export Corporation to establish a \$US40.3 million Aircraft Base Maintenance Centre at Trincomalee, a key northeastern Sri Lankan port.

New Delhi objected that allowing a military facility in Trincomalee "contravenes" the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987. That accord prohibited providing facilities in

and around the natural deepwater harbour at Trincomalee to the detriment of Indian interests. On India's insistence, Rajapakse was forced to change the location of the Chinese facility to another area.

As part of the "pivot," the US is determined to militarily encircle China and to control key shipping routes for Chinese imports of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. Justifying this strategy, a recent Pentagon report to the US Congress declared that China was "steadily spreading its wings in the Indian Ocean, with its rapidly growing Navy being equipped with advanced nuclear submarines, destroyers and frigates as well as training for long range deployments."

The *Times of India* also suggested that China and India were engaged in tit-for-tat measures. The latest Chinese submarine visit to Colombo coincided with Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's visit to India while the first submarine docking in September came during Indian President Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Vietnam and when Indian and Chinese troops were locked in a face-off along the border in Kashmir.

Vietnam, encouraged by Washington, is in dispute with China over islands in the South China Sea, as is the Philippines. There is no doubt that, via its naval visits to Colombo, Beijing wanted to send a strong message to New Delhi against India's provocative support for Vietnam under these conditions.

Such Chinese protest actions, however, will not deter the Indian elite and its government, which is clearly acting with the support of US imperialism in South Asia. The unease expressed by a section of the Sri Lankan elite over relations with China points to concerns that the Rajapakse government is risking a damaging rift with the US and its allies.



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