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US puts new Sri Lankan president on notice

The international messages of congratulations sent to Sri Lanka's newly-elected president, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, all underscore the fact that the strategically-located island is enmeshed in geo-political rivalries, centred above all on Washington's determination to undermine Chinese influence throughout the region and prepare for war.



Gotabhaya Rajapakse [Credit: AP Photo]

Rajapakse, an ex-military officer and defence secretary for 10 years, won the election under the banner of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna led by his brother and former President Mahinda Rajapakse. He won the election on the basis of a right-wing campaign

to strengthen “national security and law and order” amid mounting class struggles in Sri Lanka.

In his congratulatory message, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that Washington “stands ready to work” with the new president, pointedly called on him to cooperate in “fostering a free and open Indo-Pacific region where all countries can prosper, deepening good governance, and promoting justice, reconciliation, and human rights.”

While Pompeo couched his message to Rajapakse in terms of “human rights,” Washington’s real concern is that the new president will shift Sri Lanka towards China. The call for “fostering a free and open Indo-Pacific region” is the catch-phrase in US propaganda to justify its aggressive moves to ensure its dominance over China throughout Asia.

Pompeo’s reference to “human rights” amounts to a threat to exploit the issue against Gotabhaya Rajapakse if he moves closer to Beijing, as it was used to oust his brother Mahinda in a regime-change operation in the 2015 election.

Both Rajapakse brothers were directly implicated in the war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights by the military in the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended in 2009. The US, however, backed the war against the LTTE and remained silent on the Rajapakse regime’s crimes.

Washington only began to raise “human rights” in the aftermath of the war after the government made a pronounced shift towards Beijing. To oppose Mahinda Rajapakse, the US helped engineer the candidacy and victory of Maithripala Sirisena, one of his top ministers, in a campaign that featured appeals for “good governance” and “human rights,” along with bogus promises about improving living conditions.

After coming to power, Sirisena, with the support of Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister, abruptly shifted the country’s foreign policy towards the US as well as its strategic partner in the region, India.

The Sri Lankan military, particularly its navy, has been closely integrated with the US Indo-Pacific Command. Its head, Admiral Philip Davidson, told the US Senate Armed Services Committee in February said that Sri Lanka “remains a significant strategic opportunity in the Indian Ocean and our military-to-military relationship continues to strengthen.”

Washington was pressing in July for the renewal of a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which allows free access of US military forces to the island, but it was put on hold because of a public outcry. The finalization of a new SOFA agreement will undoubtedly be seen in Washington as a key test for the new president.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse is acutely aware of the threats that he faces. At his swearing-in ceremony on Monday, he declared that he didn't "want to get involved in power struggles among powerful nations." He added: "We want to remain neutral in our foreign relations and stay out of conflicts among the world powers" and called on "all nations to respect the unitary nature and sovereignty of the country."

The US, however, has no intention of allowing Sri Lanka to remain "neutral" and will actively seek to ensure its integration into the regional network of US allies and strategic partners directed against China. It has a long record of flouting the sovereignty of any country that it deems to be a threat to its interests, including by invasions and wars.

For its part, China will attempt to counter the US. The congratulatory message sent by Chinese President Xi Jinping to the new Sri Lankan president declared that he attached "great importance to the development of our bilateral relations." He called for deepening "practical cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to start a new chapter of China-Sri Lanka Strategic Cooperative Partnership."

China's Belt and Road Initiative is a vast infrastructure plan linking the Eurasian landmass as well as Africa, and is aimed at blocking US attempts to encircle China strategically and to undermine it economically. Though Sirisena and Wickremesinghe expressed support for the BRI, the previous government did not sign any specific BRI-related program or agreement.

However, while initially sharply distancing itself from Beijing, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, facing a worsening economic crisis, turned to China for financial aid, provoking criticisms from Washington and New Delhi.

The US was particularly hostile to the decision in 2017 to grant a 99-year lease over the Hambantota port to China which was built with Chinese loans that Sri Lanka was unable to service. The port is strategically located at the southern tip of Sri Lanka beside key shipping routes across the Indian Ocean that the US is determined to control.

Washington, which attacked Beijing for drawing countries such as Sri Lanka into a "debt trap," will seek to prevent Sri Lanka becoming more dependent on China financially. Just

weeks before the election the US agency, Millennium Challenge Corporation, extended a \$480 million grant to improve infrastructure.

India, which regards China as a strategic rival and has lined up with the US, was quick to respond to Rajapakse's election. Prime Minister, Narendra Modi was the first to send a twitter message congratulating the new Sri Lankan president, saying he looked forwards to deepening ties "for peace, prosperity as well as security in our region." Yesterday Indian External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, flew to Sri Lanka to meet Rajapakse and invited him to visit India on November 29 to meet Modi.

In a statement on Monday, the European Union also congratulated Rajapakse. It echoed Washington in declaring that it looked to working with him "to uphold Sri Lanka's commitments to implement international conventions on fundamental rights and to continue efforts aimed at improving governance, human rights and reconciliation."

The EU countries, including France and Germany, which have their own interests in South Asia, backed the US-led "human rights" campaign that led to the ousting of Mahinda Rajapakse in 2015. The EU withdrew GSP trade concessions to Sri Lanka which badly affected its exports, particularly of garments and fish products to Europe. The decision was reversed just months after Sirisena came to power.

An editorial in the London-based *Financial Times* on Monday entitled "Rajapakse's win risks Sri Lanka sliding backwards" underscored the message to the new president, declaring that his brother's "refusal [as president] to offer accountability for atrocities during the civil war strained relations with the west."

The editorial's main concern, however, was that Gotabhaya Rajapakse will turn towards Beijing and called for a concerted effort to counter China's financial inducements. "Greater co-ordination of grants and loans from individual countries, the IMF and others—while making its flow contingent on political change—could rival Chinese spending," it proposed.

The rapid emergence of geo-political rivalries in the aftermath of the Sri Lanka election underscores the advanced character of the US-led confrontation with China that has turned not only Sri Lanka, but the entire region into a battleground for strategic dominance, and highlights the danger of war.

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