

Sri Lankan president attends G7 “outreach meeting”

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena attended an “outreach meeting” on May 27 called by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the end of last week’s G7 summit in Japan. Participants in the meeting also included the political heads of Indonesia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Laos, Papua New Guinea and Chad.

Sri Lankan government leaders and the Colombo media hailed Sirisena’s invitation to this meeting as a “major victory” in “breaking the isolation” of Sri Lanka from the international community. Television channels showed a jubilant Sirisena speaking with supposed world leaders including Abe, US President Barack Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister David Cameron, as proof of cordial relations.

The main purpose of the meeting was strategic: to more firmly tie the countries involved to Japan and to the US, particularly to Obama’s “pivot to Asia” and preparations for war against China. The fact that Sirisena was invited is an indication of just how rapidly his government has integrated Sri Lanka into the geo-political agenda of US imperialism.

With the exception of Chad, all the other countries occupy important geo-strategic positions and are thus important to US-led efforts to encircle China with webs of alliances and strategic partnerships. Vietnam and Laos share borders with China. Indonesia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and, to a lesser extent, PNG occupy important locations across sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, vital for China’s trade with Africa and the Middle East.

The US military and strategic “pivot to Asia,” formally launched in 2011, has greatly inflamed tensions throughout the region. The Obama administration has encouraged Japan to more aggressively assert its territorial claims against China in

the East China Sea. Likewise, Washington has backed the maritime claims of Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea. Over the past year, the Pentagon has provocatively sent warships on three occasions within the 12-nautical mile territorial limit surrounding Chinese-claimed islets, on the pretext of “freedom of navigation.”

Central to the discussion at the G7 summit was the deep-going global crisis of capitalism and the US-led war preparations against China. The final G7 communiqué, though not directly naming China, warned that there should be no restrictions on “freedom of navigation and overflight” in the South China Sea.

At the meeting, Sirisena declared: “I am aware how G7 countries have appreciated the change we created... With a revolutionary change of governance, my government has succeeded in creating the path for a viable development environment and for reconciliation in a multifaceted society.”

For the working class and poor in Sri Lanka, Sirisena’s utterances about good governance, viable development and reconciliation are hollow phrases. The North and East of the country are still under heavy military occupation seven years after the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Police-state methods are used to suppress the struggles of workers and youth.

Sirisena’s “revolutionary change” is nothing but a shift in foreign policy away from Beijing and toward Washington. Sirisena won the January 2015 presidential election in what amounted to a regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington. The US backed the ouster of his predecessor Mahinda Rajapakse as president, not because of Rajapakse’s war crimes and anti-democratic methods, but because of his close relations with Beijing.

In a joint statement at the “outreach” meeting, Japan and Sri Lanka confirmed “the importance of maintaining the freedom of the high seas and maritime order based on the rule of law.” In the parlance of the US and its allies, “maritime security” signifies challenging Chinese claims in the East China and South China Seas—moves that threaten to precipitate military conflict. Significantly, Abe offered two naval patrol vessels to Sri Lanka as part of the two countries’ maritime security cooperation.

The Sri Lankan president went to the conference literally with a begging bowl in his hand. “We lack finances for extensive development efforts and therefore seek developed nations and multilateral and bilateral investors to invest in Sri Lanka,” he said. The island, ravaged by 30 years of civil war, is now being hard hit by the world capitalist crisis.

Sirisena’s appeal for finance underscores his government’s nervousness about the eruption of struggles of workers and the poor against relentless attacks on living conditions. Early last month, the government began to implement austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund, including tax increases and preparations for further privatisations.

After meeting with the Japanese prime minister, Sirisena signed a joint statement between the two countries. Abe pledged 38 billion yen (\$US340 million) in loans to Sri Lanka for the construction of power transmission lines and water supply facilities.

In a separate meeting with Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Abe promised a \$5 billion loan, with the immediate release of \$1.5 billion. Japan also agreed to further development aid for Vietnam. While Tokyo is lining up behind the US pivot, it is also pursuing its own geo-political interests.



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