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Sri Lankan government “postpones” visit by Chinese research vessel

On Monday, Sri Lanka’s foreign ministry requested Beijing indefinitely postpone the arrival of the Chinese ship Yuan Wang 5 to Hambantota Port, located on the southern tip of the island. The ship was scheduled to dock at Hambantota from August 11 to August 17 for “replenishing” and “refueling.”



Yuan Wang 5

Colombo’s decision, a result of pressure from the US and India, is another expression of Washington’s accelerating confrontation with China throughout the region. While China said the Yuan Wang 5 was a satellite-tracking research vessel, Washington and New Delhi have branded it a “spy ship.”

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Sri Lanka is caught in the middle of a geopolitical maelstrom over the Yuan Wang 5 with Washington backed by New Delhi determined to break Colombo's relations with Beijing. Over the past decade Washington has increasingly intervened to bring Sri Lanka—strategically located in the Indian Ocean—into line with its escalating economic and military buildup against China.

According to media reports, the foreign ministry on July 12 cleared the Yuan Wang 5 to dock at Hambantota. It granted permission, stating that it was routine for commercial and military ships of friendly nations, such as India, Australia, Japan, and China, to visit Sri Lankan ports.

On Monday, however, the Sri Lankan foreign ministry said, that “in light of the need for further consultations,” it had asked the Chinese embassy in Colombo “to defer” the Yuan Wang 5's visit.

Pointing to the real reasons, the *Washington Post* on Thursday reported that “Indian and U.S. officials have strongly pressured the Sri Lankan government to revoke access to the port, infuriating their Chinese counterparts... While the Chinese navy ship arriving at Hambantota is not strategically significant, the US and Indian officials argue that it would be viewed as Sri Lanka giving special treatment to China, a major creditor.”

In a July 29 media briefing, an Indian foreign ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi declared: “The government carefully monitors any developments having a bearing on India's security and economic interests, and takes all necessary measures to safeguard them,” and added, “I think that should be a clear message.”

The Indian media over the past weeks has churned out reports and articles portraying the Chinese vessel a threat to the country's security. Defense analyst Rahul Bedi in New Delhi claimed that the ship was “loaded with very advanced sensors that can be used for surveillance.”

On August 6, the Indian website *Firstpost* said the Yuan Wang 5 was “a dual-use spy vessel, employed for space and satellite tracking and with specific usage in intercontinental ballistic missile launches.” The ship, it continued was a “highly

sophisticated missile range instrumentation ship with top-of-the-line antennas and electronic equipment to support the launching and tracking of missiles and rockets.”

India's *Economic Times* said the Chinese ship had a surveillance range of more than 750 km and claimed it was a security threat to strategic installations in the southern Indian states, including India's largest nuclear plants situated in Kalapakkam and Koodankulam in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

None of these lurid allegations was substantiated.

The deep-water Hambantota Port in southern Sri Lanka is located at the top of the main shipping route from Africa and the Middle East and East and Northern Asia and Australia. While it was built by a Chinese company via a \$US1.5 billion loan, the Sri Lankan government was unable to repay the loan and leased it to China for 99 years in 2017 via a loan-swapping agreement.

Washington and India immediately initiated a campaign against the arrangement, alleging that China had used the port project as a “debt trap” to increase its influence in the region and planned to use the port as a military base.

While Beijing rejected these claims, declaring that it only has commercial interests, it is seeking to advance its own strategic and military interests amid the escalating US provocations against China. US accusations, and those of its strategic partners, such as India, are cynical and hypocritical. Washington alone has more than 700 overseas military bases around the world.

China has sharply reacted against Washington and New Delhi pressuring Sri Lanka to stop Yuan Wang 5 docking at Hambantota. On August 6, pro-US President Ranil Wickremesinghe met China's ambassador Qi Zhenhong, at his request, in a closed-door meeting to discuss the issue. No details have been released about the talks.

Following the Sri Lankan foreign ministry request that Yuan Wang 5's arrival be deferred, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin publicly called for an end to the “senseless pressure on Sri Lanka” over alleged security concerns.

Without mentioning India by name, his criticism was clearly directed against it. “Sri Lanka is a sovereign state. It can develop relations with other countries in the light of its own development interests,” he said. It was “morally irresponsible,” he continued, to pressure the Sri Lankan government during the country’s current unprecedented economic and political crisis.

New Delhi intervened in recent months to provide economic assistance as Sri Lanka’s crisis deepened. This includes \$US4 billion in loans to import critical supplies of food, fuel, medicine, and cooking gas, prompting President Wickremesinghe to declare in his policy statement last week that Indian Minister Narendra Modi “has given us a breath of life.”

This financial assistance, however, is not just to save the Sri Lankan ruling class but to strengthen India’s influence over Colombo. New Delhi is also keen to prevent the Sri Lankan political crisis from spilling over the Palk Strait into India where mass social opposition is mounting against the Indian government.

The Modi government has systematically pressured Sri Lanka to distance itself from Beijing. Last year, China suspended construction of a renewable energy project in three northern Sri Lankan islands off the Jaffna Peninsula, 50 km from the southern Indian coast, after India raised concerns.

While keen to secure financial assistance from China, Wickremesinghe, a longtime pro-US stooge, is acutely sensitive to US and India’s geopolitical demands. In opposition, Wickremesinghe and his United National Party backed Washington’s demands, particularly since the end of Colombo’s communalist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009, for the former President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government to distance itself from China.

Behind the scenes, former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, supported by Wickremesinghe, conspired to persuade Maithripala Sirisena to resign from Rajapakse’s ruling party, undermined Rajapakse in the January 2015 presidential election and helped install Sirisena into the presidency.

The blocking of Chinese vessel to Hambantota Port is not an isolated incident but is another component of the Biden administration's aggressive provocations against China.

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