



Strengthening bilateral ties

By **H.E. GEN. PRAYUT CHAN-O-CHA**

PRIME MINISTER OF THE KINGDOM OF THAILAND

For two nations, thousands of miles apart, to maintain constructive and intimate relations for over four hundred years is an extraordinary achievement. The United Kingdom and the Kingdom of Thailand share a rich history of engagement, prosperity and cooperation that first began with trade and investment links in the 17th century. From this has emerged a bilateral relationship based on a deep understanding of each other's histories, cultures, potentials and aspirations.

Many generations of Thai students have been educated in the United Kingdom, thus establishing an enduring bond of confidence and familiarity with the UK shared by many Thai citizens. As thousands of Thai students are enjoying their education in the UK today, and a growing number of British students are coming to Thailand for research and expertise training, education cooperation between our two countries remains a defining aspect of close Thai-UK relations.

At the same time, British goods and services have enjoyed prominence and profit in Thailand for hundreds of years, and many now have made Thailand a regional base for expansion into the Asia-Pacific region. British industry has played a major part in Thailand's economic growth for many decades, from when Thailand began its rapid rise in international trade in the 1970s, to when Thailand's economic resilience allowed it to avoid the drastic effects of the 2008 global financial crisis. With this, British science and technology has been essential to Thailand's modernisation, with the business and education sectors leading the way in forging cooperation that has greatly benefitted Thailand's infrastructure development and manufacturing capacity. Over the centuries, British investment in Thailand's leading sectors such as energy, retail and agro-industries, have been mutually rewarding, while Thailand has enjoyed a successful trade relationship with the UK, especially in our exports for a cosmopolitan British society. Currently, the UK is Thailand's second largest trading partner in Europe, and only last year, our bilateral trade increased by nearly 20 per cent, with a total trade volume of around £5.3 billion. At the same time, Thailand is set to see investment projects from the UK worth £5.9 billion, a figure that has tripled from 2016.

Meanwhile, British arts and culture have become a regular and enriching aspect of everyday life in

Thailand, ranging from media outlets to sports and recreation, to lifestyle and entertainment. Bangkok and London share the top places of the most visited cities in the world. Last year, Thailand welcomed over 1 million British tourists, while over 150,000 Thais visit the UK on a yearly basis. Moreover, there are currently over 70,000 Thais residing in the UK who are proud to be Thai and simultaneously enjoy contributing to British society.

On the international stage, Thailand and the UK share a long and productive history of cooperation on global security, humanitarian assistance and sustainable development. Thailand and the UK have also worked together on developmental and technical cooperation projects that benefit other developing countries, and we are working together more closely on climate change, poverty eradication, and public health.

In essence, Thailand and the UK have managed to develop a genuine friendship that has withstood the test of time, through the most significant events in history such as the industrial revolution and now the era of globalisation, and one that highlights a relationship that is stable, prosperous and sustainable.

Now, as the UK prepares for new regional and global challenges, and as Thailand is undergoing major reforms and gearing towards greater cooperation in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, there is an excellent opportunity to set the path and tone for a stronger Thai-UK Strategic Partnership. In a 21st century that has witnessed unparalleled levels of international cooperation as well as unprecedented global political and economic challenges, Thailand and the UK now have the chance to develop a more dynamic partnership that will take advantage of our long history of mutual benefit and genuine goodwill.

My visit to the UK follows from a successful visit to Thailand by the Foreign Secretary, The Right Honourable Boris Johnson, in February 2018. It also comes at a time when Thailand is embarking on a new path of stability and prosperity, which presents many opportunities for our British counterparts. Over the past four years, Thailand has begun to overhaul our infrastructure, reform state governance and restructure our economy towards the *Thailand 4.0* model, which is an era of sustainable and inclusive growth based on a highly competitive economy driven by value-based industries. We have also taken steps to improve our

Thailand and the UK now have the chance to develop a more dynamic partnership that will take advantage of our long history of mutual benefit and genuine goodwill

We also look forward to discussing preparation for a new era of free trade between our two countries

regional connectivity, with plans to link Thailand with the growing transportation networks across Southeast Asia, connecting Thailand to the leading markets of the Asia-Pacific and South Asia regions. With this has come our commitment to economic competitiveness, with reforms in hundreds of commercial regulations to improve the ease of doing business and facilitate investments based on attractive returns and long-term, strategic planning. As a result, Thailand's economic growth is gaining momentum, with the implementation of an economic stimulus package in 2017 yielding to a stronger domestic sector and a rapid rise in exports of high quality goods.

More specifically, Thailand is repositioning itself as a lucrative and advanced business centre in Asia through an economy that creates wealth and shares it with all sectors of society. Our approach will focus on not only income but also quality of life, and involve the development of a knowledge-based economy, using innovative technology and the highest international standards of health and safety and quality control, and measures that will protect our environment and nourish our precious natural resources. We have begun a project called the Eastern Economic Corridor or EEC, which will make Thailand a global hub for industry and investment, and we have laid the foundations for Thailand to expand in 11 targeted industries (robotics, aviation and logistics, biofuels and biochemical, digital technology, advanced medicines, smart electronics, next generation automobiles, medical and wellness tourism, agriculture and biotechnology, food processing, and defence industry), all of which British commerce and industry have expertise in. Importantly, Thailand has learnt our lessons from our quest for fast economic growth in the past, which came at the expense of balanced development and social progress. As such, we are confident that our new path will be more sustainable and will leave no one behind, which will also benefit our international friends and allies, new and old.

With this momentum of progress, Thailand looks forward to greater collaboration with the UK in many promising

areas, including science and technology, e-commerce, and aerospace, not to mention on a number of global issues that demand our firm resolve to achieve tangible outcomes, such as on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, climate change, combatting extremism and the illegal wildlife trade. We also look forward to discussing preparation for a new era of free trade between our two countries, which will greatly benefit our citizens, not to mention our wide-ranging business interests.

Thailand reaffirms our commitment to engage constructively with the UK in the face of new global challenges. While the UK will be working on a new partnership with Europe, Thailand will also be working on several emerging regional frameworks, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement (RCEP), and indeed the ASEAN Community. Given this, the UK's policy of 'Global Britain' is viewed by

Thailand as a great opportunity to work with a 'more outward-looking Global Britain', and I am delighted to visit the UK to witness the beginning of a new chapter of our mutually rewarding and prosperous friendship. **F**



HE Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand