

## **French Appeasement Policy Toward Siam (1937-1939)**

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**ABSTRACT—:** This article deals with the issue of the preparation of French Indochina for the possibility of an armed conflict with Thailand in the late 1930s. It examines the reasons that led the colony to find itself so ill-prepared for the eventuality of war. In this perspective, the article shows that, although aware of its pro-Japanese evolution and the territorial claims of Siam, the French authorities hastened to undertake nothing, an attitude which was in line with the Munich policy that marked French policy in the last month before the outbreak of war in Europe. The article also shows that reasons related to the maintenance of the social status quo in Indochina influenced the policy of equipment – and defence – of the colony.

**Keywords :** France, Indochina, Siam, Thailand, Japan, Appeasement

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## Introduction

The issue of the policy of appeasement followed by Great Britain and France towards Germany during the period between the two World Wars has been the subject of numerous studies. For the most part, they focused on the situation in Europe, less often in other regions of the world such as Africa or Asia. In any case, the implementation of the policy of appeasement was dictated primarily by the European context and, before studying France's policy of appeasement toward Siam, it might be of some interest to recall the European causes of this policy.

Studies tend to explain that the appeasement policy was essentially motivated by the trauma of the First World War, the inability to grasp the particularity of Nazism, the demographic and military weakness of France, the disagreement between London and Paris, and the impossibility of trusting Stalin. According to several authors, like Jeffrey Record, the policy of appeasement followed by Great Britain and France stemmed above all from the memory left by the First World War. Record considers that the British and French leaders would have been concerned about public opinion within their respective countries and determined not to see the horrors of the Great War repeated. Added to this was the fact that the British and French leaders would have been unable to understand the specificity of the Nazi threat. Most importantly, Great Britain and France would have been militarily incapable of undertaking anything against Germany, especially since London and Paris had refused to revive the "rear alliance" with the USSR (Record 2011, 223-237). Dealing with this last point, historian Robert Young underlined that, on the Franco-British side, there was "distrust" for ideological reasons and because of "some ugly realities" of the Soviet domestic policy. Besides this, the author emphasized the inability of the British and French governments to understand each other's security requirements, a situation that favored the pursuit of a policy of appeasement towards Berlin. Young, however, noted a change in attitude on the French side following the invasion of what remained of Czechoslovakia in 1939: Daladier, the head of government, would have become "sick of

appeasement in any language” and rearmament continued “at full speed” (Young 2011, 238-261). According to historian Georges-Henri Soutou, the causes of the policy of appeasement carried out by the French governments, at the time of the “Anschluss” and of Munich, were a “growing fear of communism”, France’s demographic and military weakness compared to Germany, as well as the absence of British and American support. The author also mentions, after Munich, the implementation by the government of Edouard Daladier of a policy of economic recovery and increasing arms production. According to Soutou, in the months following Munich, France followed a policy of preparation for war, of deterrence and, at the same time, of concessions. As for the question of the rear alliance, the historian reports that France started military discussions again with the USSR in 1939 but this attempt would not have succeeded due to the difficulties that Moscow would have created (Soutou 2007, 338-344). In reality, as historian Michael Carley has shown, the efforts at economic rapprochement led by the Soviets towards France throughout the interwar period constantly encountered refusals from the Bank of France and the Ministry of Finance. Anti-communism prevented the development of normal Franco-Soviet relations and, at the same time, contributed to the policy of appeasement to the point of threatening French security (Carley 1992, 23-57).

In order to study the case of the French policy of appeasement toward Siam, the article takes up the point of view of historian Arno Mayer who underlined the need, when it comes to studying the reasons which push country leaders to take the decision to enter war, to look at both the state of international relations in the given period and the domestic situation of the countries concerned. As Mayer pointed out, the decision-making process that leads to war is intrinsically linked to the domestic conditions of a given country. Decision-makers are led to calculate how war can be a means to “establish, maintain, advance, or undermine” the positions of elites inside and outside their countries (Mayer 1969, 291-303). The case presented in the article is that of elites undermining their own territorial security, by going to war without the will to really prepare for it, in order better to preserve

the social order.

It is by bringing together France's foreign policy in East Asia and Indochinese domestic policy that this article proposes to study the policy of appeasement followed by Paris with regard to Siam. This article intends to show what were the characteristics of French appeasement towards Siam and to suggest how the social situation of Indochina favored or motivated French diplomacy and defense policy in South-East Asia. The issue of the French appeasement policy toward Siam is all the more important that the fall of France in 1940 was followed in South-East Asia by the Franco-Thai war (1940-41). The conflict won by Thailand led to the loss, for Indochina, of several western territories, among them: Xaiyaburi, Siam Reap and Battambang.

The study of these issues is based on documents from the archives of the French ministry of Foreign Affairs. These documents include dispatches and telegrams from the minister of France in Siam sent to the minister of Foreign Affairs in Paris and to the governor general of Indochina in Hanoi, notes produced by the military attaché of the legation in Siam, as well as notes and letters produced by officials of the ministry of Foreign Affairs or by the governor general of Indochina (who depended on the ministry of the Colonies). Based on this material, the article addresses, in the first part, the question of the political evolution of Siam between 1937 and 1939 and the perception that the French authorities had of it. The second part concerns the defence policy pursued by Paris in the event of a conflict with Siam. In the last part, the article deals with the issue of the industrialisation of the French colony and the obstacles such a project faced.

## **1. French Perception of Siam: Relations with Japan and Irredentism**

The Sino-Japanese War had direct consequences on the political situation of Siam. As Japan descended into a war of aggression against China, Chinese nationalists and communists in Siam organised themselves in support of their country of origin.

They were then the object of repression on the part of the Thai authorities, a policy which constituted the most obvious evidence of the rapprochement between Bangkok and Tokyo carried out during this decade. Parallel to this, while Siam refused to renew diplomatic relations with China, the Thai government developed against French Indochina an irredentist campaign directed in particular towards Laos and Cambodia. The general policy pursued by Siam in the 1930s, particularly in the second half of the decade, is perceived differently according to the authors. As Benjamin Batson showed, there are two main approaches, one which argues that Siam had unwillingly moved closer to Japan, due to the lack of support from Britain and the United States, another which reports a more voluntary rapprochement between Siam and Japan on the part of Bangkok (Batson and Hajime 1990, 1-4). It is not the point in this part to discuss which of the approaches is the closest to the reality. The aim is to describe the implementation of a policy which was *de facto* pro-Japanese and that it was perceived as such by the French authorities.

As Charnvit Kasetsiri wrote, during the 1930s the Thai governments “were anxious to keep on good terms with the Japanese since it was obvious that they were a major contender for dominance in East Asia”. He added that, “[a]ccordingly, secret societies and political organisations formed among the local Chinese, strongly anti-Japanese in outlook, became a major concern of the Siamese government”. The outbreak of war in 1937 resulted in an intensification of anti-Japanese activities (Kasetsiri 2015, 289-290).

With the start of the war, the Guomindang launched a call for union addressed “to the main Chinese traders” in Siam. The local branch of the party, aided by the secret societies and “the Chinese Provincial Political Associations established here and acting under the directives of their respective metropolitan centres”, issued instructions for the implementation of a boycott campaign against Japanese products. Those who did not respect the boycott order were “subject to reprisals and death threats”.<sup>2</sup>

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2 FMFAA(C)/44 CPCOM 72. The French Minister in Siam, Paul Lépissier, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Paris,

The coercive measures against the offenders resulted in the execution of sixty-one people (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014, 128). The boycott was “extremely effective” and the value of Japan’s trade with Siam fell from 6,300,000 yen in September 1937 to 2,700,000 in April 1938 (Skinner 1962, 244). In 1938, anti-Japanese activities covered, in addition to propaganda, supported “if necessary, by threat”, “voluntary contributions, exceptional levies on commercial profits”, and “subscriptions to war loans”. A “Special Committee” organized the recruitment and dispatch of “several convoys of young men and young women” to China. Liaison was made with anti-Japanese associations outside Siam. The “Local Federation” thus participated in the “National Salvation Congress” organized in October in Singapore.<sup>3</sup> According to the minister of France in Siam, Paul Lépissier, the “remarkable activity of all these anti-Japanese organisations could have not, however, developed in Bangkok without the support of the Siamese Communist Party”. By 1938, the Communists formed a key element of the ‘Anti-Japanese National Salvation Federation’.<sup>4</sup>

3 FMFAA(C)/44CPCOM. 72. The French Minister in Siam, Paul Lépissier, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Paris, 7 Nov. 1938. “Les Chinois au Siam.”

4 The Communists’ anti-Japanese action had begun before the war. According to Lépissier, “[f]rom the first months of 1937 an ‘Anti-Japanese National Rescue Association’ [had been] created in Bangkok, placed under the control of the ‘Anti-Imperialist League’ and which was joined by the majority of the members of the ‘Communist Youth Federation’ and the ‘Proletarian Art League’”. The French minister added that “[t]his Association had soon launched, in the form of leaflets, an appeal to the Chinese emigrants to induce all the elements of the [Guomindang] in Siam to adhere to a common anti-imperialist front”. A few months later, with the start of the Sino-Japanese conflict, the Central Committee of the Siamese Communist Party transformed “all its subsidiary organisations into Anti-Japanese Associations in order to assimilate them to the groups of the same name created here by the [Guomindang]”. In October 1937 a split took place within the Guomindang which saw the creation of the Youth Party. This split was the result of the left wing of the Guomindang, mostly composed of “young people”, “small businessmen” and “small employees”, who blamed the right wing of the party, composed of “big businessmen obvi-

The boycott directed against the Japanese products made the Thai government, fearful of being drawn into the Sino-Japanese war as an enemy of Japan, increase the repression of secret societies, businessmen and political activists involved in the implementation of the boycott and fundraising (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014, 129). Even before Phibun Songkhram took over as prime minister, in December 1938, a French report dealing with the suppression of the Communist activities in Siam would describe the attitude of the Thai government as “clearly hostile to the Chinese minority”.<sup>5</sup>

The anti-Chinese policy carried out by the Thai government consisted of “a considerable number of laws attempting to force the Chinese out of business, by discrimination against them in such traditional areas of Chinese business as rice-milling, salt production, fishing, and the retail trade” and “[m]any professions were reserved for Siamese citizens”. Chinese were also “prohibited to buy land and reside in areas which the government regarded as strategic”. Alongside these measures, “Chinese schools and newspapers were put under restriction and many of them were finally closed down” (Kasetsiri 2015, 290). Against fundraising, the government relied on a law, enacted in 1937, which banned

ously concerned to manage the future of their interests in Siam”, to “not react sufficiently against the attitude of the Siamese Government deemed too favorable to the Japanese cause”. The Communist Party managed to place two of its agents in the new party’s management committee. The Communist Party leaders then used their influence on the Youth Party to create the “Central Executive Committee” of the “Anti-Japanese National Salvation Associations”. Then, “[a]s a precaution, and in order not to upset the moderate elements of the [Guomindang], reconciled with the ‘Youth Party’ on the intervention of a delegate specially come from [Hankou], the vast association of communist inspiration came into being as the ‘Anti-Japanese National Salvation Federation’”. See: FMFAA(C)/44 CPCOM 72. The French Minister in Siam, Paul Lépissier, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Paris, 7 Nov. 1938. “Les Chinois au Siam.”

5 FMFAA(C)/44CPCOM. 72. Document addressed to the Director of Political Affairs and General Security in Hanoi, 28 Feb. 1938. “Les récentes répressions communistes à Bangkok.”

those for military purposes.<sup>6</sup> The occurrence of police actions directed against the Chinese increased. On September 10, 1938, the Thai government “carried out a large police raid on the opium dens and the meeting places of several Associations and Secret Societies”. Before the end of the year, this operation was repeated several times and had resulted in the expulsion of about 5,000 Chinese and deprived “a number of their Associations of their most influential members”. “The close and constant surveillance which is currently exercised on all the suspects”, wrote Lépissier, “in the end, considerably hinders the activity of the militants and that of the Societies which are still intact”.<sup>7</sup> Arrests of Chinese political leaders and activists increased in early January 1939. While the Chinese community was preparing for the lunar new year celebrations, the police carried out a series of operations against the headquarters of illicit Chinese organisations. The Chinese nonetheless continued to send funds to China to support the war effort, but with less effectiveness due to repression. The culmination of the “containment” policy undertaken against the Chinese was reached in the third week of July 1939 with a series of police operations which continued until August. Searches took place in schools, printing houses, press offices and association headquarters. Several hundred arrests took place (Skinner 1962, 265-267).

On November 23, 1939, Yi Guangyan<sup>8</sup> (蟻光炎), the director of the Chamber of Commerce and treasurer of the Teochio Association of Bangkok was assassinated shortly after his return

6 The funds raised in Siam, amounting to \$ 600,000, were much lower than in Malaysia (6,000,000), the Philippines (3,600,000) or the Dutch East Indies (1,200,000). By mid-1938, several Chinese leaders had been jailed for participating in fundraising for China (Skinner 1962, 244).

7 FMFAA(C)/44CPCPOM. 72. The French Minister in Siam, Paul Lépissier, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Paris, 7 Nov. 1938. “Les Chinois au Siam.”

8 Also spelled Yi Kueng-yen, Hia Kwang Iam, and Hia Kuang Iam according to the Thai transcription system: เขียวกวางเอี่ยม) or Iam Suri (เอี่ยมสุรีย์).



from China, where he had been congratulated by Chiang Kai-shek for his action. As Leader of the left wing of the Guomindang in Thailand, he had an important role in anti-Japanese activities, especially in sending volunteers to China. According to French intelligence, he had been “killed with a revolver (of Japanese manufacture) by a professional assassin hired by the [Formosan “Wang Ching Chiu”], a known agent of the Japanese”. The latter worked for the Nippon-Siam Trade Bureau. Evidence of their complacency, at least, toward the Japanese, the Thai authorities seem to have been warned of the preparations for the crime but “were unable to prevent it”. “In the trial of the assassin, they did not dare to push hard the investigation either for fear of discovering the real instigators of this crime”.<sup>9</sup>

Besides these measures, known by the French, that showed the pro-Japanese orientation of the Thai government, the latter also developed an irredentist campaign directed against its direct neighbours.

Increasingly insistent as international tensions were escalating, the campaign targeted border territories that Siam had to recognize to have been under the control of England and France in the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1935-1936 the Ministry of Defence published a series of maps which indicated the lost territories from the end of the 18th century to 1909 and the government circulated irredentist maps in schools. The campaign also extended to the press (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014, 130-131). The director of the Department of Fine Arts, Wichit Wathakan, the most prominent intellectual of the new regime, known for his anti-Chinese discourse, participated through his plays in this campaign for a “greater Thailand”. In the one entitled *Ratchamanu*, from 1937, he made one of his characters say “that the Khmer were ‘Thais like us’ but had somehow become separated; ‘All of us on the Golden Peninsula are the same. . . [but] the Siamese Thais are the elder brothers’” (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014, 127-128). Likewise, Chris Baker and Phasuk Phongpaichit

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9 FMFAA(N)/Bangkok 66PO.1.69. “Propagande et préparatifs japonais au Siam en 1937-1941. A4”. Bangkok, 29 Apr. 1940.

reported Wichit's reaction to the sight of a map presented to him by the École Française d'Extrême-Orient which mentioned all of the Thai-speaking populations in Southeast Asia. Wichit exclaimed: "If we could recover the lost territories, we would be a great power... Before long we could be a country of about 9 million square kilometers with a population of not less than 40 million" (Baker and Phongpaichit 2014, 131). This attitude hardly offended either the Indochinese authorities or the École Française d'Extrême-Orient, which made Wichit Wathakan an honorary member of this institution on the occasion of his visit to Indochina in April 1939.<sup>10</sup>

The French authorities in Indochina and the representatives of France in Siam had noticed anti-Chinese and anti-French tendencies well before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese conflict in 1937.

On 3 October 1936, the French minister in Siam, Marcel Ray, reported that "Siamese newspapers almost daily published articles which recalled the French occupation of 1893 and the loss of the Cambodian provinces". The Campaign was developing while the Assembly had voted a credit of 30 million baht over five years for a program of new roads which "had a mainly strategic character, in the direction, or as ring road, of our Indochina border".<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of June 1937, the department of Asia of the Quai d'Orsay, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, wrote a note to the minister stating that the Ministry of Colonies and the government of Indochina had "constantly remained awake as to the possible consequences of the disposition, if not aggressive at least ostentatious, shown by Siam". According to the department, although

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10 FMFAA(C)/38 CPCOM 36. Telegram from Lépissier to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangkok, April 13, 1939. No. 62; Minister of France in Siam to Governor General of Indochina, Bangkok, 20 May 1939. « A.s. voyage de Luang Vichitr en Indochine. »

11 FMFAA(C)/44 CPCOM 76. The Minister of France in Siam, Marcel Ray, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Paris, Bangkok, 3 Oct. 1936. "Nouveaux projets d'armements siamois."

there was no “precise threat” yet, and despite the fact that Siam only appeared “dangerous because of a possible conjunction with Japan,” it was, however, not “forbidden to envisage right now the possible repercussions of [Thai leaders] state of mind in the event of a European conflict”. The department also suggested asking the Ministry of the Colonies to “concretise in a theoretical presentation the protective measures” which could “seem appropriate to counter such a threat against our colony of Indochina”.<sup>12</sup> As for the governor general of Indochina, Jules Brévié, it seemed to him, towards the middle of June, that the Thai leaders admitted “the imminence of a Franco-German conflict” which was to be “the beginning or the continuation of a general conflagration opposing on one side Germany, Italy and Japan, to France, England and Russia on the other side”. In this hypothesis, it seemed to him “indisputable” that “Siam would be with Japan and that this eventuality [could] have consequences for Indochina such as to lead us to consider a profound modification of our military policy in this country”.<sup>13</sup> According to the American ambassador Bullitt, as the president of the Council, Léon Blum, mentioned to him the prospect of a Japanese attack on French Indo-China, he “also referred to the possibility that Siam might cooperate with Japan” (FRUS 1954, 636).<sup>14</sup> A year later, after several months of war in China, the French minister of Foreign Affairs, Georges Bonnet, writing to his colleague of the Colonies, considered that the “attitude adopted by Siam since the start of the Sino-Japanese conflict has not helped to alleviate these concerns” and that the “Siamese military effort deserv[ed] very serious attention”. He added that according to the representative of France in Bangkok, while the Thai government did not “intend to change its attitude towards China”, that is to say to serve as a Japanese military base against it,

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12 FMFAA(C)/44 CPCOM 76. Note from the Deputy Director of Asia for the Minister, given to Secretary General Alexis Léger on 4 June 1937. « Situation politique au Siam. »

13 FMFAA(C)/44 CPCOM 82. The Governor General of Indochina, Jules Brévié, to the Minister of the Colonies, Dalat, 16 June 1937.

14 The ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State, “Paris, 23 Oct. 1937 – 1 p. m.

“the pressure from Japan remained [...] constant and dangerous”. According to the minister of Foreign Affairs, the government of Indochina should be “able to take in good time the protective measures that would be required by a possible modification of the policy of Siam under Japanese influence”.<sup>15</sup>

The British and French knew what the situation was in their neighbouring country. However, as Bruce Reynolds wrote about the British, they “evidently lacked the will and power to stand up to the Japanese in Asia”, illustrated by the attitude of London while facing the Japanese blockade of its concession in Tianjin. The advisor to the Thai Foreign Ministry, Prince Wan Waithayakon, warned the British minister in Bangkok, Josiah Crosby, that “because Britain ‘seemed to lack the power and the will to safeguard her own interests in Eastern Asia’, Thailand could not rely on British protection”. He also “emphasized that while his government had no desire to take sides, a choice might have to be made if war came” (Reynolds 1994, 29-30).

## **2. French Defence Policy and Diplomacy Towards Siam**

From 1937 to 1939, French authorities in Hanoi as well as the French legation in Siam stressed the fact that, in combination with the Japanese southward movement, Siam could become a serious threat to the security of Indochina. In February 1939, the danger became more precise with the landing of Japanese troops on the island of Hainan. Faced with this situation, the French government did not take any real measure to ensure the defence of Indochina in the event of a Japanese or a Thai offensive. The attitude of the minister of Foreign Affairs, Georges Bonnet, a supporter of the Munich Agreements, illustrates the policy of appeasement followed by France with regard to Siam until the outbreak of war in Europe.

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15 FMFAA(C)/44 CPCOM 76. The Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Minister of the Colonies, 24 June 1938. “Attitude du Siam à l’égard du conflit en Extrême-Orient.”

Concerning the defence of the western border of Indochina, the military balance of power between Siam and Indochina was, in 1939, in favour of the former. According to Roger Lévy, France had, at the end of the 1930s, less than 30,000 soldiers in Indochina, with 10,000 “Europeans”, divided into 10 colonial infantry battalions, 4 foreign legion battalions, 7 artillery groups, tanks, machine-gun car and 2 engineering companies, and 17,000 “Asians,” mainly Vietnamese, divided into 2 divisions and a brigade, i.e. one division in Tonkin, another for Cochinchina and Cambodia and a brigade for Annam. Lévy added that France also had a war air formation, but without specifying its composition. As for the maritime border, Indochina only had the point of support of Saigon – Cap-Saint-Jacques. In conclusion, Lévy felt that France should completely reconsider the problem of the defence of Indochina, its maritime and air defence in particular (1939, 112-115). Dealing with the Thai Air Force, a French military mission had been, in the beginning of 1939, struck by the “ease” and the “precision” the Thai pilots displayed during a demonstration while they were visiting military installations and troops in the Khorat area.<sup>16</sup> Regarding Siam, Lévy indicated that his army, “on a footing of peace,” numbered 65,000 men, a force which could rise, in the event of mobilization, to 250,000 men. Siam would have had an aviation of 150 to 200 aircraft and a navy which had 4 submarines bought in Japan (Lévy 1939, 116). Pierre Renouvin, without providing details concerning the composition of the respective armies, gave similar figures to those of Roger Lévy. That is, a “garrison which did not [exceed] 30,000 men” for Indochina and 60,000 for Siam in peacetime (Renouvin 1946, 400-401). After the war finally broke out in Europe, Indochina succeeded in mobilising some 90,000 men. However, “[t]his mass [created] an illusion and [hide] badly the weakness of the troop supervision”. According to Hesse d’Alzon, when, following the defeat of France in Europe, war broke out between the two banks of the Mekong,

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16 FMFAA(C)/38 CPCOM 36. Colonel Pichon, military attaché to the French legation in Bangkok, to the ministers of National Defence and War, Navy and Air, 27 Apr. 1939. “Échange de visites militaires entre l’Indochine et le Siam et Voyage de l’Attaché Militaire au Laos siamois.”

Siam was able to field 29 battalions, including 15 in reserve, as for Indochina, it could only field 22 battalions, including 4 in reserve (Isoart 1982, 78-94).

As an illustration of the appeasement policy followed toward Siam, an exchange of military missions took place between Siam and Indochina during the first months of 1939, with the objective, on the French side, of bringing the two countries closer together. However, the situation did not improve.

On 7 April 1939, the minister of France in Bangkok, Lépissier, reported to Paris the return to Siam of the Thai military mission which had gone to visit Indochina for almost a month. According to him, the mission had been “very impressed by what it [had] seen and by the delicate attentions with which it [had] been showered”. The minister considered this trip “as a very brilliant success” for France and that it confirmed “a withdrawal of the centrals [i.e. Germany and Italy] and the Japanese in Siam”.<sup>17</sup> However, on 22 March 1939, the legation had noticed that the newspaper “Sara Siam” had announced an “increase of military forces” in the North-Eastern provinces of Siam. The news had been officially denied the next day but, on 21 April, the French minister reported a “significant reinforcement” of troops in the Udon region, as already mentioned, and the “abnormal circulation of Japanese emissaries” in the North-East of Siam which, according to Lépissier, justified “a certain caution”.<sup>18</sup> On 12 May 1939, the French military attaché mentioned to the head of the legation the military preparations that were taking place in Indochina, which he had learned about in the Thai press. According to him, the measures taken in Indochina were justified because the “Japanese influence” in Siam remained “formidable” and the French forces in western Indochina were much weaker than the Thai forces standing opposite to them. The military attaché added that “Siam would be wrong to blame us for our garrisons

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17 FMFAA(C)/38 CPCOM 36. Telegram from Lépissier, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangkok, 7 Apr. 1939.

18 FMFAA(C)/38 CPCOM 36. Telegram from Lépissier to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangkok, 21 Apr. 1939.

in Laos and Cambodia, while in its [corresponding] border areas, Khorat and Prachinburi, it maintains a much larger force than ours [...].<sup>19</sup> He estimated the difference in forces on both sides of the border at four to one in favour of Siam. A difference that was “all the more accentuated by the fact that we only [had] a battery of artillery, no aviation, no engineering, no transmissions”.<sup>20</sup> On 19 May 1939, the military attaché reported the sending of anti-aircraft material to the Udon garrison.<sup>21</sup>

During the following weeks, the French minister in Bangkok repeatedly alerted his superiors to the increase in Japanese activities in Siam. The minister of Foreign Affairs' reaction remained in the tradition of the appeasement policy. He asked Lépissier if a visit by the governor general of Indochina, Brévié, to Bangkok “would not usefully affirm our presence today”. The minister of Foreign Affairs rejected the idea of an ultimatum, “which the present situation could not in any case entail” and suggested a concerted approach by the French and British ministers to

19 Regarding the Siamese forces he gave the following figures: 7 infantry battalions, 4 artillery groups, 3 battalions and 1 cavalry detachment, 1 engineering battalion, 2 companies of transmissions, 2 aviation squadrons. To these was added, “in the immediate vicinity of the border”: 1 infantry battalion in Udon, 1 detachment, “probably 1 squadron,” of cavalry in Roi-Et, 1 cavalry battalion in Ubon, and 1 cavalry battalion in Chantabun. Finally, another infantry battalion was planned in Nakhon Phanom. Regarding the French forces in Cambodia and Laos, the military attaché reported: 3 battalions and a half of infantry, 1 artillery battery including 2 companies in Tran Ninh, “maybe” 1 company in Phalane, 1 company in Pakse, “maybe” a company in Stung-Treng, 1 company in Sisophon, 1 company in Battambang, 1 battalion, 3 companies and 1 battery in Phnom Penh.

20 FMFAA(C)/38 CPCOM 36. Colonel Pichon, military attaché, to the Minister of France in Siam, 12 May 1939. “Au sujet de l'installation de nouvelles garnisons françaises à proximité de la frontière franco-si-amoise.”

21 FMFAA(C)/38 CPCOM 36. Colonel Pichon, military attaché, to the general commanding the Indochina's armies in Hanoi, 16 May 1939. “A. s. de la garnison d'Udon.”

the Thai government to “draw [its] attention [...] on Japanese activities”.<sup>22</sup> In his response, Lépissier indicated that he had “not found in political circles favourable echoes of Mr. Brévié’s visit to Bangkok”. He added that the leaders said they “wanted to avoid demonstrations likely to aggravate Japanese reactions”, pointing out that “[d]espite a very marked improvement, Siam’s relations with Indochina [remained] rather precarious and it would be imprudent to insist”. As for the concerted approach, he considered that it could “produce an effect, very limited however, because of the massive loss of English prestige following the isolation of Hong Kong and the blockade of [Tianjin]”.<sup>23</sup>

From the end of July to the end of August 1939, the minister of Foreign Affairs, Georges Bonnet, endeavoured to minimize the reports he received from Bangkok and proposed no real action with regard to Siam.

Faced with the political and military situation in Siam, and the “accentuated nature of Japanese propaganda”, the French minister in Siam suggested to the minister of Foreign Affairs five possible reactions:

“1 ° - The study of the means by which the Franco-British forces could assist the Siamese Government in the event of a coup d’état or a Japanese landing;

“2 ° - The preparation of the text of a Franco-British ultimatum intended possibly to counterbalance the effects of a Japanese ultimatum.

“3 ° - The strengthening of our aid works.

“4 ° - Completion of the Bangkok [Phnom Penh] rail link by building the [Aranyaprathet – Monkol Borey] section,

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22 FMFAA(C)/38 CPCOM 36. Telegram from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, signed by Alexis Léger, to the Minister of France in Bangkok, Paris, 26 June 1939. “Propagande japonaise au Siam.”

23 FMFAA(C)/38 CPCOM 36. Telegram from Lépissier to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangkok, 13 July 1939.



“5 ° - The appointment of a commercial agent in Siam.”<sup>24</sup>

In keeping with the appeasement policy, the minister only gave his approval to the third and fourth points. Relying on the point of view of English diplomacy, he considered that the only way to “maintain Siam in benevolent neutrality”, even though there was nothing “benevolent” in Siam’s “neutrality” in view of the constant irredentist campaign which the kingdom was waging, was to “give the impression that France and England [constituted] for its land borders a more serious danger than Japan for its maritime border and [were] able to bar the gulf to Japanese naval forces”. According to the minister, therefore, it was enough to “give the impression”. France and England were to engage into a “deep action to bring Siamese opinion to a better estimate of Franco-British forces.”<sup>25</sup> The minister did not specify how.

On 31 July 1939, the president of the Council, minister of Defence and War, asked the ministry of Foreign Affairs for its “opinion on the value” of the “various information” which he had received from the minister for the Colonies and which gave evidence of a “renewal” of Japanese activity in Siam and the conclusion of a secret agreement between this country and Japan.<sup>26</sup> In its response to 9 August on the subject of the activity of Japanese agents in Siam and the supposed negotiation of an agreement between Tokyo and Bangkok, the minister of Foreign Affairs affirmed, in the light of the reports of the minister and the military attaché in Bangkok, that he found “no confirmation”. The minister of Foreign Affairs affirmed to have received from the French representative in Bangkok “various indications on the instability of the governmental situation of Thailand, the Japanese propaganda in opposition circles and the danger, in the event of a new coup d’état, to see pro-Japanese elements come to

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24 FMFAA(C)/44 CPCOM 79. Note from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 29 July 1939, “situation au Siam.”

25 Ibid.

26 FMFAA(C)/44 CPCOM 79. The President of the Council, Minister of the National Defence and War, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 31 July 1939. “Accord Nippo-Siamois.”

power". But he did not mention for a moment the activities of the military missions mentioned in Lépissier's reports since the end of June 1939.<sup>27</sup>

On 9 August, the colonial chief of staff, general Bühler, addressed the minister of Foreign Affairs on the basis of information coming to him from Siam which he felt should "attract very serious attention". It appeared to Bühler that "more and more the Siamese Government not only did not [oppose] Japanese pressure but rather [seemed] to favour it". The military ended his message by asking the minister of Foreign Affairs what reaction he envisaged in the face of this situation.<sup>28</sup> The ministry of Foreign Affairs replied on 24 August and said he was also aware of some of the information that Bühler had passed on to him. He added that he had received from Lépissier on 20 August, "in addition to the announcement of movements of Japanese officers [...], the news of a Japanese offer of a trade agreement, involving the exchange of Siamese raw materials for Japanese manufactured products". The ministry hid behind the attitude of the British Foreign Office "less worried than we are". He considered that they should probably not "take as equally valid all the information which, from various sources reaches our [s]ervices". The minister believed that "the favour [then] reserved for Japanese activities" was due to the fact that Thailand feared Japan more than France and England. He added that "no properly diplomatic approach" could "prevail against an assessment of this nature". According to the minister, representations to Thailand could only demonstrate the nervousness of France and England.

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27 FMFAA(C)/44 CPCOM 79. Minister of Foreign Affairs to President of Council, 9 Aug. 1939, "conclusion supposée d'un accord entre le Japon et la Thaïlande."

28 FMFAA(C)/44 CPCOM 79. General Bühler, Colonial Chief of Staff, for the Minister of the Colonies, to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 9 Aug. 1939.

The efforts of the French and English legations had therefore to “tend to convince Siam of the effectiveness of the means” these two countries were in possession.<sup>29</sup>

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Roger Lévy wrote in 1939 that: “The new situation created by the existence in Siam of a modern army commanded by leaders ill-kept in check by the civil power has been considered with attention by the French government and its representative in Indochina”. With optimism, he added: “Appropriate measures such as reinforcing the troops stationed in Cambodia have been taken”. Even if it is true that the government had “considered with attention” the evolution of the military situation in Siam, it is however doubtful that “appropriate measures” had been taken (Lévy 1939, 117). This is what Philippe Grandjean observed, who blamed it exclusively on the Ministry of the Colonies: “Before 1939, Georges Mandel, minister of the Colonies and his director of the colonial armies, general Bührrer, did not reinforce this device.” Grandjean also mentioned the policy aimed at making Indochina autonomous for the production of warplanes: “They had concentrated their financial effort on the creation of a Breguet aviation factory in Tong, for an amount of 600 million francs of 1938. As the program was ‘frozen’ by events, the expense was wasted” (Grandjean 2004, 11).

The construction program of an aircraft factory had been announced in the press at the end of February 1939.<sup>30</sup> Several months later, nothing had been done. In a message addressed to the minister of Foreign Affairs, Georges Bonnet, on 27 June 1938, Georges Mandel indicated that he had increased the number of Indochinese troops by 20,000 men, – a number that was still not

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29 FMFAA(C)/44 CPCOM 79. The Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Minister of the Colonies, 24 Aug. 1939.

30 “Le Temps”, 28 Feb. 1939, p. 8.

enough to match the number of the Siamese troops, – and made a loan of 400 million to provide for the defence of the colony. He also reported to have informed the Ministry of Air of the superiority of the Siamese aviation: “We have a derisory number of planes in Indochina, while, from information from our Military Attaché, it appears that Siam has 200 devices, including a hundred ultra-modern”. But the ministry of Air reportedly “simply replied that the matter was under consideration.” Mandel added: “It would be unacceptable if, now that we have the financial means, one could not, for lack of material, ensure the defence of Indochina”.<sup>31</sup> His intervention with the minister of Foreign Affairs was not followed up. On 29 June, the minister of the Colonies made a report to the president of the Republic in which he mentioned that the decision had been made to build rapidly a factory capable of producing aircraft and added that every step has been taken to establish a war industry in Indochina,<sup>32</sup> but, on 17 July, after receiving information from Indochina indicating suspect movements of troops on the border with Siam, Mandel had to insist again to his colleague of the Foreign Affairs the fact that, facing Siam, Indochina had only about fifty planes “which, for the most part, date back to a dozen years”. Once again Mandel asked Bonnet “to join [his] pleas [...] to put an end to such a serious disproportion of forces”.<sup>33</sup> When on 16 July 1939 Georges Mandel proposed to general Catroux to take the head of the general government of Indochina, he underlined that, in view of the threatening nature of the international situation, the building of the defences of the colony was to be “vigorously accelerated”. He added: “In particular, we must get off the ground and produce as soon as possible an aircraft manufacturing plant which I have ordered to

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31 FMFAA(C)/38 CPCOM 34. The Minister of the Colonies, Georges Mandel, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 27 June 1938. “Effort militaire du Siam.”

32 “Le Journal Officiel de la République française”, 3 July 1939. “Le ministère des Colonies. Rapport au Président de la république française”, pp. 8500-1.

33 FMFAA(C)/38 CPCOM 34. The Minister of the Colonies, Georges Mandel, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 17 July 1938.

be created” (Catroux 1959, 5-6). This situation did not prevent the unofficial newspaper “Le Temps”, voice of the Quai d’Orsay, from showing, on 11 August 1939, its satisfaction with the state of the defence of Indochina and the air forces of the empire: “the air force has also been greatly increased everywhere, and equipped – or in the process of being equipped – with powerful and modern devices”.<sup>34</sup> Eventually, as indicated by Hesse d’Alzon, construction work began, only to be abandoned thereafter (Isoart 1982, 83).

### **3. The Refusal to Industrialise Indochina**

As underlined in the report of the minister of the Colonies to the president of the Republic dated 29 June 1939, the military defence of Indochina, which faced the threat of a confrontation with both Japan and Siam, imposed a certain degree of autonomy for the colony in terms of production of war material. This question was related to the state of the industrial infrastructure of the territory and, from the perspective of the French authorities, raised the issue of the social status quo in Indochina insofar as it implied a numerical increase in the working-class population. In addition to the attitude of the minister of Foreign Affairs, it is worth mentioning as a factor explaining the policy of appeasement pursued vis-à-vis Siam, which was a corollary to that followed toward Germany and Japan, the fears of the colonisers with regard to the question of industrialisation.

On the eve of the Second World War, modern Indochinese industrial activity, entirely in the hands of French capital favoured by the customs policy of the metropolis, was concentrated in the mining and processing industries. In 1937, the Indochinese mines employed 271 Europeans, “managers, engineers and other technical agents”, and 49,200 Asian workers. More than half, 25,000, were employed by the Société des Charbonnages du Tonkin. The vast majority, 90%, of the mine workforce was Vietnamese from the Tonkin delta or North Annam (Robequain 1939, 297-298).

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34 “Le Temps”, 11 Aug. 1939, “Questions militaires. L’empire Français. II. – La défense impériale”.

According to the book intitled *Aux heures tragiques de l'empire* (In the tragic hours of the Empire), the chief of the colonial armies, general Bührer, was aware of the poor organisation of the defence in the colonies. He anticipated that in the event of a break of the maritime communications with France, Indochina would soon be without means to support a war against a modern foreign military power. The mineral wealth of Indochina would have allowed the colony to develop a war industry. According to Bührer the issue of the industrial development of Indochina was "particularly serious". He considered that the situation "demanded an entirely new industrial policy in an agricultural country where French capital had sought its interests in the sole development of plantations of rubber, rice, tea, etc." (Général X 1947, 31)

Throughout the 1930s, the issue of the industrialisation of Indochina had been, according to Charles Robequain, "a very fashionable problem" (1939, 317). Following the global economic crisis, was a debate on the evolution to be given to economic policy in Indochina.

On the one hand, there were supporters of the status quo and on the other, supporters of an industrialisation project. Among them were senior civil servants such as Henri Brenier, director of the *Bulletin économique de l'Indochine*, Louis Mérat, director of economic affairs at the French overseas ministry in 1936, Blanchard de la Brosse, former governor of Cochinchina, Alexandre Varenne, former governor general of Indochina, and Indochinese businessmen such as Paul Bernard, polytechnician and administrator of the *Société financière et coloniale* (SFFC) and Edmond Giscard d'Estaing, president of the SFFC in 1937. For the supporters of industrialisation, the objective was to make Indochina a second Japan, a financial and industrial relay of French capitalism in the Far East, a "platform" of exports to Asia, China's equipment supplier (according to Varenne). They intended to expand the domestic market and fight against the impoverishment of the Vietnamese peasantry. These perspectives were not retained by the "metropolitan political circles" (Brocheux and Hémery 1994, 311-313).

The industrialisation of Indochina did not occur for two main reasons: the first based on economic consideration, the second on social fear.

Concerning the first reason, Brocheux and Hémery underlined that, from the perspective of those opposed to the industrialisation of Indochina, the process “would have the consequence of adding to the destabilising effects of the agrarian crisis, those of mass proletarianisation and, moreover, would go against the interests of metropolitan industry”. In the aftermath of the Great Depression, while foreign markets were closing and the French economic positions in central Europe were rapidly deteriorating, the colonial empire, Algeria and Indochina in particular, “became the principal regulator of the balance of trade and investment, which was in considerable decline”. From the perspective of the French authorities, the role of the colonies was “to bolster French industries that were losing momentum, such as textiles, metallurgy, and sugar” (Brocheux and Hémery 1994, 311-313).

As for the social reason, the question of the industrial development was, in the mind of the French leaders, closely related to that of the development of the workers’ movement. According to the author of *Aux heures tragiques*, a new industrial policy would have resulted “in the intensive development of a working-class population”, but the Indochinese authorities opposed such a development. They considered that it would have increased “the social conflicts, sometimes already acute with the few workers of the mines and the railway men.” The author of the book added that “these social movements were likely to increase” with a higher number of workers. A situation that the administration did not want and would have done “everything in its power to avoid it, even to the detriment of the defensive potential of Indochina” (Général X 1947, 31-32). He further explained that while the Indochinese population viewed favourably the idea of industrialising the country, “French officials and colonists” considered that the industrialisation would lead to “the development of a working-class population whose social demands could raise difficulties which were already very painfully avoided with the

workers of the railways and mines". From the coloniser's point of view, the process of industrialisation would bring about "rise in wages, syndicalism, etc., all things that the 'masters' of the large plantations did not want to see imported into Indochina" (Général X 1947, 65-66). Jean Chesneaux also pointed out that "[d]espite their small numbers, workers in factories, mines and plantations [were] indeed able to play a decisive role". As these workers were employed by the colonial companies and administration, "when they rose up against them to alleviate their misery, they rose up at the same time and directly against the colonial regime itself" (Chesneaux 1955, 211).

Authorities' fear related to the development of the industry – and the potential growing number of the worker-class population of Indochina – was fuelled by the role played by the communist organisations in the Vietnamese national movement. In fact, it seems that the French authorities were much less concerned with the external danger that threatened the colony than with the social movements that existed in Indochina. Japan could even be perceived less as a danger than as a guarantor against the progress of communism. According to Jean Chesneaux (1955, 223), Japan's success in Indochina in 1940 was the result of the "political solidarity" showed by the colonial interests towards Tokyo, "rather than strictly financial interest". From the First World War, they favoured Japan against the Soviet Union and, in the 1930s, they "warmly hailed Japanese successes" in China. At the same time, they turned a blind eye to the relations between Tokyo and Vietnamese right-wing nationalists. As Chesneaux wrote:

"Such is the Indochinese version of 'rather Hitler than the Popular Front': rather an understanding with Japan and a break with the metropolis than a victory for the national movement in Viet-Nam and democratic elements in France. But, taking this equivocal path, the colonial regime only hastened its own downfall."



## Conclusion

Reynolds pointed out that the pro-Japanese orientation taken by Thailand was short-lived. It would have been interrupted due to the international situation, by the signing on August 28 of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact (Reynolds 1994, 30). In April 1940, the intelligence service of the French legation also noted that the signing of the German-Soviet pact had reduced the tension accumulated since May 1939. “Three days after the declaration of war in Europe, the [c]abinet of [Phibun Songkhram] officially announced the neutrality of Thailand”. However, the threat remained, as the French intelligence also noted that the activity of the Japanese agents, even if it had become “little apparent”, did not stop. At the same time, the Japanese economic “push” was described as “vigorous”. The military and naval attachés, the “unofficial agents on the spot or passing through”, continued to examine the lands and the Thai coastline, and to “assess the economic and warlike capacities of the [k]ingdom”. Japanese activities sometimes spilled over Thai borders.<sup>35</sup> French intelligence observed an evolution of Thailand towards “a policy of neutrality and resistance against Japanese penetration” and two days after the invasion of Denmark and Norway the Thai government would have decided to side with the Allies in the event that it would have had to take a position. Yet even in these circumstances, when asked whether the Thais would militarily resist a Japanese attack, the French intelligence note’s author replied that “[i]n the opinion of those who know them well the answer would be negative”. They based their opinion “on the belief that the positions acquired by Japan [were] already very strong in political and military circles”.<sup>36</sup>

When war was declared in Europe, despite the persistence of Japanese influence in Thailand, and despite the reinforcements

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35 FMFAA(N)/Bangkok 66PO.1.69. “Propagande et préparatifs japonais au Siam en 1937-1941. A4”. Bangkok, 29 Apr. 1940.

36 FMFAA(N)/Bangkok 66PO.1.69. “Propagande et préparatifs japonais au Siam en 1937-1941. A4”. Bangkok, 29 Apr. 1940.

made by the ministry of the Colonies, the military situation in Indochina was not very different from what it was in the beginning of the year 1938. The French forces were then, according to general Bühner, “clearly insufficient to fulfil the task which could fall on them in the event of a conflict where the distant borders of the Empire could be in danger”. And their role was essentially social: “At most they made it possible to ensure internal security and to intervene usefully to maintain order if it were to be disturbed by uprisings by indigenous populations” (Général X 1947, 41).

Although the French authorities subsequently proved incapable of defending the borders of the territories they administered, they were nevertheless able to repress the communist insurrection which broke out in Cochinchina on 22 November 1940 and which lasted until the end of the year.

As Pierre Brocheux related, the main leaders of the insurrection, members of the central committee of the Indochinese Communist Party, were arrested on the night of 22 to 23 November. In the Saigon-Cholon conurbation, the uprising was “shattered in the bud”. But the movement spread around these cities. It was in the “most populated and richest provinces of the southern delta that guerrilla activity reached its maximum intensity until 30 November”. From this date the rebellion spread to other provinces. “The repression ends up bringing calm in the second half of December” (Isoart 1982, 137). The movement involved several thousand men:

“The insurrection would have mobilized 15,000 men, 5,000 of whom had firearms, the others with bladed weapons. Its power and its duration were mainly a function of the location of the CP, the nature of the terrain.

“The centre of gravity and of longest duration [was] the province of Mytho. In the liberated villages, revolutionary power [was] established, the red flag with a gold star [was] hoisted as in Bac Son, ‘the property of rich collaborators [was] confiscated and shared among the poor’.”

The repression was harsh and mobilized the army, navy and air force. It led to the death of “more than thirty militiamen or notables”, “more than twenty injured militiamen or notables”, “3 Europeans killed” and “3 injured”, “a hundred insurgents killed” and “5,848 individuals arrested”. According to Vietnamese historians, there were 5,248 killed and 8,000 imprisoned (Isoart 1982, 139).

The means that were implemented by the French authorities with the aim to preserve the social order is evidence of a determination that was totally absent in the field of the defence of the external borders. The policy of appeasement pursued toward Siam created a situation that led, in the beginning of 1941, to the incursion of the Thai armies in Western Indochina, especially in the Cambodian territory, followed by the annexation, to the benefit of the government of Bangkok, of the Laotian territories situated on the right bank of the Mekong as well as Battambang and the North of Cambodia.

## **ABBREVIATION**

FMFAA(C):French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives (Cour-neuve centre).

FMFAA(N):French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives (Nantes centre).

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