

## Iran – Sri Lanka Political and Diplomatic Relations from Past to Present

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### Abstract

Since the ancient times, Iran and Sri Lanka have maintained a cordial relationship in terms of political and diplomatic spheres. In the Persian era, the ties between Iran and Sri Lanka mainly lined to the Strait of Hormuz. The main reason for such mutual relationship of Sri Lanka to bond with Iran is Oil resources. Sri Lanka is the major beneficiary in the term of economic sector from the ties with Iran, but at the same time Sri Lanka has benefited politically as well as diplomatically. The perception of Iran towards Sri Lanka is expressed as “ours is a friendship based on mutual trust and understanding. Iran is sincerely committed to the development of Sri Lanka, whom we consider to be a true friend”. This article provides comprehensive knowledge from past to present about the political and diplomatic relations between Iran and Sri Lanka. The main objective of this paper is to examine the evolution of the political and diplomatic relations between Iran and Sri Lanka from the Persian era to the post conflict period of Sri Lanka. And also the article tended to identify the characteristics of each era. The article is organized by several sectors as Political and diplomatic relations in Persian Era, the period of war, new trend through official visits and relations in post conflict period of Sri Lanka. Through above all the sector, this article discussed the progress of political and diplomatic relations between Iran and Sri Lanka gradually. Even though Iran and Sri Lanka is still on the process of building their good will while broadening their relation, all the diplomatic as well as political enrichments of both countries is based on mutual understanding.

### Introduction

Iran which was known as Persia in the ancient period is located in Western Asia. As an energy superpower, Iran has ranked as OPEC’s (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) 2<sup>nd</sup> largest oil exporter. Sri Lanka also has been facilitated to conduct cordial relationship with Iran in the terms of political and

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diplomatic since the ancient times. Sri Lanka is largely benefited by the financial support of Iran in the period of post war. Both countries have used their diplomatic approaches actively to conduct such a strong relationship between the two countries. It is needed to emphasize that still Iran and Sri Lanka are in the process of developing their mutual ties by using new trends in political and diplomatic practices. As an effective outcome of political and diplomatic practices of the both countries, Iran has expressed their perception towards Sri Lanka as “ours is a friendship based on mutual trust and understanding. Iran is sincerely committed to the development of Sri Lanka, whom we consider to be a true friend.” (Frasco, 2010). Iran mostly tended to enhance the economic relations with Sri Lanka rather than political and other relations. But in the context of international relations, a country is forwarding their good will to another country by using the basement of political stability of that particular country. Then only they will continue the relationship in economically or socially or any other. Likewise, Iran also has a good faith in the political stability of Sri Lanka and they are willing to continue economic, political and diplomatic relations with Sri Lanka accordingly. The study is conducted to examine the new trends and development of the relations between Iran and Sri Lanka from past to present while identifying the characteristics of each period.

### **Political and Diplomatic Relations from Persian Era**

Iran (known as Persia) was one of the Persian Kingdom in the centuries ago and initially the trade relations between Sri Lanka and Iran was clearly well-established by the time Sassanian Empire formalized diplomatic relations with the court at Anuradhapura in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. At that time Persian merchants established a community in Anuradhapura (Daryae, 2005). This proves that Sri Lanka and Iran have established their diplomatic relations since 5<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, at that time Persia was India's neighbor. And Sri Lanka had trade links with the Western trade which was controlled by Persia. Several Iranian records speak of an embassy from Sri Lankan king to Iranian emperor Anusharwan (531-578) (Padmaperuma, 2008). The king has sent the emperor ten elephants, two hundred thousand pierce of teakwood and seven pearl divers. During this period also Sri Lanka and Iran has maintained cordial diplomatic as well as political relations between them through showing the good will by exchange of precious gifts.

Moreover, Persian horses were shipped to Sri Lanka and a colony was established in Sri Lanka where ships came from Persia. It proves that the two countries had quiet strong political ties that allowed establishing a colony which was belong to Iran. Likewise, since 5<sup>th</sup> century Sri Lanka and Iran have maintained their good faith and expanded their ties eventually.

After many years, Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon) officially established diplomatic relations with Iran in 1961 via initiating Sri Lankan embassy in Islamabad. This was the first official representative office in Iran which led the path for a successful bond between the two countries. Then Sri Lanka moved it to the Teheran which was established in 1990. At the same time, Iran also tended to establish their embassy in Colombo in 1975 (Mathes, 2008). According to above all data, it is clear that Sri Lanka and Iran have continued their relations gradually with a developing approach and this era has laid the initial stages for the gradual growth of the ties between two countries.

### **During the Period of War**

Sri Lanka was a victim of civil conflict which has 30 years of history. However, with the new leadership of President Mahinda Rajapaksha, the conflict was successfully directed to a victory by defeating the LTTE terrorist group. Even though, Sri Lanka followed a non-alignment foreign policy, new President, Mahinda Rajapaksha tended to build and enhance the relationship between anti-western oriented countries such as, China and Iran. Gradually this period was the turning point of broadening the relationship between new countries, especially with Iran. The main reason for that was, even though the civil conflict was labelled as an “internal conflict” it was largely influenced by many international actors, especially from Western countries. Due to that, Sri Lanka tended to reach the countries like China and Iran for help to continue the war against LTTE carders. Specially, during the last phase of war, Sri Lanka has abled to maintain arms and other economic aids from Iran. This was a result of a historic shift in Sri Lanka’s foreign policy.

In 2008, Sri Lanka faced shortages in ammunition and equipment to sustain the war against LTTE and then Sri Lanka turned to get help from Iran (Ferdinando, 2011). But at that time United States has threatened that they will impose sanctions on Sri Lanka if Sri Lanka continued arms dealings with Iran and North Korea.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka was successful to enter into few weapons procurement agreements with Iran as well as North Korea. After 2005, there has been a tremendous improvement in bilateral relations between Iran and Sri Lanka which was resulted as an unprecedented interest free credit facility to help Sri Lanka to obtain its crude oil supplies. Sri Lanka requested low interest rate loans from Iran to purchase trainer and electronic surveillance aircrafts and unmanned aerial vehicles in replacement of those lost during ground-cum-air attack launched by LTTE on the Anuradhapura air base (Ilangamuwa, 2007).

Iran agreed covertly to issue the loan and also invited selected Sri Lankan officers to train in Iran for the war. Analysts have termed Iran's aggressive courting of Sri Lanka's military capacity as a geostrategic implication of Iran's "Look east" strategy. And also the meeting between the two officials of both countries in October, 2007 on the sideline of the United Nations General Assembly in New York has prepared the platform for further ties between Sri Lanka and Iran. Further, when US intended to impose sanctions on Iran, Sri Lanka opposed imposing sanction on Iran. And also Sri Lanka was planned to purchase USD 150 million worth arms from Iran. The first arm deal with Iran was agreed by President Chandrika Kumarathunga in 2004. At that time China, Pakistan and Iran were amongst the biggest arms supplier to Sri Lanka. According to the above details, it's clear that Iran was a friendly nation to Sri Lanka in the hard times during the final stages of the war. It emphasizes that the relations between Sri Lanka and Iran have been conducted on a strong political and diplomatic platform which was facilitated the links among them in terms of military as well as economically.

In that context, Iran was friendly enough to raise financial loans and funds for several development projects in Sri Lanka including Uma Oya project and Sapugaskanda Oil refiner project. This is one of the biggest mile stone in the relationship between the two countries. The Uma Oya project is targeted to be completed by an Iranian company named Farab (Sirimane, 2013). The total expenditure is estimated to be Rs. 76,316 million of which Rs. 24,600 million will be borne by the Sri Lankan government. 85% of this will be granted by the Export Development Bank of Iran while the Sri Lankan government will foot the rest of the

bill (Alexander, 2011). This was one of the largest projects that the Iranian government agreed to fund in Sri Lanka.

During the period of war, Iran and Sri Lanka could successfully enrich their relations. This was a result of collective effort of diplomatic officials who have made a strong bond between the two countries. At the same time the two countries could maintain good political approaches which were mutually benefited to each other. Even though Iran more economic ties with Sri Lanka rather than pure and direct political relations, all these economic and other links have been built upon the effective diplomatic and political basement. Meanwhile, it can be identified that, Sri Lanka and Iran have entered into much broader relations rather than in the past. This was an effective period for both countries that they have engaged in diversified areas to continue their relations. According to that, in this period it can be recognize new trends in the affairs between two countries such as raising funds for development projects in Sri Lanka and mutual understanding in internal issues of both countries.

### **Post War Period**

Sri Lanka gained the victory by defeating the LTTE terrorist group in May 2009. At that movement foreign minister of Iran Mottaki telephoned Sri Lankan foreign minister Rohitha Bogollagama to congratulate on defeating the LTTE insurgency. This signals that the two countries have maintained a strong diplomatic relation. Meanwhile, Iran officials emphasized that Iran has always condemned terrorism and support the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka. Moreover, after the victory of Sri Lanka, United Nations Human Rights commission has claimed that Sri Lanka has engaged in war crimes and human rights violations during the war. With this statement huge international insurgency has been created against Sri Lanka. When United Nations General Secretary Ban Ki-moon appointed special panel to investigate human rights violations and war crimes during Sri Lankan counter attack on LTTE, Iranian minister of housing and city development Ali Nikasad lambasted the organization, describing it as a “paper tiger” and a “pet of the Western nations”. Further he stated that if any organization or country take action against that will harm Sri Lanka Iran will strongly oppose the move (Walker, 2011). This exposes the nature of the relationship between the two countries. When an international challenge is trying to attack Sri Lanka, Iran was one of the important countries which expressed

their idea against the Western and forwarded their hand to help us. Politically this was a great victory of Sri Lanka gained through great diplomatic practices between the two countries.

Aftermath, Iran agreed to raise fund for several infrastructure development projects in Sri Lanka. Iran has agreed to provide the funds to establish a nuclear power plant in Sri Lanka. In September 2011, Sri Lanka has announced its plan to build a nuclear power plant within next 20 years. For this purpose the main donor will be Iran. Iran's investments in Sri Lanka were tallied in 2008 at approximately US\$ 450 million (Colachal, 2008). In April 2008, Rajapaksa and Ahmadinejad issued a joint statement which called upon all nations with nuclear weapons to disarm. In August 2008, Iranian foreign minister, Manoucher Mottaki, announced that Iran was willing to share its uranium enrichment technology with Sri Lanka in order to facilitate a peaceful nuclear energy program for the nation. While the percentage of Iranian aid is most substantial, if Iran's incipient nuclear weapons program reaches the point where that nation becomes an international pariah, it is doubtful that Sri Lanka would stand with Iran against concerted pressure from the international community. The Iran-Sri Lanka relationship is one of convenience, not the guiding force behind either country's foreign policy. But every Sri Lanka is not in the favor of establishing nuclear power plant in Sri Lanka, but the aid from Iran is so much considerable as a country like Sri Lanka. Now the foreign policy of Sri Lanka is been much similar with Iran in the context of Western community. In that context, being friendly with a country like Iran will benefited in numerous ways for the development of economic, political and other sectors in Sri Lanka.

According to that for Iran to agree to help Sri Lanka to build nuclear power plant in future is all depend on the broaden relationship between the two countries.

### **New Trends Through Official Visits**

Due to the emerging trends in relations between Sri Lanka and Iran, both heads of the States planned their official visits to each country, which marked another milestone in political and diplomatic sphere. Former Iranian President Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has visited Sri Lanka on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2008 which was a two days visit to Sri Lanka as a part of his South Asian Tour (Ilangamuwa, 2008). In the joint news conference, Iranian president emphasized that the both countries have agreed to

cooperate in all sphere for the mutual benefit of each other. This statement expose that the two countries are now in emerging new trends in their relationship. Both countries are in the context of empowering their political, economic and diplomatic ties. During the visits Iran agreed to assist in the energy sector which was crucial to Sri Lankan government at a time when it's finding too difficult to pay for its increasingly costly oil imports. In addition Iran is also providing low-interest loan to Sri Lanka to enable it to purchase defense-related equipment from China and Pakistan and providing Sri Lankan Army and Military Intelligence officers. During the official visit of former president of the Islamic Republic of Iran Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, he participated at the launch of work on modernizing the Sapugaskanda Petroleum Refinery which is estimated to cost US\$ 750 million, while the Iranian Minister of Trade participated in the ceremony to launch the Uma Oya Multi-Purpose Scheme. Both projects are being funded by Iran.

In a joint statement issued at the conclusion of Iranian President's visit Sri Lanka expressed that it supported the peaceful use of nuclear energy by Iran within the framework of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The statement also stated that the two sides confirmed the full and non-discriminatory implementation of Article IV of the NPT on peaceful nuclear co-operation.

Official visits of heads of States have made due to the personal diplomacy of the leaders. Former Iranian President Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is one of the best players in forming his personal diplomacy over enhancing his relationship among countries. He has described as a man who is being described in global media, including India, as a "firebrand" Ahmadinejad won the hearts of all Sri Lankans on this very short visit. As an effective outcome of the visit, the Iranian side expressed its support for the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka and welcomed the positive political steps taken to end the conflict through negotiations, leading to a durable settlement, acceptable to all the people of Sri Lanka.

Iran and Sri Lanka have condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and emphasized the need for enhanced international cooperation to eliminate this global menace following bilateral talks between the two sides. They underscored the potential for expansion of bilateral economic co-operation by

encouraging the private sectors of both countries to invest in each other (Colachal, 2008). The net result of Iranian President's first visit to Sri Lanka is he held talks with Sri Lankan leaders and witnessed the signing of six economic agreements.

Recalling the visit of President Rajapaksa, President of Sri Lanka to Iran in November 2007, and the Agreements and MOUs (memorandum of understanding) reached between the two countries in the areas of power supply and irrigation as well as the expansion of the oil refinery facility in Sri Lanka, both sides noted with satisfaction, the conclusion several MOUs and Agreements during the visit of the President of Iran to Sri Lanka.

Such MOUs as follows,

- MOU on the Establishment of the Political Consultation Mechanism between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Islamic Republic of Iran.
- MOU between Mahinda Rajapaksa Sports Development Foundation of Sri Lanka and Mostazafan Foundation of the Islamic Revolution of Iran to build and operate "Iranian Club-Colombo" in Diyagama, Homagama, Sri Lanka.
- Heads of Agreement between the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation and the National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company.
- Financing Agreement between the Ministry of Finance & Planning of Sri Lanka and the Export Development Bank of Iran for the Uma Oya multi-purpose development project.
- Contract Agreement between the Ministry of Irrigation and Water Management of Sri Lanka and Farab Energy and Water Projects Company of Iran for the Uma Oya multi-purpose development project.

Given the ever increasing importance of regional co-operation, both sides agreed to welcome and support various initiatives for the strengthening of such co-operation in Asia, inter alia, such as the Economic Co-operation Organization (ECO), South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Co-operation (IOR-ARC), Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asia – Middle East Dialogue (AMED) and the Colombo Plan.

According to above MOUs, the two countries have expanded their political, economic and diplomatic ties while growing number of agreements signed between the two countries with different socio-political perceptions testifies to their strong future intent. This era is identified as the peak of developing trends between Sri Lanka and Iran. At the same time, it reveals that Sri Lanka and Iran have entered into number of agreements rather than they did in the past. This was a huge political and diplomatic achievement of both countries which took a gradual growth since centuries ago.

### **Conclusion**

Iran and Sri Lanka have now engaged in a strong relationship rather than the past. This is an outcome of gradual process of the political and diplomatic practice of both countries. Nowadays, Iran has drowned his attention towards South Asian region to expand his ties with Asian countries using their energy diplomacy. As a matter of fact, Sri Lanka has become one of important friend to Iran due to the strategic location as well as the foreign policy perspectives. For the development of political and diplomatic ties between the two countries, the personal diplomacy of the heads of the states has been impacted effectively. Even though the two countries have shared more economic ties, the platform to emerge such cooperation was created by the political and diplomatic missions. As mentioned above since the Persian era, Sri Lanka and Iran had several links in the sector of economic and political mostly. With the gradual growth, it expanded into more fields in the period of civil conflict in Sri Lanka. At that time Iran tended to provide low interest rate loans to Sri Lanka as well as was a main actor in arms trade. When it comes to the period of post war, the ties between Sri Lanka and Iran tended to grow rapidly due to the cooperation of Iran against the Western challenges. For that, the similar aspects of the foreign policies of the both countries have been affected. Without any hesitation, Iran has expressed their will to forward their helping hand to raise funds for the several development projects in Sri Lanka as Uma Oya project and Sapugaskanda oil refinery project. This marked a turning point in the relationship between Sri Lanka and Iran. The peak of the ties between two countries has been showed with the official visits of the heads of the States to each country. Iran and Sri Lanka have entered into several MOUS and agreements with the visit of Iranian

president in the sectors of political, economic, social and other. According to the several phases of the era, Iran and Sri Lanka have shown their gradual improvement in the relations in political and diplomatic sectors while exposing several new trends which characterize the nature of the relationship. For this achievement dedication and practice of political and diplomatic missions have played as effective role which resulted as a core element for the sustainable development of Sri Lanka.

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