

Norway-Sri Lanka diplomacy: Trade beyond aid as a pragmatic approach for future collaboration

By SRIMAL FERNANDO AND MIZLY NIZAR

SRI Lanka-Norway diplomatic relations have entered a dynamic new phase with strengthened ties and bilateral cooperation between the two nations.

Prior to 2009, during the civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE), Sri Lanka-Norway relations had not always been harmonious. Norway's role as official peace facilitators between the parties to the conflict was a matter of debate for many Sri Lankans.

Led by Eric Solehim as peace mediator, Norway assisted to broker a Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) between the Government and the LTTE in 2002. The CFA was a realistic plan to give both parties a political voice and to prevent further bloodshed. However, pro war sentiments at home eventually led to the collapse of the cease-fire in 2006 with Sri Lanka's then-government accusing Norway of favouring the LTTE souring the relationship between the countries.

Sri Lanka's transition from a conflict-riddled past into a relatively peaceful and prosperous future has changed the country's mode of managing its external affairs with Norway. To begin a new era in bilateral relations both nations came up with new lasting ideas that could solidify the bonds.

Examining the historical and current links between Norway and Sri Lanka will certainly be of interest to foreign policymakers of both nations. Existing relations between the two countries dates back to the pre-conflict period. Both countries established diplomatic ties more than six decades ago in 1952. The Norwegians foresaw the possibility of development cooperation as a commitment to Sri Lanka at that juncture.

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1965 up to 2017, according to statistics from Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). Priority areas of Norway's assistance to Sri Lanka are also linked to some of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In providing development cooperation, noteworthy is Norway's technical support in the field of fisheries since 1971, which includes fisheries management, research

and education, and private sector development with the aim of achieving sustainable management of fisheries resources in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, to provide the country with up-to-date data to better monitor its fish stocks, the Norwegian Research Vessel Dr. Fridtjof Nansen successfully completed a marine resources survey around Sri Lanka in 2018.

In addition to economic and technical cooperation, there have

been a number of high-level visits between Sri Lanka and Norway in the recent years. Reflecting the renewed commitment to revitalise bilateral ties the then Foreign Minister of Norway Børge Brende and Norway's State Secretary Tore Hattrem visited Sri Lanka in 2016.

Reiterating bilateral cooperation between the countries during his visit, Hattrem stated: “We want to strengthen the political dialogue, support the Government's policies for reform and reconciliation, promote business cooperation and support technical cooperation. It is the positive political development in Sri Lanka that makes this possible.”

To further consolidate bilateral ties the Prime Minister of Norway Erna Solberg visited Sri Lanka later in the same year commending the progress made by Sri Lanka in advancing political and economic reforms and advancing reconciliation since 2015.

More recently, in 2018, the State Minister of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Jens Frølich Holte also visited the country coinciding with the arrival of the Norwegian research ves-

sel Nansen. Looking at enhancing future cooperation and improving bilateral ties both countries should progress from aid diplomacy to the prospects of heightened economic integration. Sri Lanka could look for new areas of focus to enhance trade cooperation.

Setting a good example in this direction of trade diplomacy were the discussions held during the visit by Norwegian Ambassador for Sri Lanka Thorbjørn Gaustadsæther to Colombo Dockyard recently focusing on the extent of cooperation that Colombo Dockyard has at present with its Norwegian partners in the shipbuilding and ship repairing sectors.

In addition to vital discussions on enhanced cooperation to increase bilateral trade, future prospects of collaboration on heavy engineering projects which are in the pipeline under the scheduled infrastructure development in Sri Lanka were also discussed.

To further develop economic ties there is also the possibility of expanding Norwegian investment in Sri Lanka, both through portfolio and foreign direct investment. Such close cooperation if implemented would be a foundation to lift economic ties to a new height.

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ened relationship between Norway and Sri Lanka, which in turn will benefit the two countries and its people, it is important for both countries to learn from historical mistakes while moving forward. For a more robust bilateral relationship there should be a common commitment to strengthening ties between the two countries along with a pragmatic foreign policy. From Sri Lanka's stand point, it is imperative that the country pursues a stable foreign policy position in its external relations that does not alter course each time there is a change of government.

[This opinion piece gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Sri Lankan Government or the Norwegian Government. Srimal Fernando is a PhD Research scholar at the Jindal School of International Affairs (JSIA), India and Global Editor of Diplomatic Society, South Africa. He won the 2018/2019 Best Journalist of the Year award in South Africa. Mizly Nizar is a foreign policy analyst and a former visiting lecture at the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies (BCIS) and the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL).]

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By PROF. ZHOU GUPING AND DR. NI HAO

SINCE China proposed to build the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, now referred to as the Belt & Road Initiative, considerable attention has been attracted from the international community.

As introduced by the head of NDRC (National Development and Reform Commission) at the Press Conference for the Second Session of the 13th National People Congress (6 March 2018), China has signed 171 cooperation agreements with 123 countries and 29 international organisations, including both developing and developed countries, as well as a great number of companies and financial institutions from developed countries to explore the third-party market jointly.

Regarding the infrastructure, programs on Gwadar Port, Hambantota Port, China-Laos's railway, and Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway have achieved great progress to promote connectivity. Zamir Assadi, a reporter from Pakistan, describes it as an unprecedented chance to the global economic communities

Not only infrastructure and investment, China's BRI commits to people-to-people bonds

offered by China. It needs to be further pointed out that the Belt & Road Initiative is not only about money and railways, as represented explicitly in the mass media. Instead, five correlated pillars, namely, policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds are together regarded as the cornerstone of BRI. Among those, people-to-people bonds, which refers to the people-to-people exchanges on culture, education, sports, tourism, health, laws, youth issues and other people's livelihood related fields, is the one easiest to be neglected, whereas hardest to be achieved.

People-to-people bonds accounts for a large enough proportion in China's policy priorities. As President Xi Jinping quoted many times, “Only when the hearts meet can they achieve enduring friendship”, “Amity between people holds the key to sound relations between states”.

Harmony is built on the basis of mutual understanding and cooperation between people. Promoting people-to-people bonds lays a solid foundation for economic and social cooperation, accumulates potential energy for building a community with shared future for mankind. The fascination of exchange reflects in the communication among diverse civilisation with different culture, custom and national conditions. Beyond doubt, Belt & Road



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Initiative possess not only the attributes of materiality, but spirituality, in nature to enhance mutual learning among civilisations with an open, mutual-respect and future-oriented mind.

Specially, China's effort in health cooperation with countries alongside the Belt & Road make tremendous achievements. Infectious disease control and cure, medical and health system reform, capacity building and talents cultivation are the main domains for health cooperation.

According to the varying regional demands, China carries out long-term cooperation plans, such as The

Prague Declaration signed with central and eastern European countries, the project on building China-Laos Medical Service Community, and public health personnel joint training with Indonesia. Besides, five central Asian countries, Russia, Mongolia and China establish a medical service centre with joint efforts to provide high-quality care. Those projects brought tangible benefits to the common people, in most cases, are lack of health insurance schemes or quality healthcare.

Education matters anywhere, and concerns the future of this generation and our globe. Along the

Belt & Road, in many developing countries, there is a great demand in Technical and Vocational Education (TVET). Receiving a certain level of vocational education is an important way for local people to improve their employability and obtain higher income.

Thus, in 2016, Ningbo Polytechnic set up an international training centre in Benin, an under-developed country located in West Africa, to train local employees for the development of Chinese-funded enterprises and promote the economic development of the host country. Also known as China-African (Benin) College of

Vocational and Technical Education afterwards, it created a pioneering cooperation model in running schools and also had deep and broad implications for local human capital ecosystem.

Just in two years, the college equipped more than 400 students from Benin and surrounding countries with skills. As the dean of the college recalls, usually the last-year students get job offers from the local industrial park even before graduation, definitely they are “sweet pastry” in the labour market.

Nowadays, people are surprised to find that Confucius Institute is not the only paradigm of Chinese overseas education service, TVET is also gaining momentum to promote skill and talents exchange.

In the past five years, the outcome of Belt & Road Initiative has been fruitful, and more satisfactorily, policymakers are conscious of the significance of strengthening people's sense of having gained. The generous B&R scholarship is provided at central government, local authorities and university levels, covering most of the expense in China and attract hundreds of thousands of applications each year. As the old Chinese saying goes, “Ten years to grow trees, but a hundred to cultivate people.”

Engineering and trade is easy, but sincere communication and true empathy is not. The implementation of

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the Belt & Road Initiative also needs time and true feelings. We here humbly appeal to build a spiritual silk road in the coming decades.

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