

US Pacific Fleet commander visits Sri Lanka to cement ties with new president

Rohantha De Silva

14 October 2024

Admiral Steve Koehler, Commander of the US Pacific Fleet, visited Sri Lanka on October 10 in the wake of the election of Anura Dissanayake, leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its electoral front, the National People's Power (NPP).

While the JVP leader had already signalled his willingness to work with Washington, Koehler's visit was clearly aimed at consolidating US military ties with Sri Lanka as Washington ramps up its confrontation with China throughout the region.

Koehler not only met with military officials but also held a closed-door meeting with President Dissanayake. While US President Biden has voiced his willingness to work with his Sri Lankan counterpart, Washington is seeking to test out the JVP/NPP, which has never previously held power.

Koehler also presented the Sri Lankan Air Force with a Beechcraft King Air 360ER aircraft which is equipped with cutting-edge technology. While nominally to enhance search and rescue, drug interdiction, and counter-trafficking operations, its primary purpose is to bolster maritime surveillance and reinforce US-Sri Lanka military cooperation.

Koehler's speech at the hand-over ceremony was aimed against China. He declared the transfer was "about much more than one aircraft. It's about the relationship between Sri Lanka and the United States. It's about our shared values and the support for the rules-based international order."

Washington routinely refers to "the rules-based international order" established by US imperialism after World War II to defend its dominant global position and set the rules to meet its interests. Already at war with Russia in Ukraine and backing Israel's escalating war in the Middle East, the US is accelerating its preparations for conflict with China,

which it regards as the chief threat to its dominance.

Koehler added that the "rules" of this world "order" include "preventing the change of borders by force, maintaining freedom of the seas, and prohibitions against the use of weapons of mass destruction."

All of these stock phrases refer to dangerous flash points with China that the US has deliberately inflamed—border disputes between China and India as well as the status of Taiwan, provocative "freedom of navigation" military operations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, and the vilification of North Korea over their nuclear programs.

In his remarks, Air Marshal Udeni Rajapaksa, commander of the Sri Lankan Air Force, declared that both nations aim to "enhance competencies in maritime security" and ensure the Indian Ocean remains secure.

This dovetails with US efforts to incorporate Sri Lanka into its existing web of military alliances, partnerships and pacts in the Indo-Pacific aimed against China. India already belongs to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or "Quad" with the US, Japan and Australia, aimed at strengthening the military noose around China.

Sri Lanka is strategically located on key shipping routes across the Indian Ocean from Europe, Africa and the Middle East that are critical for China's trade. A key US objective in Sri Lanka is to obtain military access, particularly to port facilities, and to prevent China from doing the same.

Koehler noted the importance of the US-Sri Lankan military ties that developed under previous president Ranil Wickremesinghe, including the "fearless deployment" of a warship to the Gulf of Oman to support the US-led military operations against Houthi rebels in Yemen.

He also referred to CARAT Sri Lanka—joint US-Sri

Lanka naval drills—in April and the involvement of Sri Lankan marines in the huge RIMPAC naval exercises in Hawaii in July. Last month, Sri Lankan Rear Admiral Banagoda took part in a maritime commanders’ course in Hawaii—the headquarters of the US Indo-Pacific Command.

Dissanayake has already assured the US of his commitment to military ties with the US. In the past two years, Dissanayake and JVP/NPP leaders have engaged in extensive discussions with Julie Chung, the US ambassador to Sri Lanka. In response to Biden’s congratulations on his election, Dissanayake pledged to work “closely with the US for strengthening our long-standing friendly relations.”

The day after meeting Koehler, on October 11, Dissanayake held an online discussion with USAID Administrator Samantha Power, who assured him that USAID was prepared to support Sri Lanka in any way needed. Power’s last visit to Sri Lanka was in September 2022, just after the Wickremesinghe government signed a staff-level agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to impose harsh austerity measures on the masses.

Power’s visit came in the aftermath of the 2022 mass uprising that forced President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign. The pro-US stooge Wickremesinghe was anti-democratically installed as president in order to negotiate a bail-out loan with the IMF that came with a raft of severe economic demands attached.

Amid the ongoing economic and political crisis on the island, other prominent senior US officials have visited Colombo this year concerned to maintain economic and strategic ties and that events in Sri Lanka do not trigger wider regional instability. US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Donald Lu, visited in May following a three-day trip by Liz Allen, US Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, in February.

The Socialist Equality Party, which is standing in the November 14 parliamentary elections, warns workers and youth that the JVP/NPP government, like that of Wickremesinghe, will integrate Sri Lanka into US-led wars already underway and the preparations for war with China. Koehler’s visit and discussions with Dissanayake are just one more indication that the JVP is lining up with US imperialism.

The SEP is the only party campaigning in the general election that is warning of the dangers of world war, which threatens humanity with a nuclear catastrophe, and opposing the transformation of the island into a military platform for the US and its allies. The SEP, as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is fighting to build an international anti-war movement of the working class that will put an end to the capitalist system and thus the dangers of war.



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