

US steps up military exercises in South Asia

By Saman Gunadasa
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The US navy began this year's "Pacific Partnership" exercises on March 1 at Hambantota Port in southern Sri Lanka, the first time they have been held in South Asia. This marks another stage in the increasing involvement of South Asian states in the US military encirclement of China.

The Pacific Partnership involves the US Seventh Fleet, which is at the centre of the America's "Air-Sea Battle" plans against China. The Pentagon recently signed an agreement with the Indian company Reliance to carry out maintenance work for the Seventh Fleet in Gujarat state on India's west coast.

While the Pacific Partnership has been billed as a "humanitarian assistance and disaster relief preparedness mission," the multinational exercises will feature military and civilian personnel from Australia, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom and the United States. Host countries this year include Myanmar, Malaysia and Vietnam, in addition to Sri Lanka.

US Pacific Fleet's USNS Fall River arrived at Hambantota Port last week, with 104 US, Australian and Japanese marines on board. The Indian navy's Gharial and Sri Lanka's SLNS Samudura, a former US coast guard vessel donated to Sri Lanka in 2004, are also involved. Another 60 American marines and naval personnel will later join the operation.

A three-member US Congress delegation, including House Democracy Partnership chairman Peter Roskam, visited Hambantota Port and the Yala natural sanctuary, which is close to the facility, before the exercises commenced.

The 10-day military operation will involve US Pacific Fleet chief Rear Admiral Donald Gabrielson and Sri Lanka's Southern Province governor, chief minister and district secretaries. When the exercises finish on March 17, the USNS Fall River will proceed to Myanmar, Malaysia and finally to Vietnam in June.

A number of Sri Lankan naval officers will be on board the ship.

Last week, Sri Lankan president Maithripala Sirisena oversaw a passing-out parade of over 300 members of the Sri Lanka Navy Marine Battalion. The battalion is the first of its type and was modelled on the US marines.

The annual Pacific Partnership military exercises began in 2004, promoted as humanitarian and disaster relief exercises. This year, the US and the Sri Lankan navies are scheduled to be involved in civil activities, such as conducting community health clinics, school and hospital renovations, learning exchanges for medical and disaster relief, and "peace and security" seminars in and around Hambantota. The US 7th Fleet Band will perform public concerts.

No hospital ship, however, will be involved in this year's exercises. Pacific Partnership commander Stanfield Chien claimed this was because "budgets are very tough."

The humanitarian façade is aimed at whitewashing Washington's past crimes, from the war in Vietnam to those in Iraq, Libya and Syria, and covering up the real purpose of the exercises—its ongoing military buildup against China.

Hambantota Port was developed and expanded a few years ago by the Sri Lankan government using Chinese funds. The facility is part of China's "One road, One belt" project. It is adjacent to one of the world's busiest sea lanes, through which China's oil and other natural resource imports and almost all its exports to Europe, Africa and Middle East pass.

The cash-strapped Sri Lankan government is currently negotiating a deal to sell 80 percent of the port to China, along with an allocation of 15,000 acres of adjacent land to establish an industrial zone to attract foreign investment.

While the extension of the Pacific Partnership

exercises to South Asia would be of concern to Beijing, so far it has said nothing about the military operation.

The Pacific Partnership was initiated by the US after the 2004 tsunami disaster, which engulfed the South and South East Asian regions. At that time, Washington sent 13,000 troops, along with 20 warships, including the giant USS Abraham Lincoln, war planes and helicopters to the Indian Ocean region, supposedly to assist tsunami-affected countries. It was the largest US military deployment in the region since the Vietnam War. In January 2005, 200 US marines were transported by the USS Duluth to southern Sri Lanka as part of this military deployment.

The Pacific Partnership claims to be a multinational humanitarian project, but it excludes China and includes Japan, Australia, South Korea and India, which are an integral part of the US-led line-up against Beijing.

During his trip to East Asia last month, US defence secretary James Mattis reaffirmed Washington's longstanding strategic alliances with Japan and South Korea. He also reiterated the Obama administration's statement that the US would back Japan in a war with China over disputed rocky outcrops in the East China Sea.

Last month, the Trump administration also announced that India would be a service and repair hub for battleships and other vessels. Last year the Obama administration conferred "Major Defence Partner" status on India.

The Sri Lankan government is now in the process of renewing its Acquisition and Cross-Service Agreement with the US. Signed in 2007 for 10 years by the previous government of Mahinda Rajapakse, it committed Sri Lanka to the servicing, repair and refuelling of US warships or war planes, in line with US requirements, at the country's ports and airports.

In 2015, Washington orchestrated a regime-change operation to oust the Rajapakse government because of its close ties with China. The current pro-US Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration has fallen into line with all of Washington's geo-strategic demands.

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