

US and Japan increase efforts to undercut Chinese influence in Sri Lanka

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The US and Japan are stepping up their attempts to draw Sri Lanka more closely into their geo-political and military manoeuvres against Chinese influence in the Indian and Pacific ocean regions. Last month, two senior Japanese government ministers made official visits to Sri Lanka and a US naval squad conducted joint exercises with its Sri Lankan counterparts.

Japanese Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera arrived on August 20 for a three-day visit, holding discussions with President Maithripala Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and Minister of Defence Ruwan Wijewardene. It was the first time a Japanese defence minister had visited Sri Lanka.

Onodera's tour followed his trip to India where he held talks with Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman about boosting military ties. Tokyo and New Delhi both want Colombo more closely integrated into the US-led strategic partnership against China.

While Japan is already aligned with the US against China, Tokyo has its own imperialist interests and ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region and is deepening its relations with South Asian countries, especially India.

All three countries—the US, Japan and India—continue to publicly voice their concerns over Colombo's relations with Beijing, and in particular the 99-year leasing of Hambantota Port to China. Washington, Tokyo and New Delhi all claim that Beijing could use the port as a naval base, despite Colombo's repeated assurances that the deal does not allow its use for military purposes.

On August 22, Onodera travelled to Trincomalee harbour where Sri Lanka's Eastern Naval Command Headquarters is located and inspected Sri Lanka's special naval forces there. A Japanese naval warship was anchored in the natural deep water port during the

defence minister's visit. A total of 66 Japanese naval ships have visited Sri Lanka since 2008 underscoring the growing military relations.

Following his Trincomalee tour, Onodera inspected Hambantota harbour, telling Japan's NHK television that the port “should not be used for military purposes”—another indication of Tokyo's concerns about the lease with China.

Five days after Onodera left Sri Lanka, the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs Kazuyuki Nakane arrived for a three-day visit. He met with Wickremesinghe and participated in a commissioning ceremony of two patrol vessels donated to the Sri Lankan Coast Guard by Japan.

The Japanese embassy said that the boats, which cost \$11 million, could be used for search and rescue, pollution control and oil spill management, and “maritime security boarding” operations. Constructed in Japan, they are part of a \$16.5 million Japanese-Sri Lankan “Maritime Safety Capability Improvement” project.

On August 23, a US naval ship—the USS Anchorage—and a Marine Expeditionary Unit arrived in Trincomalee. The 25,000-tonne, 208-metre long and 32-metre wide, amphibious docking vessel carries 600 naval personnel and is designed to transport troops into war zones.

The massive vessel participated in joint US-Sri Lankan search and seizure, and security force reaction exercises on August 30 off the eastern coast near Trincomalee. USS Anchorage Captain Denis Jacko and other US military officers also held discussions with Rear Admiral Sumith Weerasinghe, commander of Sri Lanka's Eastern Naval Area.

A statement issued by Robert Hilton, the US embassy's chargé d'affaires, declared, “We're also

excited to try out the air logistics hub concept that utilizes Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean to ensure the quick availability of relief supplies, equipment and other material when needed by the US and partner militaries and humanitarian organizations." The "air logistics hub" is part of Colombo's increasing integration with the US military.

A statement by Cmdr. Deborah K. McIvy, assistant chief of staff for US Expeditionary Strike Group 7, said: "Successfully leveraging local logistics support services will help standardize the process for future operations, to include supplying mission-critical supplies for HADR [] efforts."

Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations are constantly used by the US, Japan and other imperialist powers for large-scale military mobilisation and as logistical dry-runs against rival powers.

Between June and August, a 25-member Sri Lankan navy team participated for the first time in the US-led "Rim of the Pacific" exercises, in Hawaii and Southern California between June and August. The biennial event is the world's largest international maritime warfare exercise and involves the US Navy's Pacific Fleet, the Marine Corps and number of other units. US quadrilateral partners, India, Japan and Australia, participated in the exercises along with a number of other countries, including Israel and Vietnam. China was a notable exclusion.

India is deepening its economic and defence ties with Sri Lanka. New Delhi wants a leasing agreement with Colombo for the southern Mattala International Airport, near Hambantota harbour, and is also seeking a strategic foothold at Trincomalee.

While an India-Sri Lanka Defence Dialogue was established in 2012, it did not become fully operational until after Maithripala Sirisena became Sri Lankan president following a US orchestrated regime-change operation to remove then President Mahinda Rajapakse. Washington, with backing from New Delhi, demanded Rajapakse distance Colombo from Beijing as part of US President Obama's anti-China "pivot to Asia." After coming to power in 2015, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government began implementing a pro-US, pro-Indian foreign policy.

Faced with the serious financial problems, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, however, has turned to Beijing for financial support and investment.

China paid \$US1.1billion to lease the Hambantota port and is currently the island's leading investor. Last month, Chinese President Xi Jinping offered Sri Lanka a \$295 million grant as part of its plans to increase its influence on the island.

To counter Washington's increasingly aggressive political and military moves, Beijing has developed its Belt and Road Initiative, which includes establishing port facilities in countries like Sri Lanka to secure sea lanes to the Middle East and Africa. The massive infrastructure project aims to link the Eurasian region, as well as Africa, by land and sea.

The expansion of US and Japanese military activities in Sri Lanka will only intensify geo-political tensions as the Trump administration ratchets up its trade war measures with China and prepares for military confrontation.



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