Indian foreign minister visits Sri Lanka to strengthen strategic ties

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Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visited Sri Lanka for two days earlier this month, following a trip to the Maldives on January 18.

India, Washington's strategic regional partner in the military preparation against China, is further strengthening its links with Sri Lanka and Maldives. Both countries are strategically located in the Indian Ocean.

Jaishankar met with Maldives President Ibrahim Solih and Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid. Solih came to power in late 2018, via a regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington and New Delhi to oust pro-Chinese President Abdulla Yameen. India has rapidly boosted its influence in Maldives since then with a series of defence agreements and investments.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Maldives last August, telling Solih that "coordination between India and Maldives in defence and security is vital for the peace and stability of the entire region."

In Colombo, Jaishankar held discussions with Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe, Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardana, Foreign Minister Ali Sabry, parliamentary opposition leader Sajith Premadasa, and leaders of the Tamil parties.

An Indian external affairs ministry statement declared that Sri Lanka and Maldives are India's maritime neighbours and occupy a special place in the Indian prime minister's vision of "SAGAR" [Security and Growth for All in the Region] and "Neighborhood First." Jaishankar reiterated this in Colombo and presented an invitation from Modi for Wickremesinghe to visit India.

The Indian government has used Sri Lanka's grave economic crisis to strengthen its political influence. Last year, it provided nearly $US4 billion in financial support to Sri Lanka, including credit lines, a currency swap arrangement and deferred import payments.

India and China, Sri Lanka's main creditors, have been urged to make concessions to Sri Lanka's "debt restructuring" arrangements as required by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Colombo will not be able to obtain a $2.9 billion bailout loan promised by the IMF unless it can restructure its debt.

Two days before Jaishankar's visit to Colombo, the Indian finance ministry wrote to the IMF stating that New Delhi "confirms" its "strong support for Sri Lanka's prospective (loan) program and commits to supporting Sri Lanka with financing/debt relief." The IMF said that this was an adequate guarantee from India, but that China had yet to make a similar commitment.

"India decided not to wait on others but to do what we believe is right. We extended financing assurances to the IMF to clear the way for Sri Lanka to move forward. India will encourage greater investments in the Sri Lankan economy, especially in core areas like energy, tourism and infrastructure," Jaishankar said.

Last December, Sri Lanka agreed to use the Indian rupee for all international trade with that country. A passenger and goods ferry service—from Karaikal in southern India to Kankesanthurai Harbour on the northern Jaffna Peninsula—is also planned.

In line with developing military relations between the two countries, the Indian naval ship INS Delhi arrived in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka's main naval base, for a two-day visit on January 15. INS Delhi is a missile destroyer and the lead ship of her class in the Indian navy. The visit is part of regular Indian navy visits to Sri Lankan ports.

Indian Chief of Naval Staff R. Hari Kumar visited Sri Lanka from December 12–16, following a trip to

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Colombo by Samant Kumar Goel, head of the Indian foreign intelligence service, the Research and Analysis Wing, on November 21.

A high-level delegation from the Communist Party of China also made a five-day visit to Sri Lanka on January 14, underscoring the intense geopolitical competition between India and China for influence on Colombo.

The delegation was led by China's International Department Vice Minister Chen Zhou who met Sri Lankan Prime Minister Gunawardana, former President and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and several other political leaders. "China is willing to work with any party and [that] collaboration with Beijing can benefit the developing world greatly," Chen said.

Beijing, which has heavily invested in Sri Lanka, is seeking ways to maintain and strengthen its influence. China has lent to Sri Lanka about $7 billion, the largest single component of Colombo's total foreign debt.

New Delhi, backed by Washington, is determined to break Colombo's relations with Beijing. In December 2021, following objections from India, China halted construction of a renewable energy project on three northern Sri Lankan islands in the Jaffna Peninsula, 50 kilometres off the southern Indian coast.

Last August, Sri Lanka was caught in a geopolitical maelstrom over the visit of Yuan Wang 5, a Chinese ship. While Beijing said it was a research vessel, Washington and New Delhi branded it a "spy ship." Sri Lanka's foreign ministry first responded to the controversy by urging Beijing to postpone the visit indefinitely but later allowed it to dock at Hambantota Port.

The US is aggressively intervening in the region. It considers Maldives and Sri Lanka key points to block sea lanes across the Indian Ocean in the event of conflict with China. These shipping routes serve as Beijing's lifeline for trade, including vital oil imports, and protecting its investments.

The US Navy and Marine Corps has just finished its regular biannual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training/Marine Exercise (CARAT/MAREX) with the Sri Lanka Navy and Air force. The January 19–26 exercises included the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Maldives National Defence Force. The land training component was done in Sri Lanka and the sea phase in the Laccadive Sea, situated between Sri Lanka and Maldives. The drills began in 2017.

These developments occur amid intensifying US-led NATO military operations against Russia in Ukraine. Washington, which considers Beijing its most significant strategic competitor and rival, is escalating its military build-up against China, supporting the rearmament of Japan and providing advanced weaponry to Taiwan in preparation for war. New Delhi is a key player in this dangerous military-strategic buildup.

Sri Lanka's ruling elite cannot maintain a balancing act between China, on one hand, and the US and India on the other. Indications are that Colombo will line up behind US imperialism. It still maintains its Acquisition and Cross Service Agreement with the US, allowing it to acquire defence logistic support in Sri Lanka.

The US and NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the escalating military provocations against China pose the danger of nuclear war. The US-led war against Russia in Ukraine has deepened the economic crisis in Sri Lanka and internationally, with devastating impacts on the lives and social conditions of the working class and the rural masses.

The looming threat of world war can only be prevented by building a global anti-war movement of the working class and in the struggle for international socialism. It is urgent for workers and youth in Sri Lanka and throughout South Asia to take up this struggle.

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