

Sri Lankan president's visit to India highlights foreign policy shift

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena's visit to India last week further underscored the shift in Colombo's orientation toward the US and India, and away from China, with which his predecessor Mahinda Rajapakse had developed close ties.

Sirisena's election as president last month followed his defection from Rajapakse's cabinet and the alignment of various parties, including the pro-US United National Party (UNP), around his campaign. It was a regime-change operation sponsored by Washington, with India's involvement.

In a clear foreign policy signal, Sirisena selected India as the destination for his first presidential trip abroad, following Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera, who visited New Delhi on January 18 and joined Sirisena on last week's visit.

Sirisena met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Pranab Mukherjee on February 16, then held a joint press conference with Modi. "We are at a moment of an unprecedented opportunity to take our bilateral relations to a new level," Modi declared. India was deeply concerned about Rajapakse's ties with China, as it considers Sri Lanka as a part of its own sphere of influence.

Modi accepted Sirisena's invitation to visit Sri Lanka. He will arrive in Colombo on March 13, for the first state visit by an India prime minister since 1987, when Rajiv Gandhi came to sign the Indo-Lanka Accord. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Sri Lanka in 2008, but only to participate in a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit.

Four bilateral agreements were signed during Sirisena's visit. The most significant was a civil nuclear cooperation pact, which Modi described as a "yet another demonstration of our mutual trust." It was

the first such deal signed by Sri Lanka with any foreign country.

Under the deal, India will help Sri Lanka develop infrastructure for nuclear power generation, including the "exchange of knowledge and expertise, sharing of resources, capacity building and training of personnel in peaceful uses of nuclear energy."

For Modi, the agreement means a strategic advantage over China as it will help integrate Colombo into India's orbit. Apart from New Delhi's own geopolitical interests, the deal also serves the interests of Washington, which wants India to play a more active role in the region as a partner in its "pivot to Asia" against China. During his visit to New Delhi in late January, US President Barack Obama asked India to help "the transition in Sri Lanka and Burma."

The nuclear deal was signed on Sri Lanka's behalf by Power and Energy Minister Champika Ranawaka. As a minister in Rajapakse's government, he had raised safety concerns over nuclear power plants in Kudankulam on India's south coast. Thus, his signing particularly highlighted the change in foreign policy orientation.

In a *Daily Mirror* interview on February 23, Ranawaka, while claiming to adhere to "our non-aligned foreign policy," accused Rajapakse of making "a mistake by allowing the Colombo Port to be used for docking Chinese submarines and other military activities." India publicly objected to last year's Chinese submarine visits to Colombo.

The US signed a civil nuclear deal with India in 2008, which became a major plank of their strategic partnership. Accordingly, the Obama administration welcomed the India-Sri Lanka deal. US State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki commented on February 17: "We welcome regional cooperation on

nuclear energy that is consistent with IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) safeguards and other international standards and practices.”

Other agreements signed during Sirisena’s visit covered cultural cooperation, education and agriculture.

Modi and Sirisena also discussed “expansion of cooperation in the energy sector, both conventional and renewable.” New Delhi wants access to potential Sri Lankan oil and gas exploration sites. According to Colombo media reports, a team from Cairn India, which discovered natural gas in the offshore Mannar basin between the island and the southern tip of India, will arrive in Sri Lanka this week for talks.

Another factor in the Indian calculations is Colombo’s attitude to the island’s Tamil elite. India has been pushing for a power-sharing arrangement between Sri Lanka’s Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim leaderships, which will allow limited devolution of powers to the country’s Tamil-majority north and east. The *Hindu*’s editorial on January 22 noted: “India’s foremost expectation from the new government would be an early settlement of the Tamil question.”

New Delhi hopes to boost its influence via the Tamil elite that would share power in the north and east. The posturing of Indian governments over the conditions facing the island’s Tamils are aimed in part at containing discontent in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, whose majority Tamil population has centuries-old cultural and family ties with Sri Lankan Tamils.

The public statement issued about Sirisena’s visit made no mention of any discussion on the Sri Lankan Tamil issue. This is an obvious concession to the Sirisena government in return for signing agreements that provide New Delhi with strategic advantages. Any reference to the power-sharing question could destabilise the government, which includes Sinhala chauvinist parties, and be exploited by its opponents in the lead-up to this year’s parliamentary election.

The Indian elite was elated over the Sri Lankan president’s visit. An editorial on February 18 in the *Hindu*, titled “New thrust in India-Sri Lanka ties,” noted: “Relations between India and Sri Lanka have not just been reinforced during the visit of President Maithripala Sirisena but have also gained new direction and momentum.” The newspaper was particularly pleased that “in a departure from the routine nature of

such visits, both sides signed four substantive agreements.” The editorial hailed the nuclear agreement “as it imparts a new strategic element to bilateral relations.”

China responded cautiously to the close ties cemented between India and Sri Lanka during Sirisena’s visit. Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said: “We believe the sound relations among the three countries are conducive to the three countries and to the whole region. Therefore we are happy to see development of relations between Sri Lanka and India.”

China’s proposal for a trilateral relationship between India, China and Sri Lanka seeks to woo India away from the US orbit and reassure the Indian ruling class that Beijing’s interests in Sri Lanka are not directed against India. Beijing clearly feels increasingly under pressure from Washington’s aggressive moves to integrate countries throughout the Indo-Pacific region into its “pivot” against China.



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