

# Washington puts pressure on Sri Lankan government over Beijing-funded Colombo Port City

**Pradeep Ramanayake****14 June 2021**

Last month, the Sri Lankan parliament passed the Rajapakse government's amended Colombo Port City (CPC) Economic Commission Act, which establishes a Special Economic Zone on reclaimed land near Colombo Harbour. The zone is being built by the China Communications Construction Company with a \$US1.4 billion loan from Beijing, the largest-ever single investment in Sri Lanka.

The project is a major component of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a geo-strategic plan to ensure the free movement of its imports and exports via the Indian Ocean and Central Asia in response to the US-led efforts to militarily encircle China.

The US, the European Union and India are hostile to the Rajapakse government's orientation to Beijing for loans and investments. Although these countries have not issued any official statements about the CPC bill, there are numerous indications that they are stepping up their efforts to undermine Chinese influence in Colombo.

In the US, Democratic Party congresswoman Deborah Ross, supported by Republican congressman Bill Johnson, introduced a resolution calling for an "effective international mechanism for accountability" over "grave human rights violations" in Sri Lanka.

Presented on May 18, the resolution is now in the hands of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. It urges Washington to work with the United Nations' General Assembly, Security Council and Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to ramp up pressure on Colombo.

While it is not clear whether the Foreign Affairs Committee will approve the resolution, the US is vehemently opposed to the Rajapakse government's growing relations with Beijing.

The "grave crimes" referred to in the resolution include the killing of 40,000 civilians during the final weeks of the 26-year brutal communal war with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the disappearance of

hundreds of people who surrendered to the army, and many other violations cited by the UN.

Then-President Mahinda Rajapakse resumed the war in 2006, with the bloody conflict ending after the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009. His younger brother and the current president, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, was defence secretary during this period.

The US has already co-sponsored a resolution presented to the UNHRC by a group of countries led by the UK, Germany, France and Canada, which calls for an investigation into Colombo's war crimes, overseen by an international mechanism.

Washington, which is guilty of committing numerous war crimes across the globe in the past three decades alone, is not concerned in the slightest over Colombo's human rights violations. It backed Mahinda Rajapakse's resumption of the war in 2006, and his anti-democratic regime.

Washington only began pressuring Colombo during the final years of the war, after China emerged as Sri Lanka's principal source of financial assistance and military hardware.

The US initially brought a series of resolutions into the UNHRC calling for a human rights investigation to pressure Colombo. When these failed, Washington sponsored a regime-change operation in 2015 that ousted Mahinda Rajapakse as president and led to the installation of the pro-US Maithripala Sirisena.

Washington's actions were supported by the United National Party (UNP), the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Denouncing Rajapakse's anti-democratic rule, a host of radicals, pseudo-left groups and unions rallied behind this operation, claiming that a Sirisena administration would establish "good governance."

Washington responded to Gotabhaya Rajapakse's election as president in November 2019, and then to the appointment of Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister, with repeated

warnings about Colombo's ties to China.

Like his predecessors, US President Joe Biden is deepening Washington's anti-China geopolitical agenda and will not tolerate the Rajapakse regime's orientation towards Beijing.

The Biden administration, US intelligence and the media are now ramping up bogus claims that the COVID-19 virus was developed and released from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Washington is also strengthening the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Known as the Quad, this is a de facto military alliance involving the US, Japan, Australia and India, directed against China.

In another significant development, the EU parliament on June 10 passed a resolution calling for pressure on Sri Lanka and citing war crimes and other human rights violations, including recent arrests and detentions under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

The resolution calls upon the European Commission to use the GSP+ as "leverage to push for advancement on Sri Lanka's human rights obligations" and demands that Colombo scrap the PTA. Sri Lanka is heavily dependent on the GSP (General System of Preferences), which provides major tax concessions on its exports to Europe and the US, its principal markets.

Point 18 of the resolution bluntly declares its "concern about the growing role and interference of China in Sri Lanka." The resolution has been submitted to the European Commission, which is scheduled to review the GSP for Sri Lanka in November.

The EU, like Washington, has a brutal record of human rights violations and war crimes. Its hypocritical invocation of Sri Lankan war crimes is in order to support US-led efforts in Sri Lanka and to advance its own geostrategic interests.

The Indian government, a frontline state against China and Washington's main regional ally, has not issued any direct statements on the Colombo Port City legislation. The Indian elite's concerns, however, echo through the media with several outlets declaring that the CPC bill represents a strengthening of "pro-Chinese" projects in Sri Lanka.

In an article entitled "With Colombo port city, China sees a potential overseas colony in Sri Lanka," the Indian-based *Wion News* declared, "Sri Lanka is on a highway to becoming a Chinese colony." The *Hindu* warned that Beijing is "increasing its footprint in the region."

The official Sri Lankan opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the UNP, the JVP and the TNA—have stepped up their reactionary nationalist and racist campaign against the Colombo Port City, declaring that it betrays the country's "sovereignty and territorial integrity" and is transforming the island into China's colony.

Parliament opposition and SJB leader Sajith Premadasa demanded the government withdraw the bill, declaring that it "sells the country's sovereignty, territorial integrity and political freedom to foreign countries."

JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake said the new legislation would lead to the establishment of a Chinese province in Sri Lanka.

M.A. Sumanthiran, a Tamil National Alliance MP, was even more explicit in the parliamentary debate: "You are gifting a land mass to China in your territorial waters and you will reap the consequences of this act very soon."

These claims are directly in line with Washington's geostrategic agenda against China. They are also being used to channel the rising anger of workers and the poor against the Rajapakse government's criminal response to the COVID-19 pandemic and attacks on democratic rights in a reactionary, nationalist direction. Significantly, these parties all supported the US-sponsored regime-change operation in Colombo in 2015.

The Rajapakse government is acutely nervous about the US and EU response to the CPC Economic Commission Act.

Sri Lankan Foreign Affairs Minister Dinesh Gunawardena raised Colombo's concerns about the American House resolution with the US embassy chargé d'affaires. Ravinath Ariyasingha, the country's ambassador in Washington, appealed to the US foreign relations committee chairman not to pursue the resolution, while Sri Lanka Central Bank Governor W.D. Lakshman urged diplomats to save the island's GSP concessions.

President Rajapakse has repeatedly claimed that his government is pursuing a "neutral foreign policy," but with the US stepping up its provocative actions against China, Washington is determined that Colombo be brought into line.



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