

US uses “partnership dialogue” to strengthen ties with Sri Lanka

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Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera and his delegation held the first-ever US-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue meeting in Washington last Friday. The talks chaired by Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Shannon marked the further integration of Colombo into the US “pivot to Asia” and military build-up throughout the region against China.

The US State Department blandly declared: “The Partnership Dialogue is a regularly planned policy consultation designed to advance our common agenda and opportunities for cooperation across the full range of bilateral and regional issues.” For Sri Lanka, however, the talks were undoubtedly a rather one-sided monologue with the United States laying out its requirements for the Colombo government.

The Obama administration is elated by the shift in foreign policy since the election of President Maithripala Sirisena in January 2015. In introducing Samaraweera before the meeting began, US Secretary of State John Kerry showered praises on the Sri Lankan government, declaring: “We are very much looking forward to defining the roadmap ahead for continued progress.”

Samaraweera responded by fully agreeing with Kerry that “a very special friendship” has been developing between US and Sri Lanka. Since Sirisena came to power, the US has strengthened ties with Colombo through a succession of high-level official visits, including by Kerry and the US Ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power.

The Obama administration was instrumental in the last year’s ouster of President Mahinda Rajapakse and the installation of Sirisena. The regime-change operation was carried out with the support of Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the United National Party (UNP) and now prime minister, and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, a leading figure in Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) with close connections in Washington. Following parliamentary elections in August, Sirisena, also from the

SLFP, formed a “national unity” government with Wickremesinghe and the UNP.

Washington backed Rajapakse’s war against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) but opposed his increasing economic and political ties with Beijing. India, which is developing strategic ties with the US, also opposed the growing Chinese influence in Colombo and backed the regime change.

Having turned a blind eye to the Sri Lankan military’s atrocities during the final offensives against the LTTE, the US cynically exploited the issue to pressure Rajapakse to distance himself from Beijing. The US moved a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for an international investigation into Sri Lankan war crimes only to change its tune when Sirisena came to power. A new US-backed UNHRC resolution gave the green light for a bogus domestic inquiry with “international support” that will enable Colombo to whitewash the military’s human rights abuses.

No details of the Partnership Dialogue discussion have been released. A State Department communiqué declared that the talks focused “on democratic governance, development cooperation, people-to-people ties, economic cooperation, security cooperation, international and regional affairs, and other issues of mutual interest.”

There is no doubt, however, that strategic collaboration was high on the agenda. Washington is developing its strategic partnership with India while deepening military alliances with Japanese and Australian imperialism. It is also encouraging the Philippines and Vietnam to aggressively assert their territorial claims in South China Sea against China.

During their visits to Colombo, Kerry in May and Under Secretary Shannon in December stressed the strategic importance of Sri Lanka for the US. After announcing the partnership dialogue meeting, Shannon declared that Sri Lanka “sits at the crossroads of Africa, South Asia, and

East Asia. By the middle of this century, economists predict that Asia will account for 50 percent of the world's GDP."

He continued: "Countless ships sail past Sri Lanka along the sea lanes between the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca. Forty percent of all seaborne oil passes through the former, and half the world's merchant fleet capacity sails through the latter. To put it simply, the stability and prosperity of the entire world is dependent on the stability of these vital energy and trade routes. And Sri Lanka is at the center of this."

In reality, the US is seeking to secure control of these sea lanes, not out of concern for "stability," but as part of its war plans against China, which include an economic blockade. China is heavily dependent on these shipping routes for vital imports of energy and raw material from Africa and the Middle East.

One of the first steps of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government was to put the multi-billion dollar Colombo Port City Project (CPCP) funded by China on hold. The decision was a major setback for Beijing which considered the project as part of its Maritime Silk Road initiative to guarantee oil supplies and trade via the Indian Ocean. Colombo has indicated that the project will be restarted on different terms as a multi-lateral venture involving other partners thus diluting Chinese involvement.

The US is also quietly developing its military collaboration with Sri Lanka. In an interview with the India-based *rediff.com*, US Assistant Secretary for State for South and Central Asia Nisha Biswal declared: "Certainly, the security partnership is an area of discussion. ... We are also open to exploring areas of cooperation between the United States and Sri Lanka's military."

During his visit to New York last year to participate in the UN General Assembly, President Sirisena agreed that Sri Lankan soldiers would participate in "peacekeeping forces." The US has been pushing for Sri Lankan contingents in UN operations.

Facing a deepening social and economic crisis at home, the Sri Lankan government is desperate for foreign investment. While in Washington, Samaraweera made an appeal to US corporations in a speech to the Institute of Peace on "Advancing reconciliation and development in Sri Lanka."

After saying that Colombo was now addressing "human rights" and "democratic governance," the foreign minister moved on to make a pitch to investors. Samaraweera

declared that the government was "taking measures to increase investor's ease of doing business and confidence" and "reviewing laws related to land and business." He then boasted that Sri Lanka had "one of the lowest income tax rates in the world—at 15 percent."

Significantly, Samaraweera explained that "the government is very seriously exploring the possibility of applying to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership." The TPP is the economic arm of the "pivot to Asia" aimed at ensuring, as Obama has put it, that the US, not China, sets the economic rules of the 21st century.

Sri Lankan government has deliberately kept workers in Sri Lanka in the dark about the implications of its deepening relations with US imperialism. As it integrates the island into US war preparations against China, it is intensifying the attacks on the living standards and democratic rights of working people to provide a business-friendly environment for investors.

Faced with the threat of a catastrophic war between nuclear-armed powers, workers and youth must oppose the drive to war of US imperialism and its various allies and lackeys such as the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government in Colombo. The only way to end the descent into war is by building a unified anti-war movement of the working class in Sri Lanka, South Asia and around the world based on socialist principles to put an end to capitalism and its outmoded nation-state system.

This is the perspective fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its Sri Lankan section, the Socialist Equality Party.



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