

High-profile US officials visit Sri Lanka as Washington steps up preparations for war against China

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Senior US government officials, including Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Richard Verma, visited Sri Lanka last month in a clear indication that Washington is expanding its strategic relationship with Colombo.

In line with US war preparations against China which the former considers the main threat to Washington's global hegemony, the primary topics of discussion with the Sri Lankan government were increased defense and maritime cooperation. Sri Lanka is strategically situated alongside east-west Indian Ocean maritime routes that are crucial for China's imports and exports.

Verma, who was accompanied by Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Afreen Akhter and US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Lindsey Ford, visited Sri Lanka on February 22–23. Their trip followed a February 17–19 visit by US Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Elizabeth M. Allen.

According to official reports, Verma held discussions with Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe and Foreign Minister Ali Sabry to strengthen bilateral collaboration, emergencies, humanitarian relief and progress on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) program, with the supposed aim of putting the country on “the path to sustainable economic growth.”

The Wickremesinghe government's implementation of the IMF's demands has nothing to do with “sustainable economic growth,” but is to impose the entire burden of the country's economic crisis onto the backs of millions of already impoverished workers and the rural masses.

During discussions, Sabry reported on Sri Lanka's “priorities” as Chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association and “opportunities” for collaboration in the blue economy and maritime security.

An official statement from the US Embassy in Colombo noted that Verma “also explored opportunities to deepen defence and maritime cooperation between the United States and Sri Lanka, including strengthening the Sri Lankan navy's capabilities to safeguard national security and promote a more stable Indo-Pacific region.”

On February 23, Verma, who was on board the SLNS Vijayabahu, one of three former US Coast Guard cutters given to Sri Lanka, said that the Department of State had notified Congress of its intent to transfer a fourth cutter to Sri Lanka.

“The Department obligated \$9 million in Foreign Military Financing to support this effort,” he said. “If completed, this transfer would further strengthen defense cooperation between the United States and Sri Lanka... [and] provide additional security for ships from all nations that transit the busy sea lanes of the Indian Ocean.”

Also speaking from the SLNS Vijayabahu, US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Julie Chung, said the “eventual transfer of a fourth vessel would be just one more point in a long history of cooperation between Sri Lanka and the United States in preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific region.”

A “free and open Indo-Pacific region” is the propaganda pretext used by Washington for its aggressive US intervention against Beijing in the South China Sea in particular, and the entire Asia-Pacific region.

Sri Lanka is already closely collaborating with the US military. In response to calls by the Biden administration for a US-led coalition, code named Operation Prosperity Guardian, the Wickremesinghe government sent Sri Lankan navy ships to the Red Sea, supposedly to protect commercial vessels from attack by Iranian-aligned Houthi rebels in Yemen as part of their opposition to Israel's genocidal war in Gaza.

Though Wickremesinghe announced its participation in the Red Sea operations on January 3, the deployment has been shrouded in secrecy because of popular opposition to the Gaza genocide.

Verma warmly welcomed Sri Lanka's participation in the ongoing Red Sea military operations and Wickremesinghe reaffirmed his government's unwavering commitment to "ensuring freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean."

On February 3, INS Karanj, an Indian navy submarine, docked at Colombo, Sri Lanka's main port, for a two-day visit. It was extended a ceremonial welcome by the Sri Lankan navy. This warm reception was in stark contrast to the Wickremesinghe government's 12-month ban on research ship visits explicitly aimed at blocking a previously planned visit by the Xiang Yang Hong 3, a Chinese scientific research vessel. Colombo's ban was made in response to diplomatic pressure from the Indian government.

Underscoring the increasing geo-political rivalries, the *Daily Mirror* reported on February 29 that "Chinese authorities were annoyed by the decision and conveyed its displeasure to Sri Lanka for taking such a decision at the influence of another country."

Sections of the US ruling elite have been voicing concerns that Washington needs to intensify its involvement in the Indian Ocean Region. On February 23, David Santoro, president of the Pacific Forum think tank, commented in the *Asia Times* that "US engagement of the region has been limited" and "been slow to roll out non-military programs and engage smaller regional countries."

In August last year, the highly influential Council of Foreign Relations declared that the US had been "far outstripped by Chinese investments in port infrastructure in the IOR [Indian Ocean Region]. From Hambantota in Sri Lanka to Bagamoyo in Tanzania, Chinese companies have constructed and operated many ports across the Indian Ocean as a part of China's 'Maritime Silk Road.'

"As China builds more ports, fiber optic cables, and supplementary maritime infrastructure, the United States risks becoming a peripheral actor in terms of economic and security development with smaller states," the New-York based think tank said. Last month's visit to Colombo by Verma and other senior US officials is another of Washington's efforts to change this situation.

While the pro-US President Wickremesinghe has fully embraced the US-India alliance against China in Asia and

Israeli genocide against the Palestinians in the Middle East, he has attempted to keep these developments away from the public eye. His government's increased geo-strategic connections with the US, however, have garnered unanimous support from the entire ruling elite, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya main opposition parliamentary party and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The JVP and its electoral front, the National People's Power (NPP), who are bidding for political power in this year's scheduled elections, has been developing its own close ties with the US and its ally India. In fact, the JVP/NPP, which long ago dropped their anti-American demagoguery, is maintaining a deafening silence on the Wickremesinghe government's integration with the US military-strategic offensive against China.

Over the past two years, JVP leaders have publicly met and held discussions with US ambassador Chung on three occasions. Their last meeting occurred after the Israeli government, backed by US imperialism, unleashed its murderous assault on Palestinians in Gaza.

Washington's diplomatic offensive to more and more closely entwine Colombo with its geo-strategic planning for war against China and in the Middle East poses grave dangers to workers, youth and the oppressed masses, not only in Sri Lanka but throughout the Middle East and Asia. These developments underscore the urgency for Sri Lankan workers to join with their class brothers and sisters in South Asia and internationally to build a unified global anti-war moment based on a socialist program and perspective.



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