Sri Lanka-Norway ties: Need to look beyond aid diplomacy

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, with new lasting ideas that could solidify their bonds, write Srimal Fernando and Mizly Nizar for South Asia Monitor

By Srimal Fernando and Mizly Nizar, March 16, 2019

Diplomatic relations between Sri Lanka-Norway have entered a dynamic new phase with strengthened ties and bilateral cooperation between them. Prior to 2009, during the civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Colombo–Oslo relations had not always been harmonious. Norway’s role as official peace facilitators between the parties in the conflict was debated by many Sri Lankans.

Led by Eric Solheim as peace-mediator, Norway helped to broker a ceasefire agreement (CFA) between the GoSL and 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 in Sri Lanka eventually led to the collapse of the cease-fire in 2006, with Sri Lanka's then-government accusing Norway of favoring the LTTE, thus souring the relationship between them.

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, with new lasting ideas that could solidify their bonds. Examining historical and current links between Norway and Sri Lanka will be of interest to foreign policy makers of both nations. Existing relations between Colombo and Oslo date back to the pre-conflict period. Both countries established diplomatic ties in 1952. The Norwegians foresaw the possibility of development cooperation as a commitment to Sri Lanka at that juncture. Financial aid has been Norway’s most important foreign policy tool and it has contributed more than 5 billion NOK to Sri Lanka in development assistance between 1965 and 2017, according to statistics from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). Priority areas of Norwegian assistance to Sri Lanka are also linked to some of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s)
In providing development cooperation, Norway’s technical support in fisheries since 1971 is noteworthy. This includes fisheries management, research and education, and private sector development, aimed at 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 Fridtjof Nansen successfully completed a marine resources survey around Sri Lanka in 2018.

In addition to economic and technical cooperation, there have been several high-level visits between Sri Lanka and Norway in recent years. Reflecting the renewed commitment to revitalize bilateral ties the former Norwegian Foreign Minister Børge Brende and State Secretary Tore Hattrem visited Sri Lanka in 2016. Reiterating bilateral cooperation between the countries during his visit, Hattrem said, “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, Prime Minister of Norway Erna Solberg visited Sri Lanka later the same year, commending the progress made by Sri Lanka in advancing political and economic reforms and advancing reconciliation since 2015. Jens Frølich Holte, State Minister of Foreign Affairs, also visited Sri Lanka, in 2018, coinciding with the arrival of the research vessel 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 discussions held during the visit by the Norwegian Ambassador, 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 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. 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 new heights.

To pursue a strengthened relationship between Norway and Sri Lanka, which in turn will benefit the two countries and their 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 standpoint, it is imperative that the country pursues a stable foreign policy position in external relations that does not alter course each time there is a change of government.