

BRITISH POLICY AND THAILAND, 1939-1940

Oleh

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AFTER Thailand regained her full sovereignty from the Western powers in 1939, Britain continuously reminded and advised her to maintain her neutrality and avoid joining any ideological bloc.¹ As far as Britain was concerned, this was important as it would determine the future security of British Territories and interests in Southeast Asia.

Britain's interest in Thailand focussed on the strategic position of the country in relation to the rest of Southeast Asia, particularly Malaya and Burma. Thailand's long frontiers in the west were contiguous with those of Malaya and Burma, whilst in the north they adjoined the Shan States. In these circumstances, from the strategic point of view, as long as Britain remained responsible for the defence of Burma and Malaya, she could not be disinterested in the fate of Thailand. Sir Josiah Crosby, former British Minister in Bangkok,² argued that, so long as Britain was able to assert herself as the effective guardian of international peace in the region, Thailand was not of much interest from the point of view of military security.³ It was otherwise, however, when the decline of British naval supremacy in Far Eastern waters set in during the late 1930s, and when Japan's assertion in East Asia became increasingly apparent. "From that time," Crosby stated, "Siam came to acquire for us an interest closer and keener than had been the case for fifty years."⁴

The most alarming aspect of the situation was Japanese pressure on the status quo in China. Japan seemed bent on dominating East Asia under her 'New Order' policy.⁵ As she advanced deep into the Asian mainland after the Sino-Japanese

¹ Craigie to FO, 11 February 1939, F233/40. In this instance, Craigie suggested that the Foreign Office hint to the Thai leaders regarding the views of the British government on the Anti-Comintern Pact. He argued: "While it is no concern of ours what pacts other countries see fit to enter into, we feel that it is only right and fair to make clear to these countries with whom we wish to maintain and strengthen good relations that our general policy was against ideological blocs and pacts directed against others, for we are convinced that really satisfactory relations can only be established with countries which are free and untrammelled in that respect." In early July, Crosby informed Pibul Songgram, the Thai Prime Minister, and advised him to maintain a neutral policy. Crosby to FO, 7 July 1939, F7016.

² Sir Josiah Crosby had served in the Foreign Office and had been posted in Southeast Asia since 1904, which marked the last stage in the Anglo-French dispute over Thailand. He had served in Thailand until early 1942.

³ J. Crosby, *Siam: The Crossroads*, Hollis and Carter, London 1945, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Japan's 'New Order Policy' was proclaimed on 2 November, 1938. It was along term policy to bring East Asia countries under Japan's domination. Summarily, it was aiming at (1), achieving economic self-sufficiency and, (2) freeing the region from western domination. A short discussion on Japan's 'New Order' and Britain's response is found in Bernard A. Lee, Britain

war broke out in late July 1937, this was seen not only to endanger Britain's economic and political position in China, but also posed a strategic threat to her vast possessions and interests in South Asia and the Western Pacific. Britain had formal control over Hong Kong, India, Burma, Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, Sarawak, Brunei, had large investments in Thailand and Netherland East Indies, and was largely responsible for the defence of Australia and New Zealand. If the British became involved in a war, it would be essential for them to maintain their contact with these areas, which supplied rubber, tin, oil, food and other materials that were important in wartime.⁶ So long as Japan was occupied in China, Britain's interests to the South and the West seemed secured. But London feared that, if the Japanese defeated Chiang Kai-Chek, they would be emboldened to attack the British Empire in Asia and the Pacific.

It was the British policy to find a way to protect her interests by either halting or diverting the Japanese advance. Since Thailand was the remaining independent country in Southeast Asia, it was necessary that she remained neutral and not allow herself to be exploited by Japan and the Axis powers.

The Thai leaders were astute enough to see that, for a small country like Thailand, the only hope of maintaining independence was by remaining neutral and preserving good relations with all countries.⁷ When the European war broke out in September 1939, Thailand declared her neutrality stance in the crisis. Although Britain recognised Thailand's neutrality on 11 September, she warned the Thai government that this only "applies so long as the neutrality of Thailand is maintained effectively".⁸ In other words, Britain implied that she would not hesitate to take action against Thailand if ever Thailand took sides in the international conflict. Foreign Office scepticism about Thailand's neutrality, apart from the unpredictable nature of Thai foreign policy, was due to the inability of Britain to provide military support to Thailand if she were attacked by a third power. Since July 1939, Crosby had warned the Foreign Office that Thailand's neutrality "depends on the last resort upon the degree of armed strength which we ourselves might be able to bring to bear for the purpose at once of defending ourselves and of putting heart into the Siamese . . ." ⁹ In early August 1939 Crosby reiterated a warning to the Foreign Office that "Thailand is behaving nowadays like a prostitute who is ready to sell herself to the highest bidder."¹⁰ In spite of Crosby's insistence, Britain failed to send her naval fleet to East Asia because it was urgently required in

and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1939, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1973. See Chapter 16.

⁶ Appreciation by the Chief of Staff, 14 June 1937, F4772/9/40; British Defence Arrangements for Far East, June 1940, F3560/61.

⁷ Crosby to FO, 6 September 1939, F10314. Thailand declared her neutrality on 5 September 1939.

⁸ Crosby to FO, 8 September 1939, F10320; Crosby to FO, 14 September 1939, F10509.

⁹ M. Coultas (B), very confidential, 16 May 1939, F5250. See also minutes by M.J.R. Talbot in Foreign Office minutes, 21 June 1939, F6310.

¹⁰ Crosby to FO, 3 August 1939, F10131.

Europe. "In its absence we can only do our best, hope for the best and be prepared for the worst," Crosby asserted.

Another related problem that continued to haunt Britain was Thai irrendentism. Despite the protestations of the British and French governments against the excessive irrendentist claims, the Thai Government failed to check the movement.¹¹ The irrendentist movement became more active, especially with the ascension of Pibul Songgram as Prime Minister of Thailand in 1938.¹² Although the movement was overtly directed more against French Indochina, this did not mean that the Thais did not have any aspirations to the "recovery" of British territories in Burma and Malaya. In Crosby's own words: ". . . the movement remained more or less underground so long as Luang Pibul continued to desire good relations with Britain."¹³

As a result of Thai irrendentism, Franco-Thai relations deteriorated perceptibly. France was suspicious of Thailand's opportunistic move in the wake of Japanese aggression in East Asia, fearing that Thailand would collaborate with Japan to "recover" her territories from French Indochina.¹⁴

Non-Aggression Pact

Presumably, it was to prevent hostility that Pibul Songgram, in late August, 1939, sounded Crosby and Monsieur Leppisier, the French Minister in Bangkok, about the possibility of a Non-Aggression pact between Thailand, France and Britain.¹⁵ Pibul's proposal was welcomed by Crosby and Leppisier, and later was approved by their respective governments, in so far as it would contain Thai irrendentism and contribute to the establishment of a regional stability.

¹¹ J. Crosby, *op. cit.*, p. 114. The movement, according to Crosby, with the full blessing of Pibul Songgram, issued a special map, with legend attached, which was displayed in schools and public buildings throughout the country. This showed the boundaries in former times of the Thai kingdom along the Mekong river, Lower Burma and Northern Malaya. To protests by the British and French ministers, Pibul replied that the map was intended for educational purposes only, in order to teach the Thais more about the history of their country.

¹² Pibul Songgram became Prime Minister of Thailand in 1938. For a detailed understanding of Pibul Songgram see J. Crosby, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-103.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁴ The French government was, in fact, suspicious towards Thailand's neutrality. In late June, 1939, the French government had gone to the extent of pressing Britain to obtain an assurance from Thailand that she would remain neutral in case of a war with Japan. M. Roche, the French representative in London, alleged that there was a military pact between Thailand and Japan. Crosby, however, denied it. Crosby to FO, 29 June 1939. F6628.

¹⁵ Crosby to FO, 9 September 1939, F10316. Pibul Songgram, in explaining the idea of a Non-Aggression Pact to Crosby expressed his concern regarding French military preparations in Indochina and said that he had no better way of stopping rumours of French invasion than by the conclusion of a Non-Aggression Pact. According to Flood, France made the first proposal but this was not accepted by Thailand. E.T. Flood, "The 1940 Franco-Thai Border Dispute and Phibuun Sonkhraam's Commitment to Japan", *Journal of Southeast Asia History*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1969, p. 307.

Surprisingly, in early October 1939, Pibul decided to drop the idea on the pretence that Thailand had already been recognised by almost all powers as a neutral country.¹⁶ Prince Varnvaidya, Adviser to the Cabinet and to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argued that to sign such a pact would arouse Japan's jealousy. With regard to France, he pointed out that Thailand had already concluded a treaty in 1937 that stipulated the mutual respect of one another's frontiers.¹⁷ It was unclear whether Thailand was really sincere in her neutrality, or was merely trying to exploit British and French weakness to satisfy her "irrendentism." It should be noted that, in September 1939, European war had already broken out while Japan, in East Asia, was exploiting the situation to strengthen and enlarge her position there.¹⁸ When Crosby suggested that Japan should also be invited to sign the pact, Pibul agreed to revive the proposal. It is significant that Pibul had taken advantage of Crosby's suggestion to satisfy his aspirations, i.e., the delimitation of the Mekong frontier.

According to Prince Varnvaidya, the Thais had always been dissatisfied with the second paragraph of article 3 of the Franco-Thai convention of 29 June 1927 concerning the delimitation of the frontier between Thailand and French Indochina on the Mekong river.¹⁹ He argued that this provision had created problems, especially on the status of certain islands in the Mekong river, which were in reality no more than sand banks separated from Thailand's mainland during the season of high water but joined to it when the river was low and the intervening channels had dried up; both on sentimental and administrative grounds, these islands or sand banks should be regarded as forming part of the mainland or placed under Thai ownership, instead of under the French. Prince Varnvaidya demanded that a new frontier be established between Indochina and Thailand at a certain point in the river, and he contemplated two agreements:

- i) a Non-Aggression Pact and,
- ii) a convention providing for the new frontier.

Prince Varnvaidya informed Monsieur Leppisier that Thailand and France should come to an agreement.²⁰ On the one hand, France should give up the islands in some part of the Mekong to Thailand, thereby establishing a new frontier between Indochina and Thailand at certain points in the Mekong. On the other hand, Thailand should agree to enter into a pact of Non-Aggression with the French on terms which would be mutually determined. While proposing this to the French

¹⁶ Crosby to FO, 6 October 1939, F11118.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-149.

¹⁹ Crosby to FO, 20 October 1939, F11136. See also, Flood, *op. cit.*, and L.V. Vandakarn, *Thailand's case*, for a brief account on the Mekong issue.

²⁰ Crosby to FO, 20 October 1939, F11136.

Minister, the Thai government offered the pact to Japan. Thus, as commented by Gage, the unique situation made "it very difficult for the French not to agree to the delimitation of the Mekong frontier, on which the conclusion of Non-Aggression with ourselves and France is virtually dependent."²¹

The French government, however, refused to accept the condition in return for the Non-Aggression pact. She believed that any concession over the Mekong islands would merely encourage Thai irrendentism.²²

The Foreign Office officials were a little irritated by the French government's response to Thailand's overture. Gage, acting First Secretary, did not accept France's argument that the French concession on the Mekong frontier would encourage Thai irrendentism. He believed that the Bangkok propaganda for the return of the lost territories was only intended to further the private ends of certain soldiers and politicians and to secure extra budget grants for the Ministry of Defence.²³ He added that the Thai government had reiterated that she was only interested in the "development of our country" and not in regaining the "lost" territories. Ashley Clarke, First Secretary, blamed M. Leppisier for instigating fears on the part of the French government.²⁴

The Foreign Office was of the opinion that Britain and France should negotiate for the pact in view of the fact that Thailand proposed it. "As failure to do so", Gage argued, "would be more than ever calculated to arouse suspicion." He also warned that "it would be disastrous for our relations with Thailand if Japan should conclude a Non-Aggression pact whereas ourselves and France did not. Our position in Thailand would deteriorate while Japan would correspondingly improve."²⁵

On 1 January 1940, the Foreign Office indicated to the French government the importance of signing the Non-Aggression pact with Thailand. The Foreign Office emphasised that the pact would prevent Thailand from aligning with Japan and thus diminish Japanese influence there. The pact would not only contribute towards making Southeast Asia a region of peace and stability, but would also bind assurance from Thailand that she would not allow herself to be made a jumping off ground for a Japanese attack upon Burma and Malaya and the British naval base in Singapore.²⁶

The situation became more critical with the failure of the Japan-Thai talks on

²¹Crosby to FO, 20 October 1939, F11460.

²²French Embassy to FO, 1 November 1939, F11483.

²³Minutes by Gage on French Embassy to FO, 1 November 1939, F11483. Gage based his argument on the report he received from Edden of the Thailand Consular Service.

²⁴Minutes by Ashley Clark on French Embassy to FO, 1 November 1939, F11483.

²⁵Minutes by Gage on Crosby to FO, 11 November 1939, F11516.

²⁶FO to French Embassy, 1 January 1940, F476.

Non-Aggression. Crosby reported that Japan seemed to be demanding a treaty of co-operation because "they hope for something better in the shape of a promise from the Thai government to recognise the 'New Order' in China."²⁷ Crosby pressed the Foreign Office to accept the Non-Aggression pact offered by the Thai government. He argued;

"If we and the French both reject this offer, Thailand will be more likely to give to Japan what she wants and they will answer our reproaches by saying we have no ground of complaint, since we could have had a Non-Aggression pact if we had wanted it. Alternatively if we sign a pact and if Thailand is still willing to come to an agreement with Japan over China, we shall lose less face than if we had had no pact at all. The Japanese-Thai agreement over China without a Non-Aggression pact with us would deal a disastrous blow at our prestige."²⁸

Though the Foreign Office agreed to proceed with the negotiation of the Non-Aggression pact, it still felt it necessary to ascertain what the French attitude was, should the French not wish them to proceed with those negotiations.²⁹ M. Chavvel, the head of French Far East Department, suggested that the Foreign Office include in the pact a clause to the effect that the pact would cease to operate in the event of hostilities between France and Thailand.³⁰ The Foreign Office, however, rejected the idea as it would arouse needless suspicion as to French designs on Thailand and, to that extent, defeat one of the objects of the pact, namely to stabilise the position in Southeast Asia.³¹ On 2 February, M. Chavvel informed the Foreign Office that the French government was willing to examine the Mekong question on a purely administrative basis.³² The Foreign Office, in return, assured the French government that, pending the outcome of the French proposal to the Thai government for an administrative solution of the Mekong frontier problem, the British government would agree not only to withhold further discussion of the Non-Aggression pact, but also the notification to the Thai government of their decisions

²⁷ Crosby to FO, 25 January 1940, F583.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ FO to Campbell (Paris), 1 January 1940, F583.

³⁰ Harvey (Paris) to FO, 24 January 1940, F593.

³¹ FO to Campbell (Paris), 7 February 1940, F593.

³² Paris to FO, 9 February 1940, F1048. Crosby, in his telegram in March explained the French government's idea of the readjustment of frontiers on the river Mekong by administrative means. He said: "The idea is that in order to facilitate the task of administering a deep water channel should be assured to the Thais which would be navigable all the year round, and that the islands between the channel and Thai headland should be held to belong to Thailand. In order to implement this arrangement, a committee would be formed to study the question under the presidency of an expert who would be sent out from France as soon as an understanding in principle had been reached. On receiving a written promise from the French Minister that prompt steps will be taken to the above end the Thai Prime Minister is ready to sign pacts of Non-Aggression immediately with both France and Britain." See, Crosby to FO, 16 March 1940, F1896.

in regard to the Burma-Thailand frontiers, provided that the outcome was not unduly delayed.³³ In early 1940, Leppisier notified Pibul Government that the French government accepted the Thai proposals concerning border revision. The Thais were further informed that a special diplomatic mission would be sent out from Paris prior to the ratification of the Non-Aggression Pact to work out details on the border revision.

On 12 June 1940 the Non-Aggression Pacts were simultaneously signed between Britain and Thailand and France and Thailand in Bangkok. These agreements, which were in fact drawn up on identical lines, were to be valid for five years and were subject to denunciation thereafter by one year's notice on either side. It also provided for the reciprocal respect by each country of the other's territorial integrity. It was further laid down that, if one country became involved in war with a third party, the other would refrain from affording aid or assistance to such third party. The Franco-Thai delegations had also exchanged secret letters which stated that the French government agreed to move the Thai-Laos frontier on the Mekong to the thalweq of the river and make any territory on the Thai side of the thalweq Thai territory. These new arrangements were to be effected by a new mixed commission of representatives from both countries. The final sentence of the text indicated that any changes resulting from the mixed commission's work would be effective from the moment the pact was signed and ratified.³⁴

Though Japan failed to secure a treaty of co-operation with Thailand, she had successfully concluded instead a "Treaty concerning the continuance of friendly relations and mutual respect of each other's territorial integrity."³⁵ Japan demurred at a pact of Non-Aggression on the model of those proposed with Britain and France on the ground that it might offend the Axis powers and also because there was no precedent in Japan for a treaty in that form.³⁶ In addition to stipulations analagous to those contained in the pacts with Britain and France, this instrument confirmed the existing friendly relations between Japan and Thailand, providing further for an exchange of information and for consultation upon matters of mutual interest. Although Prince Varnvaidya had assured the Foreign Office that the agreement so contemplated with Japan would be tantamount to a Non-Aggression pact, the Foreign Office's officials felt that the pact gave the impression that relations between Thailand and Japan were closer than with France and Britain.³⁷ Henniker-Major, Third Secretary, believed that the only dangerous clause

³³FO to Campbell (Paris), 18 March 1940, F1713. At that time Britain was negotiating with Thailand for a readjustment of boundary between Keng Tung (Burma) and Thailand along the river Mek Sai and Pak Chan, which was also based on the 'thalweq' principle.

³⁴Crosby to FO, 17 June 1940, F2888.

³⁵Coultas (B), 11 June 1940, F3204. The Non-Aggression pact was signed in Tokyo on 12 June 1940.

³⁶This assumption was based on the information provided by Prince Varnvaidya to Crosby, see, Crosby to FO, 12 June 1940, F3236.

³⁷See minutes by Gage and Henniker-Major on Crosby to FO, 12 June 1940, F3236.

was that providing for consultation.³⁸

Thus, with the conclusion of the Non-Aggression pacts, it was hoped that a further element of stability would be introduced in Southeast Asia.³⁹ Nevertheless, some other factors must be considered which would determine the success of the pacts in this role. The Franco-Thai border problem was still waiting to be solved and the pacts remained to be ratified.

French Indochina-Thai Border Dispute

In early June 1940, the Allies suffered a military reverse in the European war and this was followed by the capitulation of France in the hands of the Germans. This unexpected event had had a tremendous impact upon East Asian balance of power. Japan could not fail to take advantage of the European situation to remove the barrier to Japan's trade and solve the China incident. For instance, Japan demanded that Britain cease assisting China and close the Burma road and the transit route through Hong Kong. At the same time, Japan demanded that France close Indochina's frontier with China and establish a military mission in Indochina. The capitulation of France and the Japanese threat had aroused different responses from French authorities in Indochina, from Thailand and Britain, over the question of French sovereignty in Indochina.

The French Indochina authorities, under their new Vichy Governor-General, Admiral Jean Decoux, clung to the hope that French sovereignty in Indochina would continue to be retained.⁴⁰ Decoux's plan was to reduce the Japanese activities to a minimum, without risking actual invasion, in the hope that a change in the international scene might permit France to retain sovereignty. In line with this, he attempted to limit the activities of the Japanese mission in Indochina to its stipulated objectives. He tried to gain time and reduce the effect of military pressures by virtually referring to the Vichy government every demand made by the Japanese. At the same time, he begged the United States to recognise France's sovereignty in Indochina.⁴¹ Decoux's policy had radically transformed the encouraging attitude of the previous Reynaud government on the solution of the border problem. Decoux, as noted by Flood, was "... so bitter about the commit-

³⁸Minutes by Henniker-Major on Crosby to FO, 12 June 1940, F3236.

³⁹This was part of the message sent by Sir Winston Churchill to Pibul Songgram on the successful conclusion of the Non-Aggression pact signed between the two countries. FO to Crosby, 13 June 1940, F3395.

⁴⁰For further details on the Vichy government's policy towards Indochina see, Robert O. Paxton, *The Vichy France*, Barrie and Jenkins, London 1972, pp. 90-91. See also, Levy, Lacam and Roth, *French Interests and Policies in the Far East*, Institute of Pacific Relations, New York 1941, pp. 154-155.

⁴¹The Consul at Hanoi to the Secretary of State, 21 June 1940, Foreign Relations of the United States (hereafter FRUS); the Consul at Saigon to the Secretary of State, 25 June 1940, FRUS.

ments Leppisier had already made that he viewed him as almost a traitor for having suggested territorial concessions to the Thai."⁴²

On the part of Thailand, the unexpected capitulation of France had tremendously aroused Thai irrendentism. The Thais were not only demanding the delimitation of the frontier between Thailand and French Indochina on the Mekong river, but also the return of Thailand's "lost territories".⁴³ The Thai government felt uneasy about Japan's offensive moves in Indochina. Thai authorities continued through late June and July to check with Leppisier on when the negotiating party would arrive. But the French Minister was obliged to evade the issue with the apology that France was in great confusion due to the surrender to Germany.⁴⁴ Leppisier's inability to give the Thais any real news about when the party from Indochina might be expected, combined with the increasing Japanese threat to the colony, impelled Pibul to take a firmer position with the French before the border in question became a Japanese border with Thailand. Pibul Songgram declared to his cabinet in early July that the situation in Indochina was becoming serious and that, if the Thai permitted that colony to fall into the hands of the Japanese without any effort to regain their lost territories, his government would not be able to justify this to the Thai people.⁴⁵

The Foreign Office did realise the negative consequences of the French defeat and the Japanese threat to Indochina as well as to Thailand and the whole of Southeast Asia. The Foreign Office was kept informed by its Minister in Bangkok, Sir Josiah Crosby, on the political trends in Thailand and Indochina-Thailand relations in the context of British security interests in Southeast Asia.

On the basis of Britain's own military weakness, it was important for her to maintain cordial relations with Thailand. Crosby was of the opinion that, "if they lose faith in our ability to protect ourselves, let alone them, they will walk over into the Japanese camp. There will be nothing else for them to do."⁴⁶ Facing such a possibility, Crosby suggested that it was necessary to cultivate Thai goodwill and not exasperate them, as the French so often did, by an attitude of suspicion towards them or by unfounded suggestions that they were working in concert with the Japanese. He warned that within the Thai cabinet there was an anti-British element which had hitherto been kept in check by the majority of the members, who were friendly to Britain. He stressed that "we must retain the sympathy of the

⁴²Flood, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

⁴³Crosby to FO, 8 July 1940, F3690. The aspirations to the return of Thailand's lost territories, viz., the Trans-Mekong part of Cambodia and Cambodia itself, were not limited to the irrendentist party headed by Luang Vichitr Vадnakarn, Director of the Fine Arts, but were also held by the liberalist group. Among this group were Prince Varnvaidya Varavan and Luang Pridi Banamyong.

⁴⁴Flood, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶Crosby to FO, 1 July 1940, F3690.

latter at all reasonable costs."⁴⁷

With regard to Thai irrendentism, Crosby wrote:⁴⁸

"It will be to our interest to raise no objection to the occupation of the portion of Indochina under discussion by the Thais as the natural heirs of the French. We have no choice in the matter. To oppose them, it would also force them to do a deal with the Japanese, which is the last thing that would suit us. Moreover, I take it that on the merits we should prefer to see these regions occupied by the Thais than by the Japanese. Not that Thailand would be free to have her way in Indochina altogether without consulting Japan, for, aside from other consequence, she would presumably be bound to do so under the terms of the latest Japan-Thailand treaty. But formal consultation need not necessarily be the same thing as an understanding which might be tantamount to an alliance or to a pooling of Japan and Thailand interests in the process of carving up Indochina."

At a meeting with Nai Direck Jayanama, Thai Deputy Foreign Minister, Crosby suggested that

"if it came to the worst with France and if Thailand were in consequence to set about recovering any of her lost territories to the east, it would never do for her to receive them as gift at the hands of the Japanese, who would assuredly impose as a condition for making it that Thailand should recognise the so-called 'New Order' in East Asia. It would be better for the Thais to come by their territorial acquisitions as the natural heirs of the French, and not as a beneficiary of Japan."⁴⁹

Direck Jayanama agreed to receive these territories as an act of restitution on the part of France. Apart from that, he added, the Thai government would also like to establish the *thalweg* of the Mekong river as the boundary between Thailand and Indochina, except for those trans-Mekong districts where the population was mostly of the Thai race.⁵⁰

As mentioned earlier, Decoux's delaying tactics, combined with the increasing Japanese threat, had impelled Pibul to take a firmer position with the French. In late July 1940 Pibul decided to send military missions to Japan and the Axis countries as part of his diplomatic offensive to compel France to fulfil her

⁴⁷ Crosby to FO, 5 June 1940, F3514. Among the personalities whom Crosby described as being anti-British elements were Luang Vichitr Vadhakarn, Vice-Admiral Luang Sindhu Songgramjaya and Colonel Prayoon Bhamorn Montri. Those who were pro-British were Luang Pridi Banamyong, Luang Dhamrong, Nai Direck Jayanama and Prince Varnvaidya Varavan. See chapter XVII, "Personalities in the New Siam" in Crosby, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-111.

⁴⁸ Crosby to FO, 5 July 1940, F3690.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

promises.⁵¹ On 6 August 1940 Pibul sounded Crosby and Leppisier regarding his diplomatic plan.⁵² Pibul's decision had caused much concern to the Foreign Office. J.S.C. Bennett, the head of the Far East Department, believed that the Thai mission to Japan would be welcomed by Japan as it would enable the Japanese to show that their recently announced "Monroe Doctrine" for East Asia was in accord with the American doctrine.⁵³ Gage considered it as an indication of Thailand's impression of Japanese power.⁵⁴ Crosby attributed Pibul's decision to being "inspired by fear and by temperamental lack of sympathy" and because he saw "it the best way of getting what he wants territorially."⁵⁵ In drafting a message to the Thai government, J.S.C. Bennett stressed that "it is not the claims themselves but the moment and manner of putting them forward that we object to."⁵⁶ He added that "the point to be stressed is the inopportunity of precipitating a crisis now. We don't want to lay ourselves open to the usual criticism of clinging blindly to the status quo. It may well be that certain Thai claimants, both in the French and ourselves, have a good deal of foundation."⁵⁷ On 14 August, the message was sent to Thailand, in which it was argued that the British government did not oppose the validity of Thai claims. However, it stressed that any change or proposed change in the status quo was most untimely as it would give Japan an excuse to demand for far reaching concessions for herself. It expressed concern over the intention of the Thai government to send a military mission to Japan for the purpose of obtaining the agreement of the Japanese government to the cession to Thailand of territories in Indochina. Such a step could ultimately only be prejudicial to Thailand's interests, since the obligation under which Thailand would be placed would eventually be used as a lever to reduce that country to a state of complete subservience to Japan.⁵⁸

Crosby, on his part, did try to dissuade Pibul from pursuing his plan, but to no avail. Despite this, Pibul promised to send a similar mission to Britain and the Commonwealth countries; the mission would be renamed "a goodwill mission" and it would be composed of civilian members, apart from the military officials.

⁵¹ Flood, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

⁵² Crosby to FO, 6 August 1941, F3706.

⁵³ Minutes by J.S.C. Bennett on FO memo, 10 August 1940, F3880. Sir J. Brenan minuted that the American doctrine was different from those of Japan because the disposal of European possessions in the Western Hemisphere would be declared not by the United States alone but by agreement between the independent nations of the American continent. But he warned that "if the Thais do what they propose, the Japanese will be able to retort that the disposal of European possessions in East Asia is similarly being decided by agreement by the only independent countries in that part of the world, i.e. Japan, [puppet] China and Thailand."

⁵⁴ Minutes by Gate on FO memo, 10 August 1940, F3880.

⁵⁵ Crosby to FO, 6 August 1940, F3706.

⁵⁶ Minutes by J.S.C. Bennett on FO memo, 10 August 1940, F3880.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ FO to Crosby, 14 August 1940, F3706.

An official communique would be issued prior to the despatch of the mission to Japan.⁵⁹ Though the Foreign Office endorsed Crosby's efforts, it still deplored Pibul's proposal that Thai claims be raised at that moment. The Foreign Office was informed that the French government, probably backed by the German government, appeared to be resisting Japanese demands.⁶⁰ Despite Foreign Office disapproval, the first mission left for Tokyo on 30 August 1940.⁶¹ Pibul justified his actions by explaining that Japan was on the point of seizing Indochina; she was already consulting with Berlin and Rome to that end and Thailand must stake out her claims immediately or it would be too late.⁶² However, probably to gain Britain's opposition, the Thai government ratified the Non-Aggression Pact between the two countries on 30 August 1940.⁶³

The Prayoon Mission did not only arouse Crosby's suspicion but also that of the French government. Crosby believed that the Japanese had proposed a territorial bargain to Pibul,⁶⁴ while the French government feared that Thailand would co-operate with Japan to upset Indochina's status quo. France's fear was justified by the fact that Thailand refused to ratify the Non-Aggression Pact with her. At that time the French government was being pressed by the Japanese to allow them to move their troops through Indochina territory and to recognise the predominance of the political and economic interests of Japan in the Far East.⁶⁵

It was not surprising that, in early September 1940, the French government submitted to the Thai government a list of Indo-chinese officials who would compose the French negotiating party.⁶⁶ At the same time Baudoin, the Vichy Foreign Minister, demanded ratification of the Non-Aggression Pact with Thailand without waiting for the usual exchange of ratification documents.⁶⁷ The Thai reply on 12 September indicated that they would comply if agreements were reached on the matters which still awaited negotiation: the *thalweq* issue and the adoption of the Mekong as the Thai-Laos frontier, meaning the retrocession to Thailand of the

⁵⁹Crosby to FO, 6 August 1940, F3706.

⁶⁰FO to Crosby, 24 August 1940, F3984.

⁶¹Flood, *op. cit.*, p. 318. The mission was led by Colonel Prayoon Bhamorn Montri. Prior to its despatch, an official communique was issued on 30 August 1940 that described the purpose of the mission as "promoting towards good relationships with all countries in general, to send special missions for such purpose and also to observe the various events and courses as mentioned." Crosby to FO, 23 August 1940, F4002.

⁶²Crosby to FO, 24 August 1940, F4524.

⁶³Flood, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

⁶⁴Crosby to FO, 28 August 1940, F4002.

⁶⁵Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *The British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*, vol. 1. HMSO London 1962, p. 168.

⁶⁶Flood, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

two enclaves opposite Luang Prabang and Pakse. The Thai note also requested that France furnish Thailand with a letter of assurance of the return of Laos and Cambodia in the event of a change of sovereignty there.⁶⁸ The French government, however, refused to yield to the Thai demands. The urgency of the matter became more evident with the submission of Indochina's authorities to the Japanese demands in early September 1940.⁶⁹ In Bangkok, demonstrations demanded that strong measures be taken against French Indochina. The *Thai Rasdr Daily News*, for instance, demanded a declaration of war on Indochina.⁷⁰ Crosby, on 21 September, urged the Foreign Office to review its policy towards Thai aspirations. He believed that,

"we cannot afford to take an unsympathetic attitude towards Thai territorial claims. We may not see our way to give active encouragement to these claims, but I submit, that it would be unwise for us to disapprove of them."⁷¹

In another despatch, he noted his views on the problem. He suggested that,

"if the status quo in Indochina is going to be up set inspite of everything that we and the United States may do to maintain it, and if the French are going to evacuate that country including the regions bordering on the frontier of Thailand, then it will indubitably be to our advantage to see the latter in the occupation of the Thais rather than of the Japanese. In saying this I am thinking of the Thai claim on the larger scale, i.e., to the province of Laos and to a part at least of Cambodia. If on the contrary, it should fortunately happen that the status quo is preserved, the larger scale aspirations of the Thai must be presumed to lapse, or to fall into abeyance. . . ."⁷²

With regard to the smaller claims, he suggested that the British policy should be a non-obstructive one. "In particular", he recommended, "we should recognise these small scale demands as being disassociated with the larger and more important

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹On 5 September the Vichy government had allowed Japan to move her troops through Indochina territory and had recognised the predominance of the political and economic interests of Japan in the Far East. On 22 September, Japan was allowed to use certain airports north of the Red River. On 27 September, a Tripartite agreement was concluded between Germany, Italy and Japan promising mutual aid if one of the parties were attacked by a power not already taking part in the European war or hostilities in China. Clearly, it showed that Japan was preparing to establish a New order in East Asia which would include Thailand and Indochina. See, Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

⁷⁰The *Thai Rasdr Daily News* wrote: "The patience of the people is nearly exhausted if nothing is to be achieved peacefully then an immediate declaration of war is necessary." Quoted in Levy, Locam and Roth, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

⁷¹Crosby to FO, 21 September 1940, F4281.

⁷²Crosby to FO, 21 September 1940, F4944.

issue of the maintenance of the status quo."⁷³ He concluded that,

"the question of Thai irrendentism thus presents a most difficult and delicate problem, and I can only suggest that our policy in regard to it should be one of expediency and of sympathy towards the Thai aspirations in principle and in so far as that does not conflict with other international issues of such importance and to justify our risking an interruption of our present cordial relations with Thailand."⁷⁴

Crosby's suggestion was examined by the Foreign Office, and it was fully accepted. The Foreign Office despatched its message to the Thai government assuring it that Britain would not object to any rectification of the frontier freely negotiated between France and Thailand. It also reiterated that "in view of the firm relationship between Thailand and Great Britain, Her Majesty's a government could always be glad to be kept informed in advance of any action contemplated."⁷⁵

Britain's hopes for regional stability, however, collapsed when, in the late November 1940, war broke out between Thailand and Indochina. The chaotic situation, as predicted by the Foreign Office, was capitalized by Japan which was supplying Thailand with weapons and mechanics. The presence of the Japanese in Indochina and Thailand had refused fears in Britain lest Thailand would succumb to Japan's New Order. The Foreign Office urged the United States to intervene in the dispute and act as mediator.⁷⁶ The United States government, however, refused to intervene as mediator on the ground that "the permanence of any settlement that might be achieved in the near future would be doubtful and the adequacy of any guarantee that might be forthcoming would be questionable."⁷⁷

Without United States co-operation, Britain was powerless. She was reluctant to become a mediator herself, although she was invited to do by Thailand and France, lest it would provoke the Japanese. The opportunity, therefore, was seized by Japan, who offered her mediation on 10 January 1940 and, by 28 January 1941, hostilities between Thailand and Indochina ceased.⁷⁸

⁷³*Ibid.* The small scale demands were for the adoption of the Mekong as the Thai-Laos frontier and the retrocession to Thailand of the two enclaves opposite Luang Prabang and Pakse.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵FO to Crosby, 25 October 1940, F4342. The original telegram was, however, suspended when the Foreign Office knew that Indochina had submitted to Japan's demands. The original telegraph disapproved Thai claims at that moment which, it reiterated, would still further complicate the situation by encouraging the idea of the break-up of Indochina.

⁷⁶The British Embassy to the Department of State, 6 January 1941, FRUS.

⁷⁷The State Department to the British Embassy, 10 January 1941, FRUS.

⁷⁸Crosby to FO, 1 February 1941, F1208. Crosby regarded the acceptance of the Japanese mediation in the border dispute by Thailand and Indochina as "a most unfortunate happening." He believed that the Japanese would use the opportunity to weaken both countries and provide opportunities for further penetration.