

Sri Lankan prime minister strengthens ties with US allies

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Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe made official visits last month to Japan, Vietnam and India. In each country, Wickremesinghe pledged deeper economic ties and military cooperation on the pretext of ensuring the “security of the Indian Ocean region.”

India, Japan and Vietnam all have strategic ties with the US as part of its war preparations against China. The trips took place amid concerns in New Delhi, Tokyo and Washington about Sri Lanka’s economic dependence on China.

The US, with the help of India, orchestrated a regime-change operation in 2015 to oust Mahinda Rajapakse as president and install Maithripala Sirisena because of Rajapakse’s close relations with Beijing. Sirisena immediately suspended a number of major Chinese-funded projects but the cash-strapped and debt-ridden Colombo government has again turned to Beijing for investment.

The most contentious proposal is a \$US1.1 billion deal to give China Merchants Port Holdings (CMPH) a majority stake in a 99-year lease for the Chinese-built port at Hambantota. During his visits, Wickremesinghe assured his counterparts in carefully-worded joint statements that Colombo, despite seeking Chinese investment, remained aligned with the US-led military build-up in Asia.

Wickremesinghe engaged in extensive talks on geopolitical and economic issues in Tokyo. While Japan is an ally of the US, it has its own imperialist interests in developing strategic ties with other Asian countries and globally.

Wickremesinghe assured Japanese officials that the proposed Chinese projects were only economic in character. Referring to the Hambantota port deal, he declared: “It is only a commercial operation and we do not want any of Sri Lanka’s harbours to be used for

military purposes other than that of the Sri Lanka Navy.”

In reality, only China’s military is excluded. In March, the US Pacific Fleet’s transport ship, USNS Fall River, visited Hambantota port for 12 days and held a joint exercise with naval vessels from Sri Lanka, Japan and Australia.

A joint statement issued by Wickremesinghe and his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe outlined closer economic and military co-operation. Tokyo will provide 44 billion yen (\$US387 million) in assistance loans to Sri Lanka and another 1 billion yen to improve the management of the Port of Trincomalee, which is a proposed joint venture with India.

The two countries also promised to expand their maritime defence relations. Sri Lanka will participate as an observer in the next joint Japan-India coast guard exercise to be held in India, with possible participation as a full partner from next year. The joint statement welcomed the ongoing high-level military exchanges and pledged to expand Japanese support for the Sri Lankan coast guard, which already operates two Japanese P-3C patrol planes and will acquire two patrol vessels being built with Japanese financial and technical aid.

According to the Sydney-based Lowy Institute’s *Interpreter*, Abe proposed Sri Lanka participate as an observer in the Malabar exercises to be held in July, involving the Indian, US and Japanese navies. India has also agreed to the involvement of Sri Lankan naval officers.

In line with Washington’s stance, the joint statement condemned North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile tests “in the strongest terms.” It also declared the commitment of the two countries to “peace and stability in the South China Sea, the rights of all states

to the freedom of navigation and overflight as well as unimpeded lawful maritime commerce”—all of which is directed against China.

In Vietnam, Wickremesinghe and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc agreed to increase commercial transactions between the two countries to \$US1 billion over the next few years. They also agreed to enhance co-operation between the Vietnamese Defence Academy and the Kotelawala Defence Academy of Sri Lanka. As in Japan, Wickremesinghe agreed to stand with Vietnam for the “security of the Indian Ocean Region” and “freedom of navigation”—providing tacit support for Vietnam’s territorial claims in the South China Sea against China.

Wickremesinghe met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on April 27. The two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on “Cooperation in Economic Projects” during the visit. The discussions also covered a proposal to develop an oil storage tank farm in the port of Trincomalee and an Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement. Both are highly contentious issues domestically in Sri Lanka; the first led to a crippling strike in the petroleum industry just before Wickremesinghe left for New Delhi.

The other projects included, a 500 Megawatt (MW) Liquefied Natural Gas Power Plant and a Floating Storage Unit, near Colombo; a 50 MW Solar Power Plant in Sampur in the eastern province; joint investment in the development of port facilities, a petroleum refinery and other industries in Trincomalee; and encouraging Indian companies to invest in a container terminal in Colombo Port.

Modi is planning to visit Sri Lanka this weekend to attend International Wesak Day celebrations—a major Buddhist festival.

The Indian media pointed to the re-emerging rivalry between India and China for influence in Sri Lanka. The *Indian Express* commented that proposed joint venture in Trincomalee is “part of Colombo’s balancing act between Delhi and Beijing.” It noted: “Since Sri Lanka has given port projects in Colombo and Hambantota to China, the story goes, it is now trying to compensate an unhappy India with infrastructure projects elsewhere in the emerald island.”

The Sri Lankan government’s wooing of Chinese investment is not a geo-political turn toward Beijing, but a desperate measure to deal with the country’s

disastrous economic situation. Sri Lanka has accumulated some \$64 billion in national debt and is frantically seeking investment. Under Rajapakse, China surpassed Japan as the country’s main source of external financing.

The Colombo government’s manoeuvring takes place in the context of the Trump administration’s escalating confrontation with North Korea, which is also aimed at undermining China’s strategic position in Asia. Wickremesinghe’s visits make clear that his government continues to back the Washington’s provocative moves in the region.



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