

# Indian elite welcomes change of government in Sri Lanka

**Deepal Jayasekera****17 January 2015**

Prime Minister Modi and the Indian ruling elite have welcomed the election of Maithripala Sirisena as president of Sri Lanka, assessing it as an opportunity to reassert its interests on the island and wind back the influence that China had developed under former President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Sirisena's election was the outcome of years of US pressure on the Sri Lankan government to align with its aggressive "pivot" to Asia. The pivot is a concerted offensive to undermine Chinese diplomatic influence and economic interests across the region, combined with the development of a web of alliances and bases in preparation for military confrontation. The relations which Rajapakse cultivated with Beijing, which included granting the Chinese navy access to Sri Lankan ports, were viewed as unacceptable by the White House and the Pentagon.

Sirisena, a senior minister in Rajapakse's government, launched his challenge for the presidency on the urging of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and opposition United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe—both figures with close ties to the US foreign policy establishment. His campaign, which amounted to a US-backed regime-change operation, was supported by the UNP and an array of other parties and organisations. Sirisena's first statement upon assuming the presidency was to guarantee that the country's foreign policy would be dramatically shifted away from Beijing and toward the US and its regional allies, particularly India.

The Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which serves as a US "strategic partner", remained silent during the Sri Lankan election. Unsure of the outcome, it did not overtly support Sirisena out of concerns that if Rajapakse had won he would respond by aligning even more closely with China.

With Sirisena's swearing in as president, however, Modi has launched a diplomatic campaign to signal India's support for the new regime.

Modi has invited Sirisena to visit India as his first international foray. External Affairs Minister Shushma Swaraj has likewise invited Sirisena's foreign minister, Mangala Samaraweera, who is known for his pro-US and pro-India stance, to travel to New Delhi on January 18 for top-level strategic talks.

India's main objective will be to secure undertakings from Sirisena that he will reject Beijing's attempts to exploit Chinese investment and aid to gain access to Sri Lankan ports and use them as a base for naval operations in the Indian Ocean.

The Indian media is full of reports and opinion pieces advising the Modi government on how to pursue its interests in Sri Lanka.

In an *Indian Express* column headlined, "Colombo power shift is Delhi opportunity," foreign policy commentator C. Raja Mohan declared that the Modi government "is in a good position to rebuild the partnership with a country that occupies a vital position on India's maritime frontiers to the south."

While noting that "Sirisena has promised to evolve a more balanced approach in Colombo's relations with both Beijing and New Delhi," Mohan advised Modi to take a cautious approach.

"It might be unwise for India," he wrote, "to expect that Colombo will simply discard the China relationship that has given it a range of new economic and strategic options. For the Modi government, the challenge lies in finding ways to deepen its own economic and military cooperation with Sri Lanka, and accelerate the implementation of a variety of projects with Colombo."

According to Mohan, India, or its main partners in the

pivot, the US, Japan and Australia, should match the billions of dollars that the Chinese government and corporations have poured into Sri Lanka over recent years.

The other factor affecting India's relationship with Sri Lanka is its request for Colombo to grant some form of power-sharing arrangement to the island's Tamil elite. Successive governments in New Delhi collaborated with their Sri Lankan counterpart in the brutal 26-year civil war to crush the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its demand for a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka's north and east. Sections of the Indian establishment in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, however, have always been sympathetic to the demands for some form of Tamil autonomy, viewing it as the means of strengthening their influence on the island.

Since the end of the civil war in 2009, the Indian governments of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and then Modi had raised the issue of devolving powers with Rajapakse, primarily to gain support from the Tamil-based bourgeois parties in the Indian parliament. Raja Mohan noted in the *Indian Express* that Rajapakse's "reluctance to address India's concerns on much needed political reconciliation with the Tamil minority... was a major source of tension between New Delhi and Colombo."

Sirisena, who came to power with the full support of the Sri Lankan Tamil National Alliance, is expected to be more inclined to make some degree of concessions to the Tamil establishment. Modi is being urged to proceed cautiously over the issue, however. Sirisena's new government is based not only on the UNP—whose Sinhala racialist policies triggered the civil war—but extreme Sinhala chauvinist tendencies such as Jathika Hela Urumaya.

Moreover, Sirisena is just as complicit as Rajapakse in the war crimes committed against Tamil population during the civil war. During the election, he boasted of the fact he served as acting defence minister during the final weeks of the war, during which LTTE leaders were summarily executed and thousands of civilians slaughtered by the Sri Lankan military.

Writing in *First Post* on January 10, Indian analyst Rajeev Sharma asserted that "India will have to wait and watch to see if Sirisena walks his talk and delivers" by downgrading relations with China and granting

some form of power-sharing in the Tamil region. In all the sordid intrigues and machinations now underway, the over-riding concern of India and the US is securing Sri Lanka's shift away from Beijing.



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