

Sri Lankan prime minister's India visit underscores deepening geostrategic rivalry

K. Ratnayake**14 February 2020**

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse ended a four-day trip to India on Tuesday. It was the third visit to New Delhi by leading figures of the Colombo government in the three months since the election of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

Three days after Gotabhaya Rajapakse won the election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi sent his foreign affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, to invite the Sri Lankan leader to visit New Delhi. Gotabhaya Rajapakse responded with a two-day tour in late November. In early January, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena also travelled to India for talks.

The trips are part of the ongoing diplomatic efforts of the US and India to prevent the new Sri Lanka government developing close relations with China. Washington and New Delhi are determined to counteract Beijing's influence on the strategically-located island nation that straddles key Indian Ocean sea lanes stretching from Africa and West Asia to the Malacca Straits in the east.

During the January 2015 presidential elections, India backed the US regime-change operation to oust Mahinda Rajapakse as president and replace him with Maithripala Sirisena. While the US and India supported Sri Lanka's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and Colombo's repressive authoritarian methods, they were hostile to Rajapakse's close relations with China. While former President Rajapakse later claimed some Indian intelligence officials and foreign countries worked against him, he never publicly named them.

Following his elevation into the presidency, Sirisena, with the assistance of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, quickly brought Colombo's foreign policy into line with US and Indian geo-strategic

demands and integrated the country's armed forces with the US Pacific Command and its military planning against China.

Likewise, the Modi government, and the former Congress administration, systematically transformed India into a frontline state in America's increasingly provocative operations against China. Washington is prepared to wage war against Beijing in an attempt to block its rise as an economic and geostrategic competitor.

Although the Sirisena and Wickremesinghe administration broke apart in 2018, Washington and New Delhi are determined to deepen their political and military relations with Colombo.

No significant agreement was signed between Colombo and New Delhi during Prime Minister Mahinda's recent visit, but Modi made clear that his government is watching.

After his discussions with the Sri Lankan prime minister, Modi declared: "Stability, security and prosperity in Sri Lanka are in India's interest, but also in the interest of the entire Indian Ocean Region." He asserted that India was a "trusted partner" in Sri Lanka's development.

Modi reiterated what he said to President Gotabhaya Rajapakse: that he was confident Colombo would "fulfill the expectations of the Tamil people for equality, justice, peace and respect within a united Sri Lanka."

India wants Sri Lanka to establish a limited power-sharing operation with the Tamil elite. New Delhi has little concern for the democratic rights of the Tamil masses, who suffered bloody repression during Colombo's 30-year war. It hopes, however, that a power-sharing arrangement will assist India to influence Sri Lankan affairs and garner political

support amongst the Tamil Nadu masses in India.

The Indian media, keen to know where the new Colombo government stands in relation to China, closely questioned Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse

Referring to major power alignments in the Indian Ocean, the *Hindustan Times* asked: “There’s the Quad on the one hand, and big powers, such as China and Russia, on the other. Will Sri Lanka join the Quad if asked?” The Quad or Quadrilateral is a military strategic anti-China alliance led by the US and involving Japan, Australia and India.

Rajapakse dodged the question, claiming that the issue “has not yet come up for discussion but we would have to talk it out among ourselves first, and if we want to do it.”

Rajapakse was also asked whether he shared the view that “China’s Belt and Road Initiative [BRI] was a ‘debt-trap’ development.”

Beijing’s ambitious BRI transport project is aimed at linking China via land and sea across Eurasia and enhancing its position on the world stage. The “debt trap” claim is propaganda from the US, the European powers and India which are campaigning against BRI.

Rajapakse answered: “Sri Lanka has received a lot of benefits from being part of BRI. By the way, let me remind you—our external debt towards China is only 12 percent of our overall external debt.”

Anxious not to annoy Beijing, Rajapakse, who heads a cash-strapped government that continues to seek assistance from China and elsewhere, said that Colombo had “not defaulted” on its loans. He added: “We used whatever money we took from them to build infrastructure.”

Rajapakse has requested a moratorium on repayment of loans from India, which are currently about \$900 million.

Last month Ajit Doval, India’s cabinet-ranked National Security Advisor, visited Colombo for discussions with President Rajapakse. Following their meetings Rajapakse posted a Twitter message in which said that there had been a “strengthening of bilateral cooperation on national security, intelligence sharing, maritime security & fostering of regional collaboration.”

Doval pledged \$US 50 million in military assistance to Sri Lanka and discussed the establishment of a maritime research coordination centre.

Before Doval’s trip, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi toured Sri Lanka to meet with the president and other political leaders. Yi issued a statement which declared: “As Sri Lanka’s strategic partner, China will continue to stand by Sri Lanka’s interests. We will not allow any outside influences to interfere with matters that are essentially internal concerns of Sri Lanka.”

Last month high-level US officials also visited Sri Lanka to deliver a warning to the new government from US President Donald Trump. His message demanded “commitment and interest in furthering and deepening [its] partnership.” The delegation included Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Alice Wells and Director for South and Central Asia on the US National Security Council, Liza Curtis.

These developments point to the advanced stage of the geopolitical tensions between the US and India on one hand, and China on the other, which are driving towards a catastrophic war between these nuclear-armed powers. The US and India have made it clear to President Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s government that it must toe the US and India’s anti-China line.



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