

Sri Lankan foreign minister visits US to strengthen ties

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Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera's three-day trip to the US last week highlighted the rapid shift in relations between the two countries since President Mithripala Sirisena took office in Colombo, after defeating Mahinda Rajapakse in the January 8 presidential election.

Hostile to Rajapakse's close ties with China, the Obama administration supported Sirisena's installation. His entire campaign, which involved his defection from Rajapakse's cabinet and the gathering of several parties, including the pro-US United National Party (UNP), around his presidential candidacy, was a US regime-change operation aimed at shifting Colombo's foreign policy away from Beijing and toward Washington.

Sirisena's government is steadily tilting Sri Lankan policy in line with the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia"—aimed at undermining China and encircling it militarily in preparation for war. Following the Sri Lankan election, the US has speedily moved to integrate Colombo into the "pivot." The Obama administration sent its Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Biswal to Sri Lanka early this month.

Samaraweera's visit sought to forge closer ties with Washington. He met with US Secretary of State John Kerry and other senior officials. During a joint press briefing before their meeting on February 12, Kerry hailed Sri Lanka's "historic election in which there has been really a vote for change, a vote to move Sri Lanka in a new direction."

Samaraweera responded: "We also hope to revive and strengthen the very strong bonds we have had with the United States for several decades, but of course ... the relations have been somewhat strained given the last few years."

In effect, Samaraweera pledged that the Sirisena government will make a definitive break from Rajapakse's orientation to China. He added: "And my job I feel is to ensure that we put back our relations to an irreversible state of excellence in the coming months... For us, for the new administration, the United States of America, is not a threat but a great opportunity."

Later, addressing the National Press Club in Washington, Samaraweera stated: "I have come with the message that we want to broaden and strengthen these ties and I have discussed with Secretary Kerry about the way forward." The fact that Samaraweera was invited to speak at the Press Club underlines the importance that the US political establishment has given to the change of government in Sri Lanka.

On the first date of his visit, February 11, Samaraweera addressed a large gathering at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a key US think tank. He said his government wished for "our relations with the United States to be as comprehensive as possible, encompassing a multitude of areas of cooperation." Samaraweera signaled the Sirisena government's readiness to fully embrace the US strategic agenda in the Indo-Pacific region.

A major aim of Samaraweera's US visit was to secure Washington's assistance to delay a UN report on Sri Lanka. In recent years, the Obama administration sponsored a series of United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolutions over the war crimes committed by the Rajapakse government and the military during its onslaught against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). These resolutions sought to pressure Rajapakse's government to fully line up with Washington's anti-China "pivot."

The UN report is the product of an international

inquiry, established in line with a US-sponsored resolution last March. It was scheduled to be tabled at the UNHRC session next month. Sirisena's government requested a delay, citing Colombo's readiness to launch a "domestic inquiry" into war crimes allegations.

During his Carnegie Endowment speech, Samaraweera said: "Unlike the previous government, we are not in a state of denial, saying that such violations have not happened...We believe such violations have happened. We are ready to ensure that those who have violated human rights in Sri Lanka will be brought to justice."

However, Sirisena himself is directly complicit in the war crimes. Not only was he a central figure in Rajapakse's cabinet, he was acting Defence Minister at times during the final weeks of the war against the LTTE, when tens of thousands of Tamils were killed.

Noting the new government's foreign policy realignment, sections of the US ruling elite are advocating concessions to Colombo over the war crimes issue. These calls highlight the fact that the raising of the "human rights" issues by the US never had anything to do with concerns about the victims of such violations, or basic democratic rights, but was based on its geo-strategic interests.

In a "counseling article" to the Brookings Institute, former US ambassador to Colombo Teresita Schaffer called on the US State Department to "lower its voice" on human rights in Sri Lanka, citing the change of the government. A *New York Times* editorial last week declared: "Sirisena has moved swiftly to usher in a new chapter of hope for Sri Lanka." It backed a delay in the release of the UN report, while stating that the postponement should be "brief."

On February 16, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Raad al-Hussein, duly recommended delaying the report's release from March to September. Such a postponement rests on clear political calculations. For its part, the Sirisena government wants to preserve what Samaraweera termed a "rainbow coalition" and head off any chauvinist campaign in support of Rajapakse's comeback in the general elections to be called in late April.

The Sirisena government's rapid change of policy toward the US includes building better relations with

US allies and strategic partners. Samaraweera's first foreign trip was to India. En route to the US he met with British Foreign Office Minister Hugo Swire in London. Swire also visited Colombo at the end of January. Sirisena this week conducted a three-day visit to India—his first trip abroad as president.

Sri Lanka is being more closely integrated into Washington's war preparations, which include controlling major sea routes that can cut off China's essential supplies of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. These developments are a warning to the working class and the oppressed masses throughout South Asia and the world of the growing danger of war.



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