

Modi visits Sri Lanka to push for closer ties against China

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Sri Lanka on March 13-14, as the last and most important leg of a tour of three Indian Ocean countries, designed to strengthen India's ties with them and counter China's influence. Before reaching Colombo, Modi visited Seychelles and Mauritius, where he signed agreements to boost maritime and security cooperation.

Modi's trip was undertaken amid increased US encouragement of India to play a greater role in the Asia-Pacific region, and particularly in the Indian Ocean. This is in line with the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," which is aimed at diplomatically isolating and militarily encircling China. During his visit to New Delhi in late January, Obama asked Modi to help "the transition in Sri Lanka and Burma," where the US intervened to undermine their links with China.

This was the first bilateral visit by an Indian Prime Minister to Sri Lanka in 28 years. It came after Washington, with India's help, sponsored a regime-change operation in Colombo to oust former President Mahinda Rajapakse in Sri Lanka's January 8 presidential election. The US and India were determined to move Colombo's foreign policy away from Beijing, to which Rajapakse had turned for aid and investment.

Rajapakse's ex-health minister Maithripala Sirisena, elected as president with Washington's backing, and his prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, the leader of the right-wing United National Party (UNP), have quickly adopted a more pro-US and pro-Indian policy.

During his visit, Modi held talks with Sirisena and Wickremesinghe and signed four bilateral agreements. He addressed the Sri Lankan parliament on March 13, pushing strongly for stronger military ties. "We are two countries at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean," Modi said. "Your leadership and our partnership will be vital

for building a peaceful, secure, stable and prosperous maritime neighborhood."

Modi aims to integrate Sri Lanka into an India-led military-strategic alliance across the Indian Ocean. He stated: "We should expand the maritime security cooperation between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives to include others in the Indian Ocean area." In response, Wickremesinghe welcomed India's emphasis on "building cooperation" with its neighbours.

Modi also pushed for closer economic ties. "I will be happy if India serves as a catalyst in the progress of our neighbours," he said. Addressing a Ceylon Chamber of Commerce function, Modi called for the conclusion of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the two countries.

The CEPA was proposed in 2003 but delayed by successive Colombo governments due to concerns among sections of Sri Lankan business that they would be marginalised by relatively more competitive Indian companies gaining easy access to island.

In an attempt to woo Sri Lankan business, Modi said that "Sri Lanka's exports to India have grown 16 times" since 2000, when a bilateral Free Trade Agreement commenced. Noting the "concerns here about the huge trade imbalance" with India, he added: "I am prepared to work with you to address them."

One of the agreements signed by Modi will simplify custom rules between the two countries as a means of expanding trade. Other pacts cover easing visa regulations for Sri Lankans visiting India, "youth development" and Indian assistance in building an auditorium at the University of Ruhuna in southern Sri Lanka.

In a bid to counter China's offers of substantial investments, Modi promised a further \$US318 million for railway infrastructure. India has already been

involved in rebuilding Sri Lanka's northern railway line. Visiting northern Sri Lanka on Saturday, Modi opened the last leg of the Indian-built northern rail line to Talaimannar. Modi also announced a \$1.5 billion currency swap agreement between India's Reserve Bank and Sri Lanka's Central Bank.

Sri Lanka's biggest natural harbour, at Trincomalee, was another focus of Modi's attention. He said India "stands ready to help Trincomalee become a regional petroleum hub." Lanka IOC (Indian Oil Company) and Ceylon Petroleum have agreed to jointly develop the Upper Tank Farm of the China Bay Installation at the strategically located port.

Modi also pushed for "early commencement of work" on the Sampur Coal Power Project in eastern Sri Lanka. This joint venture between the Ceylon Electricity Board and India's National Thermal Power Corporation has been delayed because of environmental concerns.

In his speech to the parliament, Modi reiterated New Delhi's longstanding demand for a power-sharing arrangement between Sri Lanka's Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites. He asked for "full implementation of the 13th Amendment" and measures "going beyond it."

This constitutional amendment resulted from the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord signed in 1987 between Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayawardena. It was supposed to establish a provincial council system, with some limited powers devolved to the councils. However, successive Colombo governments refused to hand police and land powers to the provinces as required by the amendment.

Such a power-sharing deal has nothing to do with the democratic aspirations of Tamil workers and the poor in the island's north and east. It would only serve to secure privileges for the Tamil and Muslim elites. New Delhi has advocated such an arrangement for two main reasons: to contain the anger among Tamil people in southern India toward the oppression of Sri Lankan Tamils; and to exert India's influence in Sri Lanka via a strengthening of the political position of the island's Tamil elites.

Modi met leaders of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the island's main Tamil bourgeois party, which controls the northern provincial council. The TNA enthusiastically looked forward to the meeting, hoping to get New Delhi's help to pressure the Sirisena

government into a power-sharing deal. As reported by the *Hindu*, however, Modi asked the TNA "to be patient." He pointed to the "beginning of change" and urged the TNA to "help that change take place" without derailing it. In other words, Modi wants to avoid any action that could destabilise Sirisena's government, because of its pro-Indian stance.

In another significant move, Modi had a one-to-one 15-minute meeting with former President Rajapakse on Saturday evening. The meeting went ahead even though Rajapakse, in an interview with the *Hindu*, accused the Indian intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), of collaborating with the American CIA and the British MI6 in a conspiracy to oust him. In the interview, however, Rajapakse said he did not believe that Modi and his government were responsible for the conspiracy.

No details of the Modi-Rajapakse meeting have been publicly revealed. Quoting Indian officials, the *Hindu* reported that Modi met Rajapakse "as a matter of courtesy." Whatever the exact nature of the discussion, given the ongoing political instability on the island, Modi is keeping the lines of communication open to all sections of the island's elite.

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