

Kerry visits Colombo to deepen US ties with Sri Lanka

K. Ratnayake
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US Secretary of State John Kerry's two-day visit to Sri Lanka last weekend was a further step to reset US ties with Colombo as part of military preparations against China.

Relations between the US and Sri Lanka were strained under former President Mahinda Rajapakse, who tilted toward China and tried to balance between Washington and Beijing. A regime-change operation backed by the US resulted in Maithripala Sirisena winning a presidential election in January.

Kerry met with President Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera and Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leaders. He praised Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and Samaraweera for taking "difficult decisions" and announced "an annual partnership dialogue between our two governments" to "deepen our partnership with you."

Significantly, this was the first visit by one of the highest-ranking US officials to Sri Lanka since 2005, when Secretary of State Colin Powell travelled to the island after the devastating December 2004 Asian tsunami. Powell visited a number of affected countries, using the catastrophe to advance US strategic interests.

Kerry made hypocritical lectures during his visit about human rights, democracy and reconciliation. None of these was his real agenda. His trip was aimed at placing Sri Lanka firmly in line with the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia, which is directed at encircling China and subordinating it to US hegemony. Kerry's visit also sent a wider message that US imperialism is aggressively pursuing its drive against China.

For almost half a decade, Washington backed the Rajapakse government's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the hilt.

But it was concerned when China emerged as the principal supplier of military hardware and funds to the cash-strapped government. The Obama administration then cynically raised human rights violations committed during the final months of the war, when tens of thousands of civilians were killed, to press Colombo to distance itself from Beijing. Last year, Washington backed a UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution, threatening an international war crimes probe.

When Rajapakse called an early presidential election for January 8, State Department officials utilised long-established connections with pro-US United National Party (UNP) leader Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga to bring forward Sirisena, one of Rajapakse's senior ministers, as a candidate to oust Rajapakse. Kerry personally telephoned Rajapakse on election day, advising him to "respect the election outcome."

Sirisena and his minority government, led by Wickremesinghe, swiftly shifted in favour of the Western powers, particularly Washington and its regional ally, India. It also declared a review of Chinese-funded projects, with the \$US1.4 billion Colombo City Port City project still to be approved. The message to China is that relations will continue, but not at the same level as before.

Kerry spelled out Washington's strategic interests in a lecture at the Kadirgamar Centre in Colombo. He explained that the US had no problem with Rajapakse's war to crush the LTTE. Speaking in terms that also sought to justify Washington's ruthless wars around the globe, Kerry said: "It is sometimes necessary to go to war, despite the pain it brings. For all of my country's disagreements with the previous government in Sri Lanka over how it fought the LTTE, we clearly

understood the necessity of ridding this country of a murderous terrorist group.”

Without mentioning Rajapakse’s relations with China, Kerry pointed to Sri Lanka as a geo-strategic asset located near vital trade routes, on which China depends heavily. He declared: “Your country sits at the crossroads of Africa, South Asia and East Asia... The Indian Ocean is the world’s most important commercial highway.”

Kerry noted that 40 percent of all seaborne oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz and half the world’s merchant fleet capacity sails through the Straits of Malacca. He stated: [W]ith its strategic location near deep-water ports in India and Myanmar, Sri Lanka could serve as the fulcrum of a modern and dynamic Indo-Pacific region.”

Kerry asserted that the US was already providing leadership on maritime security in the Indian Ocean in association with “close friends and allies across the region, including India, Australia, Indonesia and Japan.”

The secretary of state said the US and Sri Lanka “are also working together to oppose the use of intimidation or force to assert a territorial or maritime claim by anyone.” He asserted the need to defend “freedom of navigation and over-flight and other lawful uses of the sea and airspace.” Freedom of navigation is a slogan with which the US is fomenting provocations against China, while encouraging Japanese imperialism’s claims in the East China Sea and claims by the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea.

The Pentagon is already boosting relations with the Sri Lankan military. On April 19, US Seventh Fleet commanders invited Samaraweera, State Minister of Defence Ruwan Wijewardena and a delegation to the USS Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group, where they had discussions and viewed its military might.

Kerry was keen to ensure that the TNA, the main Tamil bourgeois alliance, backed the government. Washington wants to stop any agitation over the repression of the island’s Tamil minority that could deepen the political instability in Sri Lanka, as well as southern India, affecting Washington’s strategic interests.

In his meeting with TNA delegates, Kerry supported “devolving powers”—a formula for power-sharing between the Colombo and the Tamil elites in the

island’s north and east. However, he urged the TNA to cooperate with “the new government’s initiative towards an amicable solution,” TNA spokesman Suresh Premachandran said.

A considerable section of the Sri Lankan elite is enthusiastic about the new relations with the US. The Colombo media featured articles on the importance of Kerry’s visit. A *Sunday Times* editorial stated: “The dialogue [between the US and Sri Lanka] completely broke down. It had to take an election in Sri Lanka to turn the tide—and Secretary Kerry’s visit is, largely, to pay tribute to the voters of Sri Lanka who helped oust the Rajapakse regime, and put back on track US-SL relations.”

Sri Lankan capitalists were dismayed about losing business with the US, the country’s largest single destination of exports, worth about \$2.5 billion in 2013. Sirisena’s government hopes to attract more investment, using its close relations with the US, the international finance capital. Speaking alongside Kerry, Foreign Minister Samaraweera declared: “Sri Lanka has been considered a paradise for tourists for many years but our government is now also keen to make Sri Lanka an investor’s paradise.”

Kerry said a US Treasury and Commerce department team would work with the government on economic measures to achieve “greater investment and greater growth.” That means deeper attacks on working-class conditions in the name of economic reform, as well as exposing workers across the region to the danger of war against China.



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