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Time to Boost Thailand-LAC Relationship

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Amid the global pandemic as well as great powers strategic competition, Thailand looks forward to enhancing regional and bilateral relationships with Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)[3]—a region with long geographical distance but close in social attributes. The region shares similar strengths of multicultural society and entertaining culture in daily life to Thailand. These characteristics offer a conducive environment for Team Thailand—collaborative platform of the Thai government's offices located abroad—to boost the relationship with LAC in a comprehensive way.

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There are three strategic areas prioritised by the Department of American and South Pacific Affairs (ASPA), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand. First, Thailand aims to enhance trade and investment with the region due to its economic potential, particularly in agricultural and renewable energy sectors. ASPA underlines 3Ps, namely (1) Product – identification of Thai export products with potential in the region (2) Procedures – business incentives provided for foreign investors in the region, and (3) Partner – information on reliable partners to help boost confidence in doing business with countries in LAC, as the key to access this market as well as to strengthen economic cooperation with nations in the region.

In the past, the main problems for the Thai entrepreneurs to do business in LAC were language obstacle as well as the absence of focal point to provide necessary information. The latter is a principal reason why Thailand-Latin America Business Council was established in April 2020. According to Montri Mahaplerkpong, Chairman of Thailand-Latin America Business Council, the foundation of the Council was praised by nine ambassadors from the Latin American and Caribbean Group (GRULAC) based in Bangkok.

Recently, ASPA hosted a virtual conference between Thailand-Latin America Business Council, and the Royal Thai Embassies together with Team Thailand in five Latin American countries, namely Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Peru. This event was arranged to exchange in-depth information and views on economic opportunities in potential goods/business sectors and relevant rules and regulations, as well as the socio-political context of main countries in LAC, which is home to more than 650 million population.

Prior to this, a seminar on “Opportunities in Doing Business in Latin America and the Caribbean” was organised in March 2021, aiming to promote the “New Market” policy, which is in line with the Thai Government’s New Normal, post-COVID-19 context, focusing on economic

recovery. In this regard, Ambassador of Argentina to Thailand, as GRULAC Dean, reaffirmed that a distance between LAC and Thailand was not an obstacle, but a challenge that can certainly be overcome by closer economic collaboration between Thai and Latin American peoples.

Second, Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) Economy is an additional strategic area for leveraging the relationship between Thailand and LAC. The idea of BCG Economy matches with the global move towards greener economic governance at both national and international level. “BCG is what we called the Thai DNA”, says Witchu Vejjajiva, ASPA Director-General. He also adds, “we position ourselves as a sustainable country following the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great’s Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) for UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), proposed when Thailand was the Chair of G77”.

This aspiration gets along well with LAC—a region equipped with rich knowledge on science, technology, and innovation. For example, Chile is a country that commits to international environmental obligations by promoting foreign investment in circular energy as well as green hydrogen energy. Colombia is well-known for its “Orange Economy”—a policy to support creative industry, including film, music, and fashion, which is accounted for 3% of the country’s GDP. Peru constructed its first industrial park in the Northern region of the country titled “Proyecto Parque Industrial de Ancón (PIA)”, which will serve as another logistical hub to be able to attract more foreign direct investment into the region.

A number of regional mechanisms also prioritised international cooperation to promote sustainable and green development. The Forum for East Asia – Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC) adopted the “Greener Right-Based Economy”, proposed by Costa Rica, to promote eco-friendly business. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) emphasises sustainable production and consumption to cope with the climate change as well as to promote food security in the fifteen

Caribbean member states. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) founded OECD-LAC's regional programme for green economic reform in the region. These existing initiatives and mechanisms provide a great opportunity for Thailand and LAC countries to work together for the sustainable post-COVID-19 socio-economic recovery.

Interestingly, the door for bilateral cooperation on science, technology, and innovation between the two sides has been already open. Thailand's Siam Bioscience ventured with Cuba's CIMAB to establish Abinis Company in Nonthaburi province, Thailand. The company successfully produced biopharmaceuticals with advanced technology to help cure patients with lupus and cancer.

Moreover, Thailand's National Innovation Agency (NIA) has also been fostering innovation diplomacy with LAC. For example, NIA inked an agreement with the Chilean Economic Development Agency (CORFO) on ecosystem and capacity development for startups. NIA also seeks a possibility to enhance cooperation with Colombia concerning the development of innovation district between Bangkok and Bogota.

Besides, the Geo-Informatics and Space Technology Development Agency (GISTDA) signed a memorandum of understanding with the Peru's National Commission for Aerospace Research and Development (CONIDA), which was to commemorate the 55th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. This MoU was also acknowledged as the first international cooperation on geo-informatics and space technology between Thailand and Latin American country.

The final strategic area is people-to-people connectivity. Thailand realises that mutual understanding is fundamental for strengthening mutual benefits. It is worth noting here that Thailand pop or T-Pop is popular in the region. Surprisingly, in Mexico, the series "2gether" has

received positive responses from its fans. The Royal Thai Embassy in Mexico City in collaboration with GMMTV, the producer of 2gether, posted a video clip featured the two main actors, inviting the Mexicans to reply questions about Thailand on the Embassy's official Facebook page. There were approximately 6,000 fans participating in the event. The results also showed excellent reflections from the local people proven by more than 185,000 views, 10,000 reactions, and 4,000 shares.

Adding to that, a Thai LGBTQ band "4Mix" is an additional evidence on how popular T-Pop is in Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. Interestingly, 80% of the comments on their debut song "Y U Comeback", aired on online platforms, are from the region. Their positive responses are also reflected in a number of more than 7 million views and 50 reaction videos from all around the world.

Apart from entertainment sector, Thailand and Latin America exchanges their aspirations and knowledge for sustainable fashion. A well-known Brazilian flip-flop sandal brand "Havaianas" once thought of producing a collection of sandals represented the Thai identity such as *Tuk Tuk* and pictures of Thai tourist attractions while a famous Thai brand "ISSUE" blended the Latin American identity into its collection.

Moreover, the Royal Thai Embassy in Buenos Aires brought various famous designers from LAC, including Min Agostini, to exchange their knowledge with the Thai brand owners of ASAVA and T-RA in Bangkok. Meanwhile, the Thai government and private sector also organised the International Thai Silk Fashion Week to showcase diverse styles of Thai silk. A famous Peruvian designer, Carlos Vigil, was invited to design an Andes-style Thai silk presented by Ambassador of Peru to Thailand.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand as a member country of FEALAC collaborated with FEALAC Cyber Secretariat to upload Thailand's information and best practices to deal with the crisis on FEALAC Cyber Secretariat website. This allows FEALAC member countries, consisting of 16 Asian and 20 Latin American nations, to gain knowledge and make use of the database, developed by Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA), on the webinar courses.

ASPA together with Thai concerned authorities has assisted LAC countries by donating RT-PCR kit as well as virtually providing technical assistance to Panama, giving the blueprint of emergency transport ventilator by King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang of Thailand (KMITL) to Chile and Peru, and cooperating with the Honorary Consulate of the Republic of Peru in Khon Kaen province to donate 5,000 disposable face masks to Thai community, as well as personnel in medical field in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Peru.

Thailand has been boosting its comprehensive relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean through multi-dimensional and multi-track cooperation. With goodwill and aspiration both sides reciprocated, long distance is no longer an obstacle for future cooperation.