

# Sri Lanka to integrate into US regional military plans

Saman Gunadasa  
11 June 2002

As part of a growing US military presence on the Indian subcontinent, the Bush administration is preparing to sign a defence agreement next month with Sri Lanka to provide extensive access to the island's ports, airfields and air space for the US armed forces. The agreement known as the Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) is the first such pact entered into by a Sri Lankan government with a major Western power since the country's independence in 1948.

The negotiations have been held in secret and no details have been formally released. The US embassy in Sri Lanka only commented after the weekly *Sunday Times* in Colombo leaked news of the deal. A brief embassy statement declared that each party to the agreement will be able "to avail itself of servicing, repairs, spare parts and equipment of the other in exchange for payment or through the exchange of identical goods or goods of equivalent value". So in exchange for refuelling US warships, for instance, the Sri Lankan armed forces will be able to claim cash, spare parts or equipment.

According to the *Sunday Times*, the agreement will go further. The US will provide military training as well as equipment and spare parts. "The training, which will encompass joint exercises with United States Armed Forces, will focus on counter terrorism and related activity... Neither Colombo nor Washington is willing to confirm the release of two maritime surveillance aircraft and one patrol ship to intensify surveillance over the eastern seas of Sri Lanka."

Even before the agreement has been signed, US warships have begun to dock in Colombo harbour to refuel and to provide shore leave for sailors. The *USS Hopper* arrived in April, the first American navy vessel to dock in Colombo in eight years.

Concerned that the deal may provoke protests by those opposed to aggressive US interventions in the region, Washington and Colombo have attempted to play down its significance. Spokesmen in both countries have described the agreement as "routine"—just like those signed by the US with another 56 countries. US embassy spokesman Stephen

Holgate declared: "Clearly when you sign an agreement that implies a certain level of cooperation and closeness, but this is not a quantum leap."

The defence agreement will, however, have far reaching implications. Firstly, it will strengthen the hand of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in negotiations with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), due to start in Thailand next month. The talks, which follow a ceasefire reached in February, are over a settlement to Sri Lanka's brutal 19-year civil war. The defence pact with the US provides Wickremesinghe, who is already under fire from Sinhala chauvinist groups, with a bargaining chip to extract concessions from the LTTE.

The obvious threat is: if the LTTE fails to agree, any renewed fighting will see significant US support for the Sri Lankan armed forces. "Counterterrorism" training and surveillance of the island's eastern seas take on a particular meaning in that context. The ruling elites in Colombo brand the LTTE and its operations as "terrorist" and the "eastern seas" are among the main routes through which LTTE boats smuggle weapons. US aid in these areas would be of direct assistance to Sri Lankan operations against the LTTE.

For the US, a defence agreement with Sri Lanka offers access to military facilities on an island that is strategically placed not only in relation to the Indian subcontinent but also a huge area of the Indian Ocean from the Middle East to South East Asia. Bush's "global war on terrorism" has provided the pretext for the invasion of Afghanistan, the establishment of military bases in Central Asia and closer military ties with a number of countries including India. The deal with Colombo integrates Sri Lanka into Washington's broader strategic plans, with one of the prime goals being domination of Central Asia's huge oil and gas reserves.

Last week the US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Ashley Wills, obliquely underscored the importance of the island's strategic position potential to the US. He told a gathering of scholars, diplomats and journalists in Washington that "because of its location and the talent and 'entrepreneurial outlook' of its citizens, the 19-million-strong nation stands

to evolve into the Singapore of South Asia and prosper”.

According to the *Sunday Times*, the defence agreement was drawn up this April in Colombo during discussion with a four-man team of US military and legal personnel. Preparations had taken place the previous month during a visit by a high-powered team of US officials, led by Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs Christina Rocca and including US Brigadier General Timothy Ghormely, commander of the US Marine Expeditionary Brigade. The group met with Wickremesinghe, Defence Minister Tilak Marapana and army top brass at the Palaly army camp in the war-torn north.

General Ghormely also visited Trincomalee, a key harbour on Sri Lanka’s eastern coast. The deep-water port was developed as a major naval base by the British military, which retained access after independence in 1948, up to 1956. US-based oil companies have shown interest in gaining control over a large oil storage facility at nearby China Bay, built by the British during World War II.

The leasing of the oil facility has been a highly controversial issue because of Sri Lanka’s strategic location. In the late 1980s, protests by the Indian government compelled Sri Lanka to abandon plans to allow the US to use oil storage. The Sri Lankan government is now preparing to lease some of the oil tanks at China Bay to the Indian Oil Corporation, which will be allowed to provide its “own security” to protect them. India has agreed to allow US interests to use other oil tanks, if requested.

During the past decade and a half, successive Sri Lankan governments have built up ties with the US in return for support in the war against the LTTE. In the early 1980s, Colombo allowed the establishment of a Voice of America radio transmitter at Iranawila on Sri Lanka’s west coast to beam propaganda to China, Burma and North Korea. Critics in India insisted the controversial facility would be used for military communications.

The US has also helped train and equip the Sri Lankan military over nearly two decades. Since 1994, US Special Forces have been involved in training for small army units. The US has provided mortar detection devices and engaged in intelligence exchanges, particularly after the Sri Lankan army’s disastrous defeats at the hands of the LTTE in 1999 and 2000. But this relatively limited military cooperation will be significantly boosted under the proposed defence agreement.

Recognising it will strengthen the Sri Lankan military, various Sinhala chauvinist groups have immediately hailed the deal with the US. An article in the *Island*, referring to the Sri Lankan army’s loss of the key Elephant Pass base in 2000, declared: “If, countries in the region [a reference to India] are unable to help us with military support... we must

be free to enter into agreements with any country that would help us... There should be no dragging of feet on the matter of signing the agreement with the US, which should be entirely in our national interest.”

Joseph Pararajasingham, a senior MP of the Tamil National Alliance (a coalition of bourgeois Tamil parties), expressed fears that the defence agreement was aimed against the LTTE. He told the head of the political section of US embassy in Colombo, Joseph Novak, that Tamils were “very much concerned and suspicious” about this pact. It could be used “as a tool to support the Sri Lankan military’s war against the LTTE. Signing the agreement would mean that you support the majority community (Sinhalese) to continue the discrimination and subjugation of the Tamil people,” he said.

But the LTTE itself has made no objections. LTTE leader Thamilchelvan told the *Sunday Times*: “We are group of freedom fighters fighting for the sovereignty and integrity of Tamil nation. The sovereignty of Sri Lanka vis-à-vis other countries, in this instance the United States, is a matter for concern for the state of Sri Lanka.” The comment reveals once again that the LTTE, far from challenging imperialist designs in Sri Lanka, is looking to establish its own relations with the major powers.

The opposition Peoples Alliance (PA) has remained completely silent. In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who heads the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), immediately offered Washington full access to the country’s port, airfields and other facilities. She has avoided any comment on the proposed deal, as have her PA allies—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Sri Lankan Communist Party.

The defence arrangement with the US does, however, have serious consequences for the working class. The Wickremesinghe government, with the tacit support of opposition, is integrating Sri Lanka with the US military right at the point where the Bush administration has aggressively intervened on the Indian subcontinent with potentially explosive results.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**