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Reconsidering the Franco-Thai dispute of 1940-1941*

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction - 2. The Franco-Thai non-aggression pact and related territorial issues - 3. Why the Franco-Thai non-aggression pact was ineffective - 4. Japan's role in resolving the Franco-Thai conflict.

ABSTRACT: This article revisits the thorny issue of Franco-Thai relations at the start of World War II, examining French diplomatic archives (up till now strangely neglected) and comparing these with research on British, US and Thai sources and archives. It corrects a number of historiographical errors that have taken hold since the mid-20th century concerning the Franco-Thai non-aggression pact of 12 June 1940 and related territorial issues, the reasons why the pact proved ineffective and failed to prevent the invasion of Indochina in January 1941 and, finally, Japan's role in resolving the dispute, which, instead of bringing lasting peace, resurfaced again in 1946-1947.

KEYWORDS: Second World War, Southeast Asia, diplomacy, international border dispute, international law, France, Thailand, Japan.

* Given the brevity and the specialized nature of the text, the article was evaluated by the editorial board rather than through a *double-blind peer review*.

1. *Introduction*

Discussion of the confrontation in late 1940 and early 1941, first diplomatic then military, between General Phibun's Thailand and Marshal Pétain's France has long been both biased and insular due to failure to cross-reference all the documentation available and look beyond national prejudices.

Through methodological examination of the archives of the French ministry of foreign affairs, collated with British and US sources and supplemented by Thai witness accounts and research, this article overturns a number of received ideas in circulation due to misapprehension fuelled by two distorting factors. The first of these is a view sympathetic to Thailand in the cold-war stand-off between East and West. The second looks at things from the perspective of third-world states standing up to declining colonial power, Marxist rhetoric dovetailing here with American discourse, as illustrated by the arguments of historian E. Th. Flood (1932-1977), which still dominate the field¹. It should be noted that Flood had no particular interest in Franco-Siamese relations, referring to them merely in passing. He relied on Thai and Japanese archives and made little or no use of US, British or French sources. However, in the 1990s, new interest, particularly in British sources, saw the emergence of fresh perspectives on the period in sharp contrast with Flood's version of events². This initial revisionary work merits further expansion.

Research on the French side has also advanced. Views such as that Japan was manipulating Thailand or that the two countries were initially colluding at the expense of Indochina have gradually faded. Franck Michelin has underlined the central place occupied by Indochina in Franco-Japanese negotiations undertaken in the summer of 1940 to end support for China and facilitate expansion of the Japanese empire³. Perceived as easy prey since the collapse of France, Indochina made the situation more complex, rapidly becoming the focus of competition between Bangkok and Tokyo. Nevertheless, since some initial probing by Jacques Valette (1929-2021) over thirty years ago⁴, French diplomatic documents on relations with Thailand have never been systematically

¹ E. Th. Flood, *Japan's Relations with Thailand, 1928-1941*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Washington, 1967.

² R. J. Aldrich, *The Key to the South*, Kuala-Lumpur 1993; E. B. Reynolds, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance, 1940-1945*, Basingstoke and London 1994; N. Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Offset of the Pacific War*, Cambridge 1996.

³ F. Michelin, *La guerre du pacifique a commencé en Indochine, 1940-1941*, Paris 2019.

⁴ J. Valette, *Indochine 1940-1945*, Paris 1993.

examined or compared with US and UK resources. Consequently, a number of conclusions that have garnered wide acceptance over the last fifty years need to be re-visited: about the non-aggression pact and its territorial issues, the reasons why the pact failed, the role played by Japan and its ostensibly pro-French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yosuke Matsuoka⁵.

2. *The Franco-Thai non-aggression pact and related territorial issues*

The first correction involves the Franco-Thai non-aggression pact, which was signed on 12 June 1940, the same day as the Anglo-Thai non-aggression pact, both being seen by their sponsors as related. According to the contemporaneous Siamese account adopted by many historiographers, France, unlike the United Kingdom, needlessly complicated negotiations by asserting claims contrary to international law and, after signing, did everything to evade its commitments. This argument was put forward to justify the offensive against Indochina, itself the logical consequence of multiple border incidents caused by «bad Frenchmen». This account aligns closely to the fantastical version of events related by fascist dictator Phibun in a radio address broadcast on 20 October 1940, prelude to the invasion of Laos and Cambodia, a version strangely taken up unquestioningly by many historians.

True, the origins of the non-aggression pact are somewhat unclear. Originally French, the idea dated back to 1937, well before the outbreak of hostilities, but came to nothing because the French saw little point pursuing it⁶. The idea was only taken up by Phibun once war had broken out, to no great enthusiasm from Paris, for which Thailand had limited interest since declaring its neutrality on 5 September 1939. There was little to differentiate between the hardliners at the ministry of colonies and those arguing for a more conciliatory stance at the ministry of foreign affairs. With the exception of Paul Lépissier (1884-1954), France's representative in Bangkok, who was strongly influenced by his British counterpart Sir Josiah Crosby (1880-1958), officials and politicians in both ministries agreed on the stance to be adopted, taking into account both the alliance with Great Britain, which was eager to come to an agreement with Thailand,

⁵ For further clarification and discussion of less important aspects not discussed here, see E. Gojosso, *Aux origines du Laos. La guerre franco-thaïlandaise et le protectorat de Luang Prabang*, Poitiers 2023.

⁶ Archives du ministère des Affaires Étrangères (AMAE, La Courneuve, France), 44 CPCOM 84.

and distrust of anything the Siamese said⁷. Incidentally, it is important not to overstate the weight of British diplomacy or of Crosby's authority. London did not want to pressure Paris on an issue seen as merely secondary in view of the situation in Europe, where war had broken out after the invasion of Poland. Moreover, the opinions of the British minister in Bangkok were not accepted uncritically in Whitehall.

Although ultimately the French agreed willingly to adopt a joint position, their reason for doing so was mostly to accommodate their ally. However, it would be wrong to assert that they caved in to all the Thai demands.

The main point of friction was the setting of the boundary between Indochina and Thailand. After European colonisation, the treaties of 1893, 1904 and 1907 had proven unfavourable to the Siamese, with the Mekong in its entirety coming under French control and the border extending to the Thai bank of the river. An unequal balance of power emerged and Thai dominance over Cambodia and Laos receded as the French settled the Indochinese peninsula. Cambodia and later Laos had been the focal point of rivalry between Paris and Bangkok since the early 1860s. Kept in check by Great Britain, which had significant interests in Burma, French imperialism was deployed to the detriment of that of Bangkok, forced to gradually renounce its claim on a number of Khmer and Lao provinces, adding fuel to irredentist rhetoric after the coup d'état in 1932.

The unfair treaties concluded between Siam and more developed states such as the United States and Japan were renegotiated in the years after World War I, leading to significant changes.

The Franco-Siamese Convention of 1926 endorsed the thalweg as the dividing line with one notable exception: the islands were to remain Indochinese, ensuring navigability for France during seasonal fluctuations in the river course, but not for Siam, which had no such guarantee during periods of low water. Attempts by Siamese negotiators to put the issue back on the table during discussions leading up to the commercial arrangement of 1937 soon foundered in the face of French resolve⁸. International law at the time had not yet fully developed, was subject to constant change and the only thing that mattered was the determination of the parties.

Although fearful of opening a Pandora's box, the French nevertheless agreed to revisit the border issue in the run-up to the establishment of the non-aggression pact (1939-1940). The Thai decision-makers, Phibun and his Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Direk Jayanama (1905-1967), later exaggerated the

⁷ AMAE, 44 CPCOM 84 and 44 CPCOM 85; AMAE, 3 GMII 402.

⁸ As attested by the principal French negotiator, Georges-Picot, in a telegram dated 27 October 1940, AMAE, 3 GMII 416, f°195.

value of this concession, pointing to it as evidence of French bad faith⁹. Their version of events is not borne out by internal exchanges within the higher echelons of the French ministry of colonies and the ministry of foreign affairs, which make it clear there was never any intention to cede any Khmer or Laotian territory. It is also contradicted by the very wording of the confidential letters supplementing the non-aggression pact of 12 June 1940 aimed at settling the issue of the river boundary.

These letters, which did not surface until the publication in Thai of Direk Jayanama's book¹⁰ and were translated into English by Flood and later by Jane Keyes in the English edition of Direk's book, entitled *Thailand and World War II*, merit closer attention¹¹.

The French originals of the confidential letters held in the archives of the French ministry of foreign affairs on Quai d'Orsay state that in order to preserve the relationship of trust and mutual cooperation,

(...) the two Governments have agreed to solve the difficulties of the Mekong by setting the border line in the river bed along a channel that ensures free navigation for Thailand in all seasons, such that any territory, regardless of form, to the right of this line shall be Thai, while any territory to the left of the line shall be French. To determine this border, the two Governments shall appoint duly authorised delegates, and the agreement between them shall take effect within one year from the date of this exchange of letters.

It is also agreed that the French mission, led by an official of ambassadorial rank, shall be empowered to handle any other outstanding administrative issues¹².

⁹ During pact negotiations and the Franco-Thai war, Phibun held the dual function of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister.

¹⁰ 1966: vol. 2, pp. 773-776.

¹¹ 1st ed. 1978, 2nd extended ed. (*Thailand and World War II*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books) 2008, pp. 348-350 with a lacuna, possibly already present in Direk's text.

¹² Original in French : « (...) les deux Gouvernements ont résolu de donner aux difficultés du Mékong la solution d'après laquelle la frontière, dans le lit du Fleuve, doit suivre un chenal qui assure la libre navigation thaïe en toute saison, de sorte que tout territoire de quelque forme que ce soit, à droite de cette frontière, sera thaï, comme tout territoire à sa gauche sera français.

Pour fixer cette frontière, les deux Gouvernements désigneront des délégués dûment autorisés, dont l'accord sera appliqué dans un délai d'une année à compter de la date de cet échange de lettres.

Il est entendu, en outre, que la Mission Française, qui sera dirigée par une Haute Personnalité ayant rang d'Ambassadeur, sera compétente pour traiter toutes les autres questions administratives en suspens », AMAE, 3 GMII 402, annex 6, f°121-123 (French letter) and f°124 (Thai letter), both identical in content. See annex below.

What this extract unambiguously shows is that any border adjustments to be set by a mixed commission would only be effective at those points where the Mekong ran between Thailand and Indochina. It would be dishonest to say that the letters ceded to Bangkok all the territories located on the right bank of the river. Firstly, the text only mentions «the difficulties of the Mekong» (by which it meant the islands), not the border problem in general, which would have accorded with the erroneous interpretation given by Thai propaganda. Secondly, adopting the Mekong as the dividing line would have transferred to Thailand not only the Laotian enclaves of Sayaboury and Bassac (Champasak) but also almost all of Cambodia. France would never have stipulated such a sacrifice to ensure the agreement was signed: Thailand was not yet seen as a threat and anyway, the bad faith of its government was notorious in Paris, its word seen as worthless.

With no evidence in this text to substantiate the argument that France was prepared to surrender the Laotian provinces of Sayaboury and Champasak on the right bank, Flood based his reasoning on the final paragraph cited above, which gave the mixed commission responsibility for settling «any other outstanding administrative issues». The American historian argued that this included the question of designating the Mekong as the natural boundary in Laotian areas where the course of the river and political borders diverged¹³. He provided no evidence to support this point of view, contenting himself with the bald assertion «it is clear that...». The truth of the matter is that while things are indeed clear, they are so in the opposite direction. For one thing, since the letters exchanged contain no specific geographical indication, it is difficult to see why the Mekong should be seen as the natural boundary between Laos and Thailand only. Flood introduced a purely imaginary limitation here to avoid portraying the Thai claims as excessive and unreasonable. In doing so, he failed to note that the irredentist claims emerging after the 1932 revolution also concerned many Khmer, Burmese and Malaysian regions. Secondly, one should not lose sight of the fact that words have a precise meaning in legal matters. Apart from the issue of the Mekong islands, the commission set up by the letters of 12 June 1940 was tasked with examining the outstanding *administrative* issues. But transferring sovereignty over an area encompassing several thousand square kilometres (even just counting the Laotian enclaves only) could not be categorised as a merely practical or secondary aspect. The implications of such a divestment are highly *political* in nature. Flood bought the line peddled by Phibun and Siamese propaganda, exemplified in a 1940 brochure entitled *How*

¹³ E. Th. Flood, *Japan's Relations with Thailand*, cit., p. 262.

Thailand lost her territories to France, which serves up all the counter-truths invented to serve the cause of annexation¹⁴.

Moreover, all the American, French and British sources agree that the Thai authorities only extended their demands to include Sayaboury and Champasak in early September 1940¹⁵. In his correspondence with Lord Halifax, British diplomat Crosby – who, incidentally, was vehemently anti-French – nevertheless identified two sequences in Thai territorial aspirations. During negotiations leading up to the non-aggression pact, they sought only to have the thalweg recognised as the boundary, which would have affected the islands in the river. But after France's defeat at the hands of Germany, Thailand started to demand «retrocession» of the Laotian enclaves as a condition for ratifying the pact¹⁶. This was precisely the position espoused by Phibun himself in a memorandum to the new French authorities on 17 September 1940. Declaring that circumstances had changed since the signing of the non-aggression pact, he sought to renegotiate two outstanding issues:

- 1) The fixation of the Mekong frontier by following the deep water channel and the settlement of all other outstanding administrative questions as provided for by the exchange of letters under date of June 12th and
- 2) The adoption of the Mekong as the frontier between the two countries from the North to the South as far as the frontier of Cambodia, involving the retrocession to Thailand of territories on the right bank of the Mekong opposite to Luang Phrabang and Pakse¹⁷.

As the Thai dictator himself acknowledged, the arrangements stipulated when the pact was signed, including in relation to «other outstanding administrative questions» (point 1), did not make any reference to the Laotian enclaves on the right bank. These were expressly added in point 2, dictated by the abnormal situation that had taken hold since Japan invaded.

We can be categorical: in signing the non-aggression pact, France never intended to give the Thais sovereignty over more than a handful of islands in the Mekong to ensure year-round navigability for Thailand.

¹⁴ *How Thailand lost her Territories to France*, Bangkok, Department of Publicity, 1940, pp. A-B.

¹⁵ *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, Washington, United States Printing Office, 1955-1969, vol. IV, p. 111 and AMAE, 3 GMII 415.

¹⁶ *British Documents on Foreign Affairs (BDF/A)*, University Publications of America, 1997, Part III, Asia, vol. 2, p. 475.

¹⁷ AMAE, 3 GMII 404, f°48. Original in English. French translation in *Documents Diplomatiques Français (DDF)*, Brussels 1998-2015, vol. 1940-2, pp. 465-466.

3. *Why the Franco-Thai non-aggression pact was ineffective*

Another question that merits closer investigation is the ratification and entry into force of the Franco-Thai non-aggression pact on 12 June 1940. To avoid being considered in breach of the terms of the pact when it invaded Indochina in January 1941, Bangkok needed to shift responsibility for the diplomatic failure onto the French government. According to the Thais, France had signed the pact reluctantly and more as a favour to its British ally than out of self-interest (true) and had formally agreed to the concessions – more or less extensive depending on interpretation – while having no real intention of giving effect to them (false, as we will see). It had therefore thwarted the implementation of the non-aggression pact. Stripped of value, the pact was no longer enforceable against Thailand, which argued it was only going on the offensive to defend itself, thus justifying its invasion of Cambodia and Laos.

Ratification of the non-aggression pact was indeed delayed for some weeks – a fact in itself unremarkable in international relations. Researchers espousing Flood's arguments have disregarded the fact that the French defeat in May-June 1940 was accompanied by an exodus of French governmental institutions, first to Bordeaux and then to Vichy, a town that gradually emerged as the capital of a country split in two. This unusual event in the history of European nations is enough on its own to explain the delay. Nonetheless, when Phibun said he was ready to engage with the process on 8 July 1940, the French authorities indicated the next day that they would do the same and agreed that the work of the Mekong commission should begin straight away¹⁸. Thailand ratified the pact on 3 or 4 August. The head of the new French state, Marshal Pétain, followed suit a fortnight later¹⁹. Again nothing unusual, the two-week difference was not a delaying tactic but rather was caused by communication difficulties between Asia and Europe. Vichy never received the original French copy of the non-aggression pact signed in Bangkok, lost in transit via Washington. Phibun seized the opportunity to demand use of the original copies in the exchange of ratifications. This was impossible in the circumstances. It was also contrary to French diplomatic practice, which he must have been familiar with, given the many agreements between Siam and France, the most recent of which was signed in December 1937 and ratified in January 1939, a full 13 months later. And indeed, the Thai dictator's outlandish demands strongly indicate that he wanted to stop the pact entering into force, his insistence holding up the exchange of instruments of ratification that would have made this possible. On

¹⁸ Telegram of 9 July 1940, AMAE, 3 GMII 415, f°61.

¹⁹ Telegram of 3 September 1940, AMAE, 3 GMII 415, f°119.

this latter point, the French archives put paid to the story that Vichy demanded the implementation of the pact before ratifications were exchanged²⁰.

Similarly – the questions are related – the Thais, followed by Flood, also blamed the diplomatic failure on France's reluctance to take part in the Mekong commission set up to determine the river boundary, pointing to this as further proof of French duplicity. In fact, the reality was quite different. Vichy was constantly demonstrating its good faith to Bangkok. To facilitate commission meetings, the French government agreed to the Siamese suggestion to appoint Lépissier to chair the commission instead of bringing a senior diplomat over from Europe. Apart from the fact that he was on hand at a time when war made travel extremely difficult, he was also conciliatory and favourable to accommodation. However, it took a long time to appoint the other members of the commission. Colonial officials in Indochina were reluctant to enter into an arrangement they saw as a backward step. Thailand was in no rush either, waiting until the end of August 1940 to address the issue. They were now more focused on wide-ranging consultation of the British, Americans, Germans, Italians and Japanese to secure *carte blanche* for their plans to carve up Indochina. This was why they later repeatedly sought to impede commission meetings, imposing increasingly unacceptable terms and putting on the agenda items such as the return of Laotian enclaves on the right bank of the Mekong. After trying for some time to make the commission work, the French ultimately gave up. Thai refusal to implement the non-aggression pact had made the issue of the river border and the islands redundant.

4. *Japan's role in resolving the Franco-Thai conflict*

The third point that merits reassessment is the role of Japan in resolving the Franco-Thai dispute, particularly from the perspective of Matsuoka's allegedly pro-French attitude.

But first, it should be recalled that both the British and the French entertained a number of fantasies regarding Japanese-Thai relations. Relying on telegrams and dispatches sent by Crosby in 1940 and 1941, London long believed that Phibun was deceiving Tokyo, that he remained sincerely attached to alliance with the British and was even looking for American support²¹. In France, on the other hand, historians believed – admittedly more often than those

²⁰ Written summary dated 17 September 1940, AMAE, 3 GMII 415, f°164. Published in *DDF*, 1940-2, pp. 466-467.

²¹ *BDEA*, Part III, Asia, vol. 2.

involved at the time – that the two Asian states were colluding in the summer of 1940 to undermine French Indochina²². Things were more complicated than that, however. France's defeat in May-June 1940 certainly whetted the appetites of Japan and Thailand, both seeing in it an opportunity to flex some muscle, albeit in different ways. The former was looking to extend its area of influence while the latter sought immediate territorial gains. The dictator was also disinclined to trust the Japanese; familiar with their designs on South-East Asia, he had no intention of becoming dependent on them. Nevertheless, he soon realised he needed to work with Japan to satisfy irredentist aspirations. The imperial government, which needed the resources of French Indochina, could not allow them to fall into the hands of a third party as this would compromise its expansionary ambitions. And Phibun had a powerful argument that could work in his favour. Thailand was the ideal launching pad for seizing British Malaya and Singapore. Unbeknownst to most members of his cabinet, the dictator approached Tokyo on 28 September 1940, offering their troops free passage to the British dominions in the Malay Peninsula²³. In exchange for a treaty of friendship formalising the new alliance, Bangkok's claims would be supported, with the details to be fleshed out later. Finally, in late November 1940, Japan decided to support the awarding, via mediation, of the Laotian west bank of the Mekong to Thailand, along with economic and military aid. The Japanese promised the French they would do everything they could to deflect Siamese claims onto the British colonies of Malaya and Burma. If either party was recalcitrant, it would be put at a disadvantage²⁴. This curious conception of diplomacy heralded the shrinking of Laos.

Phibun immediately signed up²⁵, following which the Japanese offered their services to the French on 3 December. Their overtures were rejected – Vichy had no reason to abandon its Laotian enclaves. Moreover, its greatest fear was that Japan's assurances would lead to the subjection of Indochina²⁶. Surprised by the comprehensive defeat of Thailand's navy at Ko Chang on 17 January 1941 and worried that it might get bogged down or even collapse – on land the situation was stalemate – the Japanese again offered on 21 January to mediate

²² F. Mercier-Bernadet, « Le rôle du Japon dans le conflit franco-thaïlandais (juin 1940-mai 1941) », in *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 2001, n. 199, pp. 25-39.

²³ F. Michelin, *La guerre du pacifique a commencé en Indochine*, cit., p. 162.

²⁴ D. J. Lu, *Agony of Choice: Matsuoka Yosuke and the Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1880-1946*, Lanham 2002, p. 189.

²⁵ E. B. Reynolds, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance*, cit., p. 41; N. Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Offset of the Pacific War*, cit., p. 256.

²⁶ Note of 5 December 1940, AMAE, 3 GMII 417, f°81-82.

between the two parties. The Thai dictator accepted immediately; his ministers were not informed for another three or four days. The Pétain government, which had already been approached unofficially on 15 or 16 January but had yet to respond, gave in on the 22nd to avoid giving the Japanese army a pretext to take the peninsula by force²⁷. France no longer had any choice. It was isolated. It could not rely on the United States, which as yet had no dispute with Japan. Poorly advised by Crosby, Great Britain took a risky gamble on Thai irredentism, believing that supporting Thailand at the expense of France would save its dominions Burma and Malaya. The fall of Singapore in February 1942 confirmed its mistake. In the meantime, an armistice signed in Saigon on 31 January 1941 brought an end to the hostilities.

In his work, Flood spread the idea that during peace negotiations between Thailand and France in Tokyo (February to May 1941), the Japanese, led by Matsuoka, pushed a pro-French attitude highly unfavourable to the Thais²⁸. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even before the conflict broke out, the imperial government wanted the Laotian provinces of Sayaboury and Champasak assigned to Thailand. On 6 January Bangkok launched an invasion and quickly overran the provinces. Helped by Japanese military advisors, the Thai army, which outmanned and outgunned the enemy, also pushed into Cambodia, but its gains there were much more modest. When fighting was suspended, it had only two small bridgeheads – one between Samrong and Chong Kal, the other at Poipet – and had failed to take Sisophon²⁹. Although it held in check the French terrestrial counter-offensive on 16 January, it could no longer advance and it was this that spurred Tokyo's intervention after the naval disaster at Ko Chang.

The Japanese mediators could logically have contented themselves with allowing Thailand to consolidate its military gains and forcing Vichy to formally cede the territories won. This was precisely the position taken by the highest Japanese authorities on 5 February³⁰. But after bitter discussions and multiple twists, Matsuoka ended up giving Phibun much more³¹. While the Japanese minister could at times give the impression he was not insensitive to French arguments, this was merely a ploy. Having deliberately taken Bangkok's side

²⁷ Telegrams of 22 January 1941, AMAE, 406 QO 28, f°259 and 3 GMII 406, f°27-28.

²⁸ See E. Th. Flood, *Japan's Relations with Thailand*, cit., p. 588 in particular.

²⁹ Y. Mahé, *La guerre franco-thaïlandaise, 1940-1941 : déroulement et conséquences mondiales d'un conflit régional oublié*, Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Aix-Marseille, 2016.

³⁰ E. Th. Flood, *Japan's Relations with Thailand*, cit., pp. 465-467; E. B. Reynolds, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance*, cit., pp. 45-46.

³¹ For details of these negotiations, see E. Gojosso, *Aux origines du Laos*, cit., pp. 141-188.

and having alone determined the territorial carve-up on 13 February 1941 that subsequently made its way into the treaty of 9 May 1941³² without yielding to direct pressure from the Japanese military or consulting or notifying his subordinates at the *Gaimusho*, he had to work hard to appear impartial. He also distrusted Prince Wan (Wan Waithayakon or Vanna Vaidhayakara, 1891-1976), the uncompromising chief Thai negotiator who was always quick to up the ante. He was irritated by his sweeping demands and had had to rebuke him on several occasions. Nonetheless, his exasperation with Prince Wan never affected his preferential stance towards Bangkok, in his eyes always an asset in any prospective attack on British Malaya. This is why, despite his talents, Matsuoka was not able to play the role of disinterested arbitrator up to the end. He pushed the French into a decision, recorded in the exchange of letters between France and Japan on 11 March 1941 as follows: «although neither the local situation nor the fortunes of war require it to waive the benefit of treaties freely negotiated and entered into with the government of Bangkok, the French Government shall, in the present circumstances, cede to the authorities of the Japanese government»³³. This illustrates the pressure applied and would enable Paris to have the pre-war status quo restored after the end of World War II³⁴.

Regardless, the overall outcome was disastrous for France. It is impossible to argue that both sides made «significant compromises» in the treaty of 9 May 1941³⁵. In fact, the Thais conceded nothing. Matsuoka merely reined in Wan's most outrageous demands, which extended as far as Laos and Cambodia in their entirety. While Vichy may have won a few minor concessions, the protectorates suffered huge territorial losses far in excess of Thai military gains. Japan forced France to hand over the Laotian provinces of Sayaboury and Champasak to Thailand, along with the Khmer provinces of Battambang (in its totality), Siem Reap, Kampong Thom and Stung Treng (in part). Almost 70,000 km² was ceded and almost 500,000 people affected³⁶. The gains were three times higher than had been won during the conflict.

The time has now come, therefore, to correct the errors that have become established in the historiography of Franco-Thai relations at the outset of World War II, to move beyond the partial and partisan readings that have for

³² E. Th. Flood, *Japan's Relations with Thailand*, cit., p. 482.

³³ AMAE, 3 GMII 408, f°106.

³⁴ S. Hamamoto, « Le sort d'un traité imposé : la convention de paix entre la France et la Thaïlande conclue en 1941 », in *Revue générale de droit international public*, 1998, n°4, pp. 951-981

³⁵ E. Th. Flood, *Japan's Relations with Thailand*, cit., p. 584.

³⁶ AMAE, 3 GMII 402; ANOM, Indo, 3 HCI 19.

too long distorted the representation of events through further investigation of Thai, British and US archives.

Annex: annex n. 6 to the Franco-Thai non-aggression pact on 12 June 1940
(AMAE, 3 GMII 402, f°121-123)

Annexe N°6

N° 77/40/A

Bangkok, le 12 juin 1940

Monsieur le Président,

J'ai l'honneur de confirmer à Votre Excellence l'accord déjà intervenu entre nous, dans les termes suivants :

Prenant en considération les relations amicales, qui existent si heureusement, de longue date, entre la France et la Thaïlande et animés, de part et d'autre, du désir de maintenir ces relations dans un éclat qui ne saurait s'assombrir, les deux Gouvernements sont convenus de régler, dans un esprit de bonne amitié, les difficultés d'ordre administratif qui subsistent encore entre l'Indochine et la Thaïlande, pour mettre entièrement les rapports de ces deux Pays sur un pied de confiance et de coopération mutuelles.

A cet effet, les deux Gouvernements ont résolu de donner aux difficultés du Mékong la solution d'après laquelle la frontière, dans le lit du Fleuve, doit suivre un chenal qui assure la libre navigation thaïe en toute saison, de sorte que tout territoire de quelque forme que ce soit, à droite de cette frontière, sera thaï, comme tout territoire à sa gauche sera français.

Pour fixer cette frontière, les deux Gouvernements désigneront des délégués dûment autorisés, dont l'accord sera appliqué dans un délai d'une année à compter de la date de cet échange de lettres.

Il est entendu, en outre, que la Mission Française, qui sera dirigée par une Haute Personnalité ayant rang d'Ambassadeur, sera compétente pour traiter toutes les autres questions administratives en suspens.

Il est précisé, toutefois, dès maintenant que ces questions sont dissociées de la question dite du Mékong, comportant fixation de la frontière dans le lit du Mékong, dont les bénéfices, encore une fois précisés, seront acquis dès la signature et la ratification du Pacte de Non-Agression.

Veillez agréer, Monsieur le Président, les assurances de ma très haute considération.

Signé Paul Lépissier

Son Excellence
le Général Luang Pibula Songgram
Président du Conseil
Ministre des Affaires Etrangères
Bangkok