

Top US diplomat heaps praise on new Sri Lankan government

By Deepal Jayasekera
6 February 2015

The early visit by US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Nisha Desai Biswal to Sri Lanka this week has clearly demonstrated Washington's changed attitude towards the Colombo government following the January 8 election that led to the ousting of Mahinda Rajapakse and the installation of Maithripala Sirisena as president.

The Obama administration had been deeply hostile to Rajapakse as a result of his government's relations with China and supported Sirisena's campaign. Former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who has connections with the Obama administration via the Clinton Foundation, engineered Sirisena's defection from the government and the support of opposition parties, including the pro-US United National Party (UNP), for his candidacy.

In the wake of the election, Sirisena has rapidly reoriented foreign policy away from Beijing and towards Washington and New Delhi. This is fully in line with Obama's "pivot to Asia" which is aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the region and encircling it militarily.

During her visit, US Assistant Secretary of State Biswal met with President Sirisena, Prime Minister and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera, Urban Development Minister Rauff Hakeem and representatives of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the island's main Tamil bourgeois party.

Biswal was effusive in her praise for the new government, declaring: "It was a privilege to visit Colombo to witness for myself the sense of excitement and optimism that the Sri Lankan people have ushered in through the historic January 8 election." She had come to inspect the results of the Washington-sponsored regime-change operation and to

harness Colombo into the US war drive in Asia.

Biswal continued: "I am indeed excited to be in Sri Lanka and see for myself the energy that has the world talking about Sri Lanka and about Sri Lanka's democracy and for all the right reasons." The remarks about Sri Lankan democracy are entirely cynical. Washington's opposition to Rajapakse was not because of his autocratic methods, but because of his orientation to China. In Sirisena, the US is embracing someone who was, until several months ago, a senior minister in the Rajapakse government and, as such, responsible for all its crimes and abuses.

Speaking alongside Foreign Minister Samaraweera, Biswal pledged full support for the new government. "Sri Lanka can count on the United States to be a partner and a friend in the way forward," she declared. This is a complete about-face in the US attitude. Having fully backed his war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Washington seized on the Sri Lankan military's war crimes to put pressure on Rajapakse to break his ties with Beijing following the LTTE's defeat in 2009.

The US pushed a series of resolutions through the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) calling for an investigation of human rights abuses during the civil war—a move that threatened war crimes charges against Sri Lankan political and military leaders. Now that Rajapakse has been removed, one can predict that the issue of "war crimes" will recede as the US embraces its new "partner and friend." The US will maintain its "human rights" campaign only insofar as it is useful to prevent Rajapakse and his cronies from destabilising the new government and keeping Sirisena in line.

A US-sponsored resolution adopted by the UNHRC last March established an international inquiry into Sri Lankan war crimes that is due to report in March. The

Sirisena government has called on the US and UNHRC to drop the international inquiry promising a “domestic inquiry” instead. In all this manoeuvring about “human rights,” none of those involved—the US, its various allies the European Union and Sri Lanka—has the slightest interest in the justice for the tens of thousands of civilians killed or the many other victims of the Sri Lankan security forces.

Biswal lauded the “many positive steps” already taken the Sirisena government while warning that “there is a lot of hard work ahead and some difficult challenges.” The “positive steps” she had in mind were above all in the arena of foreign policy. Sirisena appointed the pro-US UNP leader Wickremesinghe as prime minister and has already moved to mend strained relations with India, Washington’s key strategic partner in South Asia.

Foreign Minister Samaraweera visited India two weeks ago and Sirisena is due to visit New Delhi on February 16. Samaraweera will visit the US on February 12 to meet US Secretary of State John Kerry. The new government has already signaled its readiness to review Rajapakse’s policies of giving substantial economic and strategic concessions to Beijing.

Britain has also hailed the new Sri Lankan government. Junior foreign minister Hugo Swire concluded a two-day visit to Colombo on January 31 and met with Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and several other senior ministers. He praised the government’s policies, declaring: “It is also heartening to see such a renewed desire to reconcile communities and seek a long-term peace for Sri Lanka.”

The change of attitude towards Sri Lanka in the foreign policy establishment in Washington has been marked. In a “counseling article” to the Brookings Institute, former US ambassador to Colombo Teresita Schaffer called on the US State Department to “lower its voice” on human rights in Sri Lanka.

Schaffer declared: “His [Sirisena's] election presents an opportunity to reset Sri Lanka’s relations with India and the United States. To do this, he and his foreign friends will need tact and creativity, and he will need all his political skills to keep the coalition together. A good place to start would be to suspend action on the annual UN Human Rights Commission resolution on Sri Lanka while the new team gets its balance.”

Former US Deputy Secretary of State Richard

Armitage co-authored a commentary in the *Wall Street Journal* with Kara Bue, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Political Military Affairs, and Lisa Curtis, from the right-wing Heritage Foundation, that bluntly set out US motivations behind its support for Sirisena.

The article declared: “Now is the time for the U.S. to develop a roadmap for reviving ties with Sri Lanka that reflects the broad array of US interests, including respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law, as well as enhancing trade and regional economic integration and securing the Indo-Pacific...”

“Without plans for restoring US-Sri Lankan relations, Washington risks losing an opportunity to deepen ties with a strategically located island nation of 21 million people. Sri Lankans have taken a major step forward in re-establishing democracy. Under Mr. Sirisena, the country stands to remove itself from China’s Indian Ocean ‘string of pearls.’”

Biswal’s trip was precisely to restore US relations with Sri Lanka in order to secure the strategically located island. China has financed the construction of a new harbour in southern Sri Lanka as part of its “string of pearls”—port facilities designed to protect its crucial shipping routes across the Indian Ocean.

Under Sirisena, Sri Lanka is now being more closely integrated into the Pentagon’s war planning—which includes a US economic blockade of China by cutting off its essential supplies of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. This poses grave dangers to the working class and oppressed masses throughout South Asia and the world as a whole.

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