

ANGLO-THAI RESPONSE TO JAPANESE THREAT,
1940-41: A PRELIMINARY SURVEY

NIK ANUAR bin NIK MAHMUD

In June 1940 Thailand signed non-aggression pacts with Britain and France.¹ With France the pact was made on the understanding that boundary revision with Laos and Cambodia would follow, but the Petain government was not forthcoming. The landing of Japanese troops in Indochina, and another rejection from Petain, induced Pibul Songgram, with a strong support from both military and civilian actions to invade Laos and Cambodia in late November, 1940.² The chaotic situation was capitalized by Japan which was supplying Thailand with weapons and mechanics.

The presence of the Japanese in Thailand and Indochina had aroused fears in British Foreign Office lest Thailand would succumb to Japan's New Order. The Foreign Office urged the United States to intervene in the dispute as a mediator.³ However the latter refused 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'.⁴ Without United States co-operation, Britain was powerless. She was reluctant to become a mediator herself, although she was invited to do so 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 French Indochina ceased.⁵

The Japanese mediation in the France-Thai border dispute had caused considerable inconvenience to the British government. The most obvious implication of the Japanese involvement in the dispute was the greater likelihood that Japan would obtain military or, at least, economic concession in either Thailand or Indochina, or both. The establishment of a Japanese military foothold in either Thailand or Indochina⁶ would increasingly threaten the security of Singapore and sea communication in the Straits of Malacca, which was then considered to be the key to the defence of Southeast Asia.⁷ In the face of the

¹The Pacts, which were proposed by Pibul Songgram, Thai Premier, were signed on the assumption that it would promote regional stability in Southeast Asia. These pacts which were valid for five years and were subject to denunciation thereafter by one year's notice on either side, 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 a war with a third party, the other would refrain from affording aid or assistance to such a party. For further details see, Sir Josiah Crosby, *Siam: the Crossroads*, Hollis & Carter Ltd., London, 1945.

²For a brief discussion on the Franco-Thai border dispute, see E.T. Flood, "The 1940 Franco-Thai Border Dispute and Pibul Songkhraam's Commitment to Japan", *Journal of Southeast Asia History*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1969.

³The British Embassy to the Department of State, 6 January 1941 (F)oreign (R)elations (U)nited (S)tates.

⁴The State Department to the British Embassy, 10 January 1941 FRUS.

⁵Crosby to (F)oreign (O)ffice, 1 January, 1941 F1208.

⁶As far as Indochina was concerned, the Japanese had already occupied certain French airports in Northern Indochina and had also been given the privilege of using Indochina territory for the passage of Japanese troops by virtue of the Indo-China-France agreement of 5 September 1940. Sir L. Woodward, *The British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* Vol. 1, HMSO London, 1962, p. 168.

⁷British Defence arrangement for Far East June 1940, F3560/61.

Allies' economic embargo upon Japan and the Axis countries,⁸ Thailand and Indochina were the remaining countries in Southeast Asia where Japan could obtain the necessary raw materials required by her, such as rice, tin and rubber, that were important in war time.⁹ The Foreign Office realised that some of these materials were not wholly consumed by Japan but that some were sent to Germany.¹⁰ Thus, from the British point of view, action was necessary both for economic and strategic reasons: (i) to prevent the Japanese from establishing themselves in Indochina and, in particular, in Thailand, and, (ii) to prevent loss to the Allies and gain to the Axis of an important source of supply of rubber and tin.¹¹ The other fundamental factor was to prevent Thailand from falling completely under the Japanese influence. This meant Thailand had to remain neutral and independent while, at the same time, she must resist the Japanese encroachment on her sovereignty.

There were three distinct aspects inherent in Thailand's system that worried Britain most: first, the unpredictable nature of Thai Foreign policy; second, Thai irrendentism and, lastly, Pibul's character.

Though the Thai government reiterated that she would remain neutral and respect the Non-Aggression Pact, the Foreign Office was still sceptical. It had been the traditional policy of Thailand, in her international relations, that she remained neutral as long as there was a balance of power between Britain and Japan. Given the fact that Britain was involved in the European war and the American reticence,¹² it was doubtful that Thailand would remain neutral. As argued by Gage:¹³

"Pibul was a treacherous villain who does not hesitate to give the most solemn assurance with every attention of breaking them up if it suits him... the point is that he is determined to be on the winning side and for this reason has practically committed himself to Japan if we can convince we are going to win there is a chance that he will hold hard. The difficulty is that we have not in the Far East those symbols of armed strength which to the child-like Thais are only convincing proof of power."

The Foreign Office suspicion was further reinforced by Pibul's own confession that, although the declared policy of Thailand was to resist by force any attempt to violate her neutrality, he could not guarantee that he would oppose Japan by force of arms if she were to attack Malaya and Burma via Thailand. It would depend on the circumstances of the moment and it might be suicidal for Thailand to resist Japan unaided.¹⁴ Furthermore, as Pibul himself said, Thailand's attitude very much depended on America's attitude towards the

⁸The United States government, for example, had imposed an embargo upon Japan for all grades of iron and steel scrap in October 1940 as a result of Japan's actions towards China. See, Sir L. Woodward, op. cit p. 111.

⁹Japan found it difficult to obtain tin, iron, rubber and oil from either Malaya or Indochina because of the restrictions imposed on the export of these materials.

¹⁰The British Embassy to Department of State, 3 June 1941, FRUS.

¹¹The British Embassy to Department of State, 8 April 1941, FRUS.

¹²The United States Government was still undecided about her commitments to help Britain in resisting the Japanese in East Asia, or Southeast Asia in particular. Though negotiations were taking place between the two countries, the United States felt that the defence of Europe and Britain, in particular against German threat was more important. See, Herbert Feis, *The Road to Pearl Harbour*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1950.

¹³Minute by Gage on Crosby to FO, 9 February, F710.

¹⁴Crosby to FO, 28 February 1941, F1451.

Japanese. So long as the United States remained quiet or indecisive, Thailand's neutrality was very doubtful.¹⁵ It should also be noted that the pro-Japanese cliques in the Thai government were quite pronounced in agitating for a close relationship between Thailand and Japan. And this was, in fact, reflected in *Thai Rasdr*, the largest circulation newspaper in Bangkok, which had openly advocated a close association between the two countries for the establishment of a "New Order" in East Asia.¹⁶ However, the most important event was the conclusion of a peace settlement between Indochina and Thailand in early April 1941. As expected by the Foreign Office, Japan made use of her position as a mediator to force Thailand and Indochina to undertake that neither country would collaborate with an external power to impose political, economic and military co-operation against Japan.¹⁷

Thai's excessive irrendentism was another problem, Crosby, on 9 February 1941, warned the Foreign Office of the alleged Thai-Japanese conspiracy against Burma.¹⁸ It was alleged that a proposal had been submitted that Thailand should help Japan in setting up an independent Burma under a scheme of "co-prospertiy" and in establishing joint Thai-Japanese condomium over Malaya. As reward for her co-operation Thailand would recover sovereignty over the states of Kedah and Penang from Malaya, and Tavoy and Mergui from Burma. In return for these advantages, Thailand would provide Japan with active assistance in attacking Malaya and Burma or, alternatively, would acquiesce in use being made of Thai territory by Japanese forces. Although the authenticity of the information was doubtful, it was difficult for the Foreign Office to dismiss it. Crosby asserted: "We cannot ignore it as Japanese are only too likely to use it against us when the opportunity offers."¹⁹ Craigie agreed. He said, "Success against the French is likely in any case to stimulate the national vanity of the Thais and draw their attitude to other 'lost territories.'"²⁰ He believed that Japan had an obvious interest in arousing as agitation for cession of the British territories in question because: (a) that would align Thailand definitely on her side against Britain and, (b) the Japanese might expect Southern Burma and Northern Malaya to be an issue in which the American stake was negligible and therefore one which, like Tientsin, they could usefully bring to a head.²¹

Pibul's Character was another factor which caused the Foreign Office such concern. Crosby described him as "unstable as water and is inspired by incredible national vanity of exteme Nationalists."²² Crosby strongly believed that "once he is satisfied that Japan is going to expel us from Malaya and Burma. . . . Thailand is likely to benefit by our possessions."²³

The British government, however, realised that she could not prevent Japan from establishing herself in either Indochina or Thailand without the close co-operation of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Thai Rasdr* was described by Crosby as having "always been pro-Japanese and unfriendly to ourselves." In one of its editions, *Thai Rasdr* asserted: "There can be no architects of the new order other than Japan and Thailand" *Thai Rasdr*, 29 December 1941 and 3 January 1941, attached to Crosby to FO, 2 January, 1941, F597.

¹⁷ Crosby to FO, 7 April 1941, F2713.

¹⁸ Crosby to FO, 9 February 1941, F710. This report was based on covert information gathered by the secret agents sent by the government of Burma to Thailand to investigate the matter.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Craigie to FO, 11 March, 1941, F1867.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Crosby to FO, 9 February 1941, F710.

²³ *Ibid.*

the United States. Without definite United States assurance of military co-operation against the Japanese threat in East Asia, Britain was not in a position to take drastic action in Thailand. The war Cabinet, for example, had warned the Commander-in-Chief of the Far East against making any military commitments to Thailand which Britain was not in a position to fulfil.²⁴ With regard to Anglo-American relations, Feis remarked: "We walked out with Britain but would not admit an engagement, nor permit our arm to be taken."²⁵ In other sentence, he said: "Military co-operation between the British Commonwealth and the United States up to this spring of 1941 was only a favoured concept."²⁶

Failure to gain United States commitments to the defence of British interests in the East, however, did not prevent the Foreign Office from getting United States co-operation in joint economic assistance for Thailand. In early April 1941, the Foreign Office informed the State Department that its plan, which objectively would minimise Thailand's exports to Japan and, at the same time, encourage Thailand to resist Japanese encroachment.²⁷

The Foreign Office was hopeful that the United States government would be able to use her bargaining power to buy Thailand's products — rubber and tin — in return for oil, financial loans and war materials. It was envisaged that joint Anglo-American purchasing of Thai's products would minimise the flow of these essential materials to Japan or the Axis countries. The proposal was accepted by the United States. Apart from stock-piling these essential materials, the Japanese action in Southern Indochina had also influenced the attitude of the United States government towards Thailand. In mid-July 1941, Japanese troops were mobilized in Southern Indochina and had forcibly occupied air and naval bases in Camranh and Saigon.²⁸ The Japanese actions were considered as a threat, not only to the British Empire, but also to American interests in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific.²⁹ After that time, there was close co-operation between Britain and the United States towards providing economic assistance to Thailand, particularly oil, financial loans and construction products.³⁰

With the presence of Japanese troops in Southern Indochina, the possibility of a Japanese offensive towards Thailand, Burma and Malaya and the rest of Southeast Asia was deeply felt. Britain continuously reminded Thailand that she should adhere to the Non-Aggression Pact recently signed between the two countries,³¹ Thailand, on the other hand, did everything possible to build up her own strength and to convince all concerned

²⁴ War Office to Commander-in-Chief Far East, 14 May 1941, F4005.

²⁵ Herbert Feis. op. cit; p. 125.

²⁶ From January to March 1941, the British and American governments were still in the process of negotiating a plan and program towards achieving military co-operation in East Asia. However, no conclusion was ever reached. As Feis put it, "The American government had refused to obligate itself to enter the war or even to specify the circumstances in which it might do so." *ibid*, p. 167.

²⁷ FO to Halifax (Washington), 9 April 1941, F3540; the British Embassy to the Department of State, 8 April 1941, FRUS; British Minister to the Assistant Secretary of State, 4 June 1941, FRUS; British Minister to the Assistant Secretary of State, 4 June 1941, FRUS. The British government was taking the opportunity of Thailand's desperation for oil, as a result of her dispute with Oil Companies, to use oil as a weapon to induce Thailand to sell tin and rubber in the open market.

²⁸ James V. Martin, "Thai-Americans Relations in World War II", *The Journal Asian Studies* vol. 22, 1963, p. 457.

²⁹ Both the British and the United States governments froze Japanese assets in their respective countries in response to Japan's action in Indochina.

³⁰ For a brief survey on Anglo-American-Thai economic assistance, See, J.V. Martin, op. cit. pp. 457-458.

³¹ The Minister in Thailand to the Secretary of State, 16 July 1941. FRUS.

of her genuine neutrality. The Thai government, indeed, realised the unfavourable position facing the country of the possibility of becoming another theatre of war between Britain and Japan. The government made repeated public pronouncements to the effect that it was determined to prevent the invasion of Thailand and that she would oppose any attempt at violation. Vichirtar Vadakarn, Minister without portfolio, in his radio pronouncements, emphasized the precept that "it is better to die as a free man than to live as slaves."³² Pibul went further still, declaring that, in case of foreign invasion, the Thais would pursue the "scorched earth policy" and destroy all vital resources of the country rather than be utilised by the enemy.³³

In his efforts to strengthen Thailand's defence capability, Pibul requested Britain and the United States to provide him with planes and tanks.³⁴ Without such supplies, he asserted, it would be difficult for Thailand to maintain her neutrality. Pibul's demands had put Britain in a difficult position. Though she badly needed Thailand's co-operation in resisting the Japanese, Britain felt it difficult to supply Thailand with these materials. Apart from depleting supplies, some of these material were urgently required in Russia and China.³⁵ Furthermore, Britain realized that Thailand did not have the necessary trained personnel to operate planes and tanks. Moreover, the British could not spare these but, in November some field guns, ammunitions and limited quantities of aviation oil were sent to Thailand.³⁶ The Thai government, however, was far from satisfied. On 11 November, Pibul officially rejected the artillery and, instead, continued to press for planes and tanks.³⁷ Prior to this, Pibul had warned Britain that, without ample military preparation, Thailand would avoid an open clash with Japan and "should only fight if she must."³⁸ Pibul's attitude had irritated some of the Foreign Office officials. Bennett argued that "it would be doubtful wisdom to supply the Thai with aircraft, even if we have any available."³⁹ Ashley Clarke questioned, "How can any one suppose that the gift of 24-48 aircraft to the Thais will make any difference to the situation in the Far East, except in weakening our position?"⁴⁰ Seymour retorted: "It has always seemed to be absurd to consider wasting of aircraft in Thailand."

The Foreign Office informed Crosby on 28 November that it was useless for Pibul to go on pressing for forms of assistance which would do him little good and would detract "from our power to help him".⁴¹ "What is the use to him of a few aircraft if British power in the Far East is to be jeopardized for want to them? If he wishes to stand up against Japan, and if he thinks he cannot do so alone, to whom does he look for protection?"⁴²

³² Thai government's official communique entitled, "Act to preserve the duties of the Thai people in time of hostilities", B.E. 2482, enclosed in Crosby to FO, 22 September 1941, F10720.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ The Minister in Bangkok to the Secretary of State, 15 October 1941, FRUS.

³⁵ Minute by Ashley Clarke on Crosby to FO, 17 November 1941, F12453.

³⁶ The Minister in Bangkok to the Secretary of State, 25 October 1941, FRUS. The United States government, on the other hand, did not supply either planes or artillery to Thailand, as required. Hornbeck, Adviser on Political Relations of the State Department, argued that "it is better for the United State and Britain to strengthen themselves against Japan rather than distribute arms to others." Quoted in Memorandum by the Adviser on Political Relations (Hornbeck), 7 November 1941, FRUS.

³⁷ Crosby to FO, 22 November 1941, F12666.

³⁸ Crosby to FO, 20 November 1941, F12660.

³⁹ Minute by J.S.C. Bennet on FO to Crosby, 28 November 1941, F126666.

⁴⁰ Minute by Ashley Clark on FO to Crosby, 28 November 1941, F12666.

⁴¹ Minute by Seymour, on FO to Crosby, 28 November 1941, F12666.

⁴² FO to Crosby, 28 November 1941, F12666.

Nevertheless, Pibul continued to press for aircraft and, in addition to that, he also insisted that the Britain and United States governments issue a public statement to Japan that, if she were to attack Thailand, she would find herself at war with them all.⁴³

The Foreign Office, however, was not in a position to issue such a statement or give any assurance to Thailand which might provoke Japan and involve Britain in war with the latter. Though Britain had already prepared a military plan which was known as the *Matador* operation,⁴⁵ she had to wait for United States' approval prior to its operation. The same applied to the issuance of a public statement to Japan.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Office was hoping that the arrival of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* in Eastern waters would have an effect of assurance on Thailand.⁴⁶ Crosby expressed his dissatisfaction at the Foreign Office attitude towards Thailand. In a "private and personal" telegram to the Foreign Office on 12 December he argued that it was illogical for the British government to encourage the Thai government to resist the Japanese but at the same time, to be unwilling to provide her with military equipment. Crosby thought it would be of more advantage if Britain advised Thailand to give no physical resistance at all and, in the interests of her population, to play a similar role as Denmark's and content herself with a verbal protest against invasion.⁴⁷ The Foreign Office, in its message to Crosby on 5 December, however, did not mention British military assistance to Thailand, but only the British *Matador* operation in Southern Thailand.⁴⁸

On 5 December Pibul, once again, begged Britain and the United States to issue a public statement.⁴⁹ The Foreign Office was, in fact, alive to the urgency of the Thai government's request.⁵⁰ But the exact form and timing of any such military warning ultimately depended on the United States.

Nevertheless, as the Japanese threat became more imminent, the Foreign Office decided to give a promise of military assistance to Thailand. It was feared that the Thai government would come to some agreement with the Japanese government under threat of force.⁵¹ An urgent telegram was sent on 7 December warning Thailand that the Japanese attack seemed likely, and that it was hoped that Thailand would preserve her independence and sovereignty. An attack on Thailand would be regarded as an attack on Britain.⁵² However, the telegram arrived too late. On 8 December Thailand was forced to surrender to Japan.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Crosby to FO, 25 November 1941, F12862.

⁴⁵ The aim of the *Matador* operation was to forestall a Japanese landing in the Kra Isthmus or to be a replay to a Japanese violation of any other part of Thailand. It was also aimed towards strengthening the defence of Northern Malaya, to deny the Japanese the use of the railway Junction at Haadyai which connected west and east Malaya, to safeguard the reinforcement route from India and lastly, to secure rubber, tin and rice in the area. See, FO to Crosby 5 December 1941, F13230, and War Office to Commander-in-Chief Far East, 5 December 1941, F13230. The information on the operation was, however, denied to the Thai government. It was agreed that the Thai government would only be informed after the issuance of a warning to Japan, i.e. after getting an approval from the United States government. FO to Washington, 3 December 1941, F13440.

⁴⁶ FO to Craigie, 11 November 1941, F12359.

⁴⁷ Crosby to FO, 1 December 1941, F13164.

⁴⁸ FO to Crosby, 5 December 1941, F13230.

⁴⁹ Crosby to FO, 5 December 1941, F13279.

⁵⁰ FO to Crosby, 6 December 1941. The Foreign Office, in fact, had drafted the proposed statement to be delivered to Japan.

⁵¹ FO to Halifax, 6 December 1941, F13303.

⁵² FO to Crosby, 7 December 1941, F13329.