

Sri Lankan government declares it “takes no sides” in Ukraine war crisis

K. Ratnayake
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Facing mounting foreign debt and a deepening economic crisis, the Rajapakse government and the Sri Lankan ruling class are watching the developing war in Ukraine with bewilderment.

Russia’s reactionary invasion was provoked by US imperialism’s moves to integrate Ukraine into its NATO alliance as part of a military encirclement of Russia. The war is now threatening to escalate into a dangerous nuclear conflict of the major powers.

Addressing a media briefing on Friday, Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Jayanath Colombage declared: “We are watching the situation [in Ukraine] but won’t take sides. Each can have their own reasons...” He did not elaborate, even to name the “sides” involved in the conflict or explain why Sri Lanka chose to be neutral.

Colombage immediately went on to speak about the economic impact of the conflict on Sri Lanka saying, “We will have to pay more for our fuel and gas, our tea market will be affected.”

Following his briefing, the foreign ministry issued a statement of three paragraphs, each containing just one sentence. It said Sri Lanka is “deeply concerned” about the escalation of violence in Ukraine and called upon “all parties concerned to exercise maximum restraint... [and the] cessation of hostilities, in order to maintain peace, security and stability in the region.” It urged the protagonists to “resolve the crisis through diplomacy and sincere dialogue.”

Sri Lanka is a small country, and by no means a major player on the geopolitical stage. Its perfunctory “not taking sides” declaration is an indication that conflict over Ukraine is extremely sensitive for the government.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s government is acutely nervous about making any statement that might antagonise the US or European powers. His regime is

under pressure from the US and its allies, which are now involved in the Ukrainian war crisis, to break all its relations with Beijing and line up with Washington’s aggressive geopolitical and military moves against China.

In order to intensify this pressure, Washington and the major European countries passed a resolution in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in March 2021 for an investigation into war crimes during Colombo’s brutal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam that ended in 2009. The resolution also contains accusations of human rights violations, including the arbitrary arrest of political opponents, after President Rajapakse came to power in November 2019.

The US and the European countries, which are notorious for their own war crimes, cynically use the issue of “human rights” to twist the arms of various regimes and bring them into line. They used the same war-crime allegations against previous President Mahinda Rajapakse, the brother of the current president, and ultimately orchestrated a regime-change operation to remove him from office.

The Sri Lankan government has been unable to denounce these imperialist machinations. In fact, over the past year Colombo has sought to appease the US and EU to try and evade any investigation into war crimes. Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who served as defence secretary under his brother’s government, is directly responsible for the bloody final offensives of the communal war that resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians.

Russia and China have supported Sri Lanka in the UNHRC and voted against the Washington-led resolutions. At the end of this month, Colombo will have to face a review of last year’s resolution, with

indications that the US and the European powers will send ultimatums to Colombo and demand action.

The Sri Lankan government, which is reeling from an economic crisis that has dramatically worsened under the COVID-19 pandemic, is deeply concerned about the economic impact of the war.

The country's foreign reserves are drying up and it is teetering on the brink of default. Lacking enough foreign exchanges to buy oil for electricity generation, Sri Lankan authorities have been forced to impose extended power cuts, vital transport services are being curtailed and imports of many essential items have been limited.

An Institute of Policy study yesterday noted that Russia and Ukraine are major markets for Sri Lankan imports and exports, with annual tea exports to Russia alone worth about \$US150 million. Sri Lanka imports 45 percent of its wheat and more than half its soybeans, sunflower oil, peas and asbestos from Russia and Ukraine.

None of the main parliamentary opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the United National Party—has issued a political statement on the Ukraine war crisis. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, which previously engaged in anti-imperialist demagoguery, has also kept its mouth shut.

The pro-US Tamil National Alliance (TNA) appears to be in a quandary because it hopes to win support for its political agenda in Sri Lanka from New Delhi and Washington. However, India, which acts as a major strategic partner of the US in the region, has so far refused to follow Washington and denounce Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

Sri Lanka's parliamentary parties, moreover, are nervous that the escalating war will deepen the economic and political crisis and set off widespread strikes and protests by the Sri Lankan working class over wages, jobs and social rights.

The government's insistence that it will not be "taking sides," however, will not last. As the war intensifies so will Washington's pressure on Colombo, which will rapidly line up with US dictates.

An editorial entitled "Ukraine—a pawn in big power rivalries," in the *DailyMirror*, a mouthpiece of the Colombo elite, anxiously noted, "If the war is not brought to an end fast, more people in Africa, Asia and Latin America will die of starvation, than those killed

by war in Ukraine." The editorial ends by declaring: "Invasion is not the answer to problems. It is time for negotiations. NATO needs to halt its expansionist designs, Russia needs to withdraw, and good sense needs to prevail. War is no solution."

Like the rest of the ruling elite, the Colombo-based *DailyMirror* is worried about the deepening economic and political crisis. Its calls for "negotiations" and "good sense" are an attempt to divert the concerns of workers and youth about the danger of a nuclear-armed conflict into futile appeals to the very powers that are responsible for the catastrophe.

The only way to prevent war is by building an international anti-war movement of the working class based on socialist policies to abolish the capitalist system which is the root cause of conflict. This is the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Sri Lankan workers and youth must take up this struggle by joining and building the Socialist Equality Party.



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