

Sri Lankan president hints at dangers of conflict in Indian Ocean

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Sri Lanka is coming under intensifying pressure to line up more fully with the US-led confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific along with allies such as Japan and Australia, and its chief strategic partner in the region, India.

Top US and Indian officials have held talks with leaders of the Sri Lankan government during recent months to further the campaign. Samantha Power, the chief of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) visited Colombo in mid-September, offering a pittance in aid, while seeking stronger strategic ties with Sri Lanka.

As reported by the *Sunday Times*, India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) head Samant Kumar Goel, landed in Colombo on November 27, met with President Ranil Wickremesinghe and engaged in "wide-ranging talks."

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry arrived in the US on November 29 where he has held talks with USAID chief Power and will meet US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and members of Congress. China will undoubtedly be a central topic.

President Wickremesinghe highlighted the geopolitical dilemmas confronting Sri Lanka in a speech on November 11 to officers graduating at the Kothalawala Defence University. "You are living in a different world than what we were born earlier. When we were born, there was no tussle for the Indian Ocean. At one stage no one wanted it. Today it is not so..."

"In the 70s, when I became a minister all these were not required. Most people were not focussing on the Indian Ocean, but on the Pacific and the Atlantic. Today it is not so. Today the total competition in the world has gone from US and Russia to US and China. So, what happens in Russia is only a side show. What happens in this area is far more important. So, we have

to be ready for it."

Wickremesinghe reiterated the government's stance, saying: "Sri Lanka's position is we are not involved in big power rivalry. We don't want big power rivalry. Whether the US is in the Indian Ocean we have no objections. We have no objections to Japanese or Chinese or others being in the Indian Ocean as long as there is no rivalry."

Regardless of Wickremesinghe's comments, the Indian Ocean and broader Indo-Pacific region are at the centre of the mounting US-led provocations and conflict with China. Even as it wages war against Russia in Ukraine, the US is consolidating alliances throughout Asia, building up military forces throughout the region and vilifying China across a range of issues that could provide the pretext for war.

The US has forged a close strategic partnership with India transforming it into a frontline state of US war drive against China. India's regular naval war games with US, known as the "Malabar exercises," which started in 1992, have been expanded and now involve all members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, a quasi-military alliance of the US, India, Japan and Australia.

In a particularly provocative step, the latest Malabar exercises were conducted in the East China Sea, from November 8 to 15. After the naval exercises ended, the US and India held their annual bilateral military games known as "Yudh Abhyas" from November 15 to December 2. This year's military drill involved high-altitude exercises, just 100 kilometers from the Line of Actual Control, the border between India and China, where a military stand-off continues after clashes in May 2020.

Sri Lanka is attempting to maintain an increasingly difficult balancing act. Amid a profound economic and

social crisis, the Wickremesinghe government cannot afford to alienate China, which is the country's main creditor. As a part of talks with the International Monetary Fund for debt restructuring, the government needs to negotiate relief in relation to Chinese loans.

At the same time, while Sri Lanka officially remains non-aligned, the government is seeking to avoid a confrontation with US imperialism. Following the end of the island's protracted communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse came under relentless pressure from Washington to end its ties with China. The US used the threat of prosecutions over war crimes and when that was ignored, engineered the ouster of Rajapakse in the 2015 election and the installation of a pro-US government of President Maithripala Sirisena and with Wickremesinghe as prime minister.

Wickremesinghe, who is well known for his pro-American orientation, has formally maintained a "neutral" stance even while leaning towards Washington. During his November 11 speech, Wickremesinghe said that Sri Lanka's "future depends on its ability to maintain freedom of navigation" in the Indian Ocean. The US repeatedly uses the banner of "freedom of navigation" to mount naval provocations against China.

At the same time, Sri Lanka has significant military ties with the US, including an Acquisition and Cross-servicing Agreement that allows the American navy access to Sri Lankan ports for refuelling and other supplies. The Pentagon is assisting the Sri Lankan military to establish a Marine Corps and donated former US Coast Guard cutters to the Sri Lankan navy. The US and Sri Lankan militaries conduct limited joint exercises but this year some 50 Sri Lankan military personnel took part in the US RIMPAC exercises—the world's largest naval drills.

As it accelerates its preparations for war against China, the US cannot tolerate the "neutrality" of the Wickremesinghe regime. Sri Lanka is strategically placed across the major Indian Ocean sea lanes connecting Europe, the Middle East and Africa with East Asia, including China. US-backed UN Human Rights Council resolutions passed recently are aimed at intensifying pressure on Colombo. While Washington is not concerned about Wickremesinghe's loyalty, he is

heavily dependent on the party of the Rajapakses which has in the past built ties with China.

US preparations of war against China are increasingly transforming the Indian Ocean region into a major battle ground in a nuclear third world war. The US is already engaged in a war with one nuclear-armed power, Russia, but regards nuclear-armed China as the chief threat to its global dominance. A catastrophic war can only be stopped by the political mobilisation of the international working class in a global anti-war movement based on international socialism.

As part of this mobilisation, an international online meeting organized by International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) will be held on December 10 at 11.30 p.m. (Indian Standard time), titled "For a mass movement of youth and students to stop the US-NATO war in Ukraine." We urge our all readers to register for the meeting and attend this important discussion on the program and perspective to fight nuclear war danger.



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