

PROMOTION OF UKRAINE’S NATIONAL INTERESTS IN THE SOUTHEAST ASIA REGION. CONTOURS OF THE NEW “EASTERN” POLICY OF UKRAINE

Author:

Alina Hrytsenko

Mistakes and tasks of the Ukrainian “Eastern” policy

The Russian-Ukrainian war revealed the key mistake of Ukraine’s foreign policy—excessive prioritization of the Euro-Atlantic vector, which led to the neglect of other directions of foreign policy, in particular, the “Asian” track.

The result of this policy was the lack of political support from Asian states, in particular, from the countries of Southeast Asia (SEA), which declared a neutral position on the war. Undoubtedly, this stance is due to the traditional for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states policy of non-alignment and the desire to distance themselves from the conflict, which is an integral part of the global confrontation between the West and China. However, individually, most ASEAN states gravitate towards Russia. For example, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is driven by nostalgia for the Soviet-Vietnamese friendship, without fully realizing the realities of the functioning of the Russian state in the XXI century. The narrative of strong Russian-Vietnamese friendship, which goes back decades and stretches from the times of the USSR, is actively supported by Russian diplomats and propagated through information campaigns.

Another example is the Republic of Indonesia. In Indonesian society, where anti-American sentiments are prevalent, one can observe a sympathy towards Moscow. To a certain extent, this stems from the mentality and cultural and ideological views: Indonesians sympathize with strong, authoritarian leaders who use the means of hard power in pursuit of national interests, and resort to “machismo”. Combined with the robust activity of the Russian propaganda machine, especially in social media, which spreads an exclusively Russian view of the conflict and the Ukrainian political establishment, the image of the Russian president

looks positive in contrast to President Zelenskyi.

These two examples—the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of Indonesia—highlight a fundamental weakness of Ukrainian diplomacy and simultaneously answer the question: how can Ukraine promote its national interests in SEA?

Ukraine is short of information presence in the region as well as positive standing. Neither local political elites nor societies know much about Ukraine, which, of course, is not the only reason for the lack of sufficient support in the war with Russia, but still has a significant impact.

Hence, there is an obvious need to increase the information presence in order to counter Russian propaganda, to destroy negative stereotypes about Ukraine as an exclusively pro-American state, whose political establishment lacks political will, to dispel myths about the Russian-Ukrainian war spread by Russian propaganda and to create a positive image of the Ukrainian state.

Cultural-humanitarian cooperation and information presence

Aforementioned tasks should be achieved not only through information campaigns and enhanced outreach of Ukrainian diplomats, but also through cultural diplomacy, second track diplomacy, etc.

Exhibitions, festivals, various cultural events that would spread awareness of local societies about the original Ukrainian culture, values, traditions, cuisine and history, should prove the authenticity of Ukraine and its difference from the Russian Federation. Russian propaganda widely disseminates the myth about the derivation of everything Ukrainian from Russian, the secondary nature of Ukrainian culture. Cultural diplomacy should have as one of its goals the destruction of this stereotype and the sharing of information about Ukrainian identity.

It is vital to promote curricula and courses in Ukrainian language and literature at universities or embassies.

After the end of martial law, it would be advisable to expand the list of measures of cultural and humanitarian cooperation, in particular, in the field of education and the creation of educational programs and student exchange programs, as well as the conclusion of agreements on the recognition of Ukrainian diplomas in one or another state.

After the end of martial law, it would be advisable to consider the possibility of assisting local journalists in organizing press tours of Ukraine, creating documentary films. For example, several years ago journalists of the Vietnamese TV channel VTC10-NETVIET conducted a press tour of our country, which substantially contributed to the promotion of

lifestyle, culture and traditions of modern Ukrainian society in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The tourist direction is also perspective one: visa liberalization, direct regular flights will have a positive impact on boosting interest in traveling to post-war Ukraine.

Trade and economic cooperation

Further political isolation of the Russian Federation causes deterioration of the economic development of the state and undermines Russia's positions in the region of Southeast Asia, therefore, a "window of opportunity" opens for Ukraine to strengthen and build its own authority, not only political, as a sovereign state that builds its own, independent foreign policy course, but also as a responsible trade and economic partner.

The most promising sectors for deepening trade and economic cooperation with the countries of the SEA region are the following:

- agricultural (supply of grain crops and their processing products, fresh vegetables and fruits, meat and dairy products);
- aerospace, telecommunications (development of launch vehicles (over the past 20 years, Ukraine has launched more than 90 launch vehicles, which have put into orbit about 200 spacecraft), maintenance and launch of various types of satellites, including communication ones, satellites designed to provide regional and foreign television and radio broadcasting services, direct television, multimedia and the Internet, data transmission, telephony, videoconferencing, radar systems, etc;)
- military-technical (deliveries and repairs of military equipment and weapons, as well as transfer of technology for their manufacture). Military-technical cooperation seems particularly promising given the gradual degradation of the Russian Federation in this area and the inability of the Russian side to meet the needs of Asian states in the import of weapons, which are mainly Soviet or Russian-made and require life cycle support.

Promotion of Ukrainian exports to the growing market of Southeast Asia is hampered by a list of factors: lack of state support; Ukrainian system of requirements for payment for exported products; significant differences in settlements in foreign trade (for example, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam still prefers barter payments, while in Ukraine there are legal prohibitions on barter); lack of interest of most Ukrainian traders in concluding contracts on terms acceptable to South Asian enterprises. In addition, the inability to purchase Ukrainian goods (e.g. ships and aircraft) on credit is an obstacle to expanding trade.

Multilateral dimension

Strengthening mutually beneficial trade relations with the countries of SEA can be pursued not only at the bilateral level, but also within the framework of regional organizations, international and regional alliances that have the opportunity to lobby the interests of Ukrainian producers.

Ukraine's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) this year is a positive step. Last year, the General Assembly of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly adopted a resolution granting the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine observer status in the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, which will undoubtedly promote the interests of Ukraine in SEA.

As a country with a large Muslim population, Ukraine has also applied for observer status in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which should increase the authority of Ukraine in the key ASEAN countries—the Republic of Indonesia and Malaysia, which are Muslim.

Ukraine's joining the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) interregional forum would facilitate the transfer of the political dialogue with the countries of SEA to a more systematic basis. Taking into account the accession of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Croatia to ASEM at the 10th anniversary summit in 2014, new prospects are unfolding for Ukraine in this direction. It should be noted that in 2014 Ukraine also applied for membership in ASEM.

The advantages of participation in ASEM are closer contacts with economic partners (the states participating in this forum account for more than two-thirds of Ukraine's foreign trade, including more than 90% of Ukraine's trade with Asian countries). Ukraine's accession to this forum is expedient in terms of geographical location, which naturally makes Ukraine a connecting link between Europe and Asia. Membership in ASEM will allow Ukraine to join promising economic, financial, infrastructure and humanitarian projects.

It is also advisable to consider increasing Ukraine's participation in the work of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), international conferences on economic cooperation and regional security.

Bilateral dimension

It is necessary to note and recognize the limited Ukrainian resources to scale up diplomatic, informational and cultural presence in the SEA countries. This necessitates the identification of priority states on which the main attention should be focused.

Priority states can be considered not only those that have strong trade and economic ties with Ukraine (Annex 1), but also those whose economic and market potential, combined with the growth of political weight in the region, signals the geopolitical attractiveness of the state.

These are the Republic of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Kingdom of Thailand.

Indonesia

The Republic of Indonesia (RI) is one of the most promising partners of Ukraine in the SEA region for a number of reasons. Indonesia has huge human resources, as the country's population is more than 280 million people, which makes it the fourth country after China, India and the United States in terms of population (as of 2022). At the same time, Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world (almost 88% of the population professes Islam).

President of the Republic of Indonesia Joko Widodo seeks to consolidate the authority of the Republic of Indonesia in the international arena and to upgrade the geopolitical status of the country as a regional leader and in the future the leader of ASEAN. This was manifested, in particular, in attempts to act as a mediator in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Jakarta's desire to open new geopolitical frontiers, particularly in Europe, means that the Indonesian establishment is ready to listen to the position of the Ukrainian side, which should definitely be used to strengthen communication.

Indonesia is a large market (16th place in the world), which is growing rapidly in absolute terms (more than 5% in 2022), ranked 2nd in terms of average growth in exports of goods during 2014–2017, ranks 6th in terms of food consumption potential, and is in the TOP-30 in terms of the correspondence of the structure of Ukrainian exports to its imports (29th position).

The economy of the country is dominated by industry (almost 43% of GDP, the main industries are oil and natural gas extraction, fertilizer production, electronics, textile production, cement and food industries, mechanical engineering), services sector (almost 44% of GDP, mainly due to tourism) and agriculture (13% of GDP, the main agricultural products are rice, cocoa, tea, coffee, palm oil, rubber, peanuts, spices and others).

For Indonesia, Ukraine is the largest trading partner in SEA and a major market for palm and coconut oils.

Foreign trade turnover between Ukraine and Indonesia in 2021 amounted to \$1.24 billion and increased by 22% compared to 2020. The growth in bilateral trade was primarily due to

further growing demand in the Republic of Indonesia for Ukrainian agricultural products, in particular wheat. The volume of Ukrainian exports in 2021 amounted to \$809.8 million (up 10.1% compared to 2020). Its main items were cereals (92.6%), ferrous metals (5.2%), and products of the flour and cereals industry (0.4%), sugar and sugar confectionery (0.3%) and vegetables (0.3%).

Promising areas of Ukrainian-Indonesian cooperation are design, construction, reconstruction and modernization of energy, mining, oil refining enterprises, development and construction of oil and gas pipelines, geological exploration, construction of seaports, cooperation in research, peaceful use of space, military-technical cooperation, supply and repair of military equipment and weapons, as well as transfer of technology for their manufacture; merchant shipping, technology exchange, trade and tourism. There is great potential for cooperation in the pharmaceutical sector.

The military-technical sphere offers many prospects. A large share of Indonesian arms imports comes from Russia, which is currently unable to fully meet Jakarta's needs given the depletion of its own resources. Defense cooperation between Ukraine and Indonesia can become the foundation for raising bilateral relations to a strategic level in the future.

No less attractive is cooperation in the field of aircraft construction and supply of Antonov aircraft to Indonesia. Geographically, Indonesia is a territory of numerous islands with a developed network of low-cost carriers that need hundreds of new aircraft. The aircraft manufacturing industry is one of the examples of untapped potential that can benefit Indonesia and Ukraine in economic ties.

In addition, the experience of Ukraine in the introduction of online education, digitalization of public services, and development of e-commerce services are of great interest to Indonesia.

Malaysia

Malaysia, in line with Indonesia, demonstrates stable economic growth (more than 6% in 2022). Apart from agricultural production, the electrical appliances and products industry develops dynamically in Malaysia.

For Ukraine, Malaysia is the second largest trading partner in SEA after Indonesia. In 2021, bilateral trade reached \$405 million. The structure of Ukrainian-Malaysian trade is dominated by the supply of raw materials and finished products. Before the full-scale invasion of Russia, Ukraine was the biggest supplier of sunflower oil and dried peas to the Malaysian market, and the second biggest supplier of wheat and dried pulses to Malaysia. In recent years, Ukraine has been exporting fruits (apples) and berries, chocolate and honey to Malaysia. Still, despite the existing trade turnover, which tends to have a growing negative balance, the range of trade operations between the countries remains rather limited.

To raise the level of coordination of economic relations between the countries, it is necessary to develop the work of the Joint Committee on Trade, the provisions of which were agreed and signed during the visit of the President of Ukraine to Malaysia in 2016. The establishment of such a joint coordinating body will intensify bilateral cooperation and increase the level of communication in the fields of trade, investment, etc.

Expansion of cooperation in science and technology will contribute to the diversification of bilateral economic relations through the promotion of high-tech and science-intensive products with a high share of added value to the Malaysian market.

A relevant area of scientific and technical cooperation is the sphere of aircraft construction. Prior to the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation, in order to promote cooperation in this area, including in the production of composite materials and components made of them, there was a process of establishing contacts between the Antonov State Enterprise and the Malaysian Institute of technology of composite materials and the company AIROD (Aircraft Inspection, Repair & Overhaul Depot), which works on the maintenance, repair and overhaul of aircraft of the Royal Malaysian Air Force.

Particular attention should be paid to military-technical cooperation, especially in the production of armored vehicles and anti-tank weapons, joint production of aircraft, joint design of multi-purpose patrol boats and their further joint production at one of the shipyards in Malaysia. The Joint Defense Commission will facilitate the process of communication on the development of military-technical cooperation.

The dynamics of Ukrainian-Malaysian cooperation in the humanitarian sphere is potentially a considerable factor in the rapprochement of the two countries. Although the Ukrainian diaspora in Malaysia is not numerous, the Ukrainian Cultural Association is functioning in the country. According to its Statute, the main purpose of the Association is to unite Ukrainians living in Malaysia and promote the interests of Ukraine in the cultural and humanitarian spheres. Therefore, it would be reasonable to engage the institution in the exercise of cultural diplomacy in Malaysia.

Vietnam

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) has been recognized by the International Monetary Fund as the fastest growing economy in SEA (about 8% in 2022). Currently, Vietnam is the second largest trading partner of Ukraine in SEA after Indonesia: last year the bilateral trade volume exceeded \$850 million. The position of Ukrainian goods is currently uncertain, because they have to compete with the products of the Eurasian Economic Union, which cooperates with Vietnam at more favorable tariffs. The situation can be changed if a free trade agreement is concluded. Negotiations on liberalization of

bilateral trade between Ukraine and Vietnam have been ongoing since last year.

Military-technical cooperation is becoming more promising in view of the intensified search for sources of arms supply alternatives to the Russian Federation, on which Vietnam depended by almost 60%. Given the fact that most of the weapons possessed by the SRV are Soviet or Russian-made, Ukraine may become a competitor to Russia in the arms market.

One of the viable areas of bilateral cooperation is energy, including alternative energy, to the development of which Hanoi pays more and more attention. Vietnam has great potential in wind, solar and biomass energy. The country's wind energy potential is estimated at 7000-8700 MW, particularly in the coastal areas of the central and southern parts of the country, on the Tay Nguyen Plateau and island territories. With almost 2500 hours of sunshine per year, the SRV has great potential in solar energy that can be used for domestic purposes. At the current stage, when attention is paid to the development of industry and the population of the country is growing, meeting the demand for electricity is a major challenge and leads to the development of renewable energy.

In September 2020, negotiations were held with the Vietnam Institute of Atomic Energy VINATOM and the Centre For Applications Of Nuclear Technique In Industry (CANTI), during which the issues of development of cooperation between Ukraine and Vietnam in the field of rare earth metals mining and processing, as well as the prospects for the introduction of Ukrainian technologies and the creation of joint ventures were discussed.

In 2021, cooperation was launched in the space industry and biomedicine, which, along with pharmaceuticals, are also attractive areas for the development of bilateral cooperation.

Cultural and humanitarian cooperation seems quite promising, especially in education and tourism. It is essential to broaden the contractual base with the possibility of language internships for Vietnamese students, the opening of the specialty "Ukrainian language" or "Ukrainian studies" in Vietnamese universities, the need to compile Ukrainian-Vietnamese and Vietnamese-Ukrainian dictionaries, as well as specialized textbooks, etc.

Important areas of Ukrainian-Vietnamese cooperation in the field of tourism are the establishment of a permanent exchange of experience and information on tourism opportunities of both countries, involvement of tourism business and representatives of local authorities to participate in tourism and investment exhibitions, fairs, salons and exchanges held in the two countries. Also interesting is the experience of the SRV in creating routes for tourists interested in military history. However, the lack of direct transport links hinders the increase of tourist flows between the countries.

Thailand

In view of the high level of nominal GDP of the Kingdom of Thailand (KT), the growth of incomes of the local population and the stable socio-economic situation in the country, KT remains a key partner of Ukraine among the countries of the SEA region in the long term. Ukraine with its economic, scientific and technical, agricultural and industrial potential, as well as its geographical location can be an important partner of the country to enter the markets of Eastern Europe and the European Union.

The Thai market remains among top destinations in SEA for Ukrainian exports, in particular, agricultural products. Since 2019, Ukraine has become the main exporter of grain to the country.

Prospective is cooperation in the aerospace sector. Last year, the State Space Agency of Ukraine and the Geo-informatics and Space Technology Development Agency of Thailand (GISTDA) agreed to cooperate and start developing joint projects.

KT is also considered an important buyer of Ukrainian armored vehicles such as APCs and Oplot tanks. As for the prospects of cooperation, one of the directions is the establishment of armored vehicles production in Thailand, in particular BTR-3E1 armored personnel carriers, with the transfer of technology. The Thai side expressed interest in the Ukrainian BTR-4MV1, which were considered as the main combat vehicles of the Royal Thai Marines.

The opening of the Thai Embassy in Kyiv should contribute to the development of bilateral relations. Currently, the interests of the KT in Ukraine are represented by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Thailand in the Republic of Poland.

CONCLUSIONS

The priority task now should be to expand the information presence in the region and key countries in order to spread our own narratives and destroy Russian myths about the war.

It is advisable to review the work of embassies and ensure an increase in the information activity of Ukrainian diplomats, in particular, in social networks.

Provided the funding is available, it will be vital to hold cultural events aimed at raising awareness of the local population about Ukrainian culture, traditions, values, and representation of Ukrainian identity.

It is essential to set a positive positioning of the Ukrainian state and increase the authority of the Ukrainian leadership.

The focus should be on participation in multilateral formats and accelerating the ratification of the TAC, as the ASEAN member states consider the TAC as an integral part of the political and security community of ASEAN and highly appreciate the fact of involving third countries in the treaty.

After the end of martial law, the processes of visa liberalization and organization of direct flights between Ukraine and the SEA countries should be accelerated to encourage local citizens to travel to Ukraine.

The most promising areas of economic and trade cooperation are agriculture, aerospace industry, military-technical cooperation and energy.

Trade volume with ASEAN countries in 2021

Country	Export	Import	Total volume
Vietnam	276 763 200	574 467 200	851 230 400
Indonesia	809 885 800	431 889 100	1 241 774 900
Cambodia	2 386 100	27 887 400	30 273 500
Laos	254 100	984 900	1 239 000
Malaysia	132 444 000	272 585 800	405 029 800
Myanmar	25 547 900	19 527 400	45 075 300
Singapore	21 581 600	44 689 600	66 271 200
Thailand	224 886 300	252 505 900	277 392 200
Philippines	117 278 800	64 724 700	182 003 500

© Centre for International Security

Author:

Alina Hrytsenko

The information and views set out in this study are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.

Centre for International Security

Borodina Inzhenera Street, 5-A

Kyiv, 02092, Ukraine

Phone: +380999833140, +380976566675

E-mail: cntr.bezpeky@gmail.com

<https://intsecurity.org/>

