



Institute of Regional Studies

Competition in the IOR does not necessarily present binary options for Sri Lanka



ISLAMABAD, January 20, 2021: “The competition in the Indian Ocean region does not necessarily present binary options for Sri Lanka,” said political columnist and author of *Sri Lanka at Crossroads: Geopolitical Challenges and National Interests* Mr. Assanga Abeya-Goonasekera. He was speaking at a virtual conference titled “Sri Lanka and the Competing

Gunboat Diplomacies Around: Options and Challenges” organized by the Institute of Regional Studies here on Wednesday.

While Goonasekera called for finding a balance in Sri Lankan relations with China, India, and the US, he expressed his concern over the influence of one of the competing rivals getting out of balance with regard to the others. Citing an example of such an imbalance, he referred to the incident in which Chinese submarines came to the shores of Colombo, which became a serious issue in India-Sri Lanka relations.

He added that Sri Lankan policymakers had concerns about growing Indian influence in their country as well. He referred to statements of Sri Lankan leaders accusing the Indian intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), of meddling in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka. He further stated that Sri Lanka was always highlighted in elections in the southern Indian states, especially Tamil Nadu. Goonasekera shared that the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu had condemned demolition of a war memorial in Jaffna University, which many Sri Lankans viewed as interference in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka.

Goonasekera maintained that Sri Lanka enjoyed an important geo-strategic location in the Indian Ocean Region. Highlighting the importance of Sri Lanka in the strategic calculation of the British empire, Goonasekera gave the example of Japanese attack on Sri Lanka in the Second World War, which was considered a turning point by the British at the time.

He added that in the twenty-first century, both India and China were jockeying for influence in the island nation. Referring to a recent visit of the Indian Minister of External Affairs, Goonasekera shared that the visit was aimed at reviving work on the important East Container Terminal Project of India, which Indian authorities believed was stopped at the behest of the Chinese government. Signifying the strategic importance for Sri Lanka for the US, Goonasekera shared excerpts from a recently declassified US report in which it called for strengthening the capacity of emerging regional partners like Bangladesh, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. Goonasekera was hopeful that the US would play a more proactive role in South Asia and would play a more significant role in promoting what he referred to as ‘minilaterals’ in the region.

Goonasekera called for revival of SAARC and promoting more of what he referred to as ‘minilaterals’ in South Asia. He cautioned, however, that for broader connectivity it was essential for all South Asian countries to adopt an inclusive rather than an exclusive approach. Commenting on Sri Lankan relations with Pakistan, Goonasekera stated appreciated the role of Pakistan during the conflict in Sri Lanka. He urged the two countries to capitalize on their bilateral trade potential. Goonasekera was of the view that Indian influence in Sri Lanka would not affect its relations with Pakistan but it could affect its relations with China. He was further of the view that relationship trajectory between Sri Lanka and China was stronger today than the relationship trajectory between Sri Lanka and the US.