

The Neighbourly Connections: Sri Lanka and Maldives Promoting Economic Diplomacy

By Srimal Fernando | 12 March 2019

It is true that in certain epochs of Sri Lanka and Maldives bilateral history positioned their foreign policy settings in such a way to maximize its own economic and security preferences. Given these features and trends in the two-sided diplomacy, Maldivian President Solih, being the chief guest at the 71st Independence Day celebrations in Sri Lanka turned a new leaf in the formal ties.

Speaking at the state dinner in honour of the Maldivian chief guest Maithripala Sirisena the Sri Lankan President reassured of his government's unwavering commitment and support towards the Maldives. In turn the President Ibrahim Solih noted the manifold contributions made by Sri Lanka towards the Maldives and expressed his desire for further cooperation on mutually beneficial areas.

It seems reasonable to ascertain there has been a revival of the neighbourly bonds following the new government coming to power in Maldives. There is tremendous sense of anxiety in the foreign policy circles how these two nations can bring about a workable strategic diplomatic partnership that requires consensus among policy makers of Sri Lanka and Maldives in the future. Due to its geographical settings the reasons for this are manifold.

This foreign policy agenda for the two island nations is derived from an economic imperative in which both nations find it self utterly dependent on tourism and fisheries. Looking back on commercial diplomacy Sri Lanka has become one of the top trading partners of Maldives.

The current bilateral trade turnover has grown and Sri Lankan products have also gradually gained a foothold having a two-way turnover reaching US\$181 million. On the supply side Sri Lankan exports to Maldives touched US\$95 billion in 2016. Similarly US\$ 86 million worth of imports

were from Maldives (Sri Lanka Export Development Board Market Development Division 2017). Decades ago, tourist visiting Maldives and Sri Lanka numbered about 300,000. Today both these nations receive over 2 million visitors a year. Another factor worth mentioning is the undersea fibre-optic cable connecting Male to Colombo. In essence economic diplomacy offers far reaching outcomes. It is always difficult to pin point what will be the bilateral advantages of this relationship.

On the positive note foreign policies between the two nations was also shaped by leaders of certain status associated with specific political and regional networks. Years down the line at a state banquet in Male' in 1981 the visiting Sri Lankan Minister of Foreign Affairs, late Mr. A. C. S. Hameed said, "Maldives is Sri Lanka's nearest and dearest and small neighbor." In response the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Maldives Fathulla Jameel made a rather interesting comment stating that, "relations between our two nations cannot be any better and closer and these go back to the time when Sri Lanka had not tasted Maldivian fish and the Maldives had not tasted Sri Lankan tea (Verinder Grover 2002).

Larger than life personality Maumoon Gayoom Former Maldivian President and founding members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) had ambitious plans to transform his Foreign policy vision to reality. He was at the centre stage in forging stronger ties between Maldives and Sri Lanka in early parts of the last decade. This was evident when Former President Gayoom said, "The relations between the Maldives and Sri Lanka had been founded over the years on mutual understanding and respect, and shared values on important regional and international issues." (Maldives News Bulletin Department of Information, 2008). Nonetheless Maldives took a different path in a new direction some ten years ago in 2008.. Maldives was at cross roads when Mohamed Nasheed won the first ever multi-party elections and assuming duties as President of Maldives in 2008. His Presidency was a new beginning and brought considerable stability to Lanka Maldives ties. With this background, the two island nation's diplomacy underwent considerable changes.

Sri Lanka and Maldives may overcome the disadvantages of smallness and might have an advantage if they forge a interdependent strategic foreign policy partnership in the coming years. But the idea of strategic partnership between Sri Lanka and Maldives need new impetus.

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