For some time now, Russia has been strengthening its position in Southeast Asia by developing partnerships with the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member states, including Indonesia.

The Republic of Indonesia is a country with a number of unique characteristics. It is the largest island nation surrounded by both the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. Indonesia is located on a strategically important part of the shipping route between Europe and Asia: between the Indonesian island of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula lies the Strait of Malacca, used to transport up to a quarter of all the goods shipped by sea in the world. Besides, Indonesia is home to the largest Muslim population in the world, which facilitates ties in the Islamic world. Hence, Russia benefits from a partnership with Indonesia in a number of ways, even outside the scope of its cooperation with ASEAN as a whole.

Russia and Indonesia have had friendly relations since the times of the USSR. Soviet – Indonesian diplomatic relations were established in 1950 when the Soviet Union provided development aid to the newly established Republic of Indonesia. In the 1950s and 1960s, the USSR supplied the Indonesian army with weapons and military equipment, including dozens of war ships, submarines, airplanes, helicopters, tanks, missiles and ammunition exceeding $1 billion in value. Aside from this, at the end of the 1950s, thousands of Soviet military servicemen visited Indonesia with the aim of training their Indonesian counterparts on the use of the delivered military supplies.
In the 1960s, the USSR helped Indonesia win its territorial dispute with its former colonial power, Holland. Despite help from other Western nations, the Netherlands had to cede part of the New Guinea island to Indonesia.

After a military coup and a subsequent change of leadership in Indonesia in 1965, the relationship between the Republic of Indonesia and the USSR took a long-term turn for the worse. At the end of the 1980s, the relations improved once again, but the collapse of the USSR that followed decreased the levels of cooperation. Russia and Indonesia started to restore their ties in full in the nineties.

In 2003, Indonesia and Russia signed the Joint Declaration of Friendship and Partnership in the 21st century. After this, frequency in the high-level exchanges between them increased, and the two sides have continued to strengthen their cooperation in various spheres, such as agriculture, tourism, education, science, technology, construction, space exploration, resource extraction, energy production and security. Bilateral trade is also growing in volume. In 2017, it reached more than $3.2 billion, which is 25% higher than that in 2016. Negotiations are ongoing on establishing a free trade zone between Indonesia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU or EAEU), whose key member is the Russian Federation.

The level of cooperation between the two nations is especially noteworthy in the sphere of military technology and security. Russia and Indonesia are actively engaged in a dialogue on terrorism and piracy in the region. They have conducted joint military exercises on several occasions aimed at refining the necessary skills for resolving these issues. Large stable shipments of Russian weapons and military hardware to Indonesia resumed in 1997. In 2007, Russia and the Republic of Indonesia signed a long-term agreement on supplying Russian weaponry to the Indonesian military. Soon after, in 2008, the Russian Federation provided a credit line to Indonesia for the purchase of weaponry exceeding $1 billion in value. Currently Russia, as in the Soviet times, is Indonesia’s main military equipment supplier.

In August 2017, the Russian Federation and Indonesia signed an agreement laying out the terms for the future contract on the purchase of a batch of Russian Su-35 fighter jets by Indonesia. According to the agreement, Russia is prepared to supply Indonesia with 11 air planes exceeding $1 billion in value. Indonesia will pay for part of the purchase in cash and the remainder in raw materials, such as tea, coffee and palm oil. Both sides are satisfied with the terms of the deal and are ready to sign the final contract.

During the same month, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergey Lavrov, and Retno Marsudi, Head of Indonesia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, took part in a meeting resulting in the decision to increase collaboration between the Russian and Indonesian security forces to combat the threat from the Islamic terrorist organization Daesh (banned in the RF).

A collaboration on issues of security and military hardware is a clear sign of a high degree of trust between the two nations. If this is indeed true, the length and scope of the Russia – Indonesia cooperation in these spheres points to an enormous level of mutual understanding and trust between these two nations.

In December 2017, two strategic Russian bombers TU-95MS landed at the Indonesian airport in Biak on completion of their patrol of the neutral waters of the Pacific ocean. Many experts viewed this event as a signal, sent by the two nations to the rest of the world, that cooperation between Russia and Indonesia reached new heights. Aside from this, it is a sign of Russia’s increasing presence in Southeast Asia.

A new meeting between Lavrov and his Indonesian counterpart Marsudi took place on 13 March in 2018. The Russian minister said that the talks were constructive and covered a range of bilateral issues including topics that are global and regional in nature. He also stated that the meeting included a discussion about Russia’s and Indonesia’s willingness to transform their cooperation into a strategic partnership and that the countries are in the process of working on the declaration to that effect.

Unquestionably, the issues of Russia – Indonesia cooperation is crucial for the whole Asia Pacific. Malacca Strait’s western coastline belongs to Indonesia, a large powerful nation, which receives significant financial benefits from regional shipping traffic. In turn, the Republic of Indonesia (along with both Malaysia and Singapore, also located on the strait’s coastline) is responsible for maintaining security along this sea route, which is a key maritime passage on our planet.

One of the main problems this region has faced for the longest time is piracy. Recently, some experts have also started talking about the increasing terrorist threat around the Strait of Malacca. The USA hopes to control the Malacca Strait under the pretext of ensuring security along its shipping routes. As far back as 2004, the US received
a brusque rejection from Malaysia and Indonesia in response to its offer to station US military personnel in the strait. Currently, at a time of substantial escalation in the confrontation between the US and China over control of the Asia Pacific region, the role of the Malacca Strait has increased in importance. Just as the US, PRC wishes to see its naval forces there. In the meantime, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are determined to defend their territorial waters. Fortunately, an armed confrontation is out of the question; however, supplying Indonesia with modern Russian equipment and training its military by RF personnel make a substantial contribution to Indonesia’s as well as the rest of the region’s peace of mind. Russia, thanks to its cooperation with countries such as Indonesia, India, Laos and Vietnam, is in turn becoming a powerful player in the Asia Pacific region and holds a beneficial position in strategically important regions for global trade and transport.

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