

Chinese defense minister visits Sri Lanka amid rising geopolitical tension

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Chinese Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe visited Sri Lanka for two days last week as part of Beijing's efforts to strengthen its influence in the region under conditions of deepening geopolitical tensions and US-led military preparations against China.

Wei briefly visited Bangladesh on his way to Colombo, telling President Abdul Hamid that China and Bangladesh "should make joint efforts against powers outside the region setting up a military alliance in South Asia and practicing hegemonism."

Although Wei did not specifically name any country, he was clearly referring to the de facto Quadrilateral (Quad) alliance led by the United States and involving Japan, Australia and India. On March 11, US President Biden held an online meeting with Quad leaders, making clear that his administration would be strengthening military and strategic ties to confront China.

Wei's trip to Colombo is the second visit by a high-level Chinese official in the past nine months. Last October, former Chinese foreign minister and Political Bureau member Yang Jiechi came to Sri Lanka. According to media reports, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi will be arriving in Colombo next month.

Wei held bilateral talks last week with Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse. He also met with Defence Secretary Kamal Gunaratne, a retired major general, in the presence of three Sri Lankan armed forces commanders. Both sides said the discussions were "extremely fruitful" but provided few details.

The Xinhua news agency reported that President Rajapakse told Defense Minister Wei that Sri Lanka "has been pursuing an independent foreign policy and will never bend to pressure from major powers outside

the region, as well as never forge an alliance with any country." While the report did not indicate which "major powers" the president was referring to, Washington and New Delhi are openly hostile to Sri Lanka's growing relations with Beijing.

Colombo's connections with Beijing are extremely important for two main reasons. Firstly, the Rajapakse government confronts a deepening economic crisis and growing foreign debt, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Exports have sharply declined, tourist revenues have all but collapsed and the country is required to pay \$US4.5 billion annually in foreign loan and debt repayments until 2025. In order to avoid default, Colombo has turned to Beijing for financial assistance.

In March, China's People's Bank signed a three-year \$1.5 billion currency swap deal with Sri Lanka's Central Bank, and on April 12 Colombo obtained a \$500 million loan from the China Development Bank. Even before the latest financial arrangement, Sri Lanka owed Beijing over \$5 billion in loan repayments.

Secondly, the Rajapakse government is counting on Chinese support to counteract political pressure from the US and other western countries over Colombo's human rights violations.

In March, the US co-sponsored a resolution presented to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) by a "Core Group on Sri Lanka," whose members include the UK and Germany.

The resolution, which was passed in a majority vote, called for an investigation into war crimes committed during the final months of Colombo's communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. At least 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed and numerous other human right violations committed during this time. It also requested the collection and

preservation of evidence that could be used in a future prosecution of Sri Lankan military leaders.

The US and its allies are not concerned in the slightest about the violation of democratic rights or war crimes committed in Sri Lanka or anywhere else. The UNHRC resolution is in order to pressure Colombo to distance itself from China. Although New Delhi, for tactical reasons, abstained on the UNHRC vote, it expressed support for the resolution. China and Russia voted against the resolution.

The government of former President Mahinda Rajapakse faced similar US-led resolutions at the UNHRC in 2011, after it turned to China for financial support. While Beijing campaigned heavily on behalf of Colombo in the UNHRC at that time, Mahinda Rajapakse's government was ousted in 2015, following a US-sponsored regime-change operation.

Four years later in 2019, the pro-China Maldives President Abdulla Yameen was forced from office in an Indian-backed and Washington-sponsored removal.

Defence Secretary Gunaratne last week thanked Wei for China's support in the UNHRC. Wei said Beijing was looking forward to working with Colombo "to enhance practical cooperation and to promote bilateral relations to a greater extent." He promised a \$7.73 million grant for military assistance.

Wei's visit coincided with agitation against the Colombo Port City Economic Commission Bill by Sri Lankan opposition parties and other groups. The \$1.4 billion Port City was built by the China Communications Construction Company with a loan from Beijing.

The Samagi Jana Balawegaya, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and several other formations have mounted a virulent anti-China campaign against the project, alleging that Port City will become a "Chinese colony." The racist agitation lines up with the US-led opposition to Port City and other Chinese investments in Sri Lanka.

Washington and New Delhi claim that Chinese investments in Sri Lanka, and other poor countries, are "debt traps" used by Beijing to further its "hegemonic" ambitions. Last October, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Sri Lanka, openly denouncing China as a "predator" and demanding that Colombo line up against Beijing.

China regards Sri Lanka as vital to its efforts to retain

a foothold in the Indian Ocean, secure its crucial energy supplies and counteract aggressive US military preparations. The Chinese-funded Port City in Colombo and Hambantota Port are crucial links in its strategic Belt and Road Initiative.

To boost its influence in the region, Beijing also held a six-country South Asia dialogue on April 27 on COVID-19 and economic cooperation. Foreign ministers from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka participated in the meeting. India was not invited.

The Sri Lankan government, like a number of its counterparts in the region, is attempting a desperate balancing act. Washington has made clear many times, however, that it will not brook any wavering as it seeks to ensure American imperialism's hegemony in the Indo-Pacific, including, if necessary, through war.



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