

Sri Lankan prime minister promotes US defence agreement

Vijith Samarasinghe, K. Ratnayake
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Addressing the Sri Lankan parliament last Wednesday, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe attempted to gloss over the geo-strategic implications of a planned Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between Colombo and Washington. If signed, the deal would give the US the right to freely use the strategically located Indian Ocean island nation for its military forces.

The government of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga signed a SOFA deal with Washington in mid-1995. The US wants that agreement to be replaced with one that suits its aggressive military preparations against China.

Wickremesinghe commented on the planned SOFA in reply to a question from Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader and MP Anura Kumara Dissanayake. The JVP, which previously supported the pro-US government in 2015, is now attempting to posture as an opponent of US imperialism.

Wickremesinghe told parliament that the negotiations were ongoing but claimed that “no deal impacting the sovereignty of Sri Lanka will be signed [and] there are some things which we can’t agree on.” He did not elaborate on any disagreements and ludicrously claimed what was being prepared was a “peace time document.”

However, Wickremesinghe admitted, “This agreement generally establishes the framework for US military personnel operating in a foreign country. The SOFA provides for the powers and privileges of covered individuals.”

A leaked version of the 15-paragraph document published in Colombo’s *Sunday Times* on June 30 reveals some of the extensive powers that would be granted to US Defence Department officials and the American military. These include:

* All US personnel be accorded the privileges, exemptions, and immunities equivalent to those accorded to the administrative and technical staff of a diplomatic mission under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations; that US personnel enter and exit Sri Lanka with US identification and with collective movement or individual travel orders; that Sri Lanka accept as valid all professional licenses issued by the US, its political subdivisions or states; and US personnel be authorised to wear uniforms while performing official duties and to carry arms while on duty.

* The US government is to exercise criminal jurisdiction over US personnel. They cannot be subjected to Sri Lankan law.

* Vehicles, aircraft, vessels and equipment of US forces are to enter and move freely within Sri Lankan territory and be free from boarding and inspection by local authorities.

* US forces are to be allocated a dedicated radio spectrum and can operate their own telecommunication system.

* Any construction or procurement activity undertaken by US forces in Sri Lanka will be free from local taxes.

Wickremesinghe claimed in parliament that “the pact would not lead to a permanent US presence on the island,” but failed to explain why Washington needed such freedom for its forces. Contrary to Wickremesinghe’s attempts to downplay a new SOFA deal, the Trump administration wants the closest military collaboration with Colombo.

Addressing the Senate Armed Services Committee in Washington last February, INDOPACOM chief, Admiral Philip Davidson, declared that Sri Lanka “remains a significant strategic opportunity in the

Indian Ocean and our military-to-military relationship continues to strengthen.”

These relations expanded dramatically after President Maithripala Sirisena came to power in a US-orchestrated regime change operation that ousted former President Mahinda Rajapakse in 2015. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe immediately brought Sri Lanka’s foreign policy into line with Washington and New Delhi, its South Asian strategic partner, and their confrontational geo-strategic agenda against China.

In 2017, Colombo extended the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with the US for an indefinite period. Originally signed in 2007, it enables the US military access to Sri Lankan ports and airports.

In March this year, a report by the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing US think tank, listed all the US-Sri Lankan military agreements and joint exercises since 2015 and declared that “since late 2018, the country has been serving as a new Indian Ocean logistics hub for the US Navy.”

Sri Lanka is strategically important to Washington and its preparations to economically and militarily block China in the Indian Ocean region in the event of war.

While the Wickremesinghe government is seeking to push through the agreement with some cosmetic changes, other factions of the ruling elite are silent or making hypocritical criticisms.

President Sirisena, who backed Washington’s military build-up in the region after his coming to power in 2015, is now pretending to be critical of some clauses in the agreement.

At a recent public meeting, Sirisena demagogically declared: “I will not allow the SOFA that seeks to betray the nation.” Having signed the ACSA in 2017, he now claims that he was unaware of the clauses in that agreement and was duped by its authors.

Before he fell out with Wickremesinghe after their unity government was discredited among workers and poor, Sirisena boasted about his “excellent relations” with the “international community”—i.e., the US, Europe and India. When Sirisena removed Wickremesinghe and appointed Rajapakse as prime minister in an attempted political coup last October, his representatives visited western ambassadors, including the US, informing them of Rajapakse’s readiness to follow their demands.

Leaders of the opposition Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), including Rajapakse, are conspicuously silent about the SOFA and other agreements with the US. Only second ranking leaders of the SLPP or other parties in alliance with it, such as the communalist Mahajana Eksath Peramuna and the National Freedom Front, have issued statements denouncing the government for betraying the country’s sovereignty.

The JVP’s opposition to the SOFA agreement is entirely hypocritical. Its claims to have opposed the ACSA in 2007 are a lie. There is no evidence in the parliamentary Hansard or in any media report that the JVP opposed the agreement. The JVP, like other parties in Sri Lanka, fully backed Washington’s so-called war on terror in 2001 and the invasion of Afghanistan, developed relations with Western diplomats in Sri Lanka and called for US support for Colombo’s war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Nervous about the deep-seated opposition of Sri Lankan workers and youth to US imperialism, Sirisena and the opposition political parties are posturing as opponents of the SOFA agreement.

The planned SOFA deal and the ever-deepening military relations between Washington and Colombo for war against China raise the necessity for the development of a mass anti-war movement of the working class based on the struggle for socialist internationalism. As part of this fight, the Sri Lankan working class must reject all factions of the Sri Lankan ruling elite and oppose SOFA, ACSA and other overt and covert deals between Colombo, Washington and other imperialist powers.

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