

US defence secretary phones Sri Lankan president about increased military cooperation

By Vijith Samarasinghe
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Late last month, US Defence Secretary Mark T. Esper phoned President Gotabaya Rajapakse. Esper later Tweeted: “Good talk today with Sri Lankan President @Gotabaya R. We discussed our cooperation in responding to COVID 19 & the international security environment.”

The Colombo media reported that the call was about COVID-19 and claimed Esper had praised Rajapakse for “controlling” the pandemic. This was a ridiculous attempt to cover-up the real content and implications of the discussion.

The extraordinary phone call—the first in living memory from a US defence chief to a Sri Lankan president—was not about the coronavirus, but the expansion of existing military agreements between the two countries, in line with President Donald Trump’s preparations for war against China.

While Rajapakse and the Sri Lankan media have kept their mouths shut about the real purpose of the call, the US defence department later released a statement, indicating some of the issues raised.

The conversation, according to the statement, centred on the “shared commitment” of the two countries “to a free and open Indo-Pacific”—a euphemism for Washington’s ongoing campaign against Beijing and unchallenged US military operations in the region. It involved a “review of the defence priorities,” such as “military professionalization, counter-terrorism, and maritime security cooperation.” The defence secretary also called for “continued progress on reconciliation and human rights in Sri Lanka.”

Esper’s phone call was motivated by the fact that Washington and its regional allies are intensifying their military build-up against China, in the Indian Ocean region, and are determined to further expand military relations with, and operations on, the strategically located island.

The call, which was made just a few weeks after the landslide victory of Rajapakse’s party in the parliamentary election, also reflected Washington’s concerns about the new administration and its previous links with China.

Two days after the election, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article headlined “Pro-China Populists Consolidate Power in Sri Lanka.” It stated that the previous

Rajapakse administration had “embraced China,” and become “a showcase for Beijing’s global infrastructure initiative.”

While the US and India had backed Rajapakse’s brother—the former president and current prime minister, Mahinda Rajapakse—in the last phase of Sri Lanka’s bloody civil war in 2009, Washington was hostile to the regime’s economic and military relations with Beijing.

In 2015, the US orchestrated a regime-change operation to oust Rajapakse as president and replace him with the pro-US Maithripala Sirisena. The subsequent Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration rapidly and systematically expanded Sri Lanka’s defence ties with the US. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime strengthened defence agreements with Washington and involved the Sri Lankan military force in numerous drills and training exercises with the US and its allied armed forces.

The Access and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) between the US and Sri Lanka, which was first signed in 2011 by Gotabaya Rajapakse, then defence secretary, was renewed indefinitely under Sirisena. ACSA gives the US military unrestrained access to Sri Lanka’s seaports and airports, while the American navy is currently investigating the feasibility of establishing a US “logistics hub” at the strategic eastern port of Trincomalee.

Further ties are also in the pipeline. These include the proposed renewal of a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the US, the hand-over of Colombo Port’s Eastern Terminal to India, and a \$US480 million grant agreement with the Millennium Challenge Corporation, an instrument of US foreign policy. Ratification of these agreements and other defence proposals, however, were stalled by conflicts in 2018 that divided the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration.

Gotabaya Rajapakse was elected president last year by capitalising on the political instability and exploiting deep-seated popular opposition to the International Monetary Fund austerity program implemented by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime.

Esper’s phone call constitutes another clear message to the Rajapakses that Washington is insisting that pending military

agreements be ratified immediately, and that US-Sri Lanka defence cooperation is taken to a new level.

As the US embassy in Colombo declared, following the August 5 general election, “We look forward to partnering with the government and the new parliament.”

Even before last month’s election results were finalised, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Washington’s chief regional ally, rushed to congratulate Rajapakse. In Colombo, the Indian high commissioner held a dinner for the new cabinet ministers, just days after their swearing-in.

Following his election as president last November, Rajapakse quickly demonstrated his loyalty to Washington and India, and made his first official foreign visit to New Delhi, on the invitation of Prime Minister Modi.

Last month, Rajapakse appointed retired Admiral Jayanath Colabage, who is director of the pro-US Pathfinder Foundation, as foreign secretary. Senior career diplomat and former foreign secretary Ravinath Ariyasinghe was named ambassador to the US.

In an August 26 interview with the *Daily Mirror*, Colabage said, “as far as strategic security is concerned, Sri Lanka will always have an India-first approach.”

In another diplomatic posting, Rajapakse appointed Milinda Moragoda—a former minister with long established loyalties to Washington—as a “cabinet-ranked” high commissioner to India. Cabinet rank means he can directly talk to the president and his top ministers.

Moragoda, a founder of the Pathfinder Foundation in Colombo, was described in 2003 by the former US Ambassador to Colombo, E. Ashley Wills, in a diplomatic cable, later published by WikiLeaks, as a “perfect fit” for “cultivating relations with the US and India.” His appointment as the Indian High Commissioner is another indication of Colombo’s endorsement of the anti-China, military-strategic build-up in the region.

The Rajapakse administration has signalled that it will go ahead with the pending US-Sri Lanka defence agreements. Both the president and prime minister have also confirmed that they will hand over the strategic Colombo Port East Terminal to India, despite mounting opposition from port workers.

Colabage told the *Daily Mirror* that the transfer of the terminal was agreed in a 2017 deal between Sri Lanka, India and Japan, and that President Rajapakse was “committed to honour” the deal.

Rajapakse is also advancing the close military-to-military ties with the US, established by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration. In March, when the whole country was under strict COVID-19 lockdown and curfew, US Green Berets conducted combat training exercises with Sri Lankan forces in Trincomalee harbour.

President Rajapakse’s refusal to disclose the content of his discussion with Defence Secretary Esper indicates that he has no concerns about the preparations for war against China. This

silence, at least for the time being, also reflects the sensitivity of Colombo’s ruling elite to popular concerns about this issue. During the election, Rajapakse’s nationalist allies attempted to posture as anti-imperialist. At the same time, the debt-ridden Rajapakse regime is also seeking extensive financial assistance from Beijing.

Esper’s phone call came as military and economic tensions in the Asia-Pacific region have reached the highest level since the Second World War. Late last month, Beijing fired “aircraft carrier killer” missiles into the South China Sea, in response to the provocative manoeuvres of the US naval flotilla led by the USS Ronald Reagan in the disputed marine territory.

Early last week, Japan, India and Australia—all members of the US-led quadrilateral military alliance against China—agreed to restructure commercial supply chains in the region to counter so-called “China trade dominance.”

The US has also banned 24 Chinese companies, including the China Communication Construction Company (CCCC), from buying American products, citing their involvement in the development of artificial islands in the disputed South China Sea. CCCC is involved in the construction of the massive Colombo Port City project, the largest single Chinese investment in Sri Lanka. The Chinese embassy in Colombo has appealed to the Rajapakse government to oppose the US sanctions.

Attempting to navigate its path through this geo-strategic minefield, Colombo has said nothing about the latest trade bans and their possible impact on the Colombo Port City project.

In a veiled threat, the US embassy in Colombo warned that the US “further encourages countries to manage risk when dealing with CCCC,” which it claims has done “untold environmental damage... and caused instability in the Indo-Pacific.”

In his August 26 *Daily Mirror* interview, Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Colabage said: “We have to balance. The President has outlined a few specific things. Sri Lanka should be a neutral country. Sri Lanka does not want to be caught up in the power game.”

Notwithstanding the rhetoric about “balancing,” the Rajapakse regime is signalling to Washington that Colombo is not siding with Beijing, and will continue to expand its military operations with US imperialism against China. The Rajapakses know, from their own experience, that any deviation from this line could have severe repercussions for the current government.

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