

Sri Lanka assists India to isolate Pakistan by not attending SAARC summit

By Pradeep Ramanayake
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After India pulled out of the South Asian Association of Regional Corporation (SAARC) summit due to be held in Islamabad, the Sri Lankan government also decided not to attend. A Sri Lankan foreign ministry statement called for steps “to ensure our region’s peace and security” and to create an environment “conducive for the pursuit of regional cooperation.”

In fact, the opposite is the case. The Colombo government’s support for New Delhi’s decision is part of a bellicose campaign to “isolate Pakistan” which India blames for the attack last month by Islamic separatists on the Uri army camp in Indian-held Kashmir. The result is an extremely tense standoff that threatens to slide into open conflict between two nuclear-armed powers. If a war erupts, it has the potential to draw major powers, including the US and China, into the conflict. Beijing has close strategic relations with Pakistan while the US is seeking to harness India as a strategic partner against China.

Afghanistan, Bhutan and Bangladesh also followed India’s lead and pulled out of the summit, accusing Islamabad of cross-border terrorism. India was hostile to Pakistan assuming the SAARC chairmanship, which goes to the host country automatically for two years. The Pakistani government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has now postponed the summit which was scheduled for November 8–9.

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was more explicit in his support for the Indian government when he visited in early October to attend the India Economic Forum in New Delhi.

Addressing the media after a meeting with the Indian prime minister, Wickremesinghe declared: “There is no future for SAARC unless cross border terrorism is brought to the table for discussion.” He warned that without addressing “cross border terrorism” the

regional body would become “irrelevant.”

When asked about the tensions between India and Pakistan, the Sri Lankan prime minister said: “[I] don’t think war is an option, your PM has taken a lot of steps to defuse the tensions.” He added that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had to be complemented for “the restraint he has shown.”

Wickremesinghe turns reality on its head. While the Pakistani government and military are using the situation to whip up anti-Indian sentiment and direct domestic social tensions outward, India is exploiting the Uri attack to gain the upper hand diplomatically and strategically over its region rival even if that risks war.

Far from being restrained, Modi has mounted a diplomatic offensive. Its measures, including pulling out of SAARC, threatening to abrogate the Indus Water Treaty thus cutting the major water supply to Pakistan, and above all the surgical strike inside Pakistan held Kashmir on September 28, violating that country’s sovereignty, have only heightened tensions.

Answering questions raised by reporters, Wickremesinghe added that the Sri Lanka’s relationship with China is “economic not military.” He added: “With India, we are doing a lot more... infrastructure projects, road projects, military co-operation.... China has no military presence in projects such as Hambantota [the Sri Lankan port built by China]. But with India, we have strategic and military ties.”

Wickremesinghe also backed another Indian move to promote its Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) with South Asian and South East Asian countries. BIMSTEC is comprised of Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan and Nepal.

BIMSTEC is part of India’s Act East policy to widen

its strategic and economic influence in East and South East Asia. This initiative is bound up with the Modi government's economic and strategic drive against China which has been encouraged by the US. The Modi government also sees this grouping as a possible replacement for SAARC and will help further to isolate China. As part of rallying BIMSTEC countries, Modi invited their leaders to participate in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia India, China, South Africa) summit this month. Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena participated at the invitation of Modi.

Wickremesinghe expressed his support for India's BIMSTEC project. At the Indian Economic Forum, Wickremesinghe has suggested the creation of a larger special zone of economic cooperation around the Bay of Bengal that would also take Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia also on board. "Let's have a whole area around the Bay of Bengal of economic cooperation and a vibrant one. That's what we envisage and should work for."

Colombo's enthusiastic backing for the Indian government is significant. Sri Lankan President Sirisena was installed in power with the backing of the US and India in a regime-change operation to oust former President Mahinda Rajapakse in the presidential election of January 2015. Both countries supported Rajapakse's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and his anti-democratic rule. However, Washington and New Delhi sought to undercut his close relations with China. Since coming to power, Sirisena, together with the Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, has shifted Sri Lanka's foreign policy markedly towards India and the US.

SAARC, which was established in 1985, is on the verge of collapse as a result of deepening geo-political tensions. India is seeking to strengthen ties with countries in South Asia to enhance its great power ambitions while undermining traditional rival Pakistan and blocking China. Washington is encouraging India's efforts and aggressively seeking to transform it into a frontline state in the US war drive against China.

The Sri Lankan government's support for New Delhi's actions is deeply reactionary. Behind the backs of the working class and the poor, Colombo is enmeshing the country in the geo-political maelstrom that threatens to plunge the Indian sub-continent and world into a catastrophic conflict.

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