

New Sri Lankan president visits India amid growing geo-political tensions

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Recently-elected Sri Lankan President, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, made his first visit abroad as president to India on November 28–29, at the invitation of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. On Rajapakse's part, the trip was an attempt to prove that his government will not threaten the interests of India and its strategic partner, the US.

Modi's invitation was a move to prevent China gaining a foothold on the island following the return of the Rajapakse family to power. These developments demonstrate how Sri Lanka is dangerously entangled within the intensifying global geo-political tensions, particularly between the US and India on one side, and China on the other.

Rajapakse's elder brother Mahinda Rajapakse, who was Sri Lankan president from 2005 to 2015, developed close ties with China. In response, India assisted the US-sponsored regime-change operation that effectively ousted Rajapakse and installed Maithripala Sirisena in office via the January 2015 presidential election. As soon as Gotabhaya Rajapakse took office, he installed his brother as prime minister.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse sought to assure New Delhi that his administration would not do anything that harmed India's strategic interests. According to the *Indian Express*, in an hour-long, one-on-one talk with Modi, he said he would "not allow 'any third country or third force' to come in the way of the strong bilateral ties between Delhi and Colombo."

In a public statement after meeting Modi, Rajapakse insisted that his government's relations with China were just "economic and commercial (in nature)," but with India, they were "multi-faceted, with priority given to security-related matters." Relations with India would be his "top priority."

Signalling his government's readiness to collaborate

with India's military-strategic agenda in the Indian Ocean, Rajapakse promised to work "closely" with India to "ensure that the Indian Ocean remains a zone of peace."

Modi in turn, said Sri Lanka was India's "closest maritime neighbour and trusted friend." He added: "Security and the development of our two countries are inseparable. Therefore, it is natural that we should be aware of each other's safety and sensibilities."

This is a message to the Rajapakse that his government must adhere to the letter to his promises, and not follow the previous government of his brother in developing closer ties with China. Modi's missive followed a thinly-veiled warning by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that Rajapakse must not stray back toward China.

Modi announced a \$US50 million line of credit for "security and counter-terrorism" operations and another \$400 million for development and infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka. These deals aim to prevent China securing strategic advantages in Sri Lanka through financial facilities.

India's offers, however, are dwarfed by massive Chinese investments in Sri Lanka, which are part of Beijing's huge Belt and Road Initiative throughout Eurasia. These include a \$1 billion deep-water port in Hambantota, a \$1.4 billion Colombo port city development and a \$272 million contract to build the country's first major post-colonial railway infrastructure.

Rajapakse, whose government confronts a severe financial crisis, refused to close the door to Chinese investment. He rejected the claim, repeatedly made by India and the US, that the previous government's lease of the Hambantota port to China was due to a "debt trap." He repeated his statement that his brother's

government had a “purely commercial agreement with China.”

Moreover, Rajapakse passed the ball to the court of India and its allies. He said countries such as India, Japan, Singapore and Australia “should tell their companies to invest in Sri Lanka and help us to grow, because if they do not, then not only Sri Lanka, but countries all over Asia will have the same [problem]. The Chinese will take the Belt and Road Initiative all over unless other countries provide an alternative.”

China is seeking to counter India and the US by inviting President Rajapakse to Beijing. A comment entitled “With new President, Sri Lanka ties look bright,” published on November 21 in the state-run *Global Times*, mocked “regional powers” who became “uneasy” at “Colombo’s ambition.” It asserted: “Sri Lanka ...has to make policies that are in line with its own interests.”

Rajapakse’s visit to India demonstrates that his claim that Sri Lanka will maintain a “neutral” foreign policy is a myth. The US and India will seek Sri Lanka’s active involvement and integration into the regional network of US allies and strategic partners directed against China.

As a means of keeping pressure on the Sri Lankan regime, Modi said in his statement: “I am confident that the government of Sri Lanka will carry forward the process of reconciliation, to fulfill the aspirations of the Tamils for equality, justice, peace and respect. It also includes the implementation of the 13th amendment.”

The Indian ruling class has no concern for the democratic rights of the minority Tamil population in Sri Lanka. Rather, the remarks are a threat to revive the issue of the repression of Tamils as a vehicle for invoking “human rights” allegations against the Rajapakse regime, as the US did in the lead-up to its 2015 intervention.

The “reconciliation” process means a limited power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala and Tamil elites in Sri Lanka to jointly exploit the working class. The 13th amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution, introduced in line with the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, provided for a devolution of power to the country’s provinces, including those in the north and east, in a failed attempt to end Colombo’s communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

New Delhi calculates that a power-sharing arrangement would boost its political influence in Colombo through sections of the Tamil elite gaining access to the corridors of power. Successive Indian governments have also raised that issue as a mean of maintaining their support in the Tamil-majority areas of southern India.

After their meeting, Rajapakse remained silent on Modi’s call for “reconciliation.” He relied heavily on the Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist groups during his election campaign.

However, during an interview with the Chennai-based *Hindu* on November 30, Rajapakse ridiculed “urging justice ...for Tamil people.” He said “successive leaders” had promised “one single thing” for 70 years: “devolution, devolution, devolution.” Nevertheless, “ultimately nothing happened.”

Knowing that any power-sharing arrangement with the Tamil elites would antagonise his Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist allies, Rajapakse pointedly declared that he would not do “anything against the wishes and feelings of the majority (Sinhala) community.”



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