

Looking to the future

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Thailand and the UK's firm relationship over the centuries has in part been cemented by the stability provided by both countries' constitutional monarchies provided by their international projection, and of course, the high public regard for their respective heads of state.

His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who passed away in 2016, was the longest-serving monarch in the world, an honor now passed on to Queen Elizabeth II. Both monarchs have lived through times of great change, helping steer their countries through difficult waters at times.

As many commentators have noted, King Bhumibol's greatest achievement was to place the monarchy once again at the centre of Thai politics and culture and to make it an important mediator of political disputes.

The first official royal contact came in 1960, when King Bhumipol and Queen Sirikit visited the United Kingdom, a major signal that Thailand wanted to develop relations with other countries and would welcome business leaders and tourists. In 1996, Queen Elizabeth visited Thailand as part of year-long celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the Thai king's accession to the throne.

Two years after that first visit almost 60 years ago, the Anglo-Thai Society was formed, helping to further build closer relations between the two countries. There were already close ties between the two Kingdoms and Thai people had long been living in Britain: Samaggi Samagom, the Thai Association (which later became the Thai Students' Association), was established by King Rama VI at the beginning of the 20th century to bring Thais living in Britain together through a variety of events and activities. After WWII, more Thais were coming to live in the UK and by the 1960s more and more British tourists were venturing beyond Europe. The Thai population in Britain and the number of British visitors to Thailand grew steadily between the 1960s and 1980s, and with it mutual understanding of each other's cultures increased.

Since then, Thailand has become one of the most popular destinations for British tourists, with more than one million now visiting the country each year. Close to 100,000 Thais now visit the UK every year. Many have also decided to make new lives in each other's countries. The UK is now home to the largest Thai expatriate community outside Asia and North

America, while more than 50,000 British nationals have chosen to make Thailand their permanent home.

For some, the reason for visiting each other's country is to shop. In 2014, Thai tourists spent over £100 million during their visits to the UK. At the same time, major British brands, such as Marks and Spencer, Topshop, and Burberry have become household names in Thailand. British goods are highly valued for their design and quality.

Reflecting this, Thailand, and especially Bangkok, is witnessing a step-change in high-end retail. UK brands and retail stores are widely accepted by Thai consumers, who have a strong affinity with quality imported products. Thai malls are home to a growing number of leading British brands including Top Shop, Top Man and Dorothy Perkins.

The two countries also share a passion for football. Every weekend, a television audience of more than 4.5 billion people around the world watch England's teams play, and Thais are amongst the most passionate supporters. Leicester City and Sheffield Wednesday are owned by Thai groups, while Carabao, one of Thailand's most popular energy drinks, is the official partner of the English Football League and title sponsor of the EFL Cup, known as the Carabao Cup. The company is also a principal partner of Chelsea FC and the official shirt sponsor for Reading FC.

The UK and Thailand also have other cultural ties: a hundred years ago, King Rama VI, something of an anglophile, translated Shakespeare into Thai and created Thailand's first private detective, Nai Thong-In, modelled on Sherlock Holmes.

Trading partners

Over the years, Thailand has grown to be one of the UK's largest trading partners in ASEAN, while the UK is a leading EU investor in Thailand: there are up to 1,000 British companies operating in Thailand in some shape or form, backed by a British Chamber of Commerce with more than half a century's presence in the country and that now has more than 600 members. In conjunction with the British Embassy, it works with the Thai government to encourage further opening up the economy to companies from overseas to help drive up the quality of services, reduce prices and increase competition.

Following the Brexit vote in 2016, Thailand and the United Kingdom have been working toward creating a

new bilateral free trade agreement that will strengthen economic ties. The UK is one of Thailand's major export markets among EU countries and Thailand will try to ensure market access under the bilateral trade pact with the UK after its exit from the European Union.

With this in mind, In 2016, the two countries set up the Thai-UK Business Leadership Council to improve cooperation between their private sectors and to facilitate trade and investment growth. Represented by ten top Thai companies and ten top UK companies and led by the chairman of PTT on the Thai side and the chairman of Tesco Lotus on the British side, the council is also looking at a number of issues that affect business between Britain and Thailand.

Earlier this year, Thailand and the UK held their third Strategic Dialogue, established in 2012 and designed to be a high-level forum for regular consultations between the United Kingdom and the Kingdom of Thailand on areas of bilateral collaboration, as well as regional and global issues of mutual interest in view of the ever-growing strategic partnership between the two countries.

Thailand is open to a bilateral FTA with the UK, and believes a faster and more productive course might be a series of "sectoral strategic partnerships". These could initially cover sectors of UK strength such as education, aerospace, and the digital economy.

Thailand's healthcare and pharmaceutical sector continues to grow. Thailand is a leading medical tourism hub, offering world class medical infrastructure and the highest possible quality of care at a fraction of the cost of similar procedures in developed countries. Thailand imports 70 per cent of medical devices from overseas. GSK, Reckitt Benckiser and Astra Zeneca are all well-established UK companies offering medical equipment and devices, specialist treatment and technology, hospital standard certification, diagnostic equipment, e-health and elderly care equipment/technology and career training.

Shared agendas

There are a number of shared agendas between the UK and Thailand that provide opportunities to build longer term relationships. Thais have deep respect for UK education and there is a strong demand in Thailand for employees with good quality English language skills. There is an urgent push by the Ministry of Education to train Thai English language teachers and the British Council is the partner of choice.

Thailand also faces a vocational skills shortage. Opportunities for UK companies include English language provision, education products and services, private schools and vocational training.

Thais are now among the top 10 largest student populations in the UK, with over 8,000 aspiring young

people building their careers in many of the UK's world-class universities, colleges, and schools.

Both countries are interested in the skills and knowledge agenda; nurturing creativity; promoting internationalisation and cross-sectoral innovation; and developing partnerships in order to develop greater shared prosperity.

In 2016, Princess Chulabhorn Walailak, who holds a PhD in chemistry visited London. Imperial has links with Chulalongkorn University, Mahidol University, Khon Kaen University, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, and the National Science and Technology Development Agency of Thailand, among other Thai partners. There have been other high level visits by Thai delegations to British universities in recent years, highlighting growing academic links.

Many students and young professionals in Thailand want to learn English, get UK qualifications or study in the UK. All this directly supports Thailand's agenda to move towards a higher value services economy and reduce inequality and the UK's agenda to strengthen its relations internationally.

Similarly, UK universities are interested in developing stronger research links, as well as offering their services in different ways to international students. Returning Thai graduates from the UK are excited to exploit their learning and develop in areas where the UK has much to offer, such as creative hubs or social enterprise.

Looking to the future, the UK and Thailand will continue to build on their long-standing relationship, with both countries committed to forging further strategic alliances that will be supported by increased investment and trade opportunities.

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Tesco is one of the largest British investors in Thailand

