

US Congress members visit Colombo to boost US interests

By Saman Gunadasa
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A group of US Congress members—four Democrats and four Republicans led by House Judiciary Committee chairman Bob Goodlatte—called on President Maithripala Sirisena last Friday. It was the second group of Congress members to visit Sri Lanka during February, underscoring the intensifying geo-strategic tensions generated by the US military buildup in South Asia.

Indian and Chinese diplomats also arrived in Colombo during the past two weeks, seeking to strengthen their influence in Sri Lanka.

The first US delegation came on February 20 for a two-day visit under a so-called democracy partnership agreement with the Sri Lankan parliament. They met with members of parliament, as well as Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The second delegation concentrated more on sensitive political issues. The US embassy in Colombo said the delegation came to “discuss strategic issues affecting vital sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific, learn about Sri Lanka’s progress in forging lasting reconciliation and a non-recurrence of conflict” and “to learn more about economic reforms” that could increase bilateral trade and investment between the two countries.

President Donald Trump’s administration has indicated it will continue to concentrate on South Asia as it prepares for confrontation with China. US Defence Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis reportedly told his Indian counterpart, Manohar Parrikar, early last month that the US intended to build up its strategic partnership and defence cooperation with India, further developing ties forged as part of the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” directed against China.

The Obama administration orchestrated a regime-change operation in Colombo via the 2015 presidential election, installing Sirisena to replace

Mahinda Rajapakse. The main objective of this intervention was to undermine Sri Lanka’s ties with Beijing under Rajapakse’s government.

Delegation leader Goodlatte said the US was pleased with the steps taken by “the consensual government to strengthen democracy, individual freedom, and reconciliation.”

This “consensual government” is the coalition between Wickremesinghe’s right-wing United National Party (UNP) and a section of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by Sirisena. This coalition was formed not to “strengthen democracy” but to stabilise the government, which has changed foreign policy in favour of the US and its ally India, and to suppress the explosive social opposition among workers and poor to the austerity offensive begun under Rajapakse.

In his discussions, Sirisena reiterated his government’s readiness to serve the needs of American imperialism. According to a government statement, Sirisena said: “Sri Lanka has an important responsibility regarding regional security in addition to national security as the country is situated at an important strategic location in the international maritime route... [H]ence Sri Lanka takes all these into careful consideration while entering into international investment agreements.”

Sirisena appeared to be addressing US concerns over Sri Lanka’s investment agreements with China.

Sirisena halted all investment projects funded by China as soon as he took office. However, his cash-strapped government has since been compelled to seek Chinese investments and loans, and is planning to sell the controlling shares in the Hambantota Magampura Port to a Chinese company.

The port was built by Chinese companies, largely

funded by a Chinese loan, during the Rajapakse government. The US and India branded it as part of China's "String of Pearls" strategy to allegedly dominate the Indian Ocean and beyond. In response, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have declared that no Chinese military presence will be allowed in Hambantota.

While thanking the US for resuming training of Sri Lankan armed force members, which was stopped under Rajapakse, Sirisena asked for "additional training slots" for naval officers.

His government is deepening military ties with the US. In November, the USS Somerset, a naval amphibious landing ship, anchored in Trincomalee port for joint naval exercises involving 300 US marines. Last September, the Sri Lankan navy established its first ever Marine Forces with the help of the US Marine Corps.

The US delegation reportedly asked Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leaders "what they felt about China's and India's interest in Sri Lankan political affairs." The *Island* reported that TNA head and parliamentary opposition leader, R. Sambandan, replied that China did not interfere in the country's internal affairs, whereas India continued to demonstrate interest in constitutional reforms.

The TNA, which represents the Tamil capitalist elite, fully backed Washington's 2015 regime-change operation and supports the current government.

Indian Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar arrived in Sri Lanka on February 18 to meet with Sirisena, Wickremesinghe, several other ministers and TNA leaders.

Indian think tanks and the media reported that Jaishankar was sent to discuss some concerns of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. Savita Pandey, a professor of South Asian Studies at Jawaharlal University, told the press: "Although India has a favorable government in Sri Lanka, China's efforts to expand its presence in the island nation is a cause of concern for New Delhi."

New Delhi is also worried that the Sri Lankan government postponed the finalisation of an Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement with India in the face of an anti-Indian communal campaign by Sinhala extremist groups.

On February 23, Chinese International Department

Minister Song Tao led a delegation to meet Sirisena and Wickremesinghe. He also met former President Rajapakse. Tao discussed several issues, including a proposed investment zone near the Hambantota port. Beijing is perturbed by the continuing postponement of an agreement on the port project and industrial zone.

Intensifying the geopolitical tensions, the US is aggressively working to develop its military buildup. A Sri Lanka Navy statement said top-level discussions took place when Brigadier General Brian W. Cavanaugh, the Deputy Commander of US Marine Corps Forces, Pacific, met with Sri Lankan Navy Vice Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne in Colombo on Tuesday.

According to the statement, "extensive discussions" took place on matters of bilateral importance as well as "future operational and training aspects of the recently established Marine Battalion of the Sri Lanka Navy." It added that discussions were held "on issues pertinent to future naval affairs and means of strengthening defense partnerships between the two countries."

The visits by US Congress delegations and Pacific Command officers further draw Sri Lanka into the maelstrom of mounting global tensions and war dangers.

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