

# US Pacific commander visits Sri Lanka, praising new regime

K. Ratnayake

3 December 2016

US Pacific Command (PACOM) chief Admiral Harry B. Harris visited Sri Lanka late last month to stress the island's importance for the US military buildup in the Indo-Pacific region against China.

Harris, the first four-star US officer to visit Sri Lanka in almost a decade, told the Galle Dialogue International Maritime Conference that he was pleased to be deepening the “military-to-military relationship” between the two countries. He was the key speaker at the annual security meeting, which was attended by senior naval officials from 42 countries, including the US, India, Pakistan, Australia, Germany and the Netherlands. The official theme of this year's event was, “Fostering Strategic Maritime Partnerships.”

Harris's visit was part of ongoing US efforts to boost military ties with Sri Lanka after the pro-US Maithripala Sirisena became president in the January 2015 election. Washington was instrumental in this regime-change operation which ousted former President Mahinda Rajapakse and elevated Sirisena into the Sri Lankan presidency.

While the US had backed Rajapakse's anti-democratic methods and the brutal communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Washington was hostile to his close relations with Beijing.

Commenting on the new regime in Colombo, Harris praised Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, declaring that under their rule “the people of Sri Lanka have witnessed the restorative effects of democracy in action.” The PACOM chief said he admired the new Sri Lankan government's “continued commitment to justice and the rule of law and expanded cooperation with the United States.”

To claim that Sri Lankans were “witnessing the effects of democracy” is a patent lie. The Sirisena-

Wickremesinghe government is systematically suppressing the democratic rights and living conditions of ordinary Sri Lankans, deepening the methods employed by the Rajapakse administration. The only significant change is the abrupt shift of Sri Lankan foreign policy in favour of Washington and New Delhi and the closer integration of the island-nation's armed forces with the US military.

“Sri Lanka matters to United States,” Harris told the conference, because of its strategic location near vital trade routes between the Indian and Pacific oceans. “You can't get from Hormuz to Malacca—or from the Red Sea to the South China Sea—without going near Sri Lanka,” he declared. “The Strait of Malacca sees over 25 percent of global oil shipments each day, and the South China Sea sees \$5.3 trillion in annual global trade. Modern life everywhere depends on this region's stability.”

Harris's remarks about the South China Sea are significant. Washington is hostile to Beijing's claims to the South China Sea. Over the past five years, the US has provocatively encouraged Vietnam and the Philippines to aggressively pursue their claims to parts of the South China Sea and has forged closer military ties with those countries against China.

The PACOM chief told the Colombo security conference that the US would continue to invoke its “freedom of navigation” operations against China. “We must expand partnerships among like-minded nations to uphold the rules-based global operating system,” he said, calling for “a principled security network” to ensure “equal access” for all nations.

The phrase “freedom of navigation” is a political smokescreen to justify US naval operations anywhere without challenge, in particular its military buildup against Beijing.

The US Pacific Command has sent several war ships into the South China Sea provocatively exercising its so-called freedom of navigation operations close to Chinese-claimed islets. The latest of these occurred in October when the USS Decatur, a guided missile destroyer, sailed near a 12-nautical-mile territorial limit claimed by China in the area. These reckless actions pose the danger of a military clash between the two nuclear-armed nations, which could rapidly escalate into a global conflict.

As part of this military buildup, Washington is also seeking to mobilise India as a “frontline state” against China. Addressing a security dialogue meeting in New Delhi in March, Harris asked India to participate in joint naval patrols in the Indian and the Pacific oceans. He also called on India to join the US and its two most important Asian-Pacific military allies, Japan and Australia, in a quadrilateral “security” dialogue.

The PACOM commander thanked Sri Lanka for its military involvement in UN operations in Lebanon, Mali, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan and noted the increased number of US navy visits to the island-nation over the past five years. Since March the USS Blue Ridge, USS New Orleans and USS Frank Cable have visited Colombo.

Late last month the USS Somerset spent three days in the deep-sea port of Trincomalee in the eastern province. The USS Somerset was to provide basic military and small-boat operational training for members of the Sri Lankan navy and marines. The exercises were for so-called humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions.

Harris later visited Sri Lanka’s Trincomalee naval base and inspected the deep-water harbor, which is regarded as a vital strategic asset by the US and Indian militaries.

The integration of Sri Lankan and US military forces is being facilitated by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government behind the backs of Sri Lankan working class and the poor. In line with Washington’s increasingly reckless geo-strategic manoeuvres, Colombo is actively preparing the country to be used as a launching pad for US military operations in the Indian Ocean.

The danger of a major military conflict with China will intensify under the incoming US President Donald Trump who has already indicated that his

administration will take punitive trade measures against China.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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