

Comment by Michael C H Jones
10th September 2015

As Chamber inches towards a new Narrative for its role in Australia China Relations in a Global Era, the responsibilities of decades old Special Projects and more recent Peoples Diplomacy continue in constantly evolving contexts brought on by the return to Great Power status of China and India, thereby challenging the present predominance of the USA. Additionally there are re-adjustments in regional power relations whether Koreas, Japan and Russia in North East Asia or Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel not to mention Turkey and Egypt in West Asia.

Sri Lanka is a minion to India and China, the more so as the 21st century develops - ironically both more integrated global economic systems but increasingly more incessant localised attempts for regional security. There are no permanent friends or enemies, just permanent interests is a national motivation back in vogue as the basis of foreign policy. In this sense there is little difference in the motivations of Sri Lanka and Australia, or indeed Fiji, or any other of the Indauspac Island nations.

Perhaps it is just that newly elected President of Sri Lanka, Maithripala Sirisena, is a little more advanced in his thinking than Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott or Foreign Minister Julie Bishop? The SAARC (South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation) has been a disappointment, membership of ASEAN is not feasible, and the Muslim states to the West culturally "alien" to Buddhist traditions. Who should be Sri Lanka's close regional security partners in the Greater Indian Ocean - Singapore, Australia, or Kenya perhaps?

From an Australian perspective when formulating/implementing a Three Oceans Policy linking security and economic considerations, an islands strategy is worth evaluation. The policy experience of the South West Pacific may well be advantageous regarding diplomacy with the smaller island nations off the coasts of West Asia and East Africa. How does Australia maintain a forward intelligence structure without overly antagonising the major Asian Powers? With today's military technologies the giant aircraft carrier of continental Australia will increasingly be threatening to the Asian Oceans Region, particularly if the USA remains committed to global hegemony.

Sri Lanka will quietly become a key diplomatic player given its strategic location and potentially stable governance. However, arguably, the older Non-Aligned diplomacy and strategy for smaller nations is no longer possible in the 21st century world?