

Indian external affairs minister visits Sri Lanka to counteract growing Chinese influence

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Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visited Sri Lanka last week to voice New Delhi's displeasure over delays in investment projects it considers important to its geo-strategic moves against China.

During his three-day tour, which ended on January 7, Jaishankar met with President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena. He also had discussions with parliamentary opposition leader Sajith Premadasa and Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leader R. Sambandan.

India, which functions as a frontline state in Washington's aggressive military strategic build-up against China, is particularly concerned about Beijing's developing economic relations with the Rajapakse government.

Last month, India's cabinet rank security advisor, Ajith Doval, traveled to Sri Lanka to meet with the president and other political leaders to promote Indian investments on the strategically-located island.

According to the media, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has repeatedly voiced concerns over delays in the implementation of 15 projects, some of them signed in as far back as 2017. These include the Indian component of the Eastern Container Terminal (ECT) at Colombo Port and the Northern Palaly Airport. The initial agreement on the joint Sri Lanka-India-Japan project was signed in 2019. The Chinese-owned Colombo International Container Terminal adjoins the ECT.

Another proposal is for the establishment of a liquefied natural gas terminal near Colombo in partnership with India's biggest gas importer, Petronet LNG, and its Japanese partners, Mitsubishi and Sojitz.

With about 80 percent of Colombo port's business involving Indian trans-shipments, New Delhi consider it critical to have a foothold in Sri Lanka.

Jaishankar reportedly raised the ECT and other issues with the Sri Lankan president. Apart from a previous promise to supply COVID-19 vaccines, no other agreements, however, were signed during the visit. Last year, Colombo requested a \$US1 billion currency swap with India's Reserve Bank. This is yet to materialise.

Citing inside sources, the Colombo-based *Sunday Times* reported that "Jaishankar expressed concerns over China's 'influence' in Indian projects." He stated that New Delhi was "worried that the rhetoric around the ECT initiative was promoted by Chinese Intelligence, with the objective of having it blocked."

The newspaper also claimed that: "There is suspicion of a Chinese hand in slowing down or stopping all India-led initiatives, including a longstanding request to develop and operate more oil tanks in the facility in Trincomalee." It provided no evidence and did not name any individual to substantiate its allegations. These reports, however, point to growing tensions between New Delhi and Colombo.

On January 13, President Rajapakse held a discussion with 23 port trade unions, telling them that the ECT would not be sold but would be established as a joint venture. Fifty-one percent will be held by the Sri Lanka Ports Authority with the remainder going to India's Adani Company and other investors.

The ECT is part of the government's moves to privatise the Colombo Port facilities. The port trade unions, which are variously controlled by the government and the opposition parties, have lined up with extremist Buddhist groups and launched a

reactionary anti-Indian campaign to divert workers seeking to fight Colombo's privatisation program.

Addressing a joint press conference with Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, Jaishankar declared that India would always be a "dependable partner and reliable friend" and supported "the reconciliation process."

It is "in Sri Lanka's own interest," he continued, "that the expectations of the Tamil people for equality, justice, peace, and dignity within a united Sri Lanka are fulfilled."

While Jaishankar did not specifically mention the 13th amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution, which devolves limited power to the provinces, his reference to the so-called "reconciliation process" is significant. A considerable section of Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna government is pushing for the abolition of this amendment.

The 13th amendment is part of the Indo-Lanka Accord, signed in 1987 by Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayawardene and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, during Colombo's bloody war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It ratified the dispatch of Indian troops to Sri Lanka to disarm the LTTE while granting limited powers to the local Tamil elite.

The Accord and the amendment had nothing to do with addressing the democratic rights of the Tamil minority, but were a political arrangement between the Colombo and Tamil bourgeoisie, backed by New Delhi. Successive Indian governments have used Sri Lanka's Tamil elite as a political lever to pressure the Colombo regime for its strategic interests.

Foreign Minister Gunawardena evasively responded by declaring that the Sri Lankan president is committed to the well-being of every Sri Lankan, "Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and all." The Rajapakse administration, however, came to power with the active backing of sections of the military and Sinhala Buddhist chauvinists, who oppose any concessions to the Tamil elite.

During his brief visit, Jaishankar met with TNA leaders who praised him. TNA leader and parliamentarian M.A. Sumanthiran told the *Sunday Times*: "We thanked him for the no change of policy taken by the Indian government reiterating the implementation of 13A and Sri Lankan commitments."

Jaishankar also held discussions with parliamentary opposition leader Premadasa, former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and Fisheries Minister Douglas Devananda, who as leader of the Tamil Eelam People's Democratic Party had supported the 1987 Indo-Lanka accord.

Concerned that the Rajapakse regime, which faces a major economic collapse due to the impact of the worsening coronavirus, is increasingly turning to Beijing for financial assistance, Jaishankar's visit appears to be a thinly-veiled warning to Colombo.

An article in last month's *Diplomat* magazine compared the delays for Indian projects with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's recent visit to Sri Lanka. Following that trip there was a revival of discussions on a China-Sri Lanka free trade agreement and a speed-up in the completion of the Hambantota Industrial Zone and the Port City project in Colombo.

Last October, China provided \$90 million in aid to boost health care, education and water supplies in Sri Lanka's rural areas, on top of a \$500 million grant to combat the pandemic. China's Shandong Haohua Tire company also plans to invest \$300 million in Sri Lanka. These moves are in line with Beijing's attempts to boost its influence in the Indian sub-continent to counteract Washington's aggressive military build-up.

New Delhi and Washington are increasingly concerned that the Rajapakse government is wavering. Last October, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Colombo insisting that Sri Lanka had to fully line up with Washington's belligerence against China. Last month's withdrawal of a \$480 million US Millennium Corporation grant is another indication of Washington's disquiet over Sri Lanka's relations with China.

In January 2015, the US, with Indian backing, initiated a regime-change operation to oust former President Mahinda Rajapakse and his administration. The current Sri Lankan president was then the defense secretary.



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