

The US boosts military ties with Sri Lanka

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Recent visits by US Seventh Fleet vessels to Sri Lanka's eastern port of Trincomalee make clear that the island nation is rapidly being integrated into Washington's war preparations against China. The Seventh Fleet, which is headquartered in Japan, is an offensive formation geared for war and includes 60–70 ships, 300 aircraft and more than 40,000 combat personnel.

In early December, the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis visited Trincomalee, in eastern Sri Lanka, as part of the Pentagon's plans to establish a logistics hub there for the US Navy. USS Anchorage, another Seventh Fleet vessel, and a unit of Marines visited the port last August to assess the port's feasibility as a logistics hub.

Trincomalee, which is the world's second deepest natural harbour, is of great strategic military value in the Indian Ocean. It served as the naval command hub for the British Eastern Fleet during the last years of World War II.

Commenting on USS Stennis's visit, an unnamed diplomat in Colombo told the *Nikkei Asian Review* on December 29: "Trinco [Trincomalee] is a logical choice because it is the most important piece of strategic real estate in Sri Lanka. These are signs of new thinking in Washington regarding this part of South Asia, where over the past six years the Chinese presence has become so obvious and widespread."

Washington's push for a logistics hub at the port comes as the Trump administration is ratcheting up its trade war measures against China. On December 31, Trump signed the "Asia Reassurance Initiative Act," which aims to broadly strengthen the US strategic position across Asia against China.

The US Navy's focus on Trincomalee also explains Washington's response to the factional warfare that erupted in late October after Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena sacked Prime Minister Ranil

Wickremesinghe, replacing him with former President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Washington opposed Sirisena's appointment of Rajapakse, who as president established close relations with China, and called for Wickremesinghe's reappointment.

In 2014–2015, the US manoeuvred behind the scenes with local political allies to oust Rajapakse and elevate Sirisena into the presidency. Sri Lanka, under Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, strengthened its political and military relations with the US.

Despite Rajapakse's best efforts late last year to demonstrate his loyalty, Washington and New Delhi opposed his appointment as prime minister. Sirisena, under pressure from the US, and following a Supreme Court case which ruled that his dissolution of parliament was unconstitutional, eventually reinstated Wickremesinghe.

On December 9, the US Navy outlined the strategic importance of a Trincomalee logistic hub for its Indian Ocean operations. "The temporary air logistics hub concept," it explained on its web site, "allows for the use of an airstrip and storage facilities to receive large-scale shipments to move out in various directions in smaller shipments, allowing ships to continue operating at sea by receiving the right material at the right place and time."

US Navy Lieutenant Bryan Ortiz, USS John C. Stennis's stock control division officer, explained: "The primary purpose of the operation is to provide mission-critical supplies and services to US Navy ships transiting through and operating in the Indian Ocean ... The secondary purpose is to demonstrate the US Navy's ability to establish a temporary logistics hub ashore where no enduring US Navy logistics footprint exists."

There were five major collaborative engagements between the US and Sri Lankan militaries last year. As

well as the USS John C. Stennis, the US hospital ship USNS Mercy visited Trincomalee, and there were at-sea exercises between the Sri Lankan navy and the USS Anchorage. On December 21, the dock landing ship USS Rushmore visited Colombo as part of a joint program with the Sri Lankan navy. The Sri Lankan military also participated as an observer at the Pacific Rim naval exercises in Hawaii, the world's largest international maritime warfare exercise.

The *Nikkei Asian Review* and other media reports insist that increased US military activity in the Indian Ocean is in response to China's so-called "String of Pearls" strategy. In a belligerent speech to the Hudson Institute last October, US Vice President Mike Pence cited Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port as an example of Beijing's "debt-trap diplomacy" and how it ensnares smaller nations.

Claims that Washington is responding to China's attempt to dominate the Indian Ocean are bogus. The Chinese regime in Beijing has no progressive answer to the increasingly belligerent economic and military actions of the US and its allies. Its "String of Pearls" strategy is a desperate attempt to break out of the US-led encirclement, by winning geo-strategic allies amongst Indian Ocean nations.

Contrary to its claims, the US has a long established naval and military supremacy in the Indian Ocean with naval warships regularly deployed throughout the area and a major military base in the British Indian Ocean territory of Diego Garcia, as well as bases in the nearby Persian Gulf.

India—a key US ally and adversary of China—also has naval and air bases in the Andaman Islands and the Laccadives, one under construction in Mauritius, and radar surveillance facilities running in the Seychelles, Madagascar and Oman.

In 2007, Washington signed a far-reaching bilateral Acquisition and Cross-servicing Agreement with Sri Lanka's then Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse. This 10-year agreement, which gives US naval ships access to Sri Lankan ports for refuelling and other supplies, was renewed in 2017 by Prime Minister Wickremesinghe.

During the past four years of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration, Colombo has established a Sri Lankan Marine Unit and initiated

integrated naval training and exercises with the US Navy.

India and Japan, key US partners in the Indo-Pacific region, are also exploring options to establish naval footprints in Trincomalee. Japanese imperialism, under its so-called "free and open Indo-Pacific strategy," has identified Trincomalee, along with Myanmar's Dawei and Bangladesh's Matarbari, as key Indian Ocean ports for investment.

Successive Sri Lankan governments have increasingly integrated Sri Lanka into the US-led war plans against China. US military aggression against China, both nuclear armed nations, threatens catastrophic consequences. The only force that can prevent such a global disaster is an anti-war movement of the international working class directed at the abolition of the root cause of war—the capitalist system and its outmoded division of the world into rival nation states.



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