

# CHINA PUSHES DEFENCE TIES WITH BANGLADESH, SRI LANKA

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Expanding ties: Sri Lankan PM Mahinda Rajapaksa, right, and China's Defence Minister Wei Fenghe in Colombo on Wednesday. APERANGA JAYAWARDENA

China's Minister of Defence Wei Fenghe, visiting Bangladesh and Sri Lanka this week, has called on countries in the neighbourhood to resist "powers from outside the region setting up military alliances in South Asia".

General Wei's comments in Dhaka on Tuesday came amid a push back from Chinese officials on the India-U.S.-Australia-Japan Quad grouping, which some in Beijing have described as a quasi-military alliance.

## Colombo visit

The Chinese Defence Minister and People's Liberation Army General on Wednesday held talks with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka, as he began a two-day visit following his trip to Bangladesh. Both sides had discussions that were "extremely fruitful", said a statement issued by the Presidential Media Division. "He [Chinese Defence Minister] also said the relations between the two nations were further strengthened by this visit," the statement said.

The General's visit comes six months after top Chinese foreign policy official Yang Jiechi was in Colombo in October 2020 for high-level discussions. China on Tuesday also convened a six-country South Asia dialogue on COVID-19 and economic cooperation with the Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The senior Chinese official's visit to Sri Lanka coincides with mounting resistance in Sri Lanka to a Bill envisioning laws to govern the China-backed \$1.4 billion Colombo Port City. The Supreme Court recently heard a case on the matter, following some 20 petitions by opposition parties and civil society organisations that challenged the Bill arguing that it "threatened" Sri Lanka's sovereignty. The top court is expected to rule on the case soon. The visiting Chinese official is also scheduled to meet PM Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Beijing has extended over \$2 billion — in loans and a currency swap facility — to Colombo after the pandemic struck, to help the government cope with its economic strain. Prior to that Colombo owed Beijing over \$ 5 billion in loan repayment.

On Tuesday, General Wei held talks with Bangladesh President Abdul Hamid in Dhaka. A statement from China's official Xinhua news agency quoted him as calling for the two militaries to "increase high-level visits, deepen cooperation in equipment technology, broaden exchanges in specialized fields and forge closer military relations."

"To jointly maintain regional peace and stability," he said, "the two sides should make joint efforts against powers outside the region setting up military alliance in South Asia and practicing hegemonism."

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