

US, India push anti-China campaign at Sri Lankan maritime conference

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This year's Galle Dialogue, Sri Lanka's annual maritime conference, was dominated by deepening tensions between the US and its regional allies, including India, and China. Representatives of 51 nations attended the October 9-10 event.

The gathering took place amid President Donald Trump's repeated threats of a pre-emptive strike against North Korea, and provocative US military exercises on the Korean peninsula. Washington's bellicose stance is part of its aggressive encirclement of China in preparation for war against Beijing.

Addressing the Galle Dialogue, Admiral Scott H. Swift, commander of the US navy's Pacific Fleet, touted 70 years of "unprecedented levels of stability and prosperity" in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. He declared this was a product of the prevailing "international norms, standards, rules, and laws."

Swift's claim that this "rules-based order" was "not imposed by any one nation upon another" is a fraud. The admiral's remarks were a whitewash of American imperialism's record in establishing its primacy in the Asia-Pacific since the 1940s through wars and regime-change operations. These included the devastation of Japan, including by dropping two atomic bombs, brutal wars in Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia, support for military coups in Indonesia, Thailand and elsewhere, and many other crimes.

Swift obliquely denounced China for undermining US dominance in the region. He spoke of "a number of prolonged maritime disputes," which, "if not resolved using established mechanisms and in accordance with international law" would be "detrimental to the rules-based system."

Representing the blood-soaked US military, Swift said the conflicts were a product of a "destabilising course centered on the failed premise of might makes

right," i.e., on China's part.

Swift's remarks were a reference to ongoing maritime disputes in the South China Sea, between China and the Philippines, a US ally, and Vietnam.

US President Barack Obama deliberately stoked these conflicts to ramp up pressure on Beijing, and legitimise the vast American military build-up in the region. Like his predecessor, Trump has endorsed provocative "freedom of navigation" exercises, in which US warships travel in close proximity to, or enter, Chinese-claimed territorial waters in the South China Sea.

Swift's comments were aimed at pressing for closer military ties between the Pentagon and its regional partners, including India and Sri Lanka. Swift touted expanding "military to military relations" with Sri Lanka, citing joint exercises between the US Pacific Fleet and the Sri Lankan navy the previous week.

The Colombo-based *Daily Mirror* asked Rear Admiral Donald D. Gabrielson, who was also at the dialogue, whether Washington was concerned about Sri Lanka's economic relations with China.

Referencing Chinese investment projects in Sri Lanka, Gabrielson stated: "People deserve hope for the future and that requires investment and requires new things. But they also do not deserve to be shackled from their hopes for the future." His comments were a thinly-veiled threat that the US would not tolerate any turn away from the US alliance by the Sri Lankan ruling elite.

Gabrielson also warned against China's \$1 trillion One Belt, One Road (OBOR) infrastructure project, aimed at economically integrating the Eurasian landmass. "China is now trying to rearrange the very system from which they were already receiving benefits," he stated.

Gabriel's comments followed warnings by US

Defence Secretary James Mattis, who told Congress on October 7 that OBOR “passes through disputed areas.” Mattis was referring particularly to Pakistan-held Kashmir, which is also claimed by India.

Mattis’s comments were another indication that Washington is seeking to inflame tensions on the Indian subcontinent, to scuttle expanding Chinese influence. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson openly declared last week that deepening US-Indian military relations were aimed at countering China.

These ties were on display at the Galle Dialogue. Vice Admiral Karambir Singh, Vice Chief of Indian Navy staff, echoed US denunciations of “unilateralism” and “non-adherence to international norms.” Singh declared India was acting in accordance with the existing regional order. He noted that New Delhi had accepted the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s 2014 delimitation of a maritime boundary between India and Bangladesh.

This comment was aimed against China’s rejection of a ruling by the same court, upholding Philippine territorial claims in the South China Sea. The court reached that decision in collusion with the Obama administration, which used the ruling to escalate pressure on Beijing.

Singh also warned: “Looking for quick-fix solutions may lead to situations where strategic autonomy of a nation becomes dependent on external crutches.” Commenting on this statement, *South Asia Monitoring* wrote: “India feels small countries like Sri Lanka are having to give into the demands of big powers. For example, India believes that Sri Lanka is giving its vital strategic assets like harbours to China on a platter.”

The US and India have launched a campaign against Chinese investment in countries such as Sri Lanka, which they fear will undermine their attempts to militarily encircle Beijing. India has denounced China’s purchase of a major stake in Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port. New Delhi is also pressing for a deal for it to take control of the Mattala airport, located near Hambantota Port.

Without naming the US or India, Chinese Navy Rear Admiral Cui Yuzhong, Deputy Commander of the East Sea Fleet, pointedly responded to their accusations. He said China solves “disputes through peaceful consultation,” and the “the global oceans should be governed by all related sides.” His comments were

directed against the US drive for dominance in the region.

Cui continued: “The principle of peacefully solving international disputes, determined by the United Nations Charter, is a lesson learned by human mankind after painful experience from the two world wars.” His reference to the global conflagrations of the past century was significant, pointing to the danger that the US war drive could spark another conflict that would rapidly involve nuclear-armed powers.

The conference underscored the intense pressure being placed on regional countries, including Sri Lanka, to line up behind Washington’s anti-China drive.

Sri Lanka underwent a sharp turn in 2015. The US and India intervened in that year’s election to oust former President Mahinda Rajapakse and install Maithripala Sirisena. Washington was hostile to Rajapakse’s close relations with China.

Sirisena has deepened Sri Lanka’s alignment with the US and India, but continued to turn to China for economic assistance, to the consternation of Washington and New Delhi. Like his predecessor, Sirisena faces the prospect of sudden ousting if he does not toe the US line.

In a signal that the message has been received, Ruwan Wijewardene, state minister for defence, inaugurated the dialogue by declaring that the government took “cognizance of the value of freedom of navigation and the smooth flow of trade and energy across the Indian Ocean to other parts of the globe.”

Wijewardene said Sri Lanka would take part in any initiative that helps to protect “this vital freedom of navigation,” echoing one of the key US-Indian catch phrases in the drive to war against China.



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