

Indian and US officials discuss Chinese influence in Maldives and Sri Lanka

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According to Indian media reports, Atul Keshap, the US ambassador to Sri Lanka and Maldives, recently held talks with Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar over “ISIS threats” and Chinese influence in the South Asia region. The pair reportedly discussed ways of scuttling China’s economic weight in Maldives and Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka and Maldives, only 983 kilometres apart, sit astride strategic Indian Ocean sea lanes, from the Strait of Hormuz in the west to the Malacca Strait in the east. The US regards both straits as choke points that could be used to block vital energy supplies and other imports to China in a war.

Emphasising the importance of its alliance with India, Washington, which previously referred to the “Asia-Pacific” to describe its efforts to isolate China, now says its operations cover the “Indo-Pacific.” US National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster declared last week in Beijing: “If you look at the geography and trade routes, the routes flow east and west across the Indo-Pacific region.”

In response to Washington’s increasingly provocative moves, China is stepping up its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) and associated Maritime Silk Road projects to ensure the free movement of its imports and exports. The US regards OBOR as a threat to its global hegemony.

After decades of “non-alignment,” Prime Minister Narendra Modi has transformed India into a “frontline state” in Washington’s moves against Beijing.

Reporting on high-level discussions between US Ambassador Keshap and Indian officials, a November 6 article by the *Times of India*’s diplomatic editor Indrani Bagchi declared: “Maldives is a matter of particular concern. China has consolidated its hold on the island, building infrastructure with its standard

predatory pricing methods.”

The article implied that Chinese involvement in the iHavan port project on Maldives’ northernmost atoll was a security threat to India. Bagchi listed other decisions by the cash-strapped Maldives government of President Abdulla Yameen. These included selling an atoll near Male airport to Chinese interests, and allowing three Chinese warships to visit the country in August, in defiance of Indian objections.

The *Times* also revealed that India and the US were “teaming up to monitor returning ISIS fighters into Maldives.” It quoted an unnamed diplomat who claimed there was “an explosion of extremist preachers in Maldives.”

This claim has one purpose—to further pressure Yameen’s government and justify increased US and India surveillance of the country. Sections of the Indian elite, media and analysts are demanding that Modi’s government take more aggressive action to bring Maldives under India’s influence.

The US and the European Union are using Yameen’s human rights violations—citing a media crackdown and the arrest of opposition party leaders—to support the opposition led by former President Mohammed Nasheed. Nasheed is denouncing Yameen’s pro-China policy and promising to install a pro-US, pro-Indian administration in Maldives.

Indian news reports noted that the US and Indian diplomats expressed concerns over Sri Lanka’s relations with Beijing. In 2015, Washington, supported by New Delhi, orchestrated a regime-change operation to oust President Mahinda Rajapakse and replace him with Maithripala Sirisena. The US and India were hostile to Rajapakse’s close relations with Beijing and wanted Colombo to integrate itself with Washington’s war plans against China.

After taking office in January 2015, Sirisena installed pro-US United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister, halted Chinese investment projects and aligned the country's foreign policy with Washington.

Two months later, however, the indebted Sri Lankan government began looking for funds from China. It restarted halted projects, such as the \$US1.4 billion Colombo Port City Project, while attaching some terms and conditions to them. Sirisena's government also sold a 60 percent stake in Hambantota Port, which was built with Chinese funds, to a Chinese company.

When New Delhi voiced concerns over the Hambantota Port deal, claiming it was a part of China's strategic moves against India, the Sri Lankan government offered India 70 percent of the shares in the nearby Mattala Mahinda Rajapakse airport and a role in the development of the eastern Trincomalee deep water port.

The US has denounced China for providing loans to indebted countries. US acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Alice Wells recently told a congressional committee 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."

China's ambassador to Sri Lanka, Yi Xianliang, rejected these claims last week. In a Colombo media opinion piece, Yi denounced Wells's claim as "completely unfounded." He noted that the US was "the largest grant provider of assistance to Sri Lanka" and most of the Chinese loans were concessional and on fixed rates.

While Sirisena's government continues to seek financial assistance from Beijing, it is increasingly integrating the country into US war plans against China. Last week, US Under-Secretary of State Thomas Shannon visited Sri Lanka for the "Colombo-US Partnership Dialogue," which involved discussions on economic and financial assistance, and security issues. The US military, including its Pacific Command, is working closely with the Sri Lankan military and training key units.

Since Sirisena and Wickremesinghe came to power, US and Indian warships have made frequent visits to the Colombo, Trincomalee and Hambantota ports.

Late last month, an aircraft carrier strike group—the

carrier USS Nimitz, cruiser USS Princeton, and destroyers USS Howard, USS Shoup, USS Pinckney and USS Kidd—docked in Colombo Port for four days. The *Times of India* enthusiastically declared the armada's visit was a "message" to China.

On November 10, the Chinese navy training vessel, the Qi Ji Guang, came to Colombo on a four-day "goodwill visit" during a "multinational mission."

The presence of these warships is another ominous expression of the sharpening geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific region. Likewise, the discussions between US and Indian officials show that these countries are stepping up their operations against China and sending a message to the Sri Lankan and Maldives governments that there will be no room to manoeuvre in Washington's war drive.



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