

US Secretary of State Pompeo to visit Sri Lanka amid rising anti-China provocations

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Sri Lanka's secretary to the ministry of foreign affairs Admiral Jayanath Colabage announced last weekend that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will visit Sri Lanka during his scheduled trip to India at the end of this month.

Pompeo and Defence Secretary Mark Esper are visiting New Delhi for the 2+2 meeting—the highest-level consultation with their Indian counterparts—to discuss foreign policy, defence and strategic issues.

Pompeo was previously scheduled to come to Sri Lanka for an official visit in June, but that trip was called off due to the G20 summit in Japan. The most recent visit to Sri Lanka by a top US official was in August 2015 by then Secretary of State John Kerry.

Kerry toured Sri Lanka after the Washington-orchestrated operation in the January 2015 presidential election that ousted former President Mahinda Rajapakse. While the US backed Rajapakse's anti-democratic regime and its brutal communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), it was hostile to his cultivation of ties with Beijing for economic assistance and military hardware.

Pompeo and Esper's visit to the Indian sub-continent occurs as Washington's belligerence against Beijing has taken geopolitical tensions in the Asia Pacific region to new heights.

Last week when US, Indian, Australian and Japanese foreign ministers met in Tokyo for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—an anti-China grouping—Pompeo denounced China for deploying 60,000 soldiers along its border with India.

The US secretary of state declared that "India absolutely needs the United States to be their ally and partner in this fight." He said that all the Quad countries face "real risks associated with the threats attempting to be imposed by the Chinese Communist

Party." Direct US military intervention in the region, he provocatively added, would send a signal to China that "we're going to confront them and impose costs upon them."

India, after a decade of ever-closer relations with the US encouraged by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is now a frontline state in Washington's military, political and diplomatic intrigues against Beijing.

With US support, New Delhi has toughened its stand in the long-running border disputes with China. Any eruption of war between nuclear-armed India and China could lead to a global conflagration with catastrophic consequences.

The US regards Sri Lanka, situated just north of the main naval trade routes across the Indian Ocean that serve as China's economic lifeline, as crucial to its war plans in the region.

The Colombo-based *Sunday Times* has reported that Pompeo will discuss Washington's \$US480 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant with President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse during his visit.

Finalisation of the MCC agreement was stalled because Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna party criticised it during the presidential and general election campaigns in order to posture as anti-US. After the elections, the government indicated that it would sign the agreement with some "changes."

Washington has also been pressuring Colombo since July 2019 to renew its Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which allows free movement of US military personnel throughout the island.

In 2011, Sri Lanka's defence secretary, now the current president, Gotabhaya Rajapakse signed an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement with the US. Its term was extended indefinitely during the last

regime of President Sirisena. The *Sunday Times* reported that it was not clear whether these agreements would be discussed during Pompeo's forthcoming trip.

US-Sri Lanka defence cooperation grew exponentially during the five years of the Sirisena regime. Straight after President Rajapakse's election last November, Pompeo sent a congratulatory message insisting on the necessity of maintaining the relations developed under Sirisena. Washington regards its close-working relationship with the Sri Lankan military and in particular the navy's involvement with the US Indo-Pacific Command (INPACOM) as crucial.

Rajapakse has signalled to the US and India that his government will not challenge their interests in the region and has declared that when it comes to security, he will follow an "India first" policy. During Rajapakse's first year in office, INPACOM conducted joint military-to-military training and drills with Sri Lanka and a feasibility exercise to use Trincomalee in eastern Sri Lanka as a strategic naval hub.

In September, Esper telephoned Rajapakse to discuss defence-related matters. The US Defence Department reported that the "two countries discussed their shared commitment" for a "free and open Indo-Pacific"—code-phrases for the US navy's unhindered movement across the region and its anti-China provocations.

Indicating how closely Washington follows political developments on the island, the US Defence Department noted in its annual report to Congress last month that Sri Lanka is one of the countries where China "is very likely already considering and planning for additional overseas military logistics facilities to support naval, air, and ground forces."

Washington is determined to keep Sri Lanka in line with its strategic plans against China. This was made clear in a lengthy interview in the *Daily Mirror* last week with US ambassador to Colombo, Alaina B. Teplitz.

"Our concern is that Sri Lanka not be vulnerable in its relationships," Teplitz said, "and that this country is able to negotiate the best deals supporting sustainable, environmentally sensitive, and affordable results... The US stands with Sri Lanka and other nations in asserting their sovereignty."

Teplitz's hypocritical posturing about protecting "sovereignty" was combined with claims that Beijing was an aggressor in the region and that its actions in the

South China Sea have "undermined the sovereignty of the region's countries."

In fact, it is US imperialism which is the real provocateur in the South China Sea, dictating what its regional allies should do and pitting them against China, in order to advance its own geostrategic interests.

In September, Washington signed a defence agreement with the Maldives entitled "Framework for Defence and Security Relationship," which it claimed was for "engagement and cooperation in support of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean."

However, in 2018, Washington, with the backing of New Delhi, orchestrated the removal of the Maldives pro-Chinese President Abdulla Yameen and the installation of a regime that would be more pliant to US demands.

Anxious about the growing US defence ties in the region, China's Stalinist regime is seeking to bolster its political and economic relations in the Indian sub-continent.

Last week, Beijing sent a high-level delegation to Colombo led by Communist Party Politburo member and former foreign minister Yang Jiechi. President Rajapakse has asked China to "help him in disproving a perception that China-funded megaprojects are 'debt traps'."

During discussions in Colombo, China offered a \$US90 million grant for the health and education sectors and an \$898 million loan for road transport development. Rajapakse is scheduled to visit China in December.



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