In 2017, it is 120 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Siam, which is nowadays known as the Kingdom of Thailand. As the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin noted at a meeting with the Prime Minister of Thailand that took place on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in September, during all these years, relations between the two countries have never been overshadowed. He also noted the special role of the economic ties as the basis for the Russian-Thai relations. According to the Russian President, the economic cooperation of the Russian Federation and Thailand has great prospects, and has recently been demonstrating a significant growth. Trade between the countries is developing, while mutual investments are growing. Russian companies are broadly represented in the Thailand market, and vice versa.

In 2016, the reciprocal commodity circulation exceeded USD 1.7 billion, and in the first half of 2017, it reached almost USD 900 million. The main items that Russian exports to Thailand are hydrocarbon energy carriers, chemical and metal industry products, machinery and equipment. In its turn, Thailand exports to Russia various products manufactured by its industries, as well as significant amounts of agricultural products and food. It is worth recalling that 60% of the Thai population is employed in agriculture, and Thailand is one of the main global exporters of rice and seafood.

Cooperation in tourism deserves special attention. Thailand is one of the most popular tourist destinations among Russians. The number of the Russian tourists visiting Thailand annually is remaining stable at the figure of 1 million (with the maximum figure of 1.6 million recorded in 2014). Due to the sustainable growth of this index noted in
2017, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to open a Russian Consulate on the Thai island of Phuket, as well as to establish an Honorary Consulate on the island of Samui. This should favour further growth of the tourist flow from Russia.

In May 2016, Prime Minister of Thailand Prayut Chan-o-cha came to the Russian Federation to participate in the Russia-ASEAN summit. At that time, he met the Russian President Vladimir Putin and Head of the Russian Government Dmitry Medvedev. Several important documents on bilateral cooperation were signed. The President then stated that the Russian-Thailand relations were successfully developing in all areas, including in the sphere of defence, security and military technical cooperation.

In August 2017, negotiations between the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Sergey Lavrov and his Thai colleague Don Pramudwinai took place in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand. According to Mr. Lavrov, the negotiations proved to be quite fruitful. Many issues in the sphere of political and economic cooperation were discussed. The parties also reached agreement on holding a new Meeting of the Inter-Governmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation.

On September 5, 2017, a new meeting between President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister of Thailand Prayut Chan-o-cha took place on the margins of the BRICS summit. The leaders of the two countries discussed further development of the Russian-Thailand trade and economic cooperation and the expansion of cooperation in other spheres.

It can be concluded that the economic relations between Russia and Thailand are developing quite intensively. However, the proof of the real trust between the countries is their cooperation in the spheres of strategic importance, such as defence and military technologies. In recent years, Russia and Thailand have taken a number of steps in that direction. As early as April 2015, Head of the Russian Government D. Medvedev visited Bangkok. One of the important issues that he discussed with the Thai Government was the possibility of the supply of Russian military equipment.

In February 2016, Nikolay Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, visited Thailand. In May 2016, Russia and Thailand signed a treaty on military cooperation. In December 2016, the main Thai Navy military base Sattahip hosted a group of Russian warships that were following their course towards the joint manoeuvres with the Indian Navy. Minister of Defence of Thailand, Pravit Vongsuvan, also visited Russia twice in 2016.

In March 2017, Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Ground Forces, Oleg Salyukov, visited Bangkok.

In May 2017, the Sattahip military base again hosted Russian guests – the “Varyag” rocket cruiser and “Pechenga” tanker that were performing their two-month march through the seas of the South-East Asia with the aim of development of naval cooperation between the RF and the ASEAN countries.

In September 2017, a Russian-Thailand inter-governmental treaty on military and technical cooperation (MTC) was signed in Bangkok. The parties were represented by Deputy Director of the Federal MTC Service of the Russian Federation Mikhail Petukhov and Head of the Support and Logistic Service of the Staff of the Military Forces of Thailand Vice Admiral Tiva Daramyang. Presently, Russia and Thailand are negotiating the supply of Russian weapons to the Thai military forces. The negotiated subjects discussed are artillery, armoured vehicles, planes, ships and air defence systems.

The cooperation promises to be full-scale, as in February 2017, the Thai Government announced the start of a ten-year re-armament. In the course of this program, Thailand intends to significantly increase its defence expenses and diversify its imports of weapons and military equipment. The country’s own military and industrial complex is underdeveloped, and most of the Kingdom’s military equipment are of Chinese or American origin. The military budget approved in June 2017 amounted to approximately USD 6.5 billion, which is 5% more than the last year budget.

Such concern demonstrated by Thailand towards its military efficiency is due, among other things, to the increased activity of radical Islamists in the south of the country. In such circumstances, Thailand is in great need for strong and long-term partnership with a reliable supplier of weapons. According to Prime Minister Chan-o-cha, the Russian defence industry is at a very high development level, and the Government of Thailand is interested in purchasing Russian weapons. It is worth noting that during the negotiations conducted by D. Medvedev with the Thai officials in 2015, the possibility for barter of military equipment for high-quality agricultural products was discussed. At the
same time, during both his meetings with Mr Putin in 2016 and 2017, Prime Minister Chan-o-cha requested that Rosselkhoznadzor experts, who are to evaluate the quality of the Thai agricultural products, were sent to Thailand as soon as possible. This was probably undergirded by the wish to receive the Russian weapons as soon as possible.

Therefore it may be concluded that the Russian-Thailand relations are reaching a new level. Both countries are interested not only in mutually beneficial trade, but in full-fledged strategic partnership. At the same time, being one of the important ASEAN members, Thailand may help Russia in establishing a strong partnership with all the countries of South-East Asia.

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