

Negotiating an Island's Interests in a Geopolitical Landscape



**Author
Asanga
Abeyagoonasekera**



**Director General
Institute of National
Security Studies Sri
Lanka (INSSSL)**

“The Village in the Jungle is different because it's not about Us, but wholly about Them. It was very advanced in 1913, when many people in Europe were racist.” Nick Rankin

Rural Hambanthota is known best for a book by Leonard Woolf in the early 20th century and a port shaping Sri Lanka's political present. Village in the Jungle by Woolf was the first novel in English literature to be written from the indigenous point of view rather than the colonizers according to Nick Rankin.

“It was a book about the white chaps at the club who run the show, but about those at the very bottom of the imperial heap, the black and brown fellows who don't even know they're part of an Empire, but who just survive day by day, hand to mouth, as slash-and-burn agriculturalists.” If Woolf was alive today he would be writing the second master piece “Village that was leased out, Hambanthota”

After the launch of the first Belt and Road project by President Xi Jing Ping, Sri Lanka signed one of the key strategic projects with China in May 2017. The agreement was to lease out the Hambanthota port with a majority share to the Chinese party for three generations.

One Belt One Road (OBOR) is the “project of the century” according to President Xi. It aims to integrate Eurasia through this trillion dollar initiative by building the infrastructure from railways to ports. It is unquestionably the most ambitious project ever launched in the recent times. It is a project to revisit and resurrect the global legacy of the Ming dynasty’s admiral Zheng He. A century ago, a British geopolitical thinker Sir Halford Mackinder argued that whoever controls the Eurasian heartland will control the world. American strategy looks further into Alfred Mahan’s maritime power which after world war two George Kennan incorporated Mahan’s geostrategic focus on rim lands rather than heartlands to his cold war strategy of containment of Soviet Union to create a favorable balance of power.

After the Chinese foreign policy scholar Wang Jisi spelled out the “March West” policy in 2012 highlighting the “...complex regional quagmire China is in”. As Washington rebalances to Asia, the relation between the U.S. and China has become increasingly contentious and zero-sum. According to Wang, as Washington rebalances toward East Asia, China must avoid a head-on military confrontation with America. Instead, it should fill in the gaps left by the American retreat from West Asia and the Middle East. By doing so, China will be able to decisively influence regions free from a U.S.-dominated security order or a pre-existing economic integration mechanism. OBOR was a construct of Wang Jisi’s initial inputs and strategic thinking to have a significant Chinese footprint in Eurasia specially to recalibrate the existing world order. According to World Economic Forum by 2030, the US will not be a superpower and there will be several nations, China will be well placed among these many nations to become one of the big powers.

Sri Lanka with its geostrategic position at the center of Maritime Silk Road is a “superconnector” which could connect East West sea lanes and play a pivotal role in China’s project of the century. The benefit should be reaped by the people of Sri Lanka and it is important that all strategic projects in this regard should be carefully calibrated with foresight research inputs. However, the process of determining the content of the agreement has not been discussed in parliament, in consultation with think tanks nor the public. As a democracy with its sovereignty vested in the people by the constitution, it is important to get inputs and public participatory method when determining strategic projects of the nation of Sri Lanka. President Sirisena pointed out that the

debate should go to Parliament and what Minister Wijedasa Rajapaksa further explained in lengthy speech remains absolutely correct. The failure of such public consultations has triggered much internal destabilization, the best example is the Indo-Sri Lanka accord the 13th Amendment to constitution which was done hurriedly which triggered the southern insurrection.

China is the second largest trading partner surpassing US, behind India. Sino- Lanka trade remains at more than \$3billion. This position will definitely change significantly with the Chinese economic zone and full function of Hambanthota port. By 2025, China will become the largest trading partner due to the significant investments to the Island. In the geopolitical context while global hegemon US is strengthening its ties with India the regional hegemon, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka are strengthening ties with China to counterbalance India. India's role in Indian Ocean and China's aspirations in Indian Ocean remain a topic of debate among scholars. India fears the nation is encircled by China and China feel that US has encircled China.

The tensions at the lines of intersection lie especially at geostrategic hot spots like Sri Lanka. The government's consideration to lease out the newly built Chinese Airport Mattala to India is another measure of counterbalance with China. While India, USA and Japan will strengthen the rules based order of the world- China will be the peace-loving explorer set on transforming the world on a self-proclaimed "win-win" basis.

In this strained geopolitical environment, Sri Lanka should design not a plan of leasing out; but rather a chart a path within the interests of emergent and existing powers. It must seek to develop a value added export basket to strengthen the island nation's economy.

About the Author:

Asanga Abeyagoonasekera is the Director General of the Institute of National Security Studies, the national security think tank of the Ministry of Defence in Sri Lanka. He is a visiting lecturer on International Political Economy and International Security, Asanga writes on geopolitics. The views expressed here are personal and do not reflect those of the Government of Sri Lanka.