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IMPORTANT MILESTONES IN RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THAILAND: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Abstract. The article is dedicated to the overview and the analysis of the history of international relations between Russia and Thailand (formerly – Siam). The first encounters between the Russian and the Thai people are discussed, and their nature is explained. Some suggestions regarding the future potential perspectives of the Russian – Thai relations in the 21st century are presented on the basis of the historical analysis.

Key words: Thailand, Russia, history of international relations, nature of international relations, milestones.

Introduction

The current image of Russia and the Russians in the public opinion of the Thai people is strongly influenced by the long history of cordial, friendly bilateral relations between the two countries and especially between the two countries' leaderships. Historical heritage of international relations nowadays continues to play a very important role in the way how many Thai people perceive Russia and the Russians. So, how exactly this history has actually taken shape and what modern-day Russia might learn from that historical experience in order to further improve its cooperation with Thailand?

I believe that to answer those questions one must focus primarily on the earliest contacts between Russia and Siam (as Thailand was officially known before 1939 and then during the period between 1945 and 1948). The first direct and officially recorded contacts between representatives of Russia and Siam took place in Bangkok on the 8th of February 1863, when crewmembers of two Russian ships called '*Gaydamak*' and '*Novik*' sailed all the way to Bangkok from the then recently established port of Vladivostok. The Siamese King Rama IV Mongkut (1851-1868) granted the Russian sailors a royal audience and expressed his wish to establish diplomatic relations with the Russian Empire.

So, it was exactly the captain of the clipper ship '*Gaydamak*' by the name of Aleksei Peschurov, who held the rank of captain-lieutenant at the time of his visit to Bangkok, who left first description of Bangkok, known to us, written in Russian by the hand of a Russian citizen. Even though the sailors stayed in Bangkok very briefly, merely a night, and then sailed off, turns out Mr. Peschurov nevertheless managed to grasp the mentality and the nature of the Siamese people very precisely. He wrote in his report to the Naval Department of the Russian Empire, that '*the Siamese are hardworking people, strong and of very kind nature*' [Melnichenko, Pyleva 2011: 20]. He also mentioned along the way, that '*certain foreign residents in Siam (particularly the Europeans and the Americans) are privileged to enjoy too many freedoms within the Kingdom',* and that *'the Siamese are very eager to strengthen the defenses of their country and to build a descent fleet on the wharfs of Bangkok'* [Melnichenko, Pyleva 2011: 20]. Interesting to note, that before the Russian ships sailed back, King Mongkut specifically presented captain Peschurov with an envelope containing his personal business cards, for the captain to take them over to the Russian government.

So, what we see here, is that, even though these first contacts between the Russian and the Thai people were very brief, it seems that the Siamese government was in fact very much interested in formalizing their relationships with the Russian Empire. We can say this because, in December 1865, just little over a year and a half after Peschurov and the company visited Bangkok, the Russian Vice-Consul in Singapore Mr. Hoo Ah Kay (Wampoa) sent a letter to the commander

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of another Russian ship '*Gil'ayak*' Mr. K.L. Enquist. Vice-Consul informed him, that the King of Siam is very keen to establish official trade and diplomatic relations with Russia.

Yet again a direct attempt to urge the Russian government to come forward and sign an agreement with Siam was thus made. But the Russian government remained silent. And even after Enquist brought the letter to the Asian Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and supplemented it with his own report, where he explained, that there might be many lucrative opportunities to be had for Russia in case it establishes formal trade ties with Siam. It might seem puzzling what exactly did captain Enquist mean by lucrative opportunities to be acquired in Siam in the mid-1860s for Russia, a country which allegedly had never before sent its ships to trade with Siam? However, this confusion is easily removed when we look at his report more closely. Primarily he was implying that Siam was a very good market for teak timber, which was extensively used in shipbuilding during the latter half of the 19th century, hence its waterproof durability.

Anyway, the Russian government left these first attempts from the Siamese government to establish a dialogue on an official level without any feedback. And it not only stemmed out of arrogance or lack of practical interest, we also should not forget that just recently then the Crimean War took place (between 1853 and 1856) during which the Russian empire fought in a somewhat unequal fight against the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire, France, and the little Kingdom of Sardinia all at once. Russia lost that war, which led to a certain diminishment of the role of Russia in international affairs on a global scale during the first decades of the second half of the 19th century and to the refocusing of Russia's foreign policy to matters closer to its own borders. So to say, on the one hand, the circumstances were not exactly favorable for Russia at the time to put in efforts, money and resources to establish regular trade and diplomatic relations with Siam.

On the other hand, it was of course necessary for Russia to maintain at least some sort of presence and 'visibility' in Asia, to uphold the 'imperial prestige', to collect information and intelligence about the affairs of the Far Easter and Southeast Asian countries as well. That is why in the 1860s and during two following decades contacts between representatives of the Russian and Thai people continued and even intensified. Bangkok was visited several times by various Russian military ships, though all these visits can be described as semi-official, since their missions did not involve the signing of any documents, which might have laid the foundation for the official diplomatic relations between the two states.

It was not until the visit of the next Siamese King Rama V Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) to Russia as a personal guest of Emperor Nicholas II, in July 1897, that the official diplomatic relations between the two countries were finally established. In 2022, two countries celebrated the 125th anniversary of that memorable event. It was in turn preceded by the no less important visit of then Tsesarevich of Russia Nicholas in March 1891, when the Siamese King hosted the Russian heir to the throne with great hospitality. The Tsesarevich spent a week in the Siamese capital and, as he later would recall, was very indeed very pleased with the attitude the Siamese King has shown towards the Russian delegation [Melnichenko 2000: 438].

Out of those two visits, which took place in the 1890s, one of the young Russian Prince to Siam and another of the Siamese King to Russia, a strong friendship has emerged. It eventually led to the mutual appointment of the irst ambassadors, to the intensification of trade, cultural and even military cooperation (as several Siamese later received opportunities to study in military academies in Russia).

The first Siamese ambassador to be appointed to the Russian Empire was Phraya Suriyanuwat (Lek Bunnak). He, however, was not based in Russia, instead he carried out his duties, while residing in Paris. On the 16th of November 1897 the Siamese government appointed a new ambassador to Russia, Mr. Phrachonburinurak, he carried out ambassadorial duties until November 1899 and was thus the first Siamese ambassador to do so directly from the territory of Russia. As for the first ambassador of the Russian Empire to Siam it was Mr. A.E. Olarovskiy (1845-1910) – by the time of his appointment to Bangkok in 1897 he was already an experienced diplomat, who possessed deep knowledge of the Asia-Pacific region. It was largely due to Mr. Olarovskiy's

efforts, that on the 23rd of June 1899 the Russian-Siamese Declaration of Jurisdiction, Trade and Navigation was finally signed in Bangkok, an official document, which laid the legal foundation for further development of mutual relations, at least for the next 18 years, until after the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia. The official relations between the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Siam during the period between 1897 and 1917 were developing in a very productive, cordial manner for almost 20 years. One example of the productive Russian-Thai cooperation during those years is that the Siamese Royal Guards had been wearing the uniform similar of the uniform of the Russian Guards until the 1970s. Some distinctive elements of that uniform may still be seen in their garments even today.

Another example of cultural cooperation between the Russian and the Siamese people at the turn of the 19th century was the fact that a Russian composer Mr. Petr Shurovskiy from the city of Kursk wrote the music for the royal anthem of Siam, that music is still being used up to this day. King Chulalongkorn even sent the Russian composer a silver tobacco box with his name inscribed on it as a way of thanking him.

At the end of the 19th – beginning of the 20th centuries a few members of the Thai Royal Family and state officials visited Russia. Several young Thai aristocrats received education in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The son of King Chulalongkorn – Prince Chakrabongse lived in Russia for several years, as a personal guest of the Russian Royal Family, he studied at the Corps des Pages and then the General Staff Academy, later he served in the Russian Army. Eventually in 1906 he married a Russian citizen – Ms. Ekaterina Desnitskaya, with whom they had a son – Prince Chula Chakrabongse.

After the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia the official diplomatic relations between Russia and Siam came to a prolonged halt. In November 1917 the new Bolshevik government of Russia denounced all previous treaties and agreements made by the administration of the Russian Empire with foreign countries, the treaty of 1899 with Siam was no exception. The Siamese diplomats, who remained in the Russian capital after the Revolution had to eventually leave the country, especially upon learning the news of the murder of the Russian royal family. Then came a dark period in Russian history – the Civil War, that lasted for more than 5 years. Naturally, being a monarchy Siam strongly condemned the change of political regime in Russia, and the October Revolution was indeed a hard blow for the Russian-Siamese relations.

The diplomatic relations between the USSR and the Kingdom of Thailand were only established on the 12th of March 1941, however they received a chance for further development only after the end of World War II in 1945. The official reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the USSR and Thailand took place in December 1946. In 1947, the two sides signed the Agreement on the Exchange of Diplomatic Missions and a year later the Russian (Soviet) Embassy began its work once again in the Thai capital.

Since then, the history of international relations between Russia and Thailand saw many ups and downs. During the Cold War the relations between the two countries developed ambivalently. Until the end of the 1970s there were neither direct open conflicts nor any substantial progress. The new impetus to the bilateral relations was given by the historic, first ever official visit of the Thai Prime Minister – Mr. Kriangsak Chamanan to the USSR in 1979, during which the Soviet-Thai Friendship Society was established [Moskalev 2020: 17]. The next important milestone took place in May 1988, when General Prem Tinsulanonda, then the Prime Minister of Thailand, paid another official visit to Moscow. So, since the late 1970s the contacts between Russia and Thailand have mostly continued to carry on forward in a mutually beneficial and cooperative way, especially after the establishment of the Russian Federation in December 1991. The Royal Thai Government recognized the Russian Federation as a sovereign state already on the 28th of December 1991 and reconfirmed its intention to develop friendly and mutually beneficial relations with it.

At least since 1987, on the verge of Perestroika in the USSR, we have been witnessing more and more regular contacts and exchange of visits by foreign ministers of the two countries. For example, in 1997 to commemorate the Centennial Jubilee of the establishment of the diplomatic

relations between Russia and Thailand Mr. Evgeny Primakov, then the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, paid an official visit to Thailand. Also, in 1997 the Honorary Consulate General of Thailand in St. Petersburg was opened. It is currently the only Consulate of Thailand on the whole territory of Russia. The Honorary Consul of Thailand in St. Petersburg – Mr. Yurii Kovalchuk is at the same time a very successful Russian businessman, and he provides comprehensive support to Thai citizens residing or in Russia or visiting the country and, of course, the Consulate General in St. Petersburg also provides support to those Russian citizens, who would like to travel to Thailand.

Ever since the year 2002 any holder of a Russian passport has been able travel to Thailand for a period not exceeding 30 days for touristic purposes without the need for applying for a visa beforehand. And Thai citizens are reciprocally exempt from the need to receive visas prior to entering Russia for short-term touristic visits. In 2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, over 1 million Russians visited Thailand [RIA Novosti]. Even during the last quarter of 2021, despite certain limitations related to the pandemic, tourists from Russia made up the third most populous group of foreign tourists to arrive in Thailand among all the World's nations [RIA Novosti]. As for the inflow of tourists from Thailand to Russia, it has traditionally been much more modest, although in recent years there has been a noticeable tendency for certain Thai professionals to arrive in Russia for working purposes.

Perhaps the most important milestone in the development of modern-day Russian-Thai political dialogue was the first ever visit to Thailand of the head of the Russian state in October 2003. President Vladimir Putin visited Bangkok at that time to participate in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) Leaders Week and to hold talks with the Thai officials. The Russian President was very warmly welcomed by King Rama IX himself, not very much unlike when King Rama V welcomed Tsesarevich Nicholas in Bangkok back in 1891.

Since then, both the official and the unofficial forms of cooperation between the Russian people and the Thai people have only intensified, many important agreements have been signed between various ministries and government agencies of the two countries, which certainly facilitate further development. To name just a few: the Agreement on Cooperation between the Chamber of Commerce of Russia and the Chamber of Commerce of Thailand of 1997, the Convention for the avoidance of double taxation and prevention of fiscal evasion with respect to income taxes of 1999, the Agreement on the Support and Protection of Mutual Investments and the Agreement on Cooperation in Tourism in 2002 and many more.

However, there is still plenty of room for improvement, especially if we consider that the volume of trade between Russia and Thailand for the past two decades has remained quite modest. For example, according to the data published by the Federal Customs Service of Russia, the total volume of trade between Russia and Thailand in 2020 amounted to just a little over 1,7 bill. US dollars, which was a 25% decrease in comparison to the year 2019, this is certainly understandable hence the pandemic, but the numbers are still quite low. We can simply compare them to the total volume of trade between Thailand and the United States, in 2020 it amounted to over 48 bill. US dollars [United States Census Bureau], and Thailand's bilateral trade with the People's Republic of China in 2019 exceeded 70 bill. US dollars [OEC]. At the same time, there is another long-term problem pertaining to the development of trade relations between Russia and Thailand in the 21st century, namely the fact that the volume of imported goods from Thailand into Russia traditionally significantly (more than 4 times in 2020) exceeds the volume exported goods from Russia into Thailand. So, the question is – is it Thailand, that is not really interested in purchasing more Russian goods, or is it Russia, that is not too keen on selling more goods to Thailand? In my opinion, neither explanation is good enough, because neither is true.

Certainly, Thailand is very much interested in buying more of what Russia has to offer (and not just energy resources) and certainly Russia potentially has a lot to gain if only it could boost the export of its goods to Thailand. And by gaining, I mean not just purely economic profits. If Russian and Thailand manage to become better partners in trade, it could easily lead to even stronger political alliance between them, that in turn would be very beneficial to more intense and

more enriching cultural, educational, and scholarly ties. In other words, it would certainly be a win-win scenario for both countries.

Conclusion

To conclude this brief account of the most significant milestones in the history of relations between Russia and Thailand, I would like to say that we can probably learn many things just by reflecting on events long past. For the better part of the second half of the 19th century Russia was hesitant or unwilling to commit to any kind sort of official relations with Siam for many different reasons, even though Siamese government actively encouraged Russia to do so. Eventually though it was first and foremost the personal friendship between the two nations' leaders that made a difference. Then in 1979 and in 1988 history almost repeated itself, when Thai Prime Ministers Mr. Kriangsak Chamanan and then General Prem Tinsulanonda arrived in the USSR with official state visits, and by doing so, they clearly showed the Russian authorities their will and enthusiasm for strengthening ties with Russia, albeit certain ideological differences. In the 21st century President Vladimir Putin's visit to Bangkok in 2003 and his meeting with King Rama IX of Thailand also was a clear display of continuity in Russian–Thai relations. We can even say that to a certain extent the communication between the Russian President and the Thai King in 2003 proved to be even more fruitful than the historic visit of King Chulalongkorn to Russia in 1897, because President Putin's visit resulted in the signing of many important documents, each of which significantly deepened the multilateral cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Kingdom of Thailand, while the talks between the two countries' leaders in 1897 at first resulted in just an oral agreement to formally establish diplomatic relations. So today in the 21st century when all of us are concerned with finding further ways to boost, improve and strengthen cooperation between Russia and ASEAN countries and Thailand specifically it makes me wonder, maybe sometimes the kind of so-called 'personal touch' on the part of the two countries' leaders is exactly what we might need? Only time will tell surely, but at least the scholarly communities in both Russia and Thailand look forward to the continuation of development of relations between our two countries in the same friendly, mutually beneficial manner as they have been developing so far for the past 125 years.

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