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Chinese Ship Yuan Wang 5 Episode Warrants a Review of India’s Foreign Policy vis-a-vis Sri Lanka: TGTE
https://www.einnews.com/pr_news/587578799/chinese-ship-yuan-wang-5-episode-warrants-a-review-of-india-s-foreign-policy-vis-a-vis-sri-lanka-tgte

The arrival of the Chinese Yuan Wang 5 ship, which raised security and diplomatic concerns from both India and the U.S. and exposed Sri Lanka's true allegiance, left the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota on August 22nd.

The ship docked in Hambantota Port, which is 500 kilometers from India, and which China has under a 99-year lease. US Vice President Mike Pence stated in his famous 2018 speech on China that Hambantota could become a Chinese military base. Hambantota's location along important trade routes and so close to India lends credence to Mr. Pence’s concerns.

The Hambantota port lease to China has significant strategic implications. Following the signing of the 99-year lease agreement, the *Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE) commissioned a reputable maritime law firm in Brussels to conduct a study on international law, sovereignty and economic coercion. Link to the Report: https://tgte-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Expert-Opinion_Hambantota-Port-Project.pdf

The study noted that Hambantota Port's prime location within 10 nautical miles of the main shipping route from Asia to Europe makes it an asset on the Maritime Silk Road, which beyond its trade and investment pillars, necessarily incorporates a geopolitical aspect, and thus a strategic and security dimension. The study also noted that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi labeled Sri Lanka in 2015 a “dazzling pearl on the Maritime Silk Road.”

In 2013 China and Sri Lanka elevated their relationship to a ‘strategic partnership’ and signed a

joint communiqué calling for closer maritime security and defense cooperation and enhanced Chinese involvement in infrastructure projects. On previous occasions, the Sri Lanka government granted access to the port of Colombo to a Chinese submarine, prompting a negative reaction from India.

The study also noted a China-Sri Lanka Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed on 7 April 2016 that expressly mentions areas of cooperation to be developed between the two countries as defense and security-related issues. It is said that the Agreement contains clauses which make any military use of Hambantota subject to the prior authorization of the Sri Lanka government. Due to the confidentiality of the Agreement, it is uncertain if there is aformal exclusion on the military use of Hambantota Port or not.

The study emphasized the project documentation publicly available does not contain such a clause. However, should the clause actually be found in the Agreement (or another project document), this does not affect the fact that -- due to the situation of vulnerability and dependence of the government of Sri Lanka vis-à-vis its Chinese creditor -- the effectiveness of such a clause would still be subject to question.

The arrival of the Yuan Wang 5 ship cannot be viewed as a one-time event. The arrival paved the way for the Hambantota port to become a potential strategic foothold for China. Mr. Shivashankar Menon, India's former Foreign Secretary and National Secretary advisor, observed that "the only way to justify the investment in Hambantota is from a national security standpoint - that they will bring the Peoples Liberation Army in".

With Sri Lanka under a severe economic crisis, it is India that has provided nearly $3.5 billion in aid to Sri Lanka. The Tamils asked both Indian Prime Minister Hon. Narendra Modi and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Hon. Stalin to send the aid directly to the Tamils and, with respect to the aid to the Sri Lankan government, to condition aid on the implementation of the 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, specifically recognition of the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka as the historical habitation of Tamil-speaking people. However, the Indian government sent their aid directly to the Sri Lankan government as a manifestation of their good will towards Sri Lanka without attaching any conditions as far as we know.

According to diplomatic observers, what stands out in the Yuan Wang 5 episode is not the arrival of the Chinese ship, but Sri Lanka's reaction to it. Sri Lanka's decision to allow the Yuan Wang 5 is justified in some quarters that for the IMF bailout, Sri Lanka has to engage with China in restructuring her debt, so Sri Lanka cannot alienate China. It is justified in some quarters that the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lanka bureaucracy is ideologically tilted towards China.

The fact is that anti-India sentiment in the Sinhala polity runs much deeper than that. The Mahavamsa, an ancient Sinhala epic taught to all Sinhalese schoolchildren portrays Indians as invaders. History has shown that Sri Lanka which is ruled by Buddhists has always supported non-Hindu Pakistan and Buddhist-leaning China whenever there has been war against India. In

1971, during the Indo-Pakistan war, the Colombo airport in Sri Lanka was used by Pakistan to wage war against India. As an anti-Indian move, in 1987, Bombay onion and Mysore dhal were renamed in Colombo as “Big Onion” and “Red Dhal”. This anti-Indian sentiment runs across party lines.

The Hambantota 99-year lease was signed, not by Gotabaya Rajapaksa regime, but by Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickramasinghe, the pillars of “good governance”. The recent tweet and comment by Ranil Wickramasinghe that Sri Lanka is firm on a one-China policy and “Nancy Pelosi on her own has created a crisis” is not called for at this juncture, but is a clear manifestation of Sri Lanka's pro-China tilt.

Sri Lanka also plays the “China card”- using the potential threat of allying more with China to curry favor with India. Sri Lanka always tries to eat “Indian curry and Peking duck” at the same time. Sri Lanka always says that it is friendly to India as well as towards China. As the TGTE stated in our 2019 Maveerar Day statement, when the rivalry between China and India intensifies, Sri Lanka will not be able to play this game.

The Yuan Wang 5 has demonstrated this, exposing Sri Lanka’s true allegiance. It also should be noted that on August 15th, Sri Lanka also allowed a Chinese-built Pakistani ship which was denied entry in Bangladesh to visit Sri Lanka.

India always loudly proclaims that Sri Lanka is a friendly country. However, as the Tamil Nadu Legislature’s resolution dated March 27th ,2013 states, it is high time for India to stop calling Sri Lanka a “friendly country”.

As Brahma Chellaney, a former member of India’s National Security Advisory Board noted, “When a small, bankrupt nation like Sri Lanka delivers a diplomatic slap to New Delhi by hosting a Chinese surveillance ship at its commercial port of Hambantota, it is a stunning reminder of both India’s feckless foreign policy and receding influence in its strategic backyard”.

Two-thirds of the coast of the island of Sri Lanka is inhabited by Tamils, especially those parts closest to India. Tamils are ideologically, historically, and culturally aligned with India. Tamils recognize India’s legitimate concerns and interests in the Indian Ocean. Mr. Vellupillai Pirabaharan, the Tamil National Leader, in his 2008 Maveerar Day Speech (Hero’s Day Speech), stated that the Tamils would like to establish a friendly relationship with India. Along this line, the TGTE stated in the Tamil Eelam Freedom Charter promulgated by them in 2013 with the participation of more than 100,000 people that, Tamil Eelam shall maintain close relations with all nations that have democratically elected governments. Expressing solidarity with the people of India and to foster peace and security in the Indian Ocean region, Tamil Eelam will forge a special relationship with India. It also should be noted that when the LTTE administered a de-facto state of Tamil Eelam and had control over a substantial portion of the coastline of the island, no Chinese ship which had military capability came to Sri Lanka.

It is high time for India to re-evaluate its foreign policy towards Sri Lanka.

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