

US naval chief denounces China and calls for stronger military partnership with Sri Lanka

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Addressing the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) in Washington early this month, US Navy Indo-Pacific Command chief Admiral Philip Davidson denounced Beijing and called for stronger US-Sri Lanka military relations.

While Davidson's report to the SASC mainly centred on the need for an escalation of US aggression against China, he reiterated Washington's determination to keep Sri Lanka locked into the US geo-strategic agenda.

Davidson raised concerns about ethnic tensions between Tamil and Sinhalese, the government's decision to lease Hambantota Port to China and ongoing political and economic instability but insisted that, "It is in our interests to continue military collaboration and cooperation" with the island nation's military forces.

Sri Lanka, he declared, "remains a significant strategic opportunity in the Indian Ocean, and our military-to-military relationship continues to strengthen."

China, he told SACS, "represents the greatest long-term strategic threat to a free and open Indo-Pacific and to the United States" and accused Beijing of plotting "to expand its form of Communist-Socialist ideology in order to bend, break, and replace the existing rules-based international order."

Notwithstanding the ridiculous claims that the Chinese Communist Party is spreading "Communist-Socialist ideology," Davidson's tirade is another example of Washington's increasingly hysterical allegations against Beijing. He also repeated belligerent statements made last year by US Vice President Mike Pence that China was exerting greater control over smaller nations like Sri Lanka by providing soft loans and laying a "debt trap."

"Beijing is also exploiting growing debt burdens to access strategic infrastructure in the region," he said, using the recent transfer of Sri Lanka's southern Hambantota port to China in exchange for debt relief, as an example.

The US Navy Indo-Pacific Command in 2019, Davidson said, would focus on increased navy-to-navy focus and engagement. He referred to the recent transfer of a US Coast Guard (USCG) vessel to Sri Lanka and said that Washington, along with other strategic partners, such as India and Japan, was working "to rapidly enhance the Sri Lankan Navy's capabilities."

The Indo-Pacific Command chief's agenda, in fact, is already in operation. Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas J. Vajda told a "Pathfinder Panel Discussion" in Colombo on February 14 that Washington plans to spend \$39 million in Sri Lanka to support maritime security, freedom of navigation, and maritime awareness as part of its Bay of Bengal initiative.

"We are working with key partners like Sri Lanka to protect and enhance a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific," he said. The so-called rules-based order is a euphemism for Washington's economic and military domination of the Indo-Pacific region.

The US military, and the navy in particular, has systematically increased its presence in Sri Lanka in recent years. Last year there were more than five major collaborative engagements between the US and Sri Lankan naval forces. In December, USS John C. Stennis, the US 7th Fleet aircraft carrier, visited Sri Lanka's Trincomalee port in preparation for the establishment of a US Naval Logistics Hub.

Aircraft from USS John C. Stennis were also involved in logistics operations between January 21 and

29, transporting goods, including spare parts, tools, personal mail and other items, from Sri Lanka's Katunayake International Airport, just outside Colombo, to the giant aircraft carrier.

The Sri Lankan navy's Marine Force—closely modelled on its US counterpart—has been receiving extensive training from the US Marine Corps since its inception in 2016. In November 2016, the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit held week long training on vessel “search and seizure” near the Trincomalee deep seaport.

In August 2018, Sri Lankan marines participated in the US-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) military exercises for the first time and received special training in Hawaii. Later that month the US 13th Marine Expeditionary Force held “at-sea” exercises for Sri Lankan marines and sailors aboard USS Anchorage, an amphibious transport dock.

In February this year the US Coast Guard trained more than 25 Sri Lankan port security officials. According to the US embassy, the training was aimed at “providing greater protection against terrorism and other threats” and facilitating Sri Lanka becoming a “regional hub of commerce.”

The Sri Lankan government has also renewed its far-reaching “Acquisition and Cross-servicing Agreement” with the US. Originally signed in 2007, under former President Mahinda Rajapakse's administration, the agreement gives the US armed forces access to Sri Lankan ports and airports.

Sri Lanka's closer political and military alignment with the US has been expedited in the aftermath of the US-orchestrated regime-change operation that saw the ousting of Rajapakse in the 2015 elections. Rajapakse was replaced with the current president, Maithripala Sirisena, and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe pro-US administration brought to power.

While Washington had backed Rajapakse's communalist war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and his anti-democratic methods of rule, it opposed his development of closer political and economic relations with China.

Bitter factional fighting continues within the Sri Lankan ruling elite. The government faces falling export earnings and a rising debt burden, along with intensifying strikes and protests by Sri Lankan workers demanding higher wages and improved conditions.

Last October, Sirisena attempted to oust Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replace him with former President Rajapakse, his arch rival. The coup failed, however, after Sirisena came under pressure from the US, Indian and the European powers. The Supreme Court also over-ruled Sirisena's dissolution of the parliament forcing him to re-appoint Wickremesinghe.

While Rajapakse attempted to persuade the US and other western powers that he would adhere to Washington's imperialist agenda, his appeals were ignored.

The Sri Lankan ruling elites confront a political dilemma as it cannot fully sever their economic ties with Beijing, currently the country's biggest financier. Thus, the US is seeking ways to bypass the state and directly entrench itself within the Sri Lankan defence apparatus.

With no section of the Sri Lankan ruling class opposing Washington's increasing grip over Sri Lankan military affairs, the country is being drawn into the maelstrom of geopolitical rivalry in the Indian Ocean and the intensifying preparations for war against China.



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