

Pentagon sends advanced surveillance team to train Sri Lanka's military

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Early this month, a group of US naval officers flew out of the Mattala Rajapakse International Airport at Hambantota in southern Sri Lanka after a week-long training exercise with Sri Lankan naval and air force personnel.

No public information was released about the visit until the US embassy in Colombo issued a statement on December 13, two days after the US naval officers departed.

The exercises are part of the expanding military ties between the US military and the Sri Lankan security forces under the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government.

The embassy stated the US naval officers were from Patrol Squadron 10 or the “Red Lancers,” which is stationed at Jacksonville, Florida. It said the visit was “a routine deployment to the Indo-Asia-Pacific to ensure safety and security of vital sea lanes and trade routes, including integrating air and sea patrol operations.”

The US embassy quoted Lieutenant Anthony Beres, the detachment's senior officer, who declared that the US was pleased to “partner with our friends in the Sri Lankan government and armed forces” and “demonstrate the capabilities of the P-8A, and exchange expert advice.”

The group travelled to Sri Lanka on a P-8A Poseidon aircraft, regarded as world's most advanced surveillance-combat plane, which was used during the training exercises. Boeing, which manufactures P-8A Poseidon, says the aircraft “is designed for long-range anti-submarine warfare; anti-surface warfare; and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions.”

The Indian government, as part of its military cooperation with US, has signed a more than \$US1 billion deal with Boeing to purchase four P-8Is, a

previous version of the same aircraft. It already has eight of the planes. The *Indian Express* reported that the aircraft is armed with “deadly Harpoon missiles, light-weight torpedoes and rockets.”

The newspaper said the Indian navy was “extensively using” the P-8I to “keep a strict vigil on the Indian Ocean, which has seen numerous Chinese submarine forays, including the docking of a nuclear submarine in Sri Lanka.”

In line with Washington's enhancement of India's military capability, the US is establishing military interoperability with the armed forces in Sri Lanka, which sits astride strategically important Indian Ocean sea lanes (see: “US deepens military ties with Sri Lanka”).

US Pacific Command (PACOM) chief Admiral Harry B. Harris told a security conference at Galle in Sri Lanka late last month that the Pentagon was constructing a strong naval alliance against China in the Asia-Pacific region, integrating India as a “frontline state” with its other two important Asia-Pacific military allies, Japan and Australia.

Harris also visited the Trincomalee naval base, a strategic deep-water harbour on Sri Lanka's east coast. PACOM is currently training Sri Lankan navy soldiers and marines. Prior to the PACOM chief's visit, the USS *Summerset* spent three days at Trincomalee, providing basic military and small-boat operational training for members of the Sri Lankan navy.

While expanding its anti-China military alliance in the Indian Ocean, the US is continuing its provocations near Chinese-claimed islets in the South China Sea.

Under bogus claims of “freedom of navigation,” PACOM has sent several warships into waters claimed by China in the South China Sea, heightening tensions between Washington and Beijing. Last Friday, a

Chinese vessel seized an American underwater drone in the South China Sea—an act the US branded as illegal.

Three years ago, as part of its geostrategic manoeuvres to isolate China in the Asia-Pacific region, the US began pressuring Sri Lanka's then President Mahinda Rajapakse to distance his government from China.

The campaign included a US-sponsored resolution in the UN Human Rights Council calling for an international investigation into Sri Lankan war crimes. It culminated in a regime-change operation, engineered by Washington. Rajapakse was ousted and the pro-US Maithripala Sirisena installed as Sri Lankan president via the January 2015 presidential election.

Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe shifted Sri Lanka's foreign policy in favour of the US and India, and are overseeing the increasing integration of the Sri Lankan military into the Pentagon's agenda.

The government, however, is attempting to present this shift as normal activity, claiming it is part of efforts to strengthen Sri Lanka's armed forces. The Colombo establishment is concerned that if it reveals how closely Sri Lanka is being tied into the US war plans against China it could trigger widespread opposition from workers and youth.



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