

New York Times restates Washington's anti-China agenda in Sri Lanka

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On June 25, the *New York Times* published a lengthy front page article entitled "How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port." The more than 3,800-word piece repeats the usual allegations manufactured by the *Times*, and other media conduits for Washington's foreign policy propaganda, about growing Chinese influence in Sri Lanka.

The tone and timing of the piece is aimed at sending a clear message to Colombo: 'US imperialism is watching you closely, do not attempt to divert from our military-strategic preparations for war against China.'

The US and its international allies have long put pressure on Sri Lanka, which is strategically located close to major Indian Ocean sea lanes straddling Asia and Africa. As a result, the island-nation has been dragged into the maelstrom of global geo-political tensions, mainly between the US and China, and Washington's concerted economic and military offensive to undermine Beijing's influence throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

According to the *Times*, China is using loans and aid "to gain influence around the world" and is willing to "play hardball to collect." To prove this claim, the newspaper comments on China securing a majority share of Sri Lanka's southern port of Hambantota. The facility was built during former President Mahinda Rajapakse's rule.

Last December, after almost two years of negotiations, the current government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe formally handed over Hambantota Port to China Merchant Port Holdings (CMPH).

Under this agreement, Sri Lanka sold a 70 percent stake in the port to CMPH via a 99-year lease, while retaining a 30 percent share under the state-owned Sri Lanka Ports Authority.

Times notes Sri Lanka's mounting foreign debt and US imperialist fears over growing Chinese influence in the region and, in particular, the Belt and Road Initiative, which envisages the construction of a series of ports, railway lines and roads connecting China with Europe.

The article states: "The [port] transfer gave China control of territory just a few hundred miles off the shores of a rival, India, and a strategic foothold along a critical commercial and military waterway.

"The debt deal also intensified some of the harshest accusations about President Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative: that the global investment and lending program amounts to a debt trap for vulnerable countries around the world, fuelling corruption and autocratic behaviour in struggling democracies."

The *Times*' concern about democracy and Sri Lankan debt is feigned. The newspaper functions as a direct mouthpiece for the US military and intelligence apparatus, maintaining a constant stream of fabrications and outright lies to justify Washington's crimes. From the US wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan to the proxy war for regime-change in Syria, the *Times* is a vital cog in the American war machine and US intelligence operations.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has consistently explained, the US orchestrated the regime-change operation to remove Rajapakse as president and bring the pro-US Sirisena administration to office via the 2015 presidential elections.

As the WSWS noted on January 9, 2015: "The line-up of forces with Sirisena and the election result itself are the outcome of a behind-the-scenes intervention by the Obama administration. Decisions were made in Washington that [former President Mahinda] Rajapakse had to be ousted in order to shift Sri Lankan foreign

policy away from the close relations that his government developed with China, which included expanding military ties. The intervention flowed directly from the aggressive US ‘pivot to Asia.’”

The *Times* itself paid a great deal of attention to the 2015 presidential election. Supplied with background information from senior US State Department and intelligence sources about the regime-change operation in Colombo, it reported on all the major political developments during the campaign.

The *Times* published two articles on November 21, 2014, the day that Sirisena defected from Rajapakse’s government to the opposition and announced he would stand as a “common presidential candidate.”

The articles were entitled, “Suddenly, Sri Lanka Presidential Elections Become a Real Contest” and “For Sri Lankan President, Renounced by Aides, Confidence of Re-election Dims.”

The latter piece enthusiastically endorsed Sirisena, while demonising Rajapakse. It said crowds at opposition rallies listened with “fascination” as Rajapakse’s former allies described the existing government as a “soft dictatorship” controlled by the president and his relatives.

The article said Rajapakse “steered his country closer to China, which has provided Sri Lanka with billions of dollars in loans for new ports and highways.”

On election day, the *Times* voiced its satisfaction with the regime-change operation, in an article headlined, “Sri Lankan President Concedes Defeat After Startling Upset.” The newspaper repeated claims about Rajapakse’s “close ties to China” and his authoritarian methods of rule.

But as the Hambantota port deal with China indicates, the politically divided ruling elite in Sri Lanka is not fully adhering to Washington’s foreign policy script.

Although Sirisena suspended the China-funded Colombo Port City project and some other initiatives, the deepening economic crisis confronting his government has made it difficult for him to completely dispense with Beijing. Colombo cannot maintain its foreign reserves and the national currency without massive loans from China.

The *Times*’ latest article comments that Sirisena’s government was “eager to reorient Sri Lanka toward India, Japan and the West,” but that no other country “could fill the financial or economic space that China

held in Sri Lanka.”

The *Times* notes that although US policymakers were worried about a Chinese submarine visit to Colombo during Rajapakse’s administration, “the handover of Hambantota to the Chinese has kept alive concerns about possible military use—particularly as China has continued to militarize island holdings around the South China Sea despite earlier pledges not to.”

The article warns about a possible political comeback by Rajapakse, describing him as “China’s preferred partner in Sri Lanka.” It refers to the recent success of Rajapakse’s newly formed Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna in the February local government elections. The *Times* nervously quotes Harsha de Silva, the state minister for national policies and economic affairs, who says: “Governments can change.”

Notably, the article ends by noting: “Presidential elections are coming up next year, and general elections in 2020.” This is a clear warning not to allow Rajapakse back into office.

In fact, the entire *New York Times* piece is a warning bell about the possible return of a Beijing-orientated government. It is an indication that Washington’s regime-change operations will be reactivated if Colombo does not fully commit to US economic and military preparations for war against China.



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