

# Neocolonialism and Geopolitical Rivalry in Sri Lanka

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Global Research, February 07, 2020

[Asia Times](#) 29 January 2020

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*Sri Lanka's historical narrative has been defined by geopolitical rivalry, external aggression and internal resistance to that aggression. The early historical era experienced successive waves of invasion from South Indian kingdoms. These were followed by European conquest and consecutive rule of the coastal lowlands by the Portuguese (1505-1666), the Dutch (1666-1796) and the British (1796-1815).*

There have been numerous sea battles among rival powers to control Trincomalee, the second-deepest natural harbor in the world, situated on the island's east coast. Of great strategic military value, it has been controlled in turn by the Portuguese, Dutch, French and English. Its capture by the British in 1782 paved the way for Britain's [colonization](#) of the entire island after the usurpation of the Kandyan Kingdom in the Central Highlands in 1815. With deception and manipulation, the British conquered the land and built a class of native collaborators; native lords, commoners and Buddhist monks who rebelled were convicted of treason and banished, imprisoned or killed.

British colonial authority and associated capitalist development resulted in a fundamental political, economic and social transformation of the island. The authoritarian and coercive policies used to maintain law and order, land expropriation for plantations, harsh taxation of the local population and the import of indentured labor from South India and other measures had long-term detrimental effects on subsistence agriculture, peasant land rights and livelihood, and the island's demographic distribution, communal harmony and ecological balance.

Although Sri Lanka's period of "classical colonialism" with direct political control by Britain ended with its independence in 1948, the socioeconomic and cultural forces set in place during the colonial period have continued to dominate the island's development, particularly in terms of economic growth and social class and ethno-religious politics. [Neocolonialism](#) - a term introduced by Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, in the early 1960s - describes a post-colonial state that is "in theory independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty," but "in reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside." The concepts of neocolonialism and non-alignment in foreign policy that Nkrumah and other leaders of ex-colonial states championed in the 1950s and 1960s still have great relevance for Sri Lanka today.

Sri Lanka is at a decisive historical juncture, facing new forms of geopolitical rivalry and external military, political and economic as well as cultural intervention, primarily involving overt and covert expansionist efforts of the US, China and India. The small, beleaguered country is struggling to safeguard its sovereignty, its territorial integrity and its very ecological survival.

Politics is about propaganda, control of narratives and exploiting ignorance and fear. There is therefore a practical need for an understanding of the colonial experience that goes beyond academic interest.

## **Post-colonial developments**

Since independence, Sri Lanka's political, economic and cultural evolution has centered on a high level of tension between external intervention and local resistance.

In the early years, Sri Lankan governments, like those of many ex-colonial states, introduced policies to nationalize foreign-owned plantations and other private enterprises, to foster local industries and develop local culture and identities. The Constitution of 1972 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 nationalist policies backfired, giving rise to massive youth unemployment and violent social class and communal conflicts, specifically the 1971 Jathika Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) Sinhala youth insurrection and Tamil militancy.

In 1977, urged on by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, a newly elected Sri Lankan government introduced an "open economy," reversing autarkic economic policies, giving free rein to foreign investment and imports, and privatizing hitherto state-owned sectors. This economic "[liberalization](#)" and associated dismantling of the welfare state, as well as the constitution adopted a year later, made 1977 a turning point in the modern economic and political history of the island. Still, it was not a radical departure, but rather an acceleration, of the capitalist development that had begun with the colonial plantation economy in the 1830s.

The central concern of the post-1977 period was the armed struggle for [separatism](#) by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. In May 2009, the Sri Lankan government defeated the LTTE in what is considered "one of the [few instances](#) in modern history in which a terrorist group had been defeated militarily." Since the end of the armed conflict, both the political and ideological struggle demanding Tamil regional autonomy, as well as geopolitical intervention by external powers in Sri Lanka, have intensified. The convergence of these forces poses serious threats to the island's peace, security and survival as a united and independent country.

## **Neocolonialism and geopolitical rivalry**

Colonialism involves control of a less powerful country by a more powerful one, to exploit resources and increase the latter's power and wealth. In essence, neocolonialism involves the same factors as classical colonialism: militarism, external expropriation of natural resources, deception and manipulation, collusion with local elites, incitement of ethnic and religious differences and local resistance to external aggression. Colonized people must recognize the history and methodology of exploitation and power in order to prevent continued manipulation, deception and domination and to protect the sovereignty and resources of their countries.

In the era of classical colonialism, a single external power, Britain, controlled Sri Lanka. Today, several powerful foreign countries, with China on the one side and the US, India, Japan, and others on the other side, are **competing for control over the island**, which is strategically located in the heart of the Indian Ocean in the ancient East-West maritime

trade route. Sea lanes of the Indian Ocean are considered to be the busiest in the world today, with more than 80% of global seaborne oil trade estimated to be passing through the [ocean's chokepoints](#).

China has incorporated Sri Lanka within its US\$4 trillion [Belt and Road Initiative](#) spanning the world and considered the “most ambitious infrastructural investment effort in history.” China’s projects in Sri Lanka include the Hambantota Port taken over on a controversial 99-year lease and the massive Colombo International Financial City, built on 269 hectares of land reclaimed from the Indian Ocean.

In challenging China’s increasing military assertiveness in the region, the US is seeking to include Sri Lanka in its own “[grand strategy](#) of a united military front between the US and India in the Indo-Pacific.” Concerned that Hambantota Port could become a Chinese military base, India is pursuing [control](#) over Sri Lanka’s other strategic seaports, developing the British-colonial-era oil-tank farm in Trincomalee and constructing a container terminal at the port in Colombo (in partnership with Japan), next to a Chinese terminal built as part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

While there is antipathy in Sri Lanka toward Chinese and Indian intervention to grab local resources and control of ports and infrastructure, given the US military record, there is a much greater fear of US military intervention and interference in local governance. The [United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution](#) of October 1, 2015, co-sponsored by the United States and the former US-backed Sri Lankan government, in the name of peace and reconciliation could turn Sri Lanka into a client state where the US and the “international community” can dictate terms for constitutional reform and internal governance including the security and judicial sectors. In effect, the resolution has echoes of the Proclamation of March 2, 1815 - the [Kandyan Convention](#) - signed by the British and a faction of the Kandyan aristocracy that turned Sri Lanka into a British colony.

There is a parallel between the UNHRC Resolution and the proposed Sri Lanka [compact](#) with the US Millennium Challenge Corporation, a component of US National Security Strategy linking economic development with defense and diplomacy. They both manipulate the Sri Lankan government to turn against itself, giving up its power and responsibilities over the most vital sectors of the state, the resources of the country and the rights of its people. The MCC Compact seeks to privatize and commoditize state land to make them readily available to investors including foreign corporations. It brings to mind the early stage of capitalist development in Sri Lanka, when the British colonial state introduced legislation, infrastructure and other measures to establish the plantation economy.

Military engagement with Sri Lanka is considered vital to achieving US objectives in the Indo-Pacific region. The Acquisition and Cross Services Agreement ([ACSA](#)) provides the basis to set up a US ‘logistic hub’ in Sri Lanka to secure support, supplies and services at sea. If fully implemented, the ACSA would in effect “undermine the Chinese share of [geopolitical control](#) in Sri Lanka, by way of military presence in the country.” Similarly, if Sri Lanka signs the proposed Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the US, it would allow US Army personnel to operate in any part of Sri Lanka, without any restrictions. Sri Lankans fear that the SOFA would make “the whole island ... a US-controlled super state operating [above the Sri Lankan laws](#) and state....”

## **The way forward**



**Gotabaya Rajapaksa** (image on the right), the former defense secretary who led the armed victory over the LTTE in 2009, was elected president of Sri Lanka on November 16, 2019. His massive victory was a response to growing concern over national security and widespread opposition to external interventions.

The newly elected president and his administration are under pressure both from Sri Lanka's nationalist forces that brought him into office and from external powers, especially India and the United States, who want to continue pursuing their own geo-strategic and economic [interests](#) in Sri Lanka. Local activists are continuing their demands to discard the MCC compact, military agreements and UNHRC Resolution, and also renegotiate better terms for Sri Lanka on the lease of Hambantota Port and environmental regulation of the Chinese Port City. The demands against Indian projects including the oil-tank farm in Trincomalee also persist.

Sri Lankan people recognize that these interventions together would thoroughly subordinate their country and turn the government into a mere shell of a state, leaving the island wide open for economic and military exploitation and a battleground for the geopolitical rivalry over the Indian Ocean.

It is not easy for a small country like Sri Lanka to forge a foreign policy that uses its geo-strategic position to its own advantage. While maintaining cordial relationships with the external powers, the principles of sovereignty, democracy and environmental sustainability must continue to be upheld. In light of the dangers posed by the recent bilateral agreements and the UNHRC Resolution, Sri Lanka has to join with other small countries in Asia and Africa to renew the policy of non-alignment that it championed valiantly during the Cold War.

It is also necessary to call on India to do the same. India, which was itself the victim of two centuries of British colonialism, needs to take on an enlightened leadership role in the region, independent of the China-US geopolitical rivalry. In fact, the term "[non-alignment](#)" was coined by Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru during a speech he made in 1954 in Colombo.

Sri Lanka's [National Joint Committee](#) expressed the urgent call for the island's non-

alignment in a June 2019 letter written to the then Sri Lankan prime minister regarding the MCC Agreement:

“[We are] committed to protect and preserve the unity and territorial integrity of our nation. We believe that Sri Lanka should follow a foreign policy of nonalignment. Due to the fact that Sri Lanka is strategically located in the Indian Ocean the country needs to remain nonaligned and refrain from getting involved in the geopolitical confrontation that is developing between America and China, through agreements that would enable these countries to gain a foothold in Sri Lanka.”

Indeed, it is urgent for all countries to uphold the [principles](#) of non-alignment and resist the polarization and militarization tearing the world apart. These principles – sovereignty and territorial integrity of states; independence from great power block influences and rivalries; the struggles against imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism, foreign occupation and domination; disarmament; non-interference into the internal affairs of states; rejection of the use or threat of use of force in international relations; the restructuring of the international economic system; international cooperation on an equal footing – are more urgently needed than ever.

Sri Lanka’s historical trajectory – geopolitical rivalry, external aggression and internal resistance to that aggression – continues with great vigor in this current complex period. The tremendous suffering and destruction caused by this narrative calls for a [shift](#) in human relations from domination to partnership, from the exploitative and violent path of colonialism and neocolonialism to one of peace, justice and ecology. This is the [transformational](#) challenge facing both Sri Lanka and the world at this decisive time.

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