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Winds of Change:Geopolitics at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia

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Asanga Abeyagoonasekera



Asanga Abeyagoonasekera's latest book is a comprehensive account of international relations in the regions it covers, with particular reference to current rivalries between India, China and the United States. It deals with shifting alliances, or rather alliances that grow stronger or weaker through particular developments: there are no actual boundaries in the context in which the three contestants for power in the region are wooing or threatening smaller countries, moving seamlessly from one mode to the other through general diplomatic terms.

The area is now widely referred to as the Indo-Pacific. Though that term was coined over a hundred years ago by a German keen to challenge the Anglo-American hegemony that triumphed after the First World War, it gained currency more recently, following

the hawkish Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was instrumental in developing the Quad Alliance between Japan, India, the United States and Australia.

This marked a radical change in Indian Foreign Policy, for India had prided itself on being Non-Aligned, while the West saw it as close to the Soviet Union and the East. But as Abeyagoonasekera constantly reiterates, India's approach is governed now by nervousness about China, which in the last couple of decades has made deep inroads in the Indian Ocean. Now many states around this Ocean, relatively far from China, are more closely connected, economically but also otherwise, with China.

Instrumental in this development is the Belt and Road Initiative, which China has used to develop infrastructure in the region, designed to facilitate its own trade, but also to connect the countries that it has assisted. Abeyagoonasekera is clear throughout the book that the initiative has been of great assistance to the recipient countries, and contests vigorously the Western claim that it was designed as a debt trap to control those countries.

I fully endorse this view. To supplement his perspective with a couple of anecdotes, I recall a British friend in Cambodia telling me how the country had benefited from Chinese infrastructure – whereas the West in those days concentrated on what is now called capacity building, which meant supporting those who shared its views through endless seminars in expensive hotels, a practice with which we are familiar in this region too.

Soon afterwards I met a very articulate taxi driver in Ethiopia, who had come home from England, where he had worked for many years, who described the expansion of the Chinese network. This had been neglected for years, until the Chinese turned up. I remember a Dutchman at a conference talking about the sinister nature of a plane full of Chinese businessmen, to which an African responded in irritation that the West had plundered the continent by their own businessmen, and that the Africans now knew how to do it and could ensure some benefit to themselves as the owners of the commodities that they had long thought their own birthright.

Abeyagoonasekera contrasts with the Chinese approach the frugality of the Indian

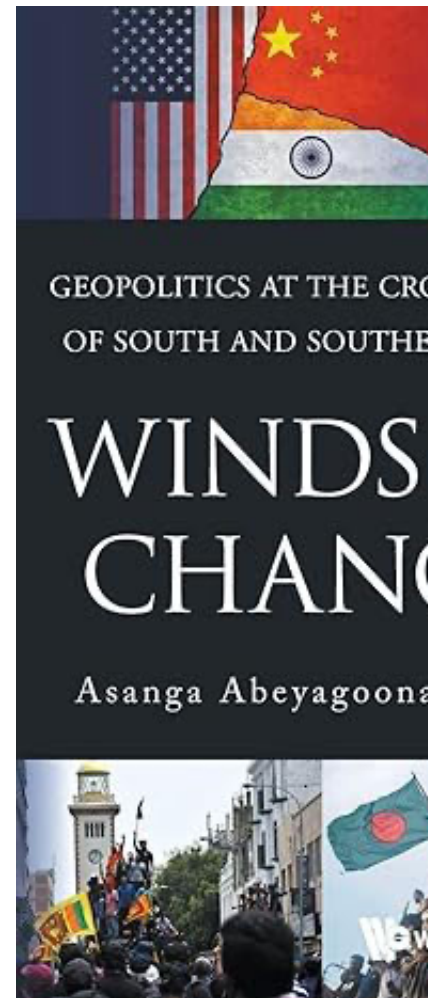
frugality born of relative poverty, and appends the general suspicions with which Indian interventions are treated, given previous efforts at domination. And while he is himself markedly diplomatic in his accounts of the different approaches of the three players in this game, time and time again he notes the effortless ease with which the Chinese have begun to dominate the field.

His research has been thorough, and the statistics he cites about trade make clear that the Chinese are streets ahead of the other two, both in terms of balances as well as in absolute terms. And he notes too that, whereas the Western discourse is of Chinese restrictions on freedom, in Sri Lanka at any rate it is the others who are wary of transparency.

Though he notes that there is no clarity about the agreements the current government has entered into with the Indians, and that contrary to what might have been expected from former Marxists it has not resumed the tilt towards Chinese left wing regimes, he shows that there has been no break with China. He seems to think that the groundwork China laid still gives hope of more economic development than the other two countries have to offer.

We cannot after all forget that the Rajapaksa government first asked India to develop Hambantota port, and I still recall the Indian High Commissioner at the time, Aswini Kumar Prasad, wondering whether India had erred in not taking up the offer. In a marked example of how individuals affect bilateral relations, I have no doubt his predecessor, the effusive Prasad, would have taken up the offer.

It was Rajapaksa hubris that made the cost of the port escalate, for when the rock



breakwaters was discovered, before the harbour was filled, and Mahinda Rajapaksa it would not cost much to get rid of it, he preferred to have the opening on his bi scheduled, which meant the waters then had to be drained away for the rock to be dynamited. And unfortunately, planning being left to the younger brother, we have buildings in the town, instead of the infrastructure that would have ensured greater economic activity.

This error was repeated in spades with regard to Mattala. Though not in the right which was not the case with the Hambantota development, nothing was done to advantage of the location such as it was and institute swift connections with the country, the East Coast, and the wildlife so abundant in the area.

The last section of the book, after its thorough examination of the activities of the major players in the region as a whole, deals with Sri Lanka's Domestic Political and records, politely but incisively, the endless blunders that have brought us low lower. But while highlighting the callousness of politicians, he also notes how efforts to appease the West weakened what he describes as core protections.

Though there has been much speculation about what exactly brought down Gotabaya Rajapaksa – not his government, for that in essence continued, with a different leadership perhaps the most far-reaching revelation in Abeyagoonasekera's book is of Gotabaya's conviction that it was the CIA that destroyed him. As so often when the hidden hand of the West is identified, the local contributions are ignored, as Gotabaya's absurd energy and the ridiculous tax concessions with which his rule began. But that does not mean there were no other players in the game.

Ironically, Gotabaya's accusations against the United States occur after a startling event which Abeyagoonasekera declares of that country that 'The fatigue gripping the deeper than weariness; it is a spiritual exhaustion, a slow erosion of belief. Rising policy paralysis, and a fractured foreign policy have left America adrift. Inflation threatens them like a spectre, while the immigrant crisis stirs frustrations in communities stretched to their limits'.

This he claims explains the re-emergence of Donald Trump. Now, in the midst of Trump has perpetrated, this passage suggests that he is desperate to assert himself of the fatigue that has overcome a nation initially built on idealism, now in the ruthless cynicism. What will follow I do not know. But the manner in which India slavishness to the bullying of Netanyahu and Trump has destroyed the moral stance had suggests that Abeyagoonasekera’s nuanced but definite adulation of Chinese be a hallmark of the new world order.

By Rajiva Wijesinha

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