

# US seeks to develop close military ties with Sri Lanka

By Vijith Samarasinghe  
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The US Navy's Seventh Fleet Flagship, USS Blue Ridge, arrived in Colombo on March 26 for a five-day visit, with 900 sailors on board. This is the first time in five years that a US navy vessel has docked in Colombo.

Marking the event, the Seventh Fleet command said the visit aimed to "build new ties and promote peace and stability in the Indo-Asia-Pacific." Part of the US Pacific command, the Seventh Fleet is the largest of the US Navy and conducts "forward deployed naval operations in support of US national interests in the Indo-Asia Pacific area."

"US national interests" is a reference to Washington's quest to establish unchallenged domination in the Indo-Pacific as part of its global drive for hegemony. Far from "promoting peace and stability" in the region, the US represents the greatest threat to peace and stability. Washington is aggressively preparing war plans against China in order to subordinate it to US interests and building military ties and alliances throughout the region for that purpose.

In a display of the Colombo government's willingness to align itself with the US, President Maithripala Sirisena visited the warship as part of the official welcome. Later, Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera and parliamentary speaker Karu Jayasuriya boarded the Blue Ridge and participated in a reception with the naval officers and the US Ambassador to Colombo, Atul Keshap.

Sirisena was installed as president in the January 2015 election in what amounted to a regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington. The US had supported former President Mahinda Rajapakse's intensified war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and ignored his attacks on democratic

rights. However, as Rajapakse strengthened ties with Beijing, Washington hypocritically exploited the issue of his government's war crimes and human rights violations and backed his removal from the office.

After Sirisena took office and appointed the United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister, a steady stream of American officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry, visited Colombo to deepen ties with the new government.

During the reception with Seventh Fleet officials, Ambassador Keshap said: "This [naval ship visit] will be the first of many to come." Blue Ridge commander Vice Admiral Joseph Aucoin emphasised that "we would like to come back and bring more of our Seventh Fleet ships to Colombo and to Sri Lanka."

Far from being a symbolic gesture of goodwill between the two nations, the ship's visit is part of the close integration of Sri Lanka into the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" directed against China.

On March 29, senior Seventh Fleet officers met with Sri Lanka Navy and Air Force officials to discuss "operational topics." A news release said there were discussions "about potential bilateral training between the US and Sri Lanka," in a "Pacific Partnership, a joint effort between the United States, foreign militaries, and other organisations to conduct civil-military operations including humanitarian and civic assistance."

The discussions are indicative of the increasing Sri Lankan collaboration with the US military. Sri Lankan Rear Admiral Dharmendra Wettewa, who attended the talks, said: "I hope we can have something constructive so that we can follow up for months and years."

Earlier, a US embassy statement announcing the warship's visit noted that it sought to build upon the

US-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue held in Washington during February, at which “both nations pledged to strengthen maritime security cooperation efforts in the Indian Ocean Region in order to counter piracy, provide humanitarian assistance, and ensure free and safe navigation in the region’s vital shipping lanes.”

“Freedom of navigation” is the pretext used by the US and its allies to denounce China for reclaiming land on islets and reefs it controls in the South China Sea and to deploy warships and planes to the area.

A joint statement issued after February’s Partnership Dialogue said the US had invited Sri Lanka to join the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC), which is a grouping of India and some ASEAN nations with America to strengthen economic, trade and transport linkages between Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia.

The statement declared that economic cooperation between the US and Sri Lanka would “fully leverage Sri Lanka’s location and skilled workforce.” This formulation further indicated that the relationship between the two countries primarily hinges on Sri Lanka’s geo-strategic position in the Indian Ocean.

Speaking in Washington on March 28, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Nisha Desai Biswal, outlined Washington’s policy priorities in South and Central Asia. Reiterating the region’s strategic importance, Biswal said: “Geographically, the Indian Ocean’s sea routes connect Asia with the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, and the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca are two of the world’s most important strategic economic throughways.” She also noted that Central Asia “shares borders with Russia, China, Afghanistan, and Iran—all states where we have complex and critical foreign policy interests.”

Biswal said Sri Lanka was “rebalancing its foreign and economic policy as it emerges from its self-imposed isolation” and benefitting “from its strategic location as a maritime gateway to some of the largest markets in Asia.”

Washington is also seeking to build a close military and strategic alliance with India against China. Washington is discussing a Logistic Support Agreement with New Delhi’s Bharatiya Janatha Party-led government to give the US military access to Indian bases. India is still hesitant to strike such an

agreement, but the discussion underscores the aggressive intent of the US.

Behind the backs of the population, the Colombo government is increasingly entrenching the country in the US war plans against China, which carry the danger of a catastrophic nuclear conflagration.

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