Sri Lankan and Japanese prime ministers declare “comprehensive partnership”

K. Ratnayake
15 October 2015

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe visited Japan for four days, ending October 7, as part of the Colombo government’s sharp shift of foreign policy to distance itself from China. Wickremesinghe also sought Japanese investment and aid on his trip, made just four days after President Maithripala Sirisena’s visit to New York to attend the UN General Assembly.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s government is particularly keen to develop close relations with South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, as part of its strategy, encouraged by the US, to counter China’s influence in the region.

In September last year, Abe visited India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Maldives just before Chinese President Xi Jinping’s South Asian tour. Abe’s government has lined up with the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia,” aimed at militarily encircling and diplomatically isolating China. Abe is remilitarising Japan and building the country’s military alliance with the US and its allies.

Washington pressured the government of former President Mahinda Rajapakse to make a break from China, which was Sri Lanka’s biggest source of investment and military assistance. In January’s presidential election, the US intervened behind the scene to oust Rajapakse and install Sirisena as president, with Wickremesinghe as his prime minister.

In Japan, Wickremesinghe held a summit with Abe, met with other government leaders, including the deputy prime minister and foreign and finance ministers, and participated in business forums. He had an audience with the Japanese emperor, Akihito, a symbol of Japanese imperialism, and addressed the Diet, or parliament. Wickremesinghe was the third political leader invited to address the Diet, after US President Barack Obama and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Abe and Wickremesinghe issued a “Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Partnership between Japan and Sri Lanka” that included promotion of investment and trade, political consultation and cooperation on Sri Lanka’s national development plan, as well as maritime and international collaboration.

Behind the diplomatic language, the cash-strapped Wickremesinghe government is seeking money from Tokyo. Japan promised to provide a $US378 million loan for airport development and more aid and investment for infrastructure projects, including highways and power plants.

The Colombo government’s major project is the Western Region Megapolis Plan, which involves the entire western province around Colombo. Indications are that Japan will provide more loans and investment for the project, which is bigger than the former Rajapakse government’s plan to convert the capital and suburbs into a commercial and tourist hub. Rajapakse’s scheme required the eviction of more than 100,000 families, and the new project will be even more devastating for the poor.

Addressing the Diet, Wickremesinghe made an explicit pitch to international investors. “The government is planning to carry out the next generation of economic reforms to make Sri Lanka a highly competitive economy,” he declared. “We are aiming to be the most competitive in South Asia, on par with South East Asia.”

Wickremesinghe pledged to establish “the appropriate environment” for direct private investment and to remove barriers, “including the bottlenecks and delays to doing business.”

This was a reference to privatising and restructuring

© World Socialist Web Site

public sector ventures, removing restrictions on capital transfers, and creating 45 free trade zones and cluster villages tied to export markets.

Significantly, Wickremesinghe declared: "We are preparing ourselves for an Asia Pacific based on the Trans Pacific Partnership [TPP]." This US-sponsored trade and investment pact between 12 countries, but excluding China, is an integral component of Washington's offensive against Beijing.

The Sri Lankan prime minister outlined a specific orientation to Japan and India, saying, "higher growth rates in South Asia require multiple options to be pursued, including Japanese connectivity to India through Sri Lanka." He stated that "economic collaboration" would "be buttressed by political collaboration," further strengthening the ties between the two countries.

The Joint Declaration said both leaders "reaffirmed the importance of the freedom of navigation and overflight of the high seas." These are terms used by the US and Japan against China, branding Beijing's territorial claims over islands in the East China and South China Seas as threats to freedom of navigation.

Japan pledged to provide maritime patrol ships to Sri Lanka, which is strategically located near the main sea routes on which both Japan and China rely heavily, particularly for raw material imports from the Middle East and Africa. Wickremesinghe agreed with Abe on "the importance of improvement of maritime connectivity" with Japan.

In an editorial, the Colombo-based *Sunday Times* welcomed the partnership with Japan, noting its "political input" through "Japan's interests in maritime security and oceanic issues in the Indian Ocean."

The *Times* added that in March the Sri Lankan government "discussed with the US an Indo-Pacific economic corridor to connect South Asia with South East Asia as part of US defence plans for this part of the world linking with their Trans Pacific Partnership, while the prime ministers of Sri Lanka and India discussed defence cooperation issues. The upshot of all this is that Sri Lanka has agreed to defence-related cooperation with the superpowers with vested interests in having their say in the Indian Ocean."

The appeal for Japanese funding is linked to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's bid to limit Chinese investment in the country. A few days before Wickremesinghe's visit to Japan, Sri Lankan central bank governor Arjun Mahendran noted that Japan wanted to "come back in a big way because they lost out to China in the last five years."

Japan was Sri Lanka's largest source of aid, loans and investment before 2009. China then surpassed Japan, providing at least $5 billion, mainly in loans. As soon as Sirisena took office, his government declared it would review China's investments, while also alleging corruption involving Rajapakse and his close associates.

Some Chinese funding was permitted to continue, but not the huge $1.4 billion Colombo Port City Project to construct a 500-acre (230-hectare) complex of hotels, condominiums and office buildings adjacent to Colombo harbour. Beijing considered the project to be integral to its plan for a "Maritime Silk Route" connecting Asia and Africa.

US and India were particularly hostile to the port project. Halting it has strained Sri Lanka's relations with China. Just as Wickremesinghe returned home, China's vice foreign minister Liu Zhenmin visited Colombo as President Xi's special envoy to discuss the project's fate. After meeting with Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, he stated that they needed to "fulfil investor interests" and "delaying the project further is an adverse sign."

As these developments show, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is deeply enmeshing Sri Lanka in the geo-political interests of the US and its allies, including Japan and India. This portends dangers of conflict and war for the working class and poor in Sri Lanka, the region and internationally.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site