

US strengthens military ties with Sri Lanka against Iran and China

Rohantha De Silva
7 October 2026

According to the US Embassy in Colombo, Lieutenant General Joel B. “JB” Vowell, Deputy Commanding General of US Army Pacific (USARPAC), is the highest-ranking US Army officer to visit Sri Lanka. His visit from September 29 to October 1 was officially presented as an effort to “expand training, interoperability, disaster preparedness and defence cooperation.”

US Ambassador Eric Meyer said Vowell’s “historic visit reflects the growing strength of our security partnership with Sri Lanka and our shared commitment to delivering results.”

Vowell has completed five combat tours—three in Afghanistan and two in Iraq. He previously commanded US Army Japan/I Corps (Forward) and the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq and Syria. As USARPAC’s Deputy Commanding General, he now helps direct US Army operations, readiness, military partnerships and deterrence activities across the Indo-Pacific, where the command’s strategy is centrally focused on the military build-up and encirclement against China.

US imperialism is seeking to draw strategically located states such as Sri Lanka into these escalating war plans. This was the purpose of Vowell’s meetings with Deputy Defence Minister Arana Jayasekara, Defence Secretary Air Vice Marshal Sampath Thuyacontha (Retd) and the military top brass.

“Interoperability,” one of the topics of discussion, means developing the capacity of different armed forces to communicate, exchange information, plan, train and act together. Though such coordination is said to be valuable in responding to floods and other emergencies, the real aim is to build cooperation, standard operating procedures, logistical links, and personal networks between militaries, integrating Sri

Lankan forces closely with US forces.

Vowell’s visit followed the US-Sri Lanka Land Forces talks in May, the first bilateral defence discussions between the US Army Pacific Command and the Sri Lanka Army.

Sri Lanka’s location near sea routes linking the Persian Gulf, Africa and Asia gives its ports, airfields and communications infrastructure considerable strategic importance.

Vowell’s declared aim of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” is a euphemism for US imperialism’s drive to assert military dominance over the Indo-Pacific region in preparation for war against China. In country after country, US military bases are being expanded and alliances strengthened to maintain American hegemony over the key maritime routes and markets of Asia.

Sri Lanka’s Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)/National People’s Power (NPP) government is strengthening ties with the US, as Washington plunders Venezuela and seeks to recolonise Latin America, and as it intensifies the criminal war against Iran.

The JVP/NPP previously led protests against the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) with the US, signed in 2007 and renewed in 2017, but has continued this agreement since coming to power in 2024. ACSA provides the US military with the framework through which its aircraft and vessels can access Sri Lankan facilities for fuel, supplies and logistical support.

On November 14 2025, Colombo signed a defence Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the US, binding Sri Lanka more closely to Washington’s military networks. The agreement links the Sri Lankan armed forces to the Montana National Guard and US Coast Guard through training, communications, cyber operations and maritime surveillance.

Vowell's visit followed overlapping June visits by US Assistant Secretary of State S. Paul Kapur and Pacific Air Forces Commander General Kevin Schneider. Kapur announced a US\$4 million satellite-communications upgrade aboard SLN Gajabahu. Together with Washington's transfer of ten TH-57 helicopters and coast guard vessels, this assistance is deepening operational integration between the US and Sri Lankan militaries.

It also followed the Atlas Angel II training exercise, held from August 31 to September 4. Under the pretext of preparing for "natural disasters," US and Sri Lankan military personnel conducted extensive training, including on aircraft maintenance and responding to "chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive hazards."

Significantly, as Vowell was holding discussions with Sri Lankan authorities, on September 30, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article under the headline "U.S. Pressure Campaign Leaves Iranian Tankers Stranded in Asian Waters."

It reported on a major humanitarian crisis involving around 20 empty Iranian oil tankers stranded roughly 15 miles off Sri Lanka's southwestern coast, with food, fuel and fresh water reportedly running low. According to the *Journal*, the vessels had delivered "sanctioned" Iranian oil, mainly to China, but were unable to return to Iran due to the US blockade. Dozens of Iranian or Iran-linked tankers have reportedly remained near Sri Lanka and Malaysia since July.

The Sri Lankan government has flatly rejected Iran's requests that the vessels be provided with essential supplies such as food and water. Foreign Affairs Minister Vijitha Herath told the *Sunday Times* on October 3 that "As a government, we haven't provided them with anything so far, and we don't intend to do so in future either."

Herath said that the US had "not officially conveyed any message" relating to the Iranian vessels. However, he did not deny pressure coming from US officials. He brushed the issue aside, saying that "such supplies to vessels are usually provided by the private sector" and therefore not a government matter.

The Diplomat on October 6 reported, citing sources in Sri Lanka's Foreign Ministry, that "the US embassy in Colombo and visiting American civilian and military officials have repeatedly warned Sri Lanka against

providing the Iranian vessels with essential supplies, despite the potential humanitarian crisis."

This was not the first time the JVP/NPP government bowed to US pressure. Its prostration before Washington was laid bare by the March 4 sinking of the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena near Sri Lankan waters. A US submarine torpedoed the vessel in international waters, killing 108 men aboard. The attack occurred without warning as the frigate returned from multinational naval drills hosted by India.

Washington then pressured Colombo through its chargé d'affaires, Jayne Howell, who insisted that the Sri Lankan government not release the crew of another vessel, the IRIS Bushehr, or the 32 rescued Dena sailors to Iran. Israel's ambassador also joined the discussions. Colombo initially refused the Bushehr entry, then took the vessel and crew into custody.

Dissanayake posed as "neutral", claiming that Sri Lanka "carries the banner of humanity." But a leaked State Department cable shattered this cover, exposing Colombo as a compliant intermediary for US-Israeli war aims, detaining the Iranian sailors and muzzling them to prevent "propaganda." The sailors were eventually repatriated to Iran in mid-April.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact