Indonesia, a country of 270 million people and ASEAN’s largest economy, is actively involved in the affairs of Southeast Asia and seeks to maintain peace, stability and economic development in the region for its own security and to accelerate its economic growth. For its part, the Russian Federation, whose foreign policy objectives include strengthening its authority in the international arena and promoting order in other countries, is interested in cooperation with ASEAN countries, which, among other things, are promising trading partners for Russia. The goals of Russia and Indonesia coincide in many ways, and that is why the ties between the two states have become increasingly strong over the past few years.

The military sphere plays an important role in relations between Russia and Indonesia. In 2016, a defense cooperation agreement was signed between the two states. The leadership of the Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation (FSMTC) stated that the National Army of Indonesia is in desperate need of the state-of-the-art weapons to improve its combat readiness. FSMTC also reported that Russia may begin to produce weapons in the country. The fact that Indonesia’s army is mainly equipped with outdated equipment is of serious concern to Jakarta, primarily because tensions in global and regional politics keep growing every year.

Back in early 2020, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said that military-technical cooperation between Russia and Indonesia has every chance to reach the strategic level. The Russian defense minister noted that his ministry views Indonesia as one of Russia’s key partners in the Asia-Pacific region, and the dialogue with this country is based...
on mutual respect and friendship. According to Shoigu, there is a high probability in the foreseeable future that a declaration on strategic partnership will be signed, which will be an important step in building warm diplomatic relations and will strengthen the degree of friendship between the two countries.

At the end of July 2021, the FSMTC of Russia announced that Russia was planning to supply a batch of Su-35 multi-role fighter jets to Indonesia. The agreement to supply 11 fighters was signed back in 2018, but to date it is still not implemented for a variety of reasons. According to the FSMTC, Russia intends to supply the latest weapons to Indonesia. The Russian leadership believes that by modernizing its armed forces, Indonesia will be able to conduct a more independent foreign policy without relying on outside forces.

It is important to note that the US and its allies are not interested in a stronger Jakarta, which is why they put vigorous pressure on the Indonesian authorities to minimize cooperation in the military sphere with Moscow. Nevertheless, the Indonesian government is still interested in contacts with Russia, because lately it has become obvious that Washington is gradually losing its former position in the world, and American statements are losing their authority every year.

Unfortunately, the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic has painfully affected trade and economic relations between Russia and Indonesia. However, thanks to effective quarantine measures, the virus gradually recedes, leading to a resumption of previous trade volumes. In the first quarter of 2021, trade between the two countries totaled about $1.5 billion, about 30% more than in 2020. This suggests that when restrictions are finally lifted, mutually beneficial relations will reach an even higher level. The Russian Federation exports to Indonesia primarily chemical products, metals, timber, pulp and paper products, and mineral products. Indonesia, in turn, supplies Russia with fertilizers, cereals, seafood and rubber products.

Russia is famous for providing countries around the world with all possible assistance in the fight against the coronavirus epidemic. To hasten the end of the pandemic, the Russian Federation is actively distributing the Sputnik V vaccine, which many scientists believe is one of the most effective vaccines today. The Indonesian Medicines Agency is very appreciative of the drug and has allowed the possibility of approving the vaccine for emergency use in the near future. Indonesia recognized all Russian vaccines against coronavirus as suitable for allowing the entry of vaccinated tourists. This indicates not only the desire of the country’s leadership to restore the previous economic growth indicators as soon as possible, but also a high level of confidence in the quality of medicine from Russia. In addition, negotiations on direct deliveries of Sputnik V to Indonesia have recently been underway.

Cooperation between the two states is not yet as close as it could be, but the Russian-Indonesian partnership enjoys fruitful foundations. Both countries seek to be independent of Washington’s policies, promote peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and increase foreign trade. Jakarta is interested in modernizing its army, and Moscow can provide tangible support in this regard.

On July 6, 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi met in Jakarta. Colleagues reviewed and analyzed geopolitical issues of universal concern, as well as issues of bilateral relations between Russia and Indonesia. Both sides positively assessed the Russian-Indonesian dialogue and expressed hope to continue strengthening ties.

During the joint press conference that followed the meeting, Lavrov said that relations between Russia and Indonesia are so trustworthy that they can be characterized as nothing less than a strategic partnership. Retno Marsudi confirmed the high level of Russian-Indonesian relations, in particular by asking Russia to support the implementation of the Five Points of Consensus. This is a package of agreements between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member Republic of the Union of Myanmar to resolve by peaceful means the political differences in that state. By involving the Russian Federation in solving a problem common to Indonesia and other ASEAN countries, Indonesia shows to them its trust in Russia.

In conclusion, significant contracts between Russia and Indonesia can be expected to be signed in the near future. It is also safe to assume that reciprocal visits of heads of state may take place sometime foreseeable. For example, during the aforementioned meeting of foreign ministers, which was held on July 6, 2021, they also mentioned the possibility of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s visit to Jakarta. It is likely that the Indonesian president will be willing to pay a return visit to Moscow, which will hopefully strengthen further relations between Russia and Indonesia.

Petr Konovalov, a political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.