Seventy-one years after independence, Sri Lanka is eventually on a new path in forging stronger diplomatic bonds with the United States of America. This bipartisan foreign relationship is perhaps one of the most important factors that could influence South Asian economies in the coming years. Going down the corridors of post-independence history, D.S Senanayake and S.W.R.D Bandaranaike the founding fathers of two major political parties in Sri Lanka helped shaping the US and Lanka foreign policy choices over the years.

Exactly five years since independence, Sri Lanka witnessed a huge change in diplomatic relations with the visit of the US Vice President Richard Nixon in 1953. This significant visit was a momentous milestone in shaping the dual foreign policy status (Richard Nixon Foundation 2009). Thirty years later, the US attitude towards Sri Lanka changed remarkably when Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayawardena unveiled a new diplomatic strategy. The memorable words of US President Ronald Reagan during the state dinner held in honor of visiting Sri Lankan President J.R Jayawardane stated,

“Sri Lanka is an example of independent people determining their own destiny and a country which the United States is proud to count among its friends “

This gesture by the American president increased the effectiveness of diplomatic collaboration between the two nations that was at a highest point (Ronald Reagan Presidential Library).

Years following President Jayawardena’s visit to the United States (US) the bilateralism took a wider angle, where both nations took steps to maintain closer economic connections. This in turn generated trade incentives from America to the island nation. The incentives involved a big change in Sri Lanka’s apparel sector. It was a big shift in Sri Lanka’s financial outlook from its previous agriculture based economy. In various corners of the island nation, more than 200 apparel factories were opened creating employment opportunities for nearly 300,000 Sri Lankans in early 1990s. Over the years both nations experimented in changing the face of the diplomatic landscape. Nonetheless, the two-way diplomacy has not always
been smooth. Thus in 2013, Sri Lanka’s relations with the Americans were seriously affected and it was disheartening to see the drift due to numerous reasons. Despite several setbacks, both nations have come a long way. Therefore, the stalemate situation in the diplomatic endeavors changed within days after Sri Lanka’s new government came into power in 2015.

Looking at the foreign relations, today the US is one of the largest trading partners of the island nation. Currently the two way trade continued to climb and it is closer to US$ 3.2 billion (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2017). According to the figures released by the Sri Lanka Export Development Board (SLEDB), the apparel exports to the US was over US$ 2.2 billion (SLEDB, 2019). It is worth noting the economic integration with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations has been the top most trade priority of Sri Lanka. The advantage for Sri Lanka is, its geographic location in the Indian Ocean that links east and west maritime routes. Therefore, there are number of ways in which these ties could become more relevant for the Americans, to tap into the 1.6 billion Indian subcontinent consumer and producer market through the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). On the other hand, the 300 million US consumer market cycle might be comparatively different than the South Asian market. Even though clearly there are abundant opportunities for investors. Therefore, treating the US investors on par with Sri Lankan businesses can go a long way if necessary steps are taken.

On the defense side, the fundamental changes in the bilateral defense policies were initiated during the former President Barack Obama’s tenure. The inaugural defense dialogue between the US and Sri Lankan armed forces in 2016 were a groundbreaking collaboration (Ministry of Defense Sri Lanka).

For the Americans to walk this fine line with Sri Lankans, they desire to balance trade and aid cooperation that can win the hearts and minds of many islanders. Since 1956, the United States has provided over US$ 2 billion worth of development assistance to Sri Lanka. It is worthwhile to mention the current US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Alaina Teplitz stated “For seven decades, the United States has supported Sri Lanka on its path to peace and prosperity “. One of the touching examples of American kindness towards Sri Lankans was, when H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, the two former presidents visiting the island nation to gain firsthand information of the post tsunami recovery efforts.

Making predictions about the future of the two-sided diplomacy might be a challenging process. The new America First Policy towards South Asian nations had taken entirely an unexpected path. Yet, Sri Lanka can take necessary steps to revise its current foreign policy towards the United States. This structural shift may gain greater recognition for Sri Lankans among the US foreign policy makers. The long-standing diplomacy evolved differently. It is obvious that there are no easy solutions to strengthen American and Lankan bonds. In fact, to pursue this bipartisan
diplomacy to a strategic partnership should come as no surprise. In short, policy
makers of the two nations are in a position to turn a new page in these enduring
bonds.

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