

Indian navy chief threatens China and Sri Lanka over port development

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Vice Admiral G. Ashok Kumar, vice chief of India's naval staff, told Asia News International on June 17 that the China-funded Colombo Port City (CPC) project in Sri Lanka "could pose a threat" to Indian interests in the region.

"When somebody external to the region starts showing so much interest, even though they might have rational reasons to do so," it was necessary to keep a "close watch" on their activities. The Indian navy, he continued, was "very well prepared to secure the maritime boundaries of the country."

On the same day, Indian external affairs ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi told the media that his government had been closely following recent developments in Sri Lanka, including the CPC, from a "security perspective." He said that his country's concerns had been explained to the Sri Lankan government of President Gotabaya Rajapakse.

Remarks such as these by top Indian officials are an open expression of New Delhi's hostility towards Colombo's growing relations with China. The Indian government's anger has particularly increased since Rajapakse's administration pushed through parliament its amended CPC Economic Commission Act, which establishes a Special Economic Zone at the port development.

The CPC is a key component of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a strategic plan to ensure the free movement of imports and exports across the Indian Ocean and Central Asia and to counteract US-led efforts to encircle China.

Hit hard economically by the global pandemic and facing long-term foreign debts, the Rajapakse government is desperate for increased foreign investment and, in particular, financial assistance from China.

Addressing last week's online "Asia and Pacific High-level Conference on Belt and Road Cooperation," Sri Lankan External Affairs Minister Dinesh Gunawardena called on all participants to take advantage of "the opportunities available in Sri Lanka for investment." He specifically referred to Colombo Port City and the Hambantota port infrastructure project, funded by China.

New Delhi arrogantly regards smaller countries in South

Asia as part of its backyard and insists that their administrations should operate accordingly.

When India voices its concerns over China's relations with Sri Lanka, however, it is not just speaking for itself but for the US. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has become a "frontline" state in the US war plans against China, which are now being intensified under the new Biden administration.

Comments by senior Indian military and government officials about "maritime security" are in line with hypocritical US claims that China's naval movements in the region are a threat to "freedom of navigation."

A recent article in the *Print*, a New Delhi-based media outlet, said that the Indian government was "looking at a 'recalibration' of its bilateral ties with Sri Lanka as China is gaining massive inroads in the Indian Ocean island nation." India, the article added, "now believes that Sri Lanka has taken a firm decision on 'completely aligning' with China even if that means doing away with the balancing act with India."

These comments make clear that New Delhi, as well as Washington, will be stepping up their moves to undermine and scuttle Colombo's relations with Beijing.

In keeping with the Obama administration's 2011 "pivot to Asia" policy, involving a military, diplomatic and economic campaign against China, Washington opposed Colombo's relations with Beijing.

The US brought a series of resolutions to the UN Human Rights Council, hypocritically seizing on bloody war crimes committed by then President Mahinda Rajapakse's regime during the final weeks of its war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009.

The resolutions had nothing to do with defending human rights but were to pressure Mahinda Rajapakse to distance his regime from Beijing. When these efforts failed to remove Rajapakse, Washington, with the assistance of New Delhi, orchestrated a regime-change operation in the 2015 presidential election, installing Maithripala Sirisena to power.

The international pressure now being directed against President Gotabaya Rajapakse's government is being orchestrated by the new Biden administration, which has intensified its aggressive military preparations targeting China.

At the G7 summit early this month, President Biden pressured other countries to support Washington's new measures against China. In the Indo-Pacific region the Biden administration has enhanced the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the Quad, a military alliance of the US, Japan, Australia and India directed against China.

Washington is also seeking to deepen its relations with the Sri Lankan military. The US Navy has led a week-long exercise near Trincomalee naval dockyard in eastern Sri Lanka that began on June 24. For the first time, the US military invited Japan's Maritime Self Defence Force to join the ongoing US Seventh Fleet and Sri Lankan Navy operation.

Rear Admiral Christopher Engdahl, head of US Indo-Pacific Command's Expeditionary Strike Group, said the "exercise series creates an opportunity to sharpen our skills, learn from one another and allows us to work towards our shared goal of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

"When we have a better understanding of the environments in which we operate, we can focus on upholding the international rules-based order in the maritime environment." Engdahl's statements further underline that these strategic exercises are directed against China.

The Rajapakse regime is also facing increased diplomatic pressure, which is being ratcheted up in the UNHRC by the major powers. Addressing this month's UNHRC session, a UK envoy decried the lack of progress in addressing human rights violations in Sri Lanka cited in a resolution passed in March. The resolution, which called for an investigation into Colombo's war crimes, was presented by a so-called core group of countries, led by the UK, Germany, France and Canada, and co-sponsored by the US.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet addressed the session, citing increasing attacks on human rights under the Rajapakse regime, including several extra-judicial killings by Sri Lankan police. The US and these European powers, which are all responsible for numerous war crimes and other human right violations, are not concerned in the slightest over government repression, war crimes and attacks on democratic rights in Sri Lanka.

Nervous about further antagonising the US and India, the Rajapakse government has not commented on the recent statements by Indian military and government officials about China's presence in Sri Lanka, or the US-led military exercises in Trincomalee.

Thus far, Sri Lanka's official opposition parties, including

Samagi Jana Balawegaya, the United National Party and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, all of which campaigned against the CPC and presented it as the creation of a "Chinese colony," have also said nothing on the recent Indian statements.

On June 17, India's High Commissioner in Colombo Gopal Baglay held discussions with the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the principal party of the Tamil elite.

According to media reports, the discussions centered on the TNA's calls for India to support development in the North and East of the country and the full implementation of provincial council powers in these provinces. Baglay voiced his support for these demands.

India is seeking closer relations with the TNA and other Tamil parties to pressure the Colombo government. At the same time, these parties are fully backing Washington's geo-strategic operations against China.

The increasing rivalry between the US and India on one hand, and China on the other, seriously poses the danger of a war between these nuclear armed nations that would engulf the world.

This imperialist-instigated catastrophe can only be stopped by a global mobilisation of workers and youth on the basis of an international socialist perspective aimed at putting an end to capitalism and its nation-state system. The International Committee of the Fourth International is the only organisation that advances this perspective, with its Sri Lankan section, the Socialist Equality Party fighting for the unity of the working class in South Asia and across the region, based on this program.



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