

US Secretary of State insists Sri Lanka lines up against China

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The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to Sri Lanka on October 27 -28 was a warning to Colombo to directly line up with Washington's belligerence against China. During his visit, Pompeo met with President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena.

Pompeo had visited India on October 26, accompanied by the US Defence Secretary Mark Esper, for the 2+2 dialogue with their Indian counterparts, to bolster the military strategic partnership focused on aggression against China. Sri Lanka was followed by the Maldives and Indonesia. The chief objective of the tour was to further strengthen US military and strategic ties in the Indo-Pacific region.

After holding talks with President Rajapakse and Gunawardena, Pompeo addressed a joint press conference with his counterpart, indicating what Washington requires from the Colombo regime. "[A] strong, sovereign Sri Lanka is a powerful and strategic partner for the United States on the world stage. It can be a beacon for a free and open Indo-Pacific," he said.

In an outpouring of thuggish remarks, Pompeo condemned China's relations with Sri Lanka, saying: "We see from bad deals, violations of sovereignty and lawlessness on land and sea, that the Chinese Communist Party is a predator." He then claimed that the US came in a different way, as a "friend and a partner."

Pompeo's message to Colombo was: "no deals" with Beijing, and to "serve the strategic interests of the US." His reference to a strong and sovereign Sri Lanka, however, is completely hypocritical, given Washington's past political interference in Colombo. Moreover, under the banner of "a free and open Indo-Pacific," the US is cajoling and bullying countries throughout the region to line up with its war drive

against China.

Sri Lanka is situated immediately adjacent to the main shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean, used by China to import energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East, and to export to the world.

The Secretary of State's remarks in Colombo follow his outburst early this month at the meeting in Tokyo of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—an anti-China grouping comprising the US, India, Australia and Japan. At that meeting, he denounced China for deploying 60,000 soldiers along its border with India, and declared that the US military build-up in the region would send a signal to China that "we're going to confront them and impose costs upon them."

At the Colombo press conference, Pompeo declared that his discussions with Sri Lanka's leaders focused on "security cooperation which helps keep some of the world's most vital sea lanes open." He pointed out that the US was involved in training Sri Lankan security forces and had donated two coast guard cutters to the Sri Lanka navy.

Gunawardena responded by saying that Sri Lanka's foreign policy would remain neutral, non-aligned, and friendly." But, he attempted to placate the US, saying that the country was "conscious of the opportunities and responsibilities that come with our strategic location, we see the importance of maintaining the freedom of navigation in our seas and airspace..."

Few details emerged of Pompeo's discussions with Rajapakse. The president's media division stated that Rajapakse had reasserted his foreign policy of "independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity" and defended economic collaboration with China, denying that Sri Lanka was caught in a "debt trap" as a result—a reference to Washington's repeated criticisms of China's relations with countries like Sri Lanka.

The statement noted in particular that the “two sides agreed to further strengthen the defence cooperation already established between Sri Lanka and the United States.” Rajapakse also urged more US investment.

In a thinly veiled threat, Pompeo told the Colombo media that the US “fully expects that Sri Lanka will fulfill its pledges to take meaningful, concrete steps to promote accountability, justice, and reconciliation.” This is a reference to US calls for Sri Lanka to investigate war crimes and seek a power-sharing agreement with the Tamil elites, following the end of Colombo’s communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Pompeo’s remarks have nothing to do with addressing “human rights” in Sri Lanka. Washington backed the brutal war waged by President Mahinda Rajapakse—the current president’s brother—which involved the indiscriminate killing of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians in its final months in 2009. The Obama administration only began to raise the issue of human rights to pressure him to distance himself from Beijing, and when that failed, orchestrated a regime change operation to oust him in 2015.

Reporting on Pompeo’s visit, the *Wall Street Journal* referred to US concerns that the Rajapakse government was seeking more financial assistance from Beijing, saying it was “ratcheting up its relationship with China with new loans, multibillion-dollar building initiatives and even new legal guidelines to cement that partnership.”

The article characterized Pompeo’s remarks in Colombo as “a warning to Sri Lanka in regards to the potential penalties” for pursuing relations with China.

The Sri Lankan government has not yet finalised the signing of the US Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) agreement, involving grants of \$US480 million. Washington is using the MCC as a means of pressuring countries like Sri Lanka to toe the line. While not rejecting the agreement, the Rajapakse government is seeking to “modify” its terms.

Since mid-last year the US has also been pushing to renew its Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which allows the movement of US military personnel in Sri Lankan territory without hindrance.

For its part, Beijing is concerned about US military encirclement and seeking to counter it in the countries in the region.

The Chinese Embassy in Colombo lashed out at Pompeo’s remarks characterizing the Chinese Communist Party as a “predator” with a twitter message featuring an image of the “Aliens vs Predator” video game. The caption read: “Sorry Mr. Secretary Pompeo, we’re busy promoting China-Sri Lanka friendship and cooperation, not interested in your Alien v Predator game invitation.”

Faced with huge debts worsened by the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, Colombo is seeking further financial aid from Beijing. Chinese assistance to Sri Lanka already amounts to \$5 billion, with the grant of another \$500 million loan in March. Beijing is now considering a \$700 million loan, along with a \$1.5 billion swap facility. Rajapakse is scheduled to visit Beijing in December, at the invitation of top Chinese foreign policy official Yang Jiechi, who toured Sri Lanka early this month.

Pompeo left Sri Lanka on October 28 for the Maldives, a small island state strategically situated near the sea lanes of the Indian ocean. In 2018, Washington, with the backing of New Delhi, sponsored the ousting of pro-Chinese President Abdulla Yameen by pro-US Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, who won the presidential election. The US signed a far-reaching defence agreement with the Maldives last month. During his visit, Pompeo announced the establishment of a US embassy there.



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