

Sri Lankan prime minister visits India

By Deepal Jayasekera
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Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's recent three-day visit to India has further highlighted closer relations between Colombo and New Delhi since the US-sponsored regime-change operation earlier this year to remove Mahinda Rajapakse as Sri Lankan president.

Rajapakse who had developed close ties with China, was ousted in the January 8 presidential elections by Maithripala Sirisena with the backing of Wickremesinghe's pro-US United National Party (UNP). Sirisena immediately appointed Wickremesinghe as prime minister and then re-appointed him after the UNP won the largest number of seats in the August 17 parliamentary elections. The UNP leads a "national unity government," which includes Sirisena's faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Wickremesinghe met this week with his counterpart Narendra Modi of Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, President Pranab Mukherjee and Minister for Road Transport, Highways and Shipping Nitin Gadkari. The talks were aimed at strengthening economic and military relations between the Sri Lanka and India.

Addressing a joint press conference with Modi on Tuesday, Wickremesinghe said the two countries had to improve trade and increase security forces cooperation in the Indian Ocean. "When there is stability in the Indian Ocean, India and Sri Lanka prosper ... And when there is instability, we get affected," he declared.

Expressing his support for the new regime in Colombo, Modi said it was "a historic year for India-Sri Lanka relations" because "Sri Lanka has voted twice this year for change, reforms, reconciliation and progress ... As a close neighbour and friend, we wish Sri Lanka every success, rejoice in

your progress, and, assure you of India's unwavering support."

Modi told the press conference: "We recognise our closely-aligned security interests and the need to remain sensitive to each other's concerns. We both reaffirmed our commitment to deepen our defence and security cooperation."

In 2014 the US and India both publicly raised concerns about the Rajapakse government's decision to allow Chinese submarines to make two port calls in Colombo. The new Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration has assured Washington and New Delhi that similar incidents will not be repeated.

Repeating India's calls for a limited power-sharing arrangement between Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites in Sri Lanka, Modi said: "I am confident that with the wisdom and will of the leadership in Sri Lanka and the support of the people, Sri Lanka will achieve genuine reconciliation and development, so that all Sri Lankans, including the Sri Lankan Tamil community, can live a life of equality, justice, peace and dignity in a united Sri Lanka."

Modi's posturing has nothing to do with defending the democratic rights of the island's Tamil minority following a quarter century of brutal communal war that ended in 2009. Rather, the Indian elite calculate that it will be able to boost its influence in Colombo through any future power-sharing arrangement involving the Sri Lankan Tamil organisations. Modi's comments are also an attempt to contain genuine anger among the Tamil majority in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu about the situation facing Sri Lankan Tamils.

Wickremesinghe responded by declaring that his government was looking into "how power sharing takes place within the Constitution." This is a reference to the limited devolution of power to Sri Lanka's provinces under the 13th amendment of the

constitution, which was adopted in line with the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement. India has been pushing for its full implementation, which successive Colombo governments, mired in Sinhala chauvinism, have failed to do.

The Modi government faces opposition from the Tamil Nadu regional elites in southern India, who are demanding increased pressure on Colombo over the Sri Lankan military's war crimes. On Wednesday the Tamil Nadu state assembly unanimously passed a resolution demanding the Modi government use diplomatic efforts to change any US-backed resolution supporting a domestic inquiry into Sri Lankan war crimes, in place of an international probe by the United Nations Human Rights Council.

In an indication of its support for the new Sri Lankan government, Washington has moved away from its previous calls for an international investigation into Sri Lanka war crimes and is now supporting a domestic inquiry. The Tamil Nadu state assembly's insistence on an international probe has nothing to do with any concerns for the fate of the island's Tamils, but is an attempt to whip up Tamil nationalism within the state to shore up their own support bases.

In his talks with the Sri Lankan prime minister, Indian Minister of Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari discussed a \$US5.19 billion India-Lanka road project and an underwater tunnel linking a 22-km stretch between Talaimannar in Sri Lanka and Dhanushkodi in India.

An opinion piece in the *Indian Express* by C. Raja Mohan reminded Wickremesinghe that he had proposed a land bridge between the two countries when he was Sri Lankan prime minister from 2001 to 2003. "Delhi must now focus boldly on transborder connectivity with Sri Lanka," Mohan wrote, adding: "It's really up to Modi and Wickremesinghe to make the political and commercial case for the causeway and address the issues raised by opponents on both sides."

India wants closer economic ties with Sri Lanka in order to counter Chinese financial influences. New Delhi wants to finalise the long-pending Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Colombo. Some sections of Sri Lankan big business are opposing the agreement, fearful that they will be undermined by Indian investors.

On the eve of Wickremesinghe's trip to India, his

minister of international trade Malik Samarawickrama said the CEPA agreement would not be discussed during the visit. Wickremesinghe, however, told his joint press conference with Modi that "the two sides should at least come to an agreement in principle and by next year we should have an agreement." Seeking to address Colombo's concerns over its trade deficit with India, Modi said bilateral trade would "grow and become more balanced for Sri Lanka."

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