

US, China and the war in Sri Lanka

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Diplomatic skirmishing in the UN Security Council between the US and China over the war in Sri Lanka underscores their growing rivalry in every corner of the globe. Both powers are intent on staking out their claims in Colombo as the 25-year conflict on the island reaches its climax.

Last week UN Security Council members Austria, Mexico and Costa Rica, backed by the US and Britain, called for an informal briefing on the humanitarian crisis facing tens of thousands of people trapped by the war in northern Sri Lanka. China, supported by Russia, blocked the move declaring that it was “an internal matter” for Sri Lanka and was not a threat to international security.

None of this diplomatic posturing should be taken at face value. All of a sudden Washington has begun to express concern about the plight of tens of thousands of civilians caught in fighting as the Sri Lankan army closes in on the remaining pocket of territory held by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The US media is now peddling a similar line. The New York Times, for instance, published an article on Sunday about the plight of refugees and the “challenges of peace”. American ambassador to Sri Lanka Robert Blake declared he was worried that the government was dominated by “certain hard-line Sinhalese elements” and appealed to President Mahinda Rajapakse to “reach out to the Tamil and Muslim communities”.

The article described the “cold peace” in the island’s eastern province, which has been firmly under army control since mid-2007. In Batticaloa, there are “army checkpoints in the town centre, armed thugs prowling back streets and continuing reports of abductions and disappearances.”

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, justified such police state measures, saying: “The war is like a cancer. Even after curing a cancer, there is a period for radiation treatment. It is the same with the war on terrorism.”

Until recently, however, the US has quietly backed President Rajapakse, the war and the military’s gross abuse of democratic rights. But as the army made rapid advances into the LTTE’s remaining territory from early January and the defeat of the LTTE appeared likely, the US made a tactical shift. It began to call for a “political solution” to the conflict—a deal, not with the LTTE, but with sections of the Tamil elite to temper the decades of anti-Tamil discrimination that gave rise to the war.

Washington’s concern is that ongoing communal tensions will not only destabilise Sri Lanka, but neighbouring India, which has become America’s key economic and strategic partner in

the South Asia. New Delhi is worried about the potential for political unrest to spill over in southern state of Tamil Nadu where Tamils have historic ties with Sri Lanka. The “humanitarian issue has been raised as a means of pressuring the Rajapakse regime to make concessions.

India and the US share another common concern—the growing influence of China in Sri Lanka. While India has had to be cautious in its support for the Sri Lankan war, China has provided military and financial aid to Colombo with no questions asked. Chinese sales of arms including fighter jets, sophisticated radar, anti-aircraft guns and other military hardware and munitions have helped tip the balance in the country’s protracted civil war. Visiting last month, Defence Secretary Rajapakse thanked China for its “steadfast support” in strengthening the “war on terrorism”.

China’s decision to block a UN Security Council discussion was also welcomed by the Sri Lankan political establishment. An editorial in last weekend’s Sunday Times denounced the mounting pressure “from the Western countries where there has been heavy lobbying by Sri Lankan expatriates and a group of international ‘bleeding hearts’. These moves in the UN, it declared, “have been shot down by Sri Lanka’s steadfast ally in its war on terrorism—China.”

Like the US, China’s manoeuvring in the UN is guided by self-interest. Beijing conveniently forgot about its principle of “non-interference in internal affairs” when it came to the US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the case of Sri Lanka, it has used the argument to curry favour in Colombo by blocking a UN debate and to defend its unconditional support for the government and its criminal war.

The pay-off for Beijing has been a \$US1 billion deal with Colombo in 2007 to construct a major port facility in the southern town of Hambantota. The first stage of the project, being built by Chinese corporations and largely with Chinese finance, is due to be completed at the end of 2010. When completed it will include a container port, a bunkering system, an oil refinery, an airport and other facilities that are expected to transform Hambantota into a major transshipment hub.

The importance of the project for China is obvious. Hambantota on the southern tip of Sri Lanka is just six nautical miles from the main east-west trade route across the Indian Ocean. Around 70 percent of China’s oil imports is shipped via this sea lane from the Middle East through the Strait of Malacca to Chinese ports. Acutely aware that its shipping would be vulnerable in the event of any conflict, especially with the US, Beijing has been expanding its navy and developing a “chain of pearls”—port facilities along this trade route. Hambantota, like the Chinese-built port of Gwadar in Pakistan, is one such pearl.

The US and India are intent on countering China’s strategy. Thus under the guise of humanitarian concern, India has sent a military medical team to Sri Lanka. Earlier this month the US proposed to send a Marine Expeditionary Brigade to northern Sri Lanka to evacuate refugees—an offer that appears to have been turned down.

Like the diplomatic posturing in the UN Security Council, none of these moves—by either side—is motivated by concern for working people in Sri Lanka who have borne the brunt of 25 years of war. Rather the small South Asian island, like other parts of the world, is being drawn into the international rivalry that is intensifying as the global economic crisis deepens and foreshadows far more catastrophic conflicts.

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