

US and India use Indian Ocean Conference to reinforce their strategic interests

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The advertised theme of last week's Indian Ocean Conference (IOC) in Colombo was "peace, progress and prosperity." But the two-day event had nothing to do with such aspirations. Washington and New Delhi used the event to unveil their plans to expand naval operations in the region and reiterate their strategic interests. Though they did not refer to China by name, it is the target of this military buildup.

The conference was hosted by the India Foundation, a think tank close to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in collaboration with Singapore's Rajaratnam School of International Studies and the National Institute of Fundamental Studies, a Colombo research centre.

The main US speaker was Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Alice Wells. The Indian delegation was led by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. Delegates attended from about 35 other countries, including Australia, France, Germany, Britain, Japan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Singapore, Seychelles, Mauritius, Malaysia and Vietnam. China and Pakistan sent low-profile delegations.

The event was held against the backdrop of increasing geo-political tensions between the US and India, on the one side, and China on the other.

The Trump administration is using North Korea's nuclear tests to threaten military action, as well as more sanctions, and to expand US military operations in South Korea. Washington accuses China and Russia of assisting North Korea, underscoring the fact that they are the ultimate targets of US attempts to assert its global hegemony. On the bogus pretext of defending "freedom of navigation," the Pentagon is dispatching naval warships to the South China Sea, challenging Beijing's territorial claims and dangerously provoking

tensions that could result in nuclear war.

India and China have long-standing territorial disputes along their mutual borders and are rivals in the struggle for resources and markets. The Modi government has effectively transformed India into a "frontline state" as part of US imperialism's war drive against China.

Indian Ocean sea routes annually carry about half the world's container shipments, one-third of the bulk cargo traffic and two-thirds of oil shipments. These routes are vital for China. Most of its raw materials imported from Africa and the Middle East, including energy, pass through the area. In the event of military conflict with China, the US and Indian navies will attempt to block Chinese shipping.

Emphasising Washington's strategic interests in the region, Wells declared: "The United States is—and will continue to be—an Indo-Pacific power." She called for a "common vision for the Indian Ocean" to counter "security threats" in the Indian Ocean and "support international standards, including freedom of navigation."

These phrases—"international standards," "freedom of navigation" and "rules-based systems" are the hypocritical mantras used by Washington against China.

Wells referred to the steps already taken by the US and reminded delegates about the US-India-Japan Malabar Naval exercise in July, describing it as "our largest and most complex to date, involving over ten thousand personnel." She told the conference that "joint capacity building and exercises" would help share "the security burden in this increasingly complex region."

Wells noted the new navy-to-navy relationship between the US and Sri Lanka and the "first-ever naval

exercise” between the two countries in October. The exercise is the latest in Washington’s efforts to fully integrate Sri Lanka into the US war drive against China.

In 2015, the US, with Indian assistance, orchestrated the ousting of former president Mahinda Rajapakse over his close relations with Beijing, and the installation of his replacement, Maithripala Sirisena.

A week before the IOC meeting, the new head of the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN), Vice Admiral Travis Sinniah, declared his commitment to “freedom of navigation.” The future role of the SLN, he declared, was “to protect commercial trade between the Gulf of Aden and the Straits of Malacca.” Both locations are strategic choke points for Chinese shipping.

Indian minister Swaraj told the conference that Indian Ocean sea lanes were among the busiest and most critical maritime transportation links in the world. Moreover, 90 percent of India’s trade by volume and almost all its oil imports used these routes. “India’s role as the key pivot in the Indian Ocean region is a given,” she declared.

India’s strategy, Swaraj continued, “included extending port connectivity among the littoral states of the Indian Ocean and beyond.” India is expanding such developments with Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles. Swaraj referred to other schemes, including the Kaladan transport project, which connects the eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata to Sittwe Port in Myanmar and the Trilateral Highway to Thailand, and the Chabahar Port Project in Iran.

The Modi government’s military buildup has been encouraged by the US, which has provided various strategic benefits to the detriment of India’s arch-rivals Pakistan and China. This includes establishing a special status for India in the international nuclear-regulatory regime and allowing it to access advanced US weapons systems. India has reciprocated by giving the US navy access to Indian ports and providing for the repair and maintenance of American ships.

“It is important to develop a security architecture that strengthens the culture of cooperation and collective action,” Swaraj told the conference. Her comment was interpreted by the Colombo media as a reference to China recently acquiring a majority stake in Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port. Following the Hambantota deal, India, which regards the sub-continent and the

Indian Ocean as its own sphere of influence, dispatched Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar to Sri Lanka to voice New Delhi’s concerns.

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe told the IOC meeting: “Let me refer to Sri Lanka’s decision to develop its major sea ports, especially the Hambantota port, which some claim to be a military base. I state clearly that Sri Lanka’s government headed by President Maithripala Sirisena does not enter into military alliances with any country or make our bases available to foreign countries.”

Wickremesinghe’s comments sought to appease not just New Delhi, but above all Washington, Tokyo and others involved in the US-led economic and military buildup against China. The IOC gathering was another indication of the advanced stage of these preparations.



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