

# Sri Lanka - Türkiye Relations in Türkiye's Asia Anew Initiative

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At the outset, I am indeed very happy to meet with Turkish and foreign students here today. Young brains are our future and if we show them the different cultures in the world, they will become sophisticated individuals in the future, and this will broaden their perspective. I hope my brief remarks will give you glimpse of Sri Lanka- Turkey relations.

My remarks now will continue with the modern-day bilateral relations i.e., post-republican period of Turkey and post-independence period of Sri Lanka. In fact, we couldn't find any authentic substantial records of Turkey and Sri Lanka then Ceylon exchanges in terms of political, trade, culture between the years that Turkey became republic in 1923 till 1948 perhaps may be Sri Lanka then Ceylon was under British rule. Perhaps the Turkish political authorities and individual businessmen would have been contacting Sri Lanka, which was then under rule, through British administration.

In 1948 February 4<sup>th</sup>, Sri Lanka became an independent state. Turkey was the one of the first countries to recognize Sri Lanka's independence. The consideration by the leaders of Turkey at that time was a clear and remarkable gesture towards Sri Lanka and people of Sri Lanka to recognize as an independent state. It shows Turkish Government's desire to build a friendship with Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankans were honored by the gesture of Turkey.

Ever since, Sri Lanka- Turkey relations grew steadily. Perhaps one can say that it was very slow. However, our relations at the international forums were binding and supportive to each other's agenda. Both countries

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respect sovereignty and integrity of each other countries' territory. Though there were no resident missions were established during this time, the two countries' relations were very friendly.

The significant high-level exchanges between Sri Lanka and Turkey occurred, as per our record available as to date, was then Prime Minister of Sri Lanka who later became the President of Sri Lanka Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1986. The visit I was told a long visit (a week) as his visit included study and familiarize on the infrastructure projects that the Turkey has started during that period. He had met his Turkish counterpart on the sidelines of his visit, he visited the Atatürk Memorial to lay wreath and met several other bureaucrats and Turkish business community. Following that visit, Turkey planned a reciprocal visit to Sri Lanka by the Prime Minister of Turkey, Turgut Ozal in 1987. Due to the unforeseen reasons, the planned visit was put on hold and later canceled. During the visit of former Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa, (I witnessed in a note) both Turkey and Sri Lanka agreed to establish resident Mission in Ankara and reciprocally a Turkish Mission in Sri Lanka. For unknown reasons the decision had not been materialized. In fact, if both countries have established resident Missions, the progress of the bilateral relations of the two countries especially trade, people to people, cultural relations would have been far better than the present situation.

Following this visit, may be the recommendations of the delegations visited Turkey in 1986 would have seen the prospects of business and trade with Turkey and agreed to establish trade links between two countries. Therefore, in 1988 then Minister of Trade of Sri Lanka, a prominent personality in then Cabinet late Hon. Lalith Athulathmudali visited Izmir Trade Fair along with a large business delegation. During that visit, he met his counterpart Hon. Sukru Yurur, Minister of Trade and Industry of Turkey and discussed ways and means to enhance bilateral trade and economic activities between Turkey and Sri Lanka. On the sidelines of the visit on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1988 in order to establish strong trade relations between Sri Lanka and Turkey signed a trade agreement between the Government of Sri Lanka and Government of Turkey that was the biggest indication to have a strong relation between two countries and to link two countries relations in terms of trade which we were enjoying during Seljuk and Ottoman empire time.

The visit by our Minister of Trade and signing of the trade agreement paved the way to establish a joint committee on trade. The first session of the joint committee met in Colombo on 19<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1990. The high-profile Turkish delegation was led by Dr. Ibrahim Cakir, Deputy Undersecretary for Treasury and Foreign Trade at the Prime Minister's Office and Sri Lankan delegation was led by Mr. R.A.P. Goonetilleke, the Secretary of the Ministry of Trade & Commerce. During the visit of Dr. Ibrahim Cakir and Turkish delegation met many VIPs during their stay in Sri Lanka. Among them are the Hon. A.R. Munsoor, Minister of Trade & Commerce, the Hon. Rani Wickramasinghe, Minister of Industries, Science & Technology, the Hon. Ranjan Wijeratne, Minister of Plantation Industries and State Minister for Defence, and the Hon. John Amaratunga, Actg. Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Minister of Provincial Councils.

During the discussion at the joint committee, the two sides discussed strategies to increase and diversify trade between the two countries. The effort of the above visit paved the way to understand each other's business and trade culture, strength, and potentials. However, the subsequent decade we could not find any documentary evidence on high level exchanges between the two countries perhaps there would have been exchanged. May be due to the situation in Sri Lanka and in Turkey would have temporary distance in our in-person interaction.

The next significant movement in the recent history of bilateral relation was that subsequent to tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka, the visit by then Prime Minister now current President H.E. Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He visited Sri Lanka on 14<sup>th</sup> of February in 2005 and he was received by the then President Madam Chandrika Kumaratunga. He also visited tsunami hit southern provinces in Sri Lanka. During my credentials presenting ceremony and subsequent interaction with H.E. the President Erdogan, he fondly remembered his visit and his meeting with the former President. I witnessed the genuine sincere desirous and intentional the President Erdogan's commitment to have a good relation with Sri Lanka. The sympatric gesture of Turkey followed gifted housing scheme which built 180 houses in Sri Lanka (Mideagama). So, this gesture shows how strong the Turkish government and the people of Turkey are.

In 2008 the first very high-level visit from Sri Lanka to Turkey occurred. Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa visited Turkey for a state visit. He had a fruitful discussion with the then President Abdullah Gul. President Mahinda Rajapaksa also paid his respect to Atatürk Memorial by placing a wreath.

Sri Lanka and Turkey continued to exchange bilateral visits right throughout new millennium. The biggest milestone of both countries' relation occurred in 2012 and 2013 i.e. establishment of Sri Lanka's resident Mission in Ankara in 2012 and Turkey's embassy in Colombo in 2013. Though it is late to establish resident

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Mission, the initiative by both countries to establish Missions brought a new chapter of the two countries' relations. In 2016 first visit by the Turkish Foreign Minister to Sri Lanka occurred. Hon. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu paid an official visit to Sri Lanka in June. And also, in 2016 November the first session of Joint Committee for Economic and Technical Cooperation was held in Ankara then Minister of Trade of Sri Lanka accompanied the large business delegation. The Minister also paid a courtesy call on former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım. (In fact, this was the first meeting for Sri Lanka- Turkey Joint Committee for Cooperation as the first meeting occurred in 1999 the Joint Committee was expanded to many other fields so therefore as the expansion of Joint Committee changed as Sri Lanka- Turkey Joint Committee for Economic and Technical Cooperation (JCETC) then followed by many visits by Sri Lankans to Turkey.) As per the record, the Minister of High Education, State Minister of Industries, and many other VIPs of the Cabinet ranks visited to Turkey.

During the Sri Lanka - Turkey Joint Committee for Economic and Technical Cooperation (JCETC), both sides set a target of achieving 500 M USD of trade volume. However, we are yet to achieve that target. We are making hard effort to achieve this objective despite challenges of Covid 19 pandemic an economic downturn all over the world.

Despite pandemic our Mission, the Turkish Mission in Colombo, Foreign Ministries, and the Trade Ministries of two country work hard to enhance economic, trade and people to people interactions. Following our effort, we were able to hold the 2<sup>nd</sup> session of Sri Lanka- Turkey Joint Committee for Economic and Technical Cooperation (JCETC) through virtual zoom platform. The co-chairs of the Committee, Minister of Trade of Sri Lanka Hon. Dr. Bandula Gunewardhane, and Minister of National Education of Turkey Hon Prof. Dr. Ziya Selcuk inaugurated the session and the delegation discussed wide range of topics to enhance not only bilateral trade but also education, defence, civil aviation science and technology, maritime transport, health, culture, tourism, energy, agriculture, and people to people contacts.

During the pandemic we never gave up keeping our bilateral relation intact. We found ways and means to keep connectivity moving to enlarge relations between two countries with the new technology. We turned difficult situations of pandemic to our opportunity. During last two years we established contacts with almost all trade chambers in Sri Lanka with Turkish trade chambers through zoom technology. Many MoUs signed between the trade chambers (Istanbul, Ankara, Konya, Eskisehir, Sinop, Erzurum, Bursa, Aegean Region and Afyon) we connected business communities in Turkey with Sri Lanka through zoom technology. More importantly we connected high education institutions in Turkey and Sri Lanka. Major universities in Turkey were connected to major universities in Sri Lanka. In fact, I have privilege and honor to connect the first university of Turkey and Sri Lanka and to establish contacts among them. Further I would like to establish contacts with this university with Sri Lankan university to start bilateral academic and student exchanges and joint research between the two universities.

Again, this year to keep our relations intact Hon. Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu visited Sri Lanka for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time in January 30th. He met his counterpart, the President of Sri Lanka and signed Agreement on Elimination of Double Taxation with respect to Tax on Income and the Prevention of Tax Evasion and Avoidance between Sri Lanka and Turkey. Our Foreign Minister was also to visit Antalya Diplomacy Forum as the first Sri Lankan Foreign Minister to visit Turkey. However due to unforeseen circumstances he could not visit. Anyway, very soon he will visit to Turkey. Furthermore, last two years we saw enhance cooperation between two countries particularly in defense sector the subsequent to Secretary of Ministry of Defence of Sri Lanka who participated at the International Defence Industry Fair IDEF 2021, this relation was further enhanced. We connected Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) with Turkish Aerospace Industry (TAI) for future exchanges and many other defence related exchanges occurred during this time and will continue to happen within next few months.

The ultimate goal of our continued interaction is to further strengthen existing relations, understanding each other's issues, respecting two counties' cultures and to fight in international forums for each other's sovereignty and integrity. The present brotherly relations will be sustained for years to come. This relation has to prosper and more and more exchanges between the two countries' people to happen. The two countries' people should travel to each other's country whether it is for tourism, business, official or trade. Understanding of culture will understand ways and means to do business, investment, and academic research.

I hope my remarks will help you to understand the two countries' relations and I hope and wish the young folks here to one day visit Sri Lanka.



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