

# The US Rebalancing Strategy towards Asia and the Pacific and Sri Lanka's Options

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Last year speaking at an event organized by the Centre for American Progress, a think tank at George Washington University in Washington DC the US Vice President Joe Biden reaffirmed the Obama administration's commitment to its rebalancing strategy towards Asia and the Pacific. He stressed that Washington's goal in the region is to make it both more secure and prosperous as economic development on one hand and peace stability on the other are interlinked. He was speaking ahead of a scheduled visit to India and Singapore.

The US Vice President's visit to India was first announced in June last year when the US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Sri Lanka's neighbor. Regional, global and bilateral issues were expected to be discussed during the visit. Biden's visit was also important in that it was expected to prepare the ground for the Summit Meeting between the US President Barack Obama and the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh which was expected to take place in September last year during Singh's visit to the US to attend the annual United Nations General Assembly. This was to be their second Summit Meeting in Washington. Both Biden's visit to India and the Summit Meeting between Obama and Singh were expected to play a role in finalizing a commercial agreement to build a nuclear reactor in Gujarat which is expected to strengthen ties between the two countries.

During a visit to India in mid-2012 the then US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta elaborated on the US rebalancing strategy towards Asia and the Pacific as follows. The American military plans to expand its partnerships and presence in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia. It is within this arc that the US plans to redeploy the bulk of its naval forces including as many as six aircraft carriers by 2020. He was of the view that India was of crucial importance to this strategy. Indian analyst Arun Sahgal, writing in New Delhi's Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) website at the time, interpreted the important place the US is giving to India in this strategy as being aimed at using India to balance against China. In the face of such a possible US intention Sahgal advocated a sophisticated approach of drawing upon advanced US technological resources to augment India's defence capabilities while maintaining India's strategic autonomy to engage and maintain close ties with China at the same time.

Now, what are Sri Lanka's options in this emerging great game in the Asia-Pacific? Faced as it is with pressure from the US at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), will Sri Lanka be pushed into the Chinese camp? Here, Sri Lanka would do well to approach the matter from a long-term perspective and avoid becoming a client state of any major power, whether it be China, India or the US, and seek to maintain its cherished independence of action in regional affairs as a sovereign state. It should adopt a neutral and non-aligned approach while doing its utmost to maintain amicable relations with all three major powers. The strategic advantage of such an approach is that it would give Sri Lanka more space for maneuver in regional affairs and enable it to benefit from security and economy enhancing opportunities offered by all three major powers in maintaining its stability and development momentum.

## REFERENCES

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