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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

This Honors thesis entitled

“Pibun Songkram’s Role in Thailand’s Entry into the Pacific War”

written by

Lukasz Staniczek

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion of the Carl Goodson Honors Program meets the criteria for acceptance and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

thesis director

second reader

third reader

honors program director

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OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

PIBUN SONGKRAM'S ROLE IN THAILAND'S ENTRY INTO THE
PACIFIC WAR

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE HONORS COUNCIL

BY
LUKASZ STANICZEK

ARKADELPHIA, ARKANSAS

APRIL 1999

Introduction

On January 25, 1942, Thailand followed the Japanese example and declared war on the United States and Great Britain. The reasons for Thailand's entry into the war remain controversial. The extent and timing of Japanese pressure and the genesis of the Thai commitment to the Axis side are in dispute. There is not a generally accepted view on why Thailand declared war; however, the issue has been thus far analyzed principally in consideration of Thai national interest. This paper provides a different approach by focusing on the main decision-maker: Thai Prime Minister Pibun Songkram, as the key to solve the Thai enigma. Whether his underlying motives were patriotism, a feeling of compelling duty to serve his people, or a hunger for power, Pibun resolved to hold his post, strengthen his position, and make his power absolute, even at the price of involving Thailand in war. Opportunism dictated his actions, his words or promises were to him of slight importance, and his piety amounted to using religion for political reasons. Pibun had but one principle: to stay in power. These motives, above all others, determined Thailand's policies during World War II.

The paper opens with a sketch of the background of Thailand's foreign relations focusing on its dealings with Japan. Later, it introduces Pibun and his position in Thai domestic politics. It presents Pibun's role in the conflict over territory disputed with French Indo-China—the first instance when domestic considerations determined the Prime Minister's foreign policy. The consequences of the dispute reflected on Thai-Japanese relations are further evaluated. An analysis of Pibun's decisions immediately preceding January 25, 1942 concludes the argumentation.

Thailand's International Position before the War

By the beginning of the 1930s, only two Asian nations, Japan and Thailand, had managed to retain complete independence from the European powers. Even so, during the century these two had to make political concessions, sign unequal commercial treaties, cede land, and grant extraterritoriality to European nationals. Both of these nations attempted to modernize, industrialize, and develop the potential to command Western respect. The Japanese transition occurred at a rapid pace. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, reforms of the Japanese economic and political system were successful and rendered Japan sufficiently strong to defeat Russia in the war of 1904-05. From that point forward, Japan was looked upon by other Asian nations as an example. The Japanese considered themselves the older brothers of other Asians.

Not unlike Germany or Italy, Japan gradually became a militaristic state with expansionist ambitions. Japan was determined to pursue its interests in Manchuria, Korea, Taiwan, mainland China, and later in Siberia, Malaysia, Singapore, Burma, French Indo-China, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Regarding Thailand, located in the heart of what the Japanese claimed to be their new southern Co-Prosperity Sphere, there were mixed views among Japanese leaders. However, the Emperor categorically demanded in 1938 that Thailand could not be attacked by Japanese troops.¹ Japanese plans provided for political, economic and defensive arrangements between the sphere's members.

The slogan "Asia for Asians" summarized the guiding ideology for the expansion. Japan desired the perception of being a liberator. This ideology could be justified in India,

¹ Thadeus E. Flood, "Japan's Relations with Siam: 1928-1941" (Ph. D. diss., University of Washington, 1986), 191-195.

Indonesia, Burma, Malaysia, and the Philippines, under the colonial rule of European powers or the United States, even though the “liberation” was by no means unanimously greeted; however, in the cases of Korea, the lands of modern China and Taiwan, and Siberia the slogan clearly did not apply. In French Indo-China, Japan tolerated the European protectorate as long as the Vichy government was cooperative. Obviously then, ideology was not the cause of the struggle: it was merely an attempt to justify it. Yet, since it was the official ideology, it would make it difficult for Japan to invade an independent Thailand.

The transformation of Thailand into a modern state was a slow process. Thai commerce was not very developed: foreigners and members of the Chinese minority conducted as much as 95% of business. Politically, Thailand remained an absolute monarchy until 1932, when it became a constitutional monarchy. Thai foreign policy through late 1930 focused on revising unequal treaties containing extraterritoriality clauses. Other Thai ambitions included developing trade, and promoting Thai interests on the Indo-Chinese Peninsula. The signature of a new treaty by Japan followed an economic mission led by Yunosuke Yasukawa in 1936. The mission not only led to the new treaty, but it also stimulated Thai-Japanese trade.²

The lands constituting the Kingdom of Thailand changed over the course of history. By the 1930s, France had taken some territories forming modern Laos and Cambodia claimed by Thailand. Thailand also frequently looked on its traditional foe Burma for possible territorial gains. Reclaiming the land lost to France was one of the priorities of Thai foreign policy. Thus, Japan emerged as a potential natural ally in the attempts to recover what Thais considered lost territories.

Formal Thai-Japanese relations began on Thai initiative with the Declaration of Amity and Commerce of September 26, 1887.³ A related treaty came into effect in 1898, with a protocol providing for extraterritoriality for Japanese subjects until Thai laws were reformed.⁴ Throughout the 1920s trade between the two countries grew steadily, but there were no close ties. During Japanese actions in Manchuria after 1931, the Thai government made efforts to control its Chinese minority who actively protested the Japanese invasion, but this was just as likely out of a desire to keep internal order as to express pro-Japanese sympathies. Until 1932, Thai-Japanese relations were friendly, but not very close.⁵

On February 24, 1933, the Lytton Report, which condemned the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, was submitted to the League of Nations. The League passed a resolution denouncing Japanese actions in Manchuria, with only Thailand abstaining. Shortly following the session, Yosuka Matsuoka, the Japanese emissary to the League, warmly thanked the Thai representative offering Japanese support if Thailand chose to cast off the European yoke. There were numerous interpretations of that act. Japanese sources often emphasized how much the two countries were alike in being mistreated by the West. The Japanese press praised Thailand for understanding its Asian brother. Thai sources tended to explain the vote as a sign of true neutrality to which Thailand had been committed.

After Thailand underwent a revolution in 1932, which introduced constitutional monarchy, bureaucrats like Phrya Mano formed much of the new government and vigorously attempted reactionary actions. Japan remained rather reserved during the coup

² *Bangkok Chronicle*, July 18, 1940.

³ Kiyoshi Inoue, "A Century of Japan-Thai 'Friendship,'" *AMPO Japan-Asia Quarterly Review* 19, no. 4 (1987): 52.

of June 20, 1933, which the Pibun-Pahon faction led against the old, traditionally royalist nomenclature. Although the coup leaders approached it for arms and funds, Japan promised only future financial support. Japan, however, was the first nation to recognize the new government. Since Pibun was a leader inspired by Ataturk and Mussolini, with dictatorial sympathies, Thai-Japanese relations from that point on began to strengthen.⁶ In 1934, Thai military officers and cadets went to Japan for training. From that year on, Thailand's trade with Japan was second only to trade with Great Britain. In 1935 and 1937, Sir Josiah Crosby, the chief British diplomat to Thailand described the Thai attitude towards Japan as one of admiration for its economic and military strength mixed with distrust of imperial ambitions. In his opinion, although Japan had a positive image in the Thai press, the Thai military remained reserved.⁷

Pibun Songkram

Pibun was born on July 14, 1898, to a family owning an orchard. An excellent student, he finished the Thai Cadet School and Army Staff College and received a King's Scholarship to study in France. Pibun became an outstanding figure in military science. Later, when his respect among the politicians came from Pibun's military connections, his scholastic abilities earned him the respect of the army.⁸ His popularity could also be attributed to his "attractive character."⁹

⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁵ Charivat Santaputra, *Thai Foreign Policy* (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 1985), 151.

⁶ Ibid., 161.

⁷ Ibid., 151-153.

⁸ Jayanta Kumar Ray, *Portraits of Thai Politics* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1972), 191.

⁹ Benjamin A. Batson and Shimizu Hajime, *The Tragedy of Wanit* (Singapore: Journal of Southeast Asian Studies Special Publications Series No. 1, 1990), 47.

Pibun participated in the 1932 revolution, from which he emerged as Deputy Commander-in-Chief. He joined forces with Mano to oust Pridi, of whose popularity they were both jealous. As gossips of those days would have it, Pibun was also involved in murdering Pridi's friend—Tasnai, who had been very popular in the military circles.¹⁰ He rose to prominence after the coup of June 20, 1933. The coup took place after Pibun persuaded three senior colonels to resign in an act of protest against Mano's rule.¹¹ Having done that, to the colonels' surprise, he remained in power by retaining his own post.¹² When one of the military leaders, Phrya Song, a hero of the first revolution, later came back to Bangkok from foreign travels in the service of the state, Pibun sent the unwanted opponent out of Bangkok, to Chiang Mai.¹³ The coup was successful, and Pahon became the Prime Minister with Pibun as his close aid. In the same year, Prince Bowodaret led a rebellion to restore absolute monarchy. The dangerous upheaval was crushed by Pibun, who thus became the unquestioned leader of the young military faction, with his official title of Commander-in-Chief of all defense forces.¹⁴

Pibun Songkram determined the course of Thai policies, including foreign policy, after 1938. He actively participated in the Pahon government from 1933 until 1938, when he became the Prime Minister at the age of thirty-five. The constitution enabled him to appoint half of the Parliament, thus assuring him wide legislative support. The legislature consisted mainly of military men, many of whom owed their appointment to Pibun. The civilian legislators were often intimidated by Pibun's ex-classmate Adun Aduldejarat, the Police General.

¹⁰ Ray, 71.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Later, Pibun's wife surprisingly refused to credit him with the resignations, she wrote: "Worse still, the four senior Colonels, the Four Tigers, by now retired from the government." Ibid., 194

¹³ Ibid., 72.

Adun behaved like a Gestapo Chief. On the instruction of Pibun, Adun would shadow politicians, and harass them till they fell in line with Pibun. I once found three to four policemen waiting for me in a car in front of my house, and they followed me wherever I went.¹⁵

Pibun argued that he could not be a dictator, because there always was a parliament during his rule.¹⁶ Thawee Bunyaketu, a civilian member of the government at that time, provided a plausible explanation for the strange circumstance of a dictator co-existing with an active legislature. Even Asada Shunsuke, a Japanese diplomat to Thailand at the time, taken by Pibun's "attractive character," later reckoned in an attempt to decipher Pibun's actions during the war: "I (...) imagine he reasoned like a sort of dictator during the war years, when Hitler and Mussolini were at the zenith of their power."¹⁷

To strengthen his position, Pibun purged several opponents of the Pahon government; his adversaries were sent to Tarutao and Tao Islands in 1933, and to Mac Hong Son in 1934. After 1938, at least eighteen of his opponents were killed after an unsuccessful coup in the course of arrests or later executions.¹⁸ Since Thailand was a constitutional monarchy, the position of the king could threaten Pibun. Under the Prime Minister's leadership, the state sued the former King Rama for misappropriating six million baht. As a result of the process, Rama VII's land and property were confiscated while he lived in exile in England. Displaying of his picture became prohibited. The new king's power was delegated to the regents throughout his education in Europe. As much

¹⁴ Ibid., 73.

¹⁵ Ibid., 75.

¹⁶ Ibid., 195.

¹⁷ Batson and Shimizu, 63.

¹⁸ Thamsook Numnonda, "Pibulsongkram's Thai Nation-Building Programme during the Japanese Military Presence, 1941-1945," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (1978): 244.

as Pibun declared himself an advocate of democracy, he desired the aura of royalty, as evident in his attempt to use the king's baton after rising to the rank of Field Marshal.¹⁹

Pibun was a man with a lucid vision of transformed Thailand. The new Thailand would be modernized and Westernized; it would have a reliable army; it would expand territorially onto all lands that had belonged to Thailand in the past and those that were always desired to belong to Thailand. Foremost, it would be a country under a great leader, namely--Pibun.

Pibun's vision took shape during the 1930s, during a time of economic crisis and political turmoil, when in other Asian and European nations dictatorial leaders were experiencing peaks of popularity. This partly explains Pibun's remark during a Cabinet meeting in April 1942:

The Japanese have the Emperor as their mentor. We Thais have nothing. What we have are Nation, Religion, Monarch, and Constitution. Nation is still a vision; Religion is not yet sacred enough; Monarch is just a child whom we can see only in picture and Constitution is merely a notebook. When the country is in trouble we cannot rely on anything. That is why I want you all to follow me—the Prime Minister...²⁰

The government launched a carefully planned campaign designed to popularize the Prime Minister. Newspapers were given adjectives which they should use when referring to Pibun, people were encouraged to display his pictures, the color green and the sign of the cock were commonly used for decorations since Pibun was born in the year of the cock, on Wednesday, a day traditionally associated in Thai culture with green. Pibun's appraisal of the campaign follows: "At present there is a tremendous propaganda to

¹⁹ Ray, 74.

²⁰ Thamsook Numnonda, *Thailand and the Japanese Presence, 1941-1945* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1977), 237.

believe in the Leader. This should be considered a national theory. Whoever is the Prime Minister must follow suit."²¹

Pibun's vision of transformed Thailand had two aspects. One was to solidify the Thai people through nationalism. The other was for Thailand to acquire Western appearances and thus to seem more cultured, such a Thailand would then be safer from too blatant abuse by international powers.

We must be as cultured as other nations otherwise no country will come to contact us. Or if they come, they come as superiors. Thailand would be helpless and soon become colonized. But if we were highly cultured, we would be able to uphold our integrity, independence, and keep everything to ourselves....²²

Pibun aroused Thai nationalism using three issues to unify the Thai people: the quest for recovery of territories lost to France, promotion of the rights of the Thai majority over the Chinese minority, and the cult of the leader. He hoped that these policies would provide him a lasting political base. The convenience of using the powerful ideology of nationalism became evident when Pibun had to deal with his political opponents. He used the same ideology to expand the military.²³

To modernize the apparel worn by Thais, Pibun issued a proclamation on correct dress. Men were supposed to wear hats, shoes and socks, long pants and jackets. Women were to wear hats, shoes, blouses, and skirts.²⁴ The new clothing styles were promoted through decrees and government sponsored campaigns. Western clothing had to be worn because "Thailand must follow a European example in order to make itself an influential modern state."²⁵ How seriously Pibun took the reform shows in his speech broadcast on

²¹ Ibid., 237.

²² Pibun quoted in Thamsook, "Pibulsongkram's," 236.

²³ Charivat, 161.

²⁴ Thamsook, *Thailand*, 238.

²⁵ Ray, 85.

the day after the declaration of war on the Allies: "My Dear Ladies, please do not take it for granted that it is unnecessary to wear hats during the war-days. On the contrary, hats have become more important than ever...."²⁶ Women not wearing hats could not board buses or enter government offices, even to pay taxes.²⁷²⁸

Through the 1930s, it was common in Thailand not to wear shoes. Men would frequently wear only a piece of cloth wrapped around their bodies or colored Chinese trousers, while women would wear a sarong around their waists and possibly a blouse or piece of cloth around their upper body. Pibun's attitude towards the way Thais dressed showed his concern about Thailand as much as his desire for a totalitarian control over the lifestyle of his people. It is interesting how in the attempt to Westernize Thailand, Pibun tried to transplant behaviors that originated from pursuing individualism (fashion), using a dictatorial decree with which all had to comply. To emphasize the effectiveness of Pibun's pragmatism, he undoubtedly succeeded. Before the end of his first dictatorship, he came to lead a hat-wearing nation.

The anti-Chinese sentiment on the Thai political scene that Pibun represented so obviously can be traced to king Rama V, who reigned between 1910 and 1925. However, no legal discrimination against the Chinese followed the King's prejudice. The 1933 Pahon government tried to discourage immigration by raising fees for newcomers while encouraging Thais to undertake commercial activity. Chinese immigration into Thailand caused by poverty in southern China and the relative prosperity of Thailand from its rubber and tin industries, culminated between 1918 and 1931 when an estimated total of 95,000 Chinese arrived in Thailand annually. Between 1932 and 1945 the immigration

²⁶ Pibun quoted in Thamsook, *Thailand*, 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

slowed to about 33,800 yearly. By the end of the 1930s, the Chinese minority numbered about 2-3 million, which constituted roughly ten percent of the whole population. Yet, the ten percent provided "70 percent of all skilled and unskilled non-agricultural labor." In some estimates, more than 80 percent of Thai economy was under Chinese control.²⁹ Thais perceived the Chinese minority as more prosperous and more advanced. The immigrants were more likely to use new technical advancements, such as bicycles.³⁰

The increase in Chinese population coincided with a change in other demographic trends as well. More Chinese women began to settle in Thailand, thus slowing down the assimilation process. On the contrary, Chinese communities grew around Chinese temples and schools aimed at retaining their own national character. The Japanese expansion in China intensified nationalism among the Chinese community in Thailand. It found an expression in various political organizations and societies, many of which were openly anti-Japanese.

The Chinese controlled much commerce in Thailand. They dominated fishing and rice cultivation, while they shared exporting teak and tin with the Europeans. Typically, Chinese labor utilized Western capital and technology, thus, effectively dividing commerce between the two groups.³¹ After his ascent to power in 1938, Pibun prohibited the Chinese from certain jobs, such as the legal profession, rice-cultivation, selling bricks, firewood, charcoal, torches, manufacturing hats, dresses, umbrellas, toys, food vending,

²⁸ Ray, 85.

²⁹ Charnvit Kasetsiri, "The First Phibun Government and Its Involvement in World War II," *Journal of the Siam Society* 62, part 2 (July 1974): 243.

³⁰ Sakdi Rattanachai, interview by author, transcribed, Lampang, 14 July 1998.

³¹ Charivat, 157.

and cutting or waving hair.³² He also ordered the closing of nine out of the ten existing Chinese newspapers.³³

The leader's person was yet another idea unifying the Thai. Pibun often addressed the nation through radio broadcasts or newspaper articles: "Through these speeches and writings Pibun asked the people to give support to his policy and at the same time tried to project his personality so that trust and faith in--and fear of--him could be generated among the masses."³⁴ He was attractive to the people, viewed as "knowledgeable, tolerant, hard-working, very sharp and, most important, he had much self-confidence."³⁵

Pibun was interested in the person of Napoleon and enjoyed comparing himself to the Frenchman. An event that took place while the Premier was at a seaside resort illustrated Pibun's outgrown ego. His radio broke down, so he requested through a phone call to Bangkok that his favorite program be postponed until further notice.³⁶ Even if his actions were to benefit the country, the manner in which Pibun chose to rule was autocratic. For example, Pibun decided to eliminate illiteracy in the armed forces. To accomplish his goal, the leader decided that the soldiers had to learn the alphabet in six month, or else they could not leave the barracks until they mastered writing.³⁷ Pibun also believed that ideas of National Socialism and Fascism would well suit Thai society. The strong individual leadership of Mussolini and Hitler clearly inspired him.³⁸ Pibun's militaristic tendencies surfaced in 1935 when he organized several youth corps, called *yuwachon*, emulating the *Hitler Jugend*.³⁹ "The process was equal to propagating

³² Ray, 196; Thamsook, *Thailand*, 26.

³³ Harvey W. Smith and others. *Area Handbook for Thailand* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army, 1968), 77.

³⁴ Thamsook, "Pibulsongkram's," 245.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 243.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 245.

³⁷ Ray, 198.

³⁸ Thamsook, "Pibulsongkram's," 243.

³⁹ Smith and others, 247.

militarism, dictatorship, and Pibun's influence among the young."⁴⁰ Pibun's efforts to shape public opinion included his articles published by newspapers, and radio addresses. He frequently censored the mass media through his additional cabinet position as Minister of Interior.⁴¹

Thai nationalism was deliberately promoted by popularizing traditional Thai songs, plays, and literature.⁴² The memories of national heroes of ancient times were revived to boost the handy ideology. To further spread Thai traditional culture, Pibun used a lively folk dance called *ramwong*. Radio Thailand broadcast its tune every day, and all government offices had to play it so that their employees could practice dancing.⁴³

Under Pibun Songkram, the pro-Japanese dictator, the name of the country was changed to Thailand and, with a heady mix of nationalism and militarism, a 'Pan-Thai' movement was launched, the object of which was to unite all the Thai peoples in Burma and Indochina.⁴⁴

The abundant propaganda directed to the "Thai brothers" in Laos and Cambodia found some positive reaction, particularly in southern Laos.

The Dispute over Indo-China

Perhaps the most popular of Pibun's nationalistic appeals was his call for a greater Thailand. The first publicly voiced Pan-Thai ideas could be traced to 1934. A year later they appeared in the Assembly. In 1936, the government popularized maps of historical Siam at its maximum territorial holding. Pibun and his lieutenant responsible for propaganda were determined to lead the irredenta. The expansion took place at the expense of the French Indo-China in 1941. After a brief military clash with the French

⁴⁰ Thamsook, "Pibulsongkram's," 243.

⁴¹ Ibid., 234.

⁴² Sakdi Rattanachai, interview, 14 July 1998.

forces in Indo-China, followed by Japanese mediation, Thailand gained the Laotian territories of Sayaboury and Champasak and the Cambodian land of Siemreap and Battambang except for the ancient city of Angkor and adjacent lands. "Such 'territorial conquest' led the Thai to believe that Pibun was a person with extraordinary power who could lead the country in times of crises."⁴⁵ "It is no exaggeration to say that this expansion policy was accepted virtually unanimously, and mobilized the vast majority of people behind the regime."⁴⁶ Pibun's military rank was Major General, which in the natural course would have been followed by Lieutenant General and General. Pibun played the conflict into his image building campaign as well. Following the Thai expansion, he promoted himself directly to the rank of Field Marshal.

Pibun's later commitments to Japan and the complex relations between Thailand and Japan in the 1940s cannot be fully explained without an analysis of the Franco-Thai confrontation over Indo-China. The border dispute between Thailand and the French in Indo-China can be traced to a treaty of 1893 between the two parties, which gave France areas on the left bank of the Mekong river (Laos) and many islands in the river. Additionally, Thailand was not allowed to erect military structures in the twenty-five kilometer wide zone along the Mekong. In 1904, Thailand was forced to make subsequent concessions to France. They included the cession of two enclaves on the right bank of the Mekong, one opposite Luang Prabang, and one opposite Pakse. The latter cessions inhibited Thai use of the river. The situation was further complicated by not employing the principle of *thalweg** and ambiguous wording of the 1883 treaty.⁴⁷ Thus,

43 Thamsook, *Thailand*, 38.

44 Geoffrey Gunn, *Political Struggles in Laos (1930-1954)* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, Thailand, 1988), 99.

45 Thamsook, "Pibulsongkram's," 245.

46 Charnvit, 46.

* *Thalweg*--a line that connects the lowest points in a riverbed.

through the expansion of colonial France, Thailand lost a large portion of its territory, the free use of the Mekong, and the natural geographical border with its neighbor.

The Thai situation improved after World War I. Emerging on the victorious side as an ally of France, it received a sympathetic reception of its request for revising the border issues. A special convention applied the *thalweg* to determine the border on the Mekong except in places where the border was to be between the French islands and the Thai bank. France also agreed to a twenty-five kilometer zone with no military structures mirroring the one on Thai side. The Thais remained disappointed with not setting the *thalweg* as the border, and with French persistence in holding the right-bank enclaves. On those matters, France was never willing to make any concessions despite Thailand's frequent efforts to modify the border.⁴⁸

From 1926 to 1939, no progress was made on revising the treaty. In 1936, when Thailand was negotiating new, equal treaties with foreign powers, the French side ignored the border question as a demonstration of "Siamese imperialism."⁴⁹ In 1939, however, as France began to feel less secure due to the growing tension in Europe and particularly the rapprochement of Germany and the Soviet Union at the expense of Poland, a French representative approached Pibun to request a non-aggression pact. The Thai response, although reluctant, was favorable, but insisted on the revision of borders as a precondition. The French side, or at least the special French representative -- Paul Lepissier, agreed to the negotiating of the border problems in October 1939. Although Lepissier enjoyed the support of Georges Mandel, in charge of the French colonial affairs until May 19, 1940, the officials governing Indo-China remained adamantly opposed to

⁴⁷ Thadeus E. Flood, "Franco-Thai Border Dispute and Phibun Songkhram's Commitment to Japan," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* (September 1969): 305.

any concessions to Thailand. Despite this, individual colonies, such as Indo-China could not independently engage in diplomatic dealings.

The non-aggression pact France desired was signed in Bangkok on June 12, 1940.

Pibun's address on that occasion was included in the *Bangkok Chronicle* of that day:

I desire to affirm that the honour which the Government of the Republic offers us today will remain deeply rooted in the hearts of the Thai people, and will constitute clear evidence that there will be no change in the traditional friendship between Thailand and the French Republic.

Secret annexes to the pact established that the border between Thailand and the French Indo-China would be based on the principle of *thalweg* and provided for a high-ranking negotiator on the French side to further discuss border issues prior to the ratification of the pact. Meanwhile, Germany had invaded France, and paralyzed French diplomacy. Instead of a negotiator from Paris, French officials from Indo-China were appointed to settle the issue. In the new environment, conservative colonial officials refused to consider any concessions.

Pibun notified Japan and Great Britain about the ongoing negotiations in the fall of 1939. The Japanese pressure was mounting in the region and the fall of Paris further destabilized the situation in the Indo-China. Pibun, influenced by his close friend, Japanese military attaché Colonel Hiroshi Tamura, believed that Japan would be true to its pan-Asian slogans and would soon overtake French Indo-China. The *Bangkok Chronicle* of June 20, 1940 reported that Japan requested the other Axis powers to recognize its dominance over the former French colony. Heading the widely supported irredentist movement, Pibun had to ensure that Japan would not take the territories under

⁴⁸ Ibid., 306.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Franco-Thai dispute. The French side lost the sense of urgency and its strong motivation to settle the issue. It merely asked to ratify the treaty with no further negotiations.

Pibun desired to take a firmer stand in the disagreement. To strengthen his position he had to rely on Japan—the emerging dominant power in the region. The importance of Japan in Southeast Asia grew as Germany continued its phenomenal successes in Europe. Following a leakage of diplomatic information from the Thai foreign affairs ministry to the West regarding Japanese request of Thailand to recognize Manchukuo, Pibun began to handle dealings with the Japanese diplomats personally.⁵⁰

As Pibun's involvement with Japan increased, he decided to send a good will mission to Japan in the fall of 1940, headed by Colonel Prom Yodhi, Vice Minister of Defense. The purpose of the mission was to give young officers some exposure to Japan and to influence the traditionally pro-Western Prom Yodhi.⁵¹ Probably the chief objective of the mission was, however, to secure Japanese backing for Thai irredenta, despite official claims that territorial enlargement was not a priority for Bangkok.⁵² The sense of urgency grew as the Thai, as well as the French in Indo-China, were expecting a Japanese attack on the French colony. Thailand probed Germany, Italy, Great Britain, and the US concerning their claims in Indo-China. The Axis powers fully supported the claims, while the United States and Britain called for a peaceful settlement. The United States shortly thereafter imposed an embargo on a shipment of planes already paid for by Thailand. Intending to benefit from this opportunity, Japan provided Thailand with the needed planes and ammunition.

⁵⁰ Batson and Shimizu, 44.

⁵¹ Flood, "Franco, 313.

⁵² Frederick Dolbeare—an adviser to the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, quoted in *Bangkok Chronicle* August 19, 1940, stated that the Thai government was interested in the internal development of Thailand rather than territorial expansion.

The Japanese attitude towards Thailand varied among different political circles. As early as 1938, Emperor Showa clearly demanded of military commanders that they must have the Thai government's approval before commencing any military movements on Thai territory. The navy, while longing for a southern expansion, remained careful in realizing its ambitions, fearing a confrontation with the United States. The army, having decided on southern expansion, sought a way to assure Thai cooperation necessary to invade Burma and Malaya. As a result of the intense interest in Thailand, more Japanese intelligence forces were sent to Bangkok; Tamura and Asada were charged with leading Pibun into an alliance with Japan. The growing irredentist movement in Thailand proved a great opportunity for Japan to secure Thai pledges of support.

The new Thai-Japanese friendship treaty of June 12, 1940 fulfilled the Japanese desire to become more influential in Southeast Asia, and the Thai need for strong support in its irredenta. The document consisted of three major points. It confirmed the existing cordial relations and mutually pledged respect for the other party's territorial integrity. The parties agreed to share information and discuss mutually important issues. Lastly, "In the event of one of the High Contracting Parties suffering an attack from any third Power or Powers, the other Party undertakes not to give aid or assistance to the said Power or Powers against the Party attacked."⁵³

In August 1940, Asada approached Pibun to intensify Thai economic relations with new members of the Co-Prosperity Sphere, raising the Thai-Japanese diplomatic relations to an ambassadorial level, signing a Japan-Thai cultural agreement, and recognition of Manchukuo. Pibun replied favorably to the request, yet he did not act on

⁵³ Thak Chaloemtiarana, ed., *Thai Politics: Extracts and Documents 1932-1957* (Bangkok: The Social Science Association of Thailand, 1978), 447.

the verbal approval until a year later. Thus, Pibun's pro-Japanese predisposition became questionable.⁵⁴ Even more so, because of the message carried by Prom Yodhi to the French officials in Hanoi on his way to Tokyo. He proposed an alliance between Thailand and Indo-China against Japan in exchange for the enclaves of land on the right bank of the Mekong. The French, determined not to make any further concessions, refused the offer. In response, Pibun announced that, unlike the pact with Britain ratified on August 31, the non-aggression pact with France would not be ratified unless France made concessions on the territorial issues. Thai demands included the return of Lao states and lands opposite of Pakse and Luang Prabang and setting a border in accordance with the deep channel water.⁵⁵ Pibun represented the demand for Lao states as an unwanted expansion, merely a move necessary to protect the Thai people living on that area. The *Bangkok Chronicle* editorial from October 20, 1940 referred to the natives of Laos: "They are Thai people, a few millions of them, who are ever so eager to rejoin their brethren."⁵⁶

The subsequent talks and diplomatic correspondence that occurred between Bangkok and Hanoi proved futile, as the French conservatives ascended in power and Lepissier became less influential. The French would not compromise. Instead, they sought a quick, unconditional ratification of the pact. In response to the adamant French position, Pibun, determined to lead the irredenta to a successful conclusion, indirectly approached the Japanese naval attaché Commander Torigoe Shinichi. Wanit delivered the pro-Japanese commitment. As Pibun confirmed in person on October 1, 1940, Japan would receive the right of troops' passage through Thailand, supplies, and raw materials.

⁵⁴ Flood, "Franco," 317.

⁵⁵ *Bangkok Chronicle*, September 14, 1940.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, October 20, 1940.

The implied consideration was the Japanese support of Thai expansion.⁵⁷

Thus, Pibun was determined to recover the historically Thai territory at any price.

As Pibun was quoted in Kamon Pensrinokun:

...you might wonder how this border adjustment can be successfully achieved after we received only denials in our talks with the French both times. I would like to explain to you that we have at our disposal several other means which [I] need to reserve as the tool of this government in achieving this goal...⁵⁸

Despite his status as the leader of a notorious pro-Japanese faction, Pibun sought support in the West.⁵⁹ When it failed, he turned to Japan.

Pibun was a cautious man and was no doubt loath to enter into the secret verbal understanding with the Japanese that he actually did. Yet, in his eyes, the only alternative would be the abandonment of the claims on the Mekong that he earlier believed could be realized easily. This would in turn cause him a loss of face among his countrymen, and there were domestic political rivals waiting to take advantage of such opportunity.⁶⁰

The Thai press successfully helped in spreading anti-French sentiment. November headlines of the *Bangkok Chronicle* included the following: “French Drive against Thailand Reviewed,” or “Further Violations of Thai Sovereignty.” The paper reported about ill-treatment of the native population and priests in Laos as well as about several anti-French parades and demonstrations of thousands of people organized by the “Thai Blood Party.”⁶¹

The first major military clashes occurred in early December 1940. Thai planes bombed Indo-China: Vientiane, the Saravane region, Pakse, and Savannakhet. The French air force bombed Thailand: Udon, Sakhone, and Ubon. Following minor clashes, the ground operations intensified in January 1941. In Cambodia, they included Thai

⁵⁷ Flood, “Franco,” 324.

⁵⁸ Kamon Pensrinokun, *Adaptation and Appeasement: Thai Relations with Japan and the Allies in World War II. Thai-Japanese Relations in Historical Perspective* (Asian Studies Monograph No. 041): 139.

⁵⁹ Batson and Shimizu, 48, 83; Flood, “Franco,” 325.

⁶⁰ Flood, “Franco,” 325.

⁶¹ *Bangkok Chronicle*, November 1940.

artillery bombardment. While the Thai army was victorious, the French navy defeated Thai forces in the Gulf of Siam on January 17, 1941.

Japan's promotion of Asian interests proved to be as insincere as Pibun's pro-Japanese sympathies he had expressed. As Thailand and Indo-China became exhausted with the war effort, Japan stepped in as a mediator. The cease-fire went into effect on January 28, 1941; after lengthy negotiations the treaty of May 9, 1941 signed in Tokyo provided for a retrocession of the lands Thailand lost to France in 1904 and 1907, but it also allowed France to retain a few islets on the Mekong. The treaty gave Thailand some 70,000 square kilometers of area forested with precious teak, but it also committed Pibun to the Co-Prosperity Sphere.⁶² The mediation was an insulting loss to France—supposedly some French diplomats remarked at the time that the settlement would not last long. At the same time, the limited gains deeply disappointed Thailand. Many were unaware of the extent of the naval defeat and demanded greater gains. Thailand not only had to agree to a demilitarized zone along the border, but it also had to pay to France money represented as compensation for capital improvements.⁶³ Japan clearly benefited from the arrangement, gaining prestige and Thai commitments. Pibun also gained. Through his maneuvering, the dispute that was supposed to lead to a non-aggression pact became a military conflict. Because of this, he saved face, gained popularity, and not only retained his position, but promoted himself to the rank of Field Marshal.

The Coming of War

⁶² Gunn, 101.

⁶³ Benjamin A. Batson, "The Fall of the Phibun Government," *Journal of the Siam Society* (July 1974): 92.

The Indo-China dispute was one reason why Japan and Thailand drew closer together. The war in Europe weakened trade with the belligerent countries, leading to growing Thai dependence on exchange with Japan.⁶⁴ Despite Thailand's growing dependence on Japan, neutrality remained the official Thai policy. In the words of Pibun quoted in the *Bangkok Chronicle* of June 8, 1940:

Whatever the trend of the war in Europe and whatever the nature of its repercussions abroad, Thailand is firmly determined to pursue her policy of strict and impartial neutrality as hitherto.⁶⁵

When Thailand signed pacts of non-aggression on June 12, 1940, in contrast to the pacts with Britain and France, the agreement with Japan concerned "the continuance of friendly relations and mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity" rather than being limited to a non-aggression clause.⁶⁶

The cultural ties included Thai youth studying at Japanese universities. As of the summer of 1940, there were about 115 Thai students in Tokyo at that time.⁶⁷ An increasing amount of the news presented by Thai newspapers came from Axis news agencies like Domei or Trans-Ocean, replacing the BBC and Reuters. Thailand and its Prime Minister received favorable press in Japan (notably, in the *Osaka Mainichi*, but also in the *Japan Times*). Reciprocally, Thai newspapers wrote about Japanese actions like the "China Incident" in very careful terms.⁶⁸

Thailand's foreign trade with Japan went through three distinct stages. The first began with the opening of the Yokohama Specie Bank's branch in Bangkok. This period of slowly growing exchange ended with the China Incident. In the second stage, Thai

⁶⁴ *Bangkok Chronicle*, June 1, 1940.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, June 8, 1940.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, June 12, 1940.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, July 6, 1940.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

trade, largely controlled by Chinese merchants, excluded Japanese products due to Japan's aggression. The beginning of World War II started the third era of Thai-Japanese trade. With the belligerent nations unable to sustain production and shipping, Thailand turned to the neutral nations i.e. the United States and Japan, as well as British colonies (mainly Hongkong).⁶⁹

The economic ties within the Co-Prosperity Sphere strengthened, as it became increasingly difficult for its members to trade with the Allies. Although in 1939 Japan was a net exporter to Thailand (exports exceed imports little less than five times), Japanese demand for Thai rice, timber, rubber, ferrous ores, and tin greatly increased due to the war conditions of the Japanese economy. In July 1941, Japan requested a 10 million baht loan to finance its purchases. Thailand granted the loan, however, on the condition that the Japanese repay in gold. Pibun was hesitant to lend the money, fearing inflation, but the completion of rice sales to Japan depended on the loan. The money lasted until another request in August, this time for 25 million baht. Thailand granted this loan too, on the condition that all of the gold backing up the loan except for 10 million, baht would be kept in Bangkok. Thailand depended on supplies of oil from Japan, shipments of which were conditional on Thai supplies of tin and rubber.

Two events on the global arena proved crucial for the Thai future. In April 1941, Japan and the Soviet Union signed a neutrality pact, which significantly eased tensions on Japan's northern borders; in June 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union. Due to the latter, Japan could put more trust into the recently signed pact. With the Soviet Union engaged in the European conflict, Japan could safely pursue its southern expansion.

⁶⁹ Bangkok Chronicle, July 17, 1940.

As Japan established its control over Indo-China, it intensified its attempts to persuade Thailand into military cooperation. Despite the commitment to support Japan made in September 1940, Pibun, probably disappointed with the Japanese mediation, turned once again to the West for weapons and assistance. However, the Western response was very limited. The United States since the Franco-Thai conflict, the United States viewed Thailand with deep distrust. Its pledge of help to Thailand was limited to an insignificant supply of arms. Great Britain at that time was in no position to protect anyone. However, in November, Sir Josiah Crosby, the British Minister to Thailand, mentioned some field guns, howitzers, and ammunition in Singapore on which Thailand could possibly count. Crosby had always been sympathetic towards Thailand; notwithstanding, at the time instead of defending Thailand, Great Britain was considering operation "Matador:" a military action to secure Thai areas necessary for the defense of Singapore. In all, the Western powers promised Thailand nothing binding.

In July 1941, Japan requested of Thailand a diplomatic upgrade from Ministers to Ambassadors. The exchange took place in October 1941. For the Japanese, it provided a chance to increase the number of personnel deployed for infiltration, while Pibun could eliminate one of his opponents, Sri Sena, by sending him to Tokyo. The Thai minister of foreign affairs, Direk Chayanam, turned to the United States and Great Britain with a proposal of similar exchange. Both refused citing as reasons principles unrelated to Thailand—one had a policy not to do such things while at war, and the other had refused to grant the request to other countries, thus it could not grant it to Thailand. Another diplomatic request Japan made of Thailand concerned the recognition of Manchukuo and Nanking. Thailand recognized the first while refusing to recognize the second.

Pibun, while double-dealing and trying to secure favors from the Allies and from Japan, officially maintained that Thailand continued the strict neutrality policy as outlined in the Royal Proclamation of September 5, 1939 (countersigned by the Prime Minister). On August 21, his lieutenant, Wichit Wichitwathakan, released a statement about Thai neutrality. On September 8, The Duty of the Thai People During War Act was released:

All Thai people must resist the enemy in every way with weapon supply, monetary supply, and other supplies (...) all Thai people must resist the force of the enemy in ways possible until the end. (...) They must also destroy tools, equipment, household supply, consumption supply, houses, living quarters, beast of burden, and other supplies.⁷⁰

In the same spirit, Pibun told a British agent, on October 3, 1941, that Thailand would resist Japan vigorously and cooperate with Great Britain.⁷¹

In the fall of 1941, Japanese diplomats several times urged Pibun to cooperate more closely with Japan. However, he managed to avoid further commitments. At the same time, Japan, foreseeing an unnecessarily strenuous campaign against Burma and Malaya in case of Thai alienation, was careful not to press its demands too bluntly. In November, tension between Japan and the United States reflected on the situation in Thailand, where a newly established defense command called Thai military reserves.⁷² The press reflected the general state of unrest among the people facing uncertain future.⁷³ On November 5, 1941, Hideki Tojo reported on the forum of the Imperial Conference that “we have been working on Pibun Songkram to set up close military relations ever since the time of our advance into Southern French Indo-China.” However, he had no

⁷⁰ *The Duty of the Thai People During War Act* in Thak, 448.

⁷¹ *The “MAGIC” Background of Pearl Harbor* vol.4, app. (Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, 1978), A-520.

⁷² William L. Swan, “Thai-Japanese Relations at the Start of the Pacific War: New Insight into a Controversial Period,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 18, no. 2 (September 1987): 274.

⁷³ “MAGIC,” vol. 4, app., A-518, A519.

certainty as to the outcome of the Japanese advances.⁷⁴ Later that month, Tsubokami Teiji, the newly arrived Japanese ambassador, approached Pibun to discuss transit of troops through Thailand. Pibun pledged economic cooperation and was generally sympathetic towards Japan throughout the meeting.⁷⁵ Although his inclinations seemed pro-Japanese (particularly his opinion presented during the November 28, Cabinet meeting), Pibun had not made a decision.⁷⁶ Thus, Tojo stated on December 1, that Thailand's alignment could not be foreseen.⁷⁷

On December 3, in a three-hour speech to the cabinet, Pibun declared "The time has come when we must cast our fate with that of Japan."⁷⁸ As the Thai cabinet was debating which course to take in the approaching conflict, Asada brought from Tokyo a document outlining the actions to be taken by the Japanese diplomats on the day prior to the troops' entry. The date was to be specified later.⁷⁹ Pibun received a warning that the attack had been scheduled for December 3, but was postponed for a few days. On December 4, Tamura asked once more about possible military cooperation. While Pibun appeared closer to an agreement than previously, on the same day he dispatched a note addressed to Churchill asking for an official statement that a Japanese aggression on Thailand would put Great Britain in a state of war with Japan.⁸⁰ The December 5 *Bangkok Chronicle* presented news supplied by BBC and Reuters about the powerful British fleet headed by *HMS Prince of Wales* and slowing Japanese offensive actions. The press at that time portrayed both powers as matched opponents. The same issue brought an

⁷⁴ Ike, Nobutaka, *Japan's Decision for War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 235. [minutes from Imperial conferences]

⁷⁵ "MAGIC," vol. 4, app. A-524.

⁷⁶ Swan, "Thai-Japanese," 275.

⁷⁷ Ike, 281.

⁷⁸ "MAGIC," vol. 4, app., A-5.

⁷⁹ Batson and Shimizu, 60.

⁸⁰ "MAGIC," vol.4, app. A-539, A-540.

interview with Pibun in which he said that Thailand, if forced to, would fight to the very end. He confirmed the policy of strict neutrality and declared that Thailand was safe unless the great powers “consider [the recently ratified] sacred treaties as scraps of paper.” “Honour is our life and soul,” he stated.⁸¹

The War

Pibun was absent from Bangkok on the critical night of December 7. There are at least two different explanations given by Pibun for his sudden departure.⁸² Whether he went away to investigate an unjust imprisonment of a minor official or to inspect defense posts, both seem mere pretexts. It remains undetermined whether he purposely left Bangkok in the crucial time so as to defer the decision. Asada, who was charged with delivering the Japanese requests, wrote in his diary “Inferring a possible Japanese military move, he temporarily evaded talks with Japan...”⁸³ A very plausible explanation comes from another source:

The Japanese were going to war. It was now a matter of how quickly and strongly the British would react. If they were able to cope with the Japanese, the old order could remain intact. Thus a commitment too early to Japan could expose Pibun’s anti-British stance which might easily lead to his downfall. [...] If he remained in Bangkok, Pibun would be forced at the very start, before events had developed at all, to reveal his commitment. If he were “out of reach,” however, he could delay this commitment and perhaps have a chance to grasp the development of events.⁸⁴

On the evening of December 7, at 10:30 P.M., Teiji Tsubokami asked to see the Prime Minister. Since Pibun was absent, Tsubokami informed the cabinet that on the next day by 2:30 A.M., the Imperial Army would enter Thailand for the purpose of attacking

⁸¹ *Bangkok Chronicle*, December 5, 1941.

⁸² Swan, “Thai-Japanese,” 279-280.

⁸³ Batson and Shimizu, 83.

Burma and Malaya, and requested permission and facilitation of transit.⁸⁵ No delay was possible after the simultaneous strike against Pearl Harbor, Singapore, and Malaya had been initiated. The cabinet members replied that since Thailand was under martial law, only Pibun had the power to make the decision.⁸⁶

Pibun returned to Bangkok just before 7 A.M. Meanwhile the troops and police stationed on the borders fiercely resisted. Thai troops fought with bare hands, for there was virtually no ammunition for any sustained fighting. It was a small event in the scope of what was to follow on a world-wide scale, but it was deadly real to those who fought there...⁸⁷ Once again, Pibun won through his political maneuvers. He gained precious hours during which he could make the decision most benefiting him. During the Cabinet meeting he hypocritically cut short Pridi by saying that there was no time for lengthy discussion while Thai soldiers were dying. The delay was a result of Pibun's concern for his political standing in the first place.⁸⁸ The "deadly real" price was paid by the soldiers, police, and civilians who, whether out of patriotism or at the gunpoint of their superiors, followed Pibun's words about "resistance to the end." That he did not believe in the policy himself was proved by the disorganized defense to which Thai resistance amounted. While foreseeing a Japanese military move, he did not dispatch troops to the likely invasion points.⁸⁹

At 7:30 A.M. the cabinet reached a consensus to declare a cease-fire. Pibun delivered the news to the waiting Japanese and returned to the meeting with the Japanese

⁸⁴ Swan, "Thai-Japanese," 281.

⁸⁵ William L. Swan, "Japanese Economic Relations with Siam: Aspects of Their Historical Development 1884-1942," (Ph. D. diss. Australian National University, 1986): 240. [Minutes of the Cabinet Meeting]

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Ray, 201.

⁸⁸ Batson and Shimizu, 84.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

offer, which consisted of four proposed courses of action Thailand could take: 1. A Thai-Japanese offensive/defensive alliance, 2. Joining the Axis, 3. Cooperation with Japanese military operations, 4. Mutual defense of Thailand which would include Thailand's participation in the Tripartite Pact, and an offensive/defensive bilateral treaty with Japan.⁹⁰ A cease-fire and transit of Japanese troops was a part of each option, as well as a promise to aid Thailand in recovery of some Malayan and Burmese territories.⁹¹

Further Cabinet discussion yielded a decision to allow Japanese transit, avoid military cooperation with the Imperial Army, and refuse the lost territories from Japanese hands. A treaty to that effect was signed at 11:25. The first signed agreement, as presented by the *Bangkok Chronicle* of December 9, 1941, provided for allowing of the troops' transit in exchange of Japan's recognition of Thai sovereignty, independence, and national honor. The first clause of the treaty further stipulated that Thailand would provide "all convenience necessary for this passage."⁹² The decision seemed justified by the circumstances as they appeared to Pibun: five hundred Japanese planes were allegedly ready to bomb Bangkok, three Japanese convoys of warships blockaded Thailand, no dependable external help was immediately forthcoming, the country would be destroyed in the course of war, and lastly, the army would be disarmed and Thailand would be occupied by the Japanese.⁹³ Pibun's wife, Lady La-Iad, speaking for Pibun, explained all subsequently made agreements by simply saying, "There was no choice for a small, weak country deprived of any support of a Big Power."⁹⁴ It seems, however, that there were

⁹⁰ Swan, "Japanese Economic," 153. Swan notes, however, that the options he presented were based on the Cabinet minutes, which seem to be incorrect.

⁹¹ Batson and Shimizu, 78.

⁹² Agreement of December 8 in Swan, "Japanese Economic," 233.

⁹³ Ray, 78, 201; Asada in Batson and Shimizu on page 85 implied that it was merely a rumor spread by Wanit either of his own or Pibun's initiative.

⁹⁴ Ray, 203.

other options, only maybe not as appealing to Pibun due to the political risk he would face from even a remote danger of disarming the Thai army. Furthermore, Pibun might have had already resolved by that time to join the Japanese bandwagon. Asada recalled that shortly after the agreement on the least cooperative option of passage was reached by dolorous Thai ministers, Wanit came to his office radiating with joy and ambiguously promised to the perplexed diplomat that "Everything is O.K. Step by step."⁹⁵ It must be noted that as early as December 3, Wanit expressed his hope that Thailand would cooperate with Japan.⁹⁶ Whereas Wanit could possibly act on his own initiative, Pibun would soon directly undertake steps towards an alliance.

On December 10, at a meeting with the Thai Cabinet, Pibun spoke of Japan in favorable terms. He noted that Japan posed a danger, but advocated cooperation.⁹⁷ This new attitude differed considerably from his remarks on December 8. Later the same day, Pibun arranged a meeting with Tsubokami. The ambassador brought to the meeting a draft of an alliance treaty expecting Pibun to seek closer ties. Indeed, at the meeting Pibun announced that he would enforce martial law, reshuffle the cabinet, and after the people were prepared, he would declare war on Britain.⁹⁸ When approached with the draft treaty, Pibun promised to sign it the next day. The *Bangkok Chronicle* for that day reported the sinking of the formidable *HMS Prince of Wales* and *HMS Repulse*.⁹⁹ The strike clearly pointed to Japan as the likely victor. Pibun's radio address from the last night followed the proclamation of the martial law. The Prime Minister announced: "May I state on oath that, however serious the situation of the country, I shall not resign my

⁹⁵ Batson and Shimizu, 79.

⁹⁶ Swan, "Thai-Japanese," 278.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Bangkok Chronicle*, December 9, 1941.

post as Premier and shall serve the Nation to the last.” On the abandonment of the policy of “fighting to the very end” he remarked “The policy of the Nation has changed somewhat and the people ought to behave themselves accordingly.”¹⁰⁰

The relations with Great Britain at the time were defined by the non-aggression pact of June 12, 1940, later ratified in Bangkok. Article 2 of the pact provided the following:

If one of the High Contracting Parties is the object of an act of war or of aggression on the part of one, or more than one, third Power, the other High Contracting Party undertakes not to give, either directly or indirectly, aid or assistance to the aggressor or aggressors for the duration of the present Treaty.¹⁰¹

The treaty was to be valid for at least six years.

At the December 11 Cabinet meeting, Pibun informed the ministers that the Japanese were pressing for the next step and that they would resort to force if their demands were not met. Although Asada recalled in his memoirs that he had been surprised by the development,¹⁰² Pibun presented the closer cooperation as a solely Japanese idea, and magnified the threat of a forceful military invasion to conclude that whoever acted violently against the Japanese, in effect betrayed Thailand.¹⁰³ Pibun used the Japanese threat to pressure the cabinet into approving the treaty and accepting his unofficial pro-Japanese inclination. The draft was signed that day. The *Bangkok Chronicle* of December 12, 1941 reported the news as a development that would “add glorious pages to the history of Thailand as well as Japan.” It presented the Japanese aggression as an act of self-defense and triumphantly announced that “While the parleys

¹⁰⁰ *Bangkok Chronicle*, December 8, 1941.

¹⁰¹ Thak, 444.

¹⁰² Batson and Shimizu, 62.

¹⁰³ Swan, “Japanese Economic,” 277. [Minutes of the Cabinet Meeting]

have been used to deceive other races for the cause of their existence, their fate is now sealed; the Asiatic race subjected to pressure for hundreds of years have now risen up.”¹⁰⁴

On December 15, Pibun assumed the Defense and Foreign Affairs ministries. He transferred Direk Chayanam from the post of the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the post of Ambassador to Japan, thus giving himself a free hand in Thai foreign policy. The *Bangkok Chronicle* for that day reported about several Japanese successes and a clash between Thai and British troops on the Burmese border on December 12. Another article described the people’s reaction to the new treaty:

Public sentiment in Thailand underwent an absolute change yesterday, when the entire Thai Nation, at the request of the Government, united in celebrating the conclusion of the Nippon-Thai Offensive and Defensive Alliance. True to their traditional warrior spirit, the Thai people were not in the least degree scared at the prospects of war but on the contrary rejoiced because they know that they had been accorded their due share in the creation of a New Order in East Asia [...] Never before was the warmth of friendship between the Thai and Japanese peoples felt so keenly...¹⁰⁵

Thus, among “peace loving” Thai, the martial spirit suddenly revived. Both Britain and Japan were viewed as neutral powers until December 8; then, the Japanese became the invaders. One week later, the friendship with the Japanese was “everlasting,” while the British were referred to as the “enemy.” The changes in the language employed by *Bangkok Chronicle*—censored by the government as all other press, well illustrate the change in Thai foreign policy. The swift change of friends and enemies could well inspire George Orwell. Pibun was a true dictator.

Some of his decisions could be explained by duress caused by the Japanese presence. Pibun later spoke:

¹⁰⁴ *Bangkok Chronicle*, December 12, 1941.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, December 15, 1941.

... if the people were to know of the pressure which the Japanese exerted in forcing me to join in the defensive and offensive treaty ... I am sure they will fully sympathize with me and my government. It would take too long to relate the story in full, allow me therefore to point out briefly that I tried to argue and stubbornly refused to do anything till I got a headache. The Japanese who packed my residence at each occasion comprised of military officers as well as diplomats, all of them screamed to have their demands carried out."¹⁰⁶

However, it must be remembered that Pibun himself arranged the crucial meeting with Tsubokami on December 10. The treaty of December 12, or certainly the declaration of war, was a choice Pibun made freely, for the purpose of advancing his interests.

On December 17, Pridi's promotion to the regent's council was announced. The promotion would strengthen Pibun's position in the Cabinet which Pridi was forced to leave. Also, Vilas Osthanom, a minister without portfolio and the Director General of Public Relations Department, a supporter of Pridi, had to leave their posts.¹⁰⁷ On December 18, one of the most pro-Japanese politicians, Wanit Pananon assumed the position of Minister of Finance concurrently with Phra Boriphan.¹⁰⁸

Pibun declared his commitment to the new treaty:

As this Pact of Alliance is a sacred document, arrangements have been made for its formal signature to take place in this sacred temple, and I pray that, by virtue of the Triple Gems, our two allied countries may be blessed with the successful and fruitful achievements of our aspirations for the peace and prosperity of East Asia.¹⁰⁹

The unusual setting of the signing ceremony was supposed to indicate how earnest Pibun was. In retrospect, it only proved that nothing was sacred for him. In his explanation of wartime actions Pibun wrote after the war: "Considering the fact that I and the government headed by me led our country to fight on the side of Japan, it is clear that

¹⁰⁶ Pibun quoted in Thamsook, *Thailand*, 13.

¹⁰⁷ Ray, 79.

¹⁰⁸ Swan, "Thai-Japanese," 289.

¹⁰⁹ *Bangkok Chronicle*, December 22, 1941.

we did not have any intention of earnestly doing so."¹¹⁰ Ironically, Pibun sacrilegiously mentioned the Triple Gems once again, after the war. He wrote:

Some propaganda pieces accused me of concluding a secret treaty with Japan as a war ally before Japan entered Thailand. For this, I would like the Triple Gems to bear me witness that I have never committed such an act.¹¹¹

Here, he chose not to recall the day when he gave his word to Torigoe in October 1940, to which he later referred during the war:

Yes, I remember that day very clearly. I did my best to abide by that promise (...) I would like to go hand in hand with you, Captain Torigoe, up the same road. Let us exert our best efforts for Asia.¹¹²

On December 11, Pibun also invoked his Buddhist values. He spoke of the Japanese: "They want us to help them fight, and if they don't give us anything, then that's our [bad] karma."¹¹³ It was ominous for Thailand that its leader would not take the responsibility for negative outcomes, but blame them on bad karma instead.

The Pact of Alliance of December 21 consisted of three points: both countries were to respect each other's independence and sovereignty, they were to extend mutual aid if one of the parties were in conflict with a third party, and neither party could enter a peace agreement without the other party's consent.¹¹⁴ The secret protocol provided for return to Thailand of the lands it had had to cede and for immediate Thai help in the Japanese war effort. Lastly, the new agreement superseded the one of December 8. The Assembly enthusiastically received the treaty at its secret session on December 23, because of its support for the clause about recovering territories.

¹¹⁰ Thak, 351.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹¹² Bruce E. Reynolds, *Ambivalent Allies: Japan and Thailand, 1941-1945* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1988), 330.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 329.

¹¹⁴ Thak, 450.

On January 25, at 10 A.M. the cabinet decided to declare war on the United States and Britain. The decision followed what the January 26 *Straits Times* described as a “highly successful low-level attack on the power station and other targets in Bangkok” by heavy R.A.F. bombers; it was the second raid in that month. The Declaration of War read:

Whereas Great Britain and the United States of America have committed successive acts of aggression against Thailand, in certain cases by sending troops to invade Thai territory and, in particular, by sending aeroplanes clandestinely to bomb the homes of the people who carry on their normal livelihood ... so that Thailand can no longer look on with forbearance, ... now therefore ... it is hereby declared by Royal Command that a state of war exists between Thailand on the one hand, and Great Britain and the United States of America, on the other hand, as from noon of the 25th of January B.E. 2485 [1942]...¹¹⁵

All twenty-four ministers present assented to it; so did two of the three regents (Pridi was absent at the time). At noon the decision was broadcast to the people. December 29 brought the Assembly’s approval of the declaration of war. The declaration was merely a diplomatic confirmation of the previous developments in Thai-Japanese relations. In fact, the Thais had already been fighting at Japan’s side in accordance with the Alliance Treaty.

On January 26, Tsubokami congratulated Pibun on the decision to enter the war. The Emperor awarded him the highest order of the Empire.¹¹⁶ Despite an isolated opinion that the decision came as a surprise to the Japanese, an unwelcome one since it enabled Britain to attack freely the troops stationed in Thailand without considering the natives, Japan had clearly planned on directly involving Thailand in the war.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 457.

¹¹⁶ Swan, “Thai-Japanese,” 291.

¹¹⁷ Inoue, 57.

The Allied reaction was decidedly unfavorable. Seni Pramoj, the Minister to the United States at that time, refused to deliver the declaration since there was no *causus belli*. Washington decided not to reciprocate or even recognize the declaration of war, and maintained the decision until the end of the war. Britain was very disappointed with Thai actions since December 8. However, its precautionary strengthening of defenses in Malaya began as early as July 2.¹¹⁸ On December 17, a British Foreign Office commentator had stated that declaration of war on Thailand “was obviously on the cards,” in a front page article titled “War Declaration Against Thais?”¹¹⁹ On December 22, 1941 the same newspaper informed about the Thai-Japanese mutual, offensive-defensive alliance with the comment:

It is now evident that Field Marshal Luang Pibun Songkram, the Prime Minister of Thailand, was flirting with Japan for an alliance even at the time when he declared that Thailand would defend her country to the end against aggression.¹²⁰

Thus, the tone of the *Straits Times* of January 26, 1942 announcement about the declaration of war did not convey any surprise. Crosby recalled Thai pledges to remain neutral at all costs and called the declaration a most shameful document in Thai diplomatic history. Churchill reciprocated the declaration of war and used it as justification to occupy Thailand at the end of the war.

Pibun suppressed any opposition to the alliance. He imprisoned twelve journalists, of whom two were sentenced for life. The state of war further strengthened his dictatorial power. He delayed the date of the 1942 Assembly elections by two years to maintain his strongholds there. Pibun swiftly accumulated ministerial portfolios. By February 16,

¹¹⁸ *Bangkok Chronicle*, July 2, 1940.

¹¹⁹ *Straits Times*, December 17, 1941.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, December 22, 1941.

1942 he was the Minister of Defense, Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Education simultaneously. The military power he wielded was of Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Commander of the Navy, Commander of the Air Force, and Supreme Commander of Armed Forces.¹²¹ In addition to the key portfolios held by Pibun, he manipulated the Cabinet members according to his will. As Thawee recalls:

The way Pibun consulted his colleagues smacked of full-blasted authoritarianism. Usually a Prime Minister in a constitutional regime is expected to ascertain the views of his colleagues, then offer his own, on a particular subject, and try to arrive at a final decision. But Pibun (while in a meeting) would talk and talk, trying as it were to make others chew his views, and then ask what views others held. By that time others had lost all appetite for a healthy debate. Moreover, any expression of a difference of opinion was dangerous and sometimes likely to draw retaliation, especially from the police.¹²²

Thawee also documented how Pibun threatened him with prison and later offered him a bribe not to become the Speaker of the house.¹²³

After the war, Pibun denied any dictatorial ambitions. As he put it:

What is dictatorship? If I am alleged to imitate fascist Mussolini or Hitler, I swear I have never had even the least thought.

Is there any Dictator who upholds democracy as much as myself? It is me who built Democracy Monument. It is me who constructed Democracy Avenue. It is me who ordered citations of constitution on the air every night. It is me again who minted Democracy coins.

I am not a dictator. A dictator must be much more ruthless. A kind-hearted one like myself can never be a dictator.¹²⁴

Such was Pibun's position officially accepted after the war; apparently it was convincing enough to allow him to lead Thai politics once more with Western backing. Yet, this opinion calls for scrutinizing it once more. In the light of various sources this paper will

¹²¹ Foran Songsri, *Thai-British-American Relations during World War II and the Immediate Postwar Period, 1940-1946* (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 1985), 26.

¹²² Ray, 76

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 97

¹²⁴ Thamsook, "Pibulsongkram's," 242

demonstrate that Pibun desired nothing less than a dictatorship and the interest of (as he had declared) beloved Thailand, was not closer to him than his political power.

Pibun's Motives

What caused Pibun to make the decision? When did his attitude change to decidedly favor Japan? Answering these questions seems impossible. The only available clues are Pibun's words. But, whether they appeared in diplomatic talks, a formal treaty, a political speech, or an address to the Cabinet, Pibun himself never regarded them as meaningful. Moreover, despite his name being commonly associated with the pro-Japanese faction, it seems he never had a principle-based attitude towards Japan.

He was clearly convinced that the Japanese would emerge victorious:

The British have already lost the War and I am convinced that the Japanese will defeat the British very soon in every theatre of war in Asia. [...] There is not the slightest indication that the British could win the war. I am of the opinion that the Japanese will undoubtedly defeat the British very soon in all theatres of war in Asia. [...] And, if I am wrong in this viewpoint, I bet you a dozen bottles of champagne.¹²⁵

Pibun's confidence in Japanese victory had been rising since the sinking of *HMS Prince of Wales* and Pearl Harbor. Thai historians often differ on that opinion and accept Pibun's own explanation:

The military alliance and, to a greater degree, the declaration of war were intended to prove to Japan that there would be no stab in the back. The recovery of more lost territories, offered by Japan on the day of the invasion and at first rejected by the Thais, proved a secondary concern. It could be said that all the steps of the march into the Japanese camp were aimed at preventing negative developments, rather than in attaining positive objectives.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ *Bangkok Chronicle*, February 12, 1942.

¹²⁶ Kamon, 150.

Admittedly, the territorial gains were of secondary importance. But, the ultimate goal of the government, namely: Pibun, was to stay in power (its loss would be the negative development mentioned above).

Many scholars see the opportunism of Pibun as his reason for joining the war on the Japanese side.¹²⁷ Some argue it happened because he believed in Pan-Asianism or, as a true patriot, wanted to advance the national interest.¹²⁸ But, the issue of disarmament of the Thai military needs closer analysis. The conflict with Indo-China ended in a stalemate at a time when France had just lost to Germany, and its Asian possession became a Japanese military base. The humble successes in border skirmishes proved the pitiful state of Thai military. Pibun realized the weakness very soon. The decision to order a cease-fire on the morning of the Japanese incursion came very quickly, as he had been aware of the army's incapacity. Asada wrote in his memoir:

At that time, Thailand had about a hundred thousand soldiers, but their military equipment was old, dating to the days of imperialism, and unsuitable for modern international warfare. To borrow a recent Japanese expression, they were an "army without military power," whose *raison d'être* was to provide a domestic base for Pibun's political power.¹²⁹

Tsubokami and a Japanese General Iida did not expect much of the Thai army as an ally either.¹³⁰ Indeed, the Thai army was not allowed to participate in the campaigns of Japan's Southern Army until May 1942. The decision to allow it to take Kengtung from Chiang Kai-shek's withdrawing 93rd Army was made to reinforce Pibun's political position rather than to help the Japanese troops.¹³¹ The Thai army performed poorly as expected. It lacked exact maps and appropriate horses, and was otherwise terribly

¹²⁷ Flood, Numnonda, Swan, Reynolds, Aldrich, Songsri Foran, Nuntana.

¹²⁸ Batson and Shimizu, 66; Charnvit, 60.

¹²⁹ Batson and Shimizu, 87. Due to the nature of the source, the size of the army was overestimated.

¹³⁰ Bruce E. Reynolds, *Thailand and Japan's Southern Advance 1940-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 111.

unprepared.¹³² Pibun himself admitted that his army had not been capable of resisting an outside enemy.¹³³

The army was too weak to protect the country, but it certainly was a sufficient force to keep a dictator in power. Thai armed forces consisted of approximately 60,000 soldiers, two hundred airplanes (of which the pursuit planes were obsolete), and fifteen regiments of field artillery and one regiment of medium artillery. The equipment also included eighty tanks, several hundred trucks, and one platoon of armored cars. Thai navy had two heavy gunboats, two light gunboats, thirty-six naval planes, and six thousand personnel.¹³⁴

Pibun was a leader of a military faction, the Field Marshal, and he exercised great influence among the military parliament members whom he had appointed. He had long favored his soldiers. Only in 1941, he awarded eight thousand decorations to the military and appointed thirty generals.¹³⁵ The army, even considering its "downtrodden state," provided a sense of sovereignty.¹³⁶ Whereas on the issue of sovereignty the meaning of the army was only symbolic, the army prevented civilian rule (in the end of 1941 only one third of the Cabinet was civilian), provided Pibun with political support, and executed his dictatorial whims. For example, in February 1943, following a quarrel with his wife, he resigned from the post—an event that was publicly announced. On the next day, however, he changed his mind and resumed the rule with the aid of armored cars.¹³⁷

¹³¹ Ibid., 116.

¹³² Reynolds, *Ambivalent*, 356.

¹³³ Thak, 351.

¹³⁴ Nuntana Kapilakanchana, Phungphet, and Supatra Nilwatchala, *The Relationship between Japan and Thailand 1932-1945* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1978), 70.

¹³⁵ Thamsook, "Pibulsongkram's," 244.

¹³⁶ Kamon, 150.

¹³⁷ Ray, 93.

The Assembly was enthusiastic about the alliance and fully supported the declaration of war, particularly because of the first clause of the secret protocol attached to it: "The Japanese Government will cooperate in the realization of Thailand's demands for the return of its lost territories."¹³⁸ People warmly welcomed the Japanese troops (if the press could be trusted). Among the politicians, none could oppose the planned irredenta. The army, instead of being disarmed, gained importance, and so did the Field Marshal whose traditional power base was the military. Pibun stormed through the crisis and continued to hold the rudder, only sailing a different course.

The Japanese presence since December 8, solidified the political status quo of the time. Pibun became very closely associated with the Japanese camp. Through Japan, Thailand could enlarge its territory. Also, Japanese propaganda flooded Bangkok. The slogan "Asia for Asiatics" and the idea of a "Co-Prosperity Sphere" were successfully implanted on Thai soil and helped to galvanize the nation around the militaristic leader.

Until the beginning of the war Pibun tried to maintain good relations with both Japan and the Allies, angling to gain territory and advantages in a bidding war between the sides. Asada was convinced how anti-British Pibun was, while Crosby, also on very good terms with Pibun, did not consider him pro-Japanese or anti-Western.¹³⁹ Crosby did not realize the emptiness of Pibun's words until later. Retrospectively, the long time Minister to Thailand described its Field Marshal as a "human weather vane."¹⁴⁰ As late as December 4, 1941 Pibun requested a joint Anglo-American declaration of support for Thailand.¹⁴¹ His procrastination culminated in his disappearance from Bangkok on

¹³⁸ Swan, "Japanese Economic," 169, 234.

¹³⁹ Swan, "Thai-Japanese," 272.

¹⁴⁰ Crosby quoted in Richard Aldrich, "A Question of Expediency: Britain, the United States and Thailand, 1941-1942," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (September 1988): 244.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

December 7. As early as 1940 he had committed himself to Japan, but he maintained some flexibility as late as December 1941. Notwithstanding, he promulgated the Act of Resistance in September 1941, while maintaining the appearances of strict neutrality. Obviously, Pibun had made more commitments than he could fulfill. Thus, his actions should not be analyzed considering his commitments, but considering what he thought would keep him in power.

Pibun's words and the commitments he made, although taken seriously by his contemporaries, meant little to him.

I once said it would be splendid to fight and die (...). That would bring honor. But that is to arouse the feelings of the people, because the propaganda of the government before troubles begin and after they have begun has to be two different things. Before trouble comes we have to act fearless in every way. Now that's all passed, meaning all that about fighting to the last man.¹⁴²

These words were not likely to soothe the families of those who died defending Thailand on December 7, 1941. Such were Pibun's beliefs concerning propaganda, but Pibun's attitude towards treaties was not different. In December 1941 he declared:

I do not consider this pact as a simple diplomatic document but as a sacred document. I have therefore arranged for the signature of this pact to be done in the Royal Chapel before the Emerald Buddha which is highly worshipped by the people not only in Thailand but also in Burma and a great part of India.¹⁴³

Here his words from December 5 are worth recalling. Pibun had said that honor was Thailand's life and soul and that Thailand was safe unless the Great Powers treated the non-aggression agreements like mere scraps of paper. In fact, it was Pibun who did so. Soon afterwards, Pibun's lack of integrity or even a single principle, beside staying in power, amazed even his own ministers: "I do not treat the pact of alliance with Japan as

¹⁴² Swan, "Japanese Economic," 275. [Minutes of the Cabinet Meeting]

¹⁴³ Pibun quoted in Swan, "Japanese Economic," 168.

more than a scrap of paper. I can tear it up anytime."¹⁴⁴ Pibun later claimed that the declaration of war against Britain and the United States was a trick to fool Japan.¹⁴⁵

Obviously, the ideas of democracy remained foreign to Pibun, and the monuments he built to it apparently did not influence his political thought. The emptiness of his ideology adopted from Japan, Pan-Asianism, became evident in his dealings with the West after the war.¹⁴⁶ The idea of "Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" was merely another ideology Pibun chose to utilize. It gave the Thais political and economic hope.¹⁴⁷ Pibun used religion and a variety of ideologies to which he never truly subscribed. Pibun's sympathies were neither pro-Western nor pro-Japanese, although diplomats of both sides considered him their ally. When the country under his leadership was threatened by war, he was mainly concerned about the political results of the choices he was making and the fate of the supporting him army.

Undeniably, Pibun was very popular among his people. Many still revere their Field Marshal. This cannot be explained only by omnipresent propaganda. He employed several ideas to gain popular support. He managed to make nationalism, the powerful force shaping many nations' histories, a tool for his own use. He appealed to the ideas of democracy, pan-Asianism, territorial expansion, and patriotism. Still, people did not turn against him when it became apparent that he believed in none of the above. His popularity came from his character traits. He was extremely self-confident, lacking principles, yet determined to carry out his ideas, and sufficiently ruthless to risk Thailand's interest for his personal benefit. Considering that such a man in effect

¹⁴⁴ Words spoken in the presence of Thawee, the Minister of Agriculture, and a police general. Ray, 95.

¹⁴⁵ Thamsook, *Thailand*, 16.

¹⁴⁶ Flood, "Japan's Relations," 771.

¹⁴⁷ Thamsook, *Thailand*, 15.

constituted the Thai government, the evident reason for Thai participation in the Pacific War was to prolong Pibun's dictatorship.

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