

US high official visits Sri Lanka to enhance strategic ties

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US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu paid a three-day visit to Sri Lanka in early December, during a tour of the region that included India and Nepal. The aim of the visit was to consolidate ties in South Asia, particularly with the newly-elected Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government in Sri Lanka, as Washington intensifies its war preparations against China.

Lu, who was accompanied by USAID Deputy Assistant Administrator Anjali Kaur and Treasury Deputy Assistant Secretary Robert Kaproth, met with top Sri Lanka political figures, including President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who took office on September 23. The JVP/NPP won a two-thirds majority in parliamentary elections held on November 14.

The elections mark a sharp shift in Sri Lankan politics. The JVP and its NPP electoral front, which have never held office before, exploited the mass disaffection with the traditional parties after the country defaulted on foreign debt in 2022 and was plunged into an acute economic and social crisis. A huge popular uprising forced President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign.

Lu's visit follows that by Admiral Steve Koehler, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, on October 10. The two trips were clearly intended to consolidate ties with the new government and ensure ongoing close military cooperation. In 2022, Dissanayake and other party leaders held talks with the US ambassador in Colombo, Julie Chung, who declared the JVP to be "a significant party" and thought it her duty "to really connect with the JVP leadership as person to person."

Lu met with Dissanayake on November 7, expressing Washington's support for his government's campaign against "corruption"—the main plank of the JVP/NPP

election campaigns. Its claim that the fight against "corruption" would resolve the crisis of Sri Lankan economy underscores the fact that the JVP long ago abandoned its false claims to be Marxist and socialist, and is fully integrated into the Colombo political establishment as a defender of capitalism.

Replying to a question from a *Daily Mirror* columnist, a US embassy officer said: "Lu emphasised the importance of the US-Sri Lanka partnership in advancing key priorities, including economic recovery, democratic governance and regional security." In particular, he stressed the necessity of fully implementing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity demands as part of the \$US3 billion IMF bailout loan negotiated by the previous President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The JVP has already fallen completely into line and reneged on its campaign promise to renegotiate aspects of the loan agreement. In his inaugural address to the parliament on November 21, Dissanayake declared that renegotiation was out of the question as the economy was in dire straits.

Asked by the *Mirror* "whether there will be any policy shift under President-elect Donald Trump," Lu was diplomatically vague. He declared that US policy reflects long-standing commitments to democracy, economic growth and regional security" and indicated those "principles" would not be changed.

In reality, the fascist Trump is preparing for his accession on January 20 by assembling a far-right cabinet of billionaire oligarchs, warmongers and fascists to make huge cuts to social spending, deport millions of immigrants and, despite claims to the contrary, wage economic and military war against any threat to US hegemony.

The policies of the first Trump administration and the

anti-China hawks that he is appointing to his next administration indicate that the economic and military confrontation with China will sharply intensify.

Sri Lanka is strategically positioned in the Indian Ocean across key sea lanes and is important for the Pentagon's war plans against China. Dr. Chulanee Attanayake, from Swinburne University of Technology in Australia, wrote on October 18: "A vital element of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy is strengthening maritime security by building the capacity of regional partners like Sri Lanka."

However, it is not clear exactly how Trump, who is known for his reactionary anti-communist diatribes, will approach the JVP/NPP government, which the media routinely describe as "Marxist" and "leftist"—by bullying, cajoling or buddying up to Dissanayake, as he did with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un during his first term in office.

What can be said with a degree of certainty is that Dissanayake and the JVP/NPP will shift even further to the right to accommodate to whatever the Trump administration demands. The JVP, a petty bourgeois organisation based on a mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala populism, jettisoned its pro-Chinese and the anti-US rhetoric long ago.

China is also trying to make an appeal to the Sri Lankan government. On November 25, a Chinese delegation led by Sun Haiyan, vice minister of the International Department of the Communist Party of China, met with Dissanayake.

The officials expressed China's readiness to collaborate closely with Sri Lanka and offered support in areas such as investment promotion, technology transfer, digitisation and rural economic development. Five days later, a discussion on strengthening China-Sri Lanka investment opportunities took place between Sri Lankan Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya and the Chinese Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Qi Zhenhong.

During the recent election campaigns, Dissanayake indicated that Sri Lanka would maintain a supposed independent, even-handed approach to foreign policy. However, like his promise to "renegotiate" the IMF loan, the government's attempts to balance between the US and China will quickly evaporate. Dissanayake is well aware that US and its allies could, if Washington deemed it necessary, pull the plug on the IMF loan and, with that, the Sri Lankan economy.



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