

Sri Lankan president visits India to strengthen economic and political ties

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Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe made his first official visit to India on Friday for discussions with the Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Wickremesinghe is keen to strengthen ties with New Delhi amid the island's ongoing economic crisis and the political instability of his rule.

The Modi regime is stepping up its pressure on Colombo to line up with India's geopolitical interests and undermine Beijing's influence in Sri Lanka, underscoring the intensifying global geo-political tensions between US imperialism and India on one hand, and China on the other.

While Wickremesinghe is a notorious pro-US politician, India is concerned about his administration's dependence on the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) of former President Mahinda Rajapakse, who is known to be inclined to China.

During the visit India signed several economic and trade agreements that vastly enhance its economic influence on Sri Lanka. Media reports indicate that Modi held closed door talks with Wickremesinghe on the growing geopolitical tensions with China and the need for Colombo to support India's interests.

Replying to a question as to whether the issue of China was raised, Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra said: "These challenges were brought up appropriately during the discussion [between Modi and Wickremesinghe]."

Sri Lanka is strategically located in the Indian Ocean adjacent to sea lanes connecting Europe, the Middle East and Africa with East Asia, including China. In line with the intensifying US-led war against Russia in Ukraine, Washington is consolidating strategic partnerships in the Indian subcontinent in preparation for war against China. New Delhi is a major partner of Washington in these provocative measures. Both countries calculate that control of the Indian Ocean is vital in blocking supplies, including oil, to China in the event of war.

Following the bilateral discussions, Modi and Wickremesinghe adopted a document titled, "Promoting Connectivity, Catalyzing Prosperity: India-Sri Lanka Economic Partnership Vision." It focused on strengthening

air, maritime, energy, power, trade and finance "connectivity." Five Memorandums of Understanding between the two countries were signed.

The document included the establishment of a high-capacity power grid interconnection between India and Sri Lanka, a solar power project and LNG (liquefied natural gas) infrastructure and a pipeline from southern India to Sri Lanka. It also proposed developing the key Sri Lankan port city of Trincomalee, into an industrial hub, and the development of port and logistics infrastructure in Colombo, Trincomalee, Kankesanthurai and other cities.

These extensive "development" projects indicate the Modi government's efforts to exploit whatever available resources and business opportunities in Sri Lanka for the benefit of the Indian big business and to further draw the island into its geopolitical grip.

Significantly, Wickremesinghe met notorious Indian billionaire Gautam Adani to discuss his projects in Sri Lanka, such as the West Container Terminal at Colombo port and a wind power farm.

Sri Lanka's economic crisis, which intensified to an unprecedented level in early 2022, leading to the eruption of nationwide protests, demonstrations and strikes by workers and peasants over skyrocketing inflation, shortages of essentials and long hours of power cuts.

This mass movement brought down the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse. New Delhi provided financial support throughout this period even as Rajapakse was forced to flee the country and Wickremesinghe elevated into presidency.

Since early last year, India provided a \$US4 billion long-term loan, aimed at sidelining Beijing's influence in Colombo. New Delhi also backed Sri Lanka's efforts to obtain a \$3 billion bailout loan from the International Monetary Fund, issuing a guarantee.

The numerous projects announced during Wickremesinghe's visit to India have alarmed some sections of Sri Lankan big business who have raised concerns about their international repercussions and economic

disadvantages.

A news report in the *Daily ft*, a mouthpiece of Sri Lankan big business, stated: “Sources warned that unreasonable failure of awarding the projects under such political pressure would definitely exert a deterrent signal on the large Chinese companies operating in Sri Lanka who seek fair competition.”

The article noted that the original agreement for a huge LNG project was originally awarded to a Chinese company after a tender process and has been ready since September 2022, pending cabinet approval. This deal, it reported, could now be halted, “kicking China out of Sri Lanka’s LNG space.” This is precisely what New Delhi is aiming for.

An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* on July 22 entitled “The President’s visit to India and balancing strategic interests,” commented: “While it is true, India has had a history of helping us at different times, greater connectivity with her via energy programmes and electricity grids may seem good. But we have to ensure we do not become over dependent on foreign sources for strategic sections of our economy. Dancing to whoever’s tune is ok, but the DANCE must be ours NOT theirs.”

The Modi government is also using Sri Lanka’s ongoing communal discrimination against Tamils and Indian-origin Tamil plantation workers to twist the arm of the Wickremesinghe government.

During their joint media briefing, Modi cynically said: “We hope Sri Lanka’s government will ensure a life of respect and dignity for the Tamil people.” These words come from the far-right Hindu supremacist leader of the BJP government that continues to bloodily suppress minorities in India.

The Modi government and the rest of the Indian ruling elite have no sympathy for the democratic rights of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. They backed Colombo’s 26-year communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the culmination of decades of anti-Tamil provocations.

Modi also called for full implementation of the 13th amendment to the constitution which was part of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord, between India and Sri Lanka. Under this Accord, Indian peace-keeping forces were sent into northern Sri Lanka to disarm the LTTE, allowing Colombo to concentrate on suppressing popular opposition in the south.

The proposed amendment was supposed to devolve powers to a united North and East province of the island, boosting the position of the Tamil bourgeoisie. However, Sinhala chauvinist groups opposed any devolution of power to the Tamil elite, ensuring that consecutive Colombo governments, which are rooted in anti-Tamil communalism,

granted only nominal powers to the provinces.

As in the past, Modi’s statements are aimed at using the Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist parties, which support Washington’s and New Delhi’s geopolitical interests, to pressure Colombo.

Immediately after Wickremesinghe’s return from India, the government announced that all political parties represented in parliament will be consulted on devolving powers to provinces.

Beijing is acutely conscious that Washington and New Delhi are seeking to isolate China, while Beijing continues to develop its relations in the region. It was the second main trading partner of Sri Lanka last year, providing around \$7 billion in loans and is involved in big investment projects.

While Wickremesinghe was in India, a Chinese delegation headed by Yuan Jiajun, a senior member of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, visited Sri Lanka. He met with former president and leader of the ruling SLPP, Mahinda Rajapakse as well as the opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya leader Sajith Premadasa. While details of these discussions are not available, Rajapakse said the visit was to strengthen the bilateral relations with Sri Lanka.

The Modi regime’s intense pressure on Colombo underscores the advanced stage of the US military preparations against China. India is intimately involved in these preparations.

Last November, Wickremesinghe declared, “We don’t want big power rivalry (in the Indian Ocean region).” But in his joint press conference with Modi last week, he said, “India’s growth will be beneficial for the neighbourhood and Indian Ocean Region,” making clear his orientation towards India.

The US and India will not tolerate a “neutral” position from Sri Lanka as they transform South Asia and the Indian Ocean into a major battle ground with China. Such a conflict between nuclear-armed nations would be catastrophic for humanity.

The only way to prevent such a catastrophe is through the political mobilisation of the international working class in a global anti-war movement against the capitalist profit system and for socialist internationalism. All workers in India, Sri Lanka and across South Asia must join with their class brothers and sisters around the world in building such an anti-war movement.



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