



POINTS OF VIEW

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A High Time for a Revitalisation of Thailand - Middle East Relations

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In recent years, Thailand and the Middle East have undergone significant socio-economic transformations and developments. Yet, their interactions have arguably seen too few changes in terms of depth and scope, still focusing on ‘naturally complementary’ areas such as public health, food security, trade and investment, and energy. As both are gradually venturing into the post-COVID-19 pandemic world, this is an opportune time for Thailand and the Middle East to revisit their relations and explore the future of their cooperation so that they can help each other seize new opportunities and overcome mutual challenges of the world today.

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Even before the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the world as we knew it, ambitious national plans were already underway in both Thailand and the Middle East to prepare for the world of tomorrow. For Thailand, the Royal Thai Government launched the 20-Year National Strategy and the “Thailand 4.0” policy in 2018 with a view to helping Thailand escape the middle-income trap and transforming it into a knowledge-based and high-income country. In 2021, it added another national agenda, namely the Bio - Circular - Green (BCG) Economy, to ensure a sustainable and balanced development by utilising science, technology and innovation to add value to Thailand’s traditional areas of strengths, such as medical and wellness, food and agriculture, bioenergy and tourism.

Similarly, the Middle East too has been making remarkable progresses in the last decade. What was thought of as merely petroleum-rich desert is now home to bustling economies, modern skyscrapers, and some of the world’s most important aviation hubs. Yet, these developments rely too heavily on the limited supply of oil and gas as well as external sources, such as expatriates and foreign technologies. Well aware of this fact, the Middle Eastern countries have embarked on national transformations guided by their so-called “Visions” or national strategies to achieve self-reliance and sustainability in vital areas, such as economy, food security, public health, and energy, through economic diversification, privatisation, and human resources development.

While it is clearly evident that socio-economic goals and priorities in both Thailand and the Middle East have changed drastically in recent years, the same cannot be said for their relations. For example, their cooperation in public health still largely focuses on medical tourism, whereby Thailand still holds on to the hope of attracting high-spending Middle Eastern patients whereas the Middle East has actually been enhancing its own domestic healthcare system and capabilities. Food security cooperation is still mostly thought of in terms of food export from Thailand to the Middle

East when the COVID-19 pandemic has proven just how easily the food supply chain can be disrupted. And while there has been an extensive “talk” on clean and renewable energy, there have been few tangible results, and oil and gas remain the mainstream mode of cooperation. Furthermore, there is too little investment by potential Thai investors in the Middle East as many of them still hold the traditional view of the region as unstable and conflict-ridden whereas in reality it is fast-growing and full of investment and business opportunities.

These are only a few examples of how the relations between Thailand and the Middle East are falling behind their present realities. Consequently, both are missing out on opportunities to foster closer cooperation and help each other achieve the goals in their national agenda. Therefore, it is crucial for Thailand and the Middle East to recalibrate their relations to match the context of their present realities. The following are some ways how they can do that.

For starter, Thailand and the Middle East should upgrade their traditional areas of cooperation to better synchronise with their current priorities. For example, in public health cooperation, Thailand should use its expertise to offer training to healthcare personnel in the Middle East and to invest in their medical facilities and services. It could also bring high-quality food for health products, such as organic fruits and vegetable or riceberry, and herbal medicine to the increasingly health-conscious Middle Eastern market. In food security cooperation, Thailand and the Middle East should conduct joint research in food science and agricultural technology that would sustainably enhance the region’s food security through, for example, longer storage or local food production. They should also expand cooperation in halal products to halal science, technology and innovation. In clean and renewable energy cooperation, both sides should support the roles of private sectors and learn from each other’s best practices. In trade and investment,

Thailand and the Middle East should ramp up their efforts to raise awareness about business and investment opportunities, especially in start-ups and mega-projects.

Furthermore, Thailand and the Middle East should seek out new areas of cooperation to support their national developments and overcome emerging challenges in the modern world. For instance, they should work together on digital transformation, which will in turn help facilitate other areas of cooperation, such as telemedicine to bolster Thailand's medical hub status, e-visa schemes to promote tourism, or electronic payments and filing system to increase the ease of doing business. They should also cooperate to combat climate change by, for example, exploring ways how Thailand can help support the Middle East Green Initiative, a project launched by Saudi Arabia to plant 50 billion trees across the region and reduce the region's carbon emissions. Moreover, they should join forces to face ever-growing cybersecurity threats through intelligence sharing and joint training and exercises.

These ideas may seem obvious to policymakers in Thailand and the Middle East, but why has such cooperation not yet fully materialised? One reason is that there have been too little people-to-people contact between them. As a result, the ideational distance between their peoples today is as far apart as the geographical distance between them. This has prevented both from fully understanding and appreciating each other's potential. Therefore, it is imperative to bridge such gap between the two peoples through increased people-to-people contact and closer cooperation in educational and cultural exchanges so that they can learn more about each other and realise the huge untapped potential between them. This will ultimately provide a strong foundation for achieving future cooperation between Thailand and the Middle East as envisioned by their policymakers.

In conclusion, Thailand and the Middle East have undergone and will continue to undergo significant socio-economic developments in the years to come. It is high time that their interactions finally catch up with their individual progresses as both are poised to benefit vehemently from each other. Indeed, the time is now ripe for both Thailand and the Middle East to step out of their comfort zones of “what have been” their traditional interactions and to let creativity and boldness of both their leaders and peoples guide them into the “what could be” the future of their cooperation.

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