

US pushes for closer Sri Lankan involvement into war drive against China

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While rapidly strengthening its military ties with Sri Lanka, the Trump administration is voicing concerns over Colombo's "unsustainable debts" to China. These views were outlined last month by Alice Wells, the US acting assistant secretary for South and Central Asia, in a report to the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Titled "Maintaining US Influence in South Asia: the FY 2018 budget," the report deals with Washington's foreign assistance to South Asian countries including India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives, over the next financial year.

Wells told the House Foreign Affairs committee that Sri Lanka's "historic" elections in January 2015 had "ushered in a path to reform and reconciliation" She also noted, however, that Washington would "continue its oversight of implementation" of steps outlined in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution passed in October 2015.

The "historic" election referred to by Wells is the US-backed, regime-change operation that ousted former President Mahinda Rajapakse and replaced him with Maithripala Sirisena. The US opposed Rajapakse's close relations with China and demanded that Colombo fall into line with Washington's military preparations against Beijing.

The US supported Rajapakse's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). However, after the LTTE's defeat in 2009, Washington sponsored resolutions in the UNHCR calling for an international war crimes investigation into the decades-long conflict. This had nothing to do with exposing Sri Lankan war crimes but was to pressure Rajapakse to end Colombo's close ties with China.

The UNHCR resolutions were dropped soon after the pro-US Sirisena government came to power and replaced with a new diluted proposal that allowed

Colombo to establish a "domestic mechanism" to investigate human rights violations.

Wells told the House Committee on Foreign Affairs that the new Sri Lankan government was committed to a "reform agenda," but significantly added, that it had a "growing interest in expanding engagement with the US, including in military-to-military relations."

US assistance to Sri Lanka, however, will only be \$3.4 million for the 2018 financial year, 92 percent less than in 2017. Although Wells did not explain why this cut had occurred, it appears that Washington is concerned about the Sri Lankan government's recent investment deals with China.

The Indian-based *Economic Times* reported that Wells told the hearing that "China is providing non-concessional loans that promote unsustainable debt burdens, which I think are increasingly now of concern to the Sri Lankan people in the government."

Wells also declared that the US is "using its tools to reinforce a message of reform, and to bring Sri Lanka into a space where they too will institutionalize the principles of the Indo-Pacific—freedom of navigation, transparency, non-militarization humanitarian assistance and disaster relief at its core."

These statements are significant. Washington's concerns are not Sri Lankan "unsustainable debt burden," humanitarian relief or disaster relief but its ongoing economic relations with Beijing and the requirement that it fall into line with US strategy. "Freedom of navigation" is the catch phrase used by Washington to justify its provocative challenges to Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Soon after Sirisena came to power, Colombo halted some investment projects with China, such as the \$1.4 billion Colombo Port City Project and South Asia's tallest building, the Lotus Tower. But facing a foreign

loan default, the cash-strapped government, turned to Beijing to negotiate an easing of the debt burden.

The government eventually signed an agreement with China Merchant Holdings Company to sell a 70 percent of share in the Hambantota Port for \$1.2 billion, hoping to offset part of its loan repayments. It has also given a green light for the resumption of other Chinese-financed projects.

Wells remarks are a thinly-veiled warning to Colombo that it must strictly follow Washington's line. This is the only meaning of her declaration that Sri Lanka must "institutionalize the principles of the Indo-Pacific."

Washington's methods to "reinforce a message of reform" will no doubt include behind-the-scenes threats to ramp up the UNHRC war crimes allegations against Colombo if it continues to move closer to Beijing.

The *Indian Express* has reported that the US Senate Appropriations Committee opposed the 92 percent cut in aid to Sri Lanka and last month tabled a separate bill calling for \$43 million in 2018. The committee declared that Sri Lanka should be assisted because of its strategic location and the impact of the decades-long war on the country. The Pentagon is nevertheless strengthening its military ties with Sri Lanka.

Addressing the Indian Ocean Conference in Colombo at the end of August, Wells announced the first ever US-Sri Lanka joint naval exercise, Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training or CARAT 2017, which will occur this month at Trincomalee. The exercise will be conducted by the US Seventh Fleet, which is at the centre of Washington's war plans against China, and follows the Malabar naval exercise held in July, which involved India, US and Japan.

US war ships have been making frequent visits to Colombo since 2015 and the US Marine Corps are training Sri Lankan marines and navy soldiers, including on the Guam naval base in the western Pacific.

India, Washington's main strategic and military ally in South Asia, has voiced concern over Colombo's recent Hambantota Port deal and loan agreements with China. This was reflected in an August 13 article by Indian analyst Swaran Singh in the *Daily Mirror*.

Entitled, "Why India is worried about China consolidating in Sri Lanka?" Singh described the loans from Beijing to Colombo as a "debt trap" that would

force India to "shore up its defence mechanism" with Sri Lanka.

India is currently bolstering defence ties with Sri Lanka. The Indian and Sri Lankan navies have resumed their annual SLINEX exercises. This year's event was held at the Viskhapatnam naval base and in the Bay of Bengal from September 4–14. Joint exercises involving US, Indian and Sri Lankan naval personnel were also held last month at the Welisara navy camp, near Colombo.

Behind the backs of workers and the poor, the Sri Lankan government is tying the country to the US-led war drive against China that will have catastrophic consequences for the working class in South Asia and the world.



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