

# Indian prime minister visits Sri Lanka to strengthen ties

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two-day visit to Sri Lanka last Thursday and Friday was an attempt to further cement New Delhi's political, economic and strategic ties with the Colombo government.

Modi was invited by the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe as the chief guest to inaugurate the UN Vesak Ceremony, the main Buddhist festival in Sri Lanka. During his visit no agreement was signed between the two countries and no joint statement was issued. However, his tour was significant, in the context that India and the US have expressed concerns about the Colombo government's economic ties with Beijing, which New Delhi considers its rival.

*Press Trust of India* noted in its report on Thursday that Modi's visit was "mainly aimed at reinforcing the traditional connect between India and Sri Lanka at a time when China is seeking to make inroads in the island nation."

In his keynote speech in Colombo, after boasting about thousands of years of India-Sri Lanka relations through Buddhism, Modi said India is "at a moment of great opportunity in our ties with Sri Lanka—an opportunity to achieve a 'quantum jump' in our partnership across different fields." He added: "Whether it is on land or in the waters of the Indian Ocean, the security of our societies is indivisible."

Modi did not explain what he meant by "a quantum jump" or "indivisible security." Yet, these statements underscore the Indian ruling elite's determination—encouraged by the US—to maintain the integration of Sri Lanka into its strategic and economic interests in the Indian Ocean region.

After coming to power two-and-a-half years ago, Modi's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party government is transforming India into a "frontline

state" of US war preparations to confront China. India, with the help of the US, is increasingly intervening in every country in South Asia, including Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Maldives.

Washington and New Delhi did not oppose former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and his anti-democratic rule. However, both countries were hostile to Rajapakse's close economic ties with Beijing. When the Obama administration orchestrated a regime-change operation in Sri Lanka, via the presidential election in January 2015, to replace Rajapakse with Sirisena, New Delhi fully backed the move. After taking office, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe immediately changed Sri Lanka's foreign policy in favour of the US and India, deepening military ties with them and suspending Chinese investments.

When Sirisena won the presidential election, Modi became the first Indian prime minister to make a trip to Sri Lanka in 28 years. Now he has visited for the second time in two years. Meanwhile, Sirisena has travelled to India twice and Wickremesinghe three times.

In recent months, the Indian government has expressed concerns over two developments in Sri Lanka. One is that the cash-strapped Colombo government, facing a balance of payments and debt crisis, has turned to Chinese investments and loans, and sought to resume suspended Chinese projects, including the Colombo Port City Project. It is also seeking to run Hambantota Port as a joint venture with a Chinese company in order to raise money to pay back China's loan to build the port.

During Rajapakse's regime, Washington and New Delhi opposed both projects, saying China was building them as part of an Indian Ocean strategic network.

India's other concern is Sri Lanka's repeated postponement of economic pacts between the two countries, including an Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA), which the Indian ruling elite regard as beneficial for its strategic interests.

In his speech, Modi said: "We believe that the free flow of trade, investments, technology, and ideas across our borders will be to our mutual benefit. India's rapid growth can bring dividends for the entire region, especially in Sri Lanka." He reiterated that India has extended \$US2.6 billion in "development" aid to Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan government and sections of big business support the ETCA. However, Rajapakse and his group of MPs oppose the proposed economic agreements with India, seeking to stir communalism and exploit popular discontent with the government. Rajapakse has threatened to topple the government and his group is making virulent anti-Tamil and anti-Indian propaganda.

Wickremesinghe went to Delhi in April, just two weeks before Modi's tour. When Wickremesinghe met Modi during that visit, the two governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding on "Cooperation in Economic Projects." The discussions also covered a proposal to develop an oil storage tank farm in the port of Trincomalee.

Reuters reported that on Thursday, as the Indian prime minister landed in Sri Lanka, two senior officials said the Colombo government had rejected China's request to dock one of its submarines in Colombo this month. In October 2014, when a Chinese submarine docked in Colombo, New Delhi protested to Rajapakse.

Modi's visit is the latest expression of the sharp contest between India and China to influence Sri Lanka, strategically located in the Indian Ocean.

Modi had an unscheduled meeting with Rajapakse at the latter's request, even though some prominent members of Rajapakse's group had threatened to hoist black flags in opposition to Modi's visit.

Rajapakse accompanied his government's defence secretary and brother, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, and G. L. Peiris, his former foreign minister, for the talks. Peiris told the media no "information can be divulged" about what they discussed. Nor did the Indian prime minister reveal anything about the hour-long meeting.

Rajapakse is likely to have appealed for India's support in the event he comes to power. When Donald Trump won the US presidential election, Rajapakse immediately greeted him and praised his reactionary nationalist policies.

During his visit, Modi addressed a meeting of plantation workers organised by the estate trade unions. He opened a new hospital funded by his government and promised 10,000 houses for plantation workers. Plantation union leaders, many of whom are government ministers, mounted a campaign to gather around 30,000 workers for the meeting, held at Hatton-Dick Oya. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe also enthusiastically participated.

The discredited union leaders staged the meeting to boost their organisations amid an explosive situation among plantation workers because of deepening attacks on their living conditions.

With their help, Modi, a fascistic Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh leader, postured as a champion of workers despite his government's ruthless assault on their living conditions and social rights. One such blatant attack is the sentencing to life imprisonment of 13 workers of the Japanese-owned car making giant, Maruti Suzuki, in the Indian state of Haryana.

Modi hypocritically praised Indian-origin plantation workers for facing challenges since their migration from southern India. These workers were forcibly brought to Sri Lanka in the latter part of the 19th century by the British imperialists who ruled India and Sri Lanka as colonies. At the hands of the Sri Lankan capitalist class, their citizenship rights were abolished in 1949 and they still live as second-class citizens, despite their citizenship rights being restored decades later.

Modi has no sympathy for the downtrodden plantation workers and their rights. His visit had one purpose—to boost the strategic interests of India and the US against China, at the expense of workers, in a socially explosive situation.



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