

Sri Lankan defence seminar reflects pro-US foreign policy shift

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The Sri Lankan military establishment held its fifth annual defence seminar on September 1–2 in Colombo, a high-level event attended by 350 military commanders, senior officials, diplomats and academics, including 66 foreign participants.

While underscoring the newly-installed United National Party (UNP)-led government's alignment with Washington and its strategic partners, especially India, the event highlighted the strategic significance of Sri Lanka, located in the Indian Ocean adjacent to some of the world's key sea routes between the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Australasia.

The seminar also reflected deepening geo-political tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, mainly generated by the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," which seeks the diplomatic isolation and military encirclement of China.

The convening of such seminars annually since 2011 has been a part of Sri Lankan military's efforts to cultivate ties with its counterparts in the region, Asia and the West. Delegates from those countries, including military leaders and officials, are invited to make speeches and remarks.

This year's seminar was held in the context of escalating moves by the US to integrate countries in the Asia-Pacific region into its strategic build-up against China. As a part of that broader process, in the January 8 presidential election, Maithripala Sirisena was installed as Sri Lankan president, defeating Mahinda Rajapakse. It was a regime-change operation sponsored by Washington, which opposed Rajapakse's close ties to China.

Since taking office, Sirisena and his prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, the leader of the pro-US UNP, have clearly shifted country's foreign policy away from China and toward the US and its allies. In return,

the US has repeatedly assured the new government of its support.

There have also been changes in the top defence and military posts. Along with the presidency, Sirisena holds the defence minister's post, replacing Rajapakse in that role as well. Sirisena's appointee as defence secretary, former government ministerial secretary B.M.U.D. Basnayake, convened this year's seminar, whereas every previous one was hosted by Rajapakse's defence secretary, his brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

Sirisena has also appointed new generals to lead the military. In February, Major General Crishanthe De Silva was elevated to army commander and his predecessor Lieutenant General Daya Ratnayake allowed to retire. In May, Sirisena replaced Major General S.A.P.P. Samarasinghe as Chief of Army Staff with Major General Jagath Dias.

The seminar was titled, "National Security in the context of Emerging Global Threats." Its two main themes were "terrorism" and "maritime security," both of which dovetail with the agendas pushed by the US and its partners as means of using military might to pursue their strategic interests.

Underscoring Colombo's foreign policy shift, the speakers included British professor Christopher Coker, who works closely with the UK and US governments and their military chiefs, and India's Deputy National Security Adviser Arvind Gupta. Saudi Arabia's Royal Land Force Commander, General Eid Bin Awad Al Shalawi, attended as a "distinguished guest."

Coker, a British government adviser who is a member of the Washington Strategy Seminar and a regular lecturer at NATO's Defence College, was explicit in laying out the perspective of the Western powers.

Coker labelled Russia a "revisionist great power" that "is challenging the international order by annexing

territory viz, Crimea, and effectively partitioning Ukraine by supporting the separatists.” He then branded China as another possible “emerging revisionist power.”

Coker’s accusations echoed those of the US and its allies in justifying their war preparations against both Russia and China, including by exploiting the crisis in Ukraine, triggered by their support for a fascist-backed coup in February 2014.

Speaking on behalf of India, which is aligning itself more closely with the US against China, Gupta noted with satisfaction that “the ever-increasing India-Sri Lanka relations are now on a sound footing.” He emphasised the island’s strategic significance as “a vital component in the periphery as regional development is taking root.”

Gupta referred to “maritime security” as one of “new facets which we need to look at closely if we were to keep our economics, as well as Indian Ocean, stable.” India is boosting its naval power in the Indian Ocean, under the banner of “maritime security,” in order to assert its own influence over the region and counter China. New Delhi’s orientation also meshes with Washington’s fraudulent claims to be protecting “freedom of navigation” in the South China Sea against alleged Chinese assertiveness.

The seminar’s keynote speaker was Afghanistan’s former President Hamid Karzai, a long-time US stooge. This was another clear change from earlier seminars where the main speakers were mostly either Gotabhaya Rajapakse or a top Sri Lankan military or civil official.

From 2001 to September 2014, Karzai’s US-installed regime was the front for a military occupation that was responsible for the deaths of an estimated 450,000 Afghans. In his speech, he insisted that countries had to work with the “international community,” i.e., the US and other imperialist powers, to fight “extremism and terrorism.”

Karzai emphasised that as president, he had “worked closely with other world leaders on how to bring about a solution to the extremism” and held “numerous conversations with President Obama and close contacts with many European leaders.”

Referring to Afghanistan, Karzai accused “external political forces” and “state actors” of supporting attacks to damage the country. Although he did not name Pakistan, his charges pointed to Islamabad,

India’s regional rival, whom he has repeatedly accused of backing Islamic fundamentalist forces fighting US occupation troops in Afghanistan.

The mounting tensions produced by the aggressive moves of the US and its allies in the region were evident when Chinese Ambassador He Yi Xianliang addressed the seminar. In a bid to counter the escalating US pressure, he insisted there were “no ulterior purposes or hidden agenda” in cooperation between China and Sri Lanka. He asserted that China strove to “play a constructive role in international affairs with an objective and impartial position.”

At the same time, Xianliang declared that China would “never depend on or subjugate itself to any external forces.” He urged “all the countries in the Indian Ocean region to play a positive and constructive role in promoting the regional security and cooperation, and work together to achieve [a] win-win situation for all.”

By appealing to governments in the “region,” Xianliang underscored Beijing’s line of opposing US intervention in the Indian Ocean, on whose sea routes China depends heavily for oil and raw materials imports from the Middle East and Africa.

On behalf of the new Sri Lankan government, Defence Secretary Basnayake boasted of “the defeat of the terrorists in May 2009,” by which he meant the bloody military victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). He insisted on the need for the country’s “security forces and law enforcement agencies” to “remain vigilant about emerging threats, including drug smuggling, human trafficking, and organised crime.”

Basnayake’s remarks echoed the speech made by President Sirisena on the May 19 “war victory day,” the anniversary of the LTTE’s defeat, in which Sirisena glorified the military and promised to strengthen it.



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