

Demise of Sri Lanka's Independence. Deepening of Foreign Control: China, US, India, Japan

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The 71st anniversary of Sri Lanka's independence from British rule was celebrated on February 4 in a "[gallant ceremony](#)" at the Galle Face Green in Colombo. Geopolitical rivalry, foreign intervention and constitutional reform for political devolution, however, are posing serious threats to the island's sovereignty and environmental and human well-being. Even the country's nominal "flag independence" is severely threatened.

Beginning in 1505, Sri Lanka's coastal lowlands were successively colonized by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British until the entire island came under the British with the capture of the Kandyan kingdom in 1815. [Colonial rule](#) was maintained through deliberate policies to divide and conquer local communities, cultivate patronage and collude with local elites. Colonial plantations undermined local subsistence agriculture and the ecological balance, while Western religion and ideologies of progress and civilization weakened the people's historical pride in their cultures and the island's sovereignty.

In the early years following independence, Sri Lankan governments introduced policies to nationalize plantations and other private enterprises, foster local industries, and develop local culture and identities. The 1972 constitution replaced the island's colonial name "Ceylon" with "Sri Lanka," declaring the country to be a "free, sovereign, independent and democratic socialist republic." These designations remain on paper but many of the post-colonial policies backfired, giving rise to massive youth unemployment and violent social [class and communal conflicts](#).

Reversing autarkic economic policies, a newly elected Sri Lankan government introduced an [Open Economy](#) in 1977 giving free rein to foreign investment and imports and to privatizing hitherto state-owned sectors such as transport and telecommunications. The speed-up of economic "liberalization" and the dismantling of the traditions of state welfare, urged on by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, made 1977 a turning point in the economic and political history of the island.

Still, it was not a radical departure in that it signified an acceleration of capitalist development begun with colonial plantations in the 1830s. Notwithstanding promises of prosperity and freedom for all, the post-1977 period saw the emergence of the horrific armed conflict over Tamil separatism that lasted for more than 30 years, until 2009.

Deepening foreign control

In the years following the 2015 elections and a change in political leadership, Sri Lanka's economic crisis, foreign debt, geopolitical rivalry and foreign intervention have all intensified

posing serious threats to the island's independence, peace and security. The Indian Ocean (along with the Western Pacific) is expected to become the center of future world politics, strategy and economics and one of the most [strategically contested](#) regions in the world. China, the US, India and also Japan and other states are struggling for influence over Sri Lanka, which is strategically located in the heart of the Indian Ocean. Sea lanes of the [Indian Ocean](#) are considered to be the busiest in the world with more than 80% of global seaborne oil trade estimated to be passing through them.

Sri Lanka is central to China in its massive import of energy and export of goods. The US-backed political leadership in Sri Lanka tried to break ties with China upon coming into office in 2015. However, faced with the necessity of Chinese economic support, notwithstanding India's concerns over Chinese encirclement, Sri Lanka has committed itself to active participation in the [Maritime Belt and Silk Road initiative](#), China's extensive network of ports and maritime facilities connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

In January 2017, **the Sri Lankan government announced a deal granting China a 99-year lease of [Hambantota Port](#) in the south in exchange for US\$1.1 billion in debt relief.** The debt-for-equity swap raises concerns over the loss of the island's strategic state assets and economic sovereignty, and the long-term impact on the Sri Lankan people.

Another massive Chinese project in Sri Lanka is the [Port City](#) being built in Colombo on 269 hectares of land reclaimed from the Indian Ocean. This \$1.4 billion project by the state-owned Chinese engineering firm China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) is the largest single foreign direct investment in Sri Lankan history.

Environmental activists have pointed out that excavation of sand along the coast is destroying the habitats of various species including corals, while disturbing the ecological balance and the livelihood of those in the fishing and related industries. The Sri Lankan government suspended the project in 2015 but it was resumed in 2016 and is now rapidly moving forward. The new set of environmental regulations the government is said to have negotiated with CCCC is yet to be made public.

The Port City, called "Sri Lanka's 'new Dubai'" by British newspaper The Guardian, "with its own business-friendly tax regime and regulations - and possibly a different [legal system](#) to the rest of Sri Lanka," has serious implications for the island's sovereignty and independence. Sri Lankan activists are concerned about the power a majority-state-owned Chinese corporation would wield as landlord of the territory it leases in the Port City.

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Efforts are also under way by neighboring India to integrate Sri Lanka (as well as other smaller neighbors like Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan) firmly within its sphere of economic and political influence. Based on a memorandum of understanding signed between the Indian and Sri Lankan governments in April 2017, India has been invited to develop the West

Container Terminal in the Colombo Port as a joint venture with the Sri Lanka Ports Authority.

According to The Diplomat, the [Colombo port](#) “is one of the busiest ports in South Asia and an important trans-shipment hub in the region.” After a visit to the island by Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono in January 2018, plans have been made for Japan to build an LNG (liquefied natural gas) terminal in the Colombo Port and a floating storage regasification unit. Both the FSRU and LNG terminal projects are to be joint ventures by the Sri Lanka Ports Authority with both Japan and India.

The [disagreement](#) between Sri Lankan **President Maithripala Sirisena** and **Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe** regarding control of the island’s ports is said to have been a key issue that led to Sirisena’s dismissal of Wickremesinghe as PM last November (he was reinstated in December). Wickremesinghe, backed by International **Trade Minister Malik Samarawickrama**, wanted port development, specifically the East Container Terminal of the Colombo Port, on the basis of an Indian investment. Sirisena, on the other hand, had argued that it was vital to keep the seaport “within the ambit of the Sri Lankan government.”

Another highly controversial agreement between India and Sri Lanka is the proposed Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA). Unlike earlier bilateral trade deals with India, this Indo-Sri Lanka trade deal covers trade in services, especially information technology, shipbuilding and engineering. Although the [ETCA](#) proposal is yet to be made public, given the asymmetry in size and economic and political power of the two countries, it has generated tremendous opposition from professional bodies in Sri Lanka. They are fearful that inundation of doctors and other professionals from India would displace Sri Lankans in their own country.

There are also criticisms in the country of the bilateral trade agreement signed between the governments of Sri Lanka and Singapore in January 2018 on grounds that Sri Lanka would lose millions of dollars each year due to elimination of tariffs for Singapore exports, among other negative effects.

In reverting attention to growing Indian involvement in Sri Lanka, it is necessary to consider India’s plan to build a [sea bridge and tunnel](#), at a cost of more than \$5 billion from the Asian Development Bank, to connect the southern tip of India with the northwest of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka’s territorial integrity, sovereignty and unique cultural heritage were maintained historically through its physical separation from its large and powerful neighbor. As such, there is fear particularly among the Sinhala Buddhist majority that the easy influx of Indian Hindus and Muslims into Sri Lanka through the [planned bridge](#) would change the demographic make-up of Sri Lanka turning them into a minority in the island.

It is also believed that in the long term, the bridge could well threaten the territorial integrity of India itself by providing the basis for the long-held Tamil separatist dream of [Greater Eelam](#) combining Tamil Nadu and northern Sri Lanka, renewing conflict and violence in the process.

In August 2016 the first joint operation between the US and Sri Lankan militaries took place in Jaffna with participation of TNA (Tamil National Alliance) politicians at the launch. Since 2016, [US Navy](#) ships have visited Colombo, and US Seventh Fleet vessels and the aircraft carrier USS *John C Stennis* have visited the eastern port of Trincomalee. Trincomalee, the second-deepest natural harbor in the world, is considered to be of great strategic military

value in the Indian Ocean. Last December, the US Navy announced the setting up of a [logistic hub](#) in Sri Lanka to secure support, supplies and services at sea.

On December 31, US President Donald Trump signed the [Asia Reassurance Initiative Act](#) to strengthen the US strategic position in Asia vis-à-vis China. According to recent reports, between [January 24 and 29](#) this year, Bandaranaike International Airport in Sri Lanka was “used for US military planes to bring in supplies, and for aircraft aboard the [John C Stennisto](#) fly in, load, and ferry them back.”

The Sri Lankan government has not responded to questions regarding the violation of Sri Lankan sovereignty inherent in these acts. Indeed, has [Sri Lanka](#) been turned into a theater for the foremost geopolitical struggle of the 21st century?

Constitutional reform

An October 2015 UN Human Rights Council [Resolution](#) co-sponsored by the US and Sri Lankan governments called on the Sri Lankan government to devolve power as the means to political settlement, reconciliation and human rights. This infamous resolution has to be understood in the broader context of US strategic interests in Sri Lanka. High-level [US government](#) officials have admitted a direct link between the United Nations resolution and a [new constitution](#) for Sri Lanka and have offered assistance to draft and monitor its adoption, claiming “a shared responsibility to help this process through.”

In September 2016, the United States also signed a [partnership](#) with Sri Lanka allowing the [US House of Representatives](#) to “work with” the Sri Lankan Parliament to help develop an “accountable, effective and independent” legislature, thereby raising issues about external interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. Sri Lanka’s treatment as a client state was also evident in [“unwarranted interference”](#) by diplomats of the US and its allies the UK, Canada and the European Union during the crisis caused by the Sri Lankan president’s dismissal of the prime minister last October.

The current government in Sri Lanka does not have a mandate to introduce a new constitution and change the governance structure from a unitary to a federal state. Moreover, the “National Government” that initiated the constitution-making process in March 2016 was [replaced](#) in October 2018 with a minority government without a legal or moral basis for continuing constitutional reform. Nevertheless, constitutional reforms backed by the US and its allies that are under consideration could be adopted by Parliament in the near future.

The [proposed reforms](#) would provide a framework for each province to become constitutionally independent with the freedom to secede from a federal union. Although only Tamil politicians claiming to represent the Northern Province have been clamoring for separation, the proposed federal structure is likely to encourage other politicians to take up secession and call for new names and flags for their regions as well. The political fragmentation and destabilization engendered by the draft constitution could result in several warring mini-states, greater foreign political and military intervention and deeper economic control over local assets.

Sri Lankans from all ethnic, religious, social-class and political backgrounds need to understand the [geopolitical threats](#) facing the country and the dangers of proposed constitutional reforms, and stand up for Sri Lanka’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is

important for us to put aside narrow ethno-religious divisions promoted by self-interested politicians and foreign interests and come together to protect the ecological integrity and sustainability of our island home, which is severely threatened by [climate change](#) – rising sea levels, frequent droughts, floods, landslides and the like.

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