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THE FOX IN THE CABBAGE PATCH
THAILAND AND JAPAN’S
SOUTHERN ADVANCE

E. Bruce Reynolds

A question and answer session following a speech by The Thai Minister to Washington, M. R. Seni Pramot, on January 29, 1941 produced a memorable characterization of contemporary Thailand as a rabbit and Japan as a wily fox. The questioner, Dr. Riley Moore, referring to Japan’s mediation of the 1940-1941 border dispute between Thailand and French Indochina, suggested: “Wasn’t it like a fox coming in to arbitrate a dispute between two rabbits in a cabbage patch? And wasn’t the fox likely to fatten up the rabbits and then eat both of them?” To this Seni responded: “What would you do if you were a rabbit?”

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Moore phrased his question to reflect the prevailing Western view that the Thais were simply being outsmarted and used by the devious Japanese. Minister Seni accepted the characterization of his nation as a helpless rabbit to emphasize the extent to which the Thais were at the mercy of Japan’s power and to thereby dampen American suspicions, fanned by the reports from his American counterpart in Bangkok, Hugh Gladney Grant, that the Thai government had willingly and irrevocably joined forces with the Japanese. However, the historical record indicates that the Thais were not overmatched dupes of the wily Japanese (as Moore implied), passive victims (as Seni suggested), nor Japanese running dogs (Grant’s version). In fact, during the months leading up to World War II Thailand’s leaders had considerable success in outwitting and manipulating Japan and the other great powers in order to advance their own foreign policy agenda. This study illustrates the point by focusing on Thai diplomacy during the border conflict with French Indochina, from August 1940 to the conclusion of the Tokyo Peace Conference in May 1941.

The Origins of The Thailand-Indochina Border Dispute

The military element in the clique which overturned the absolute monarchy in Thailand in 1932 increasingly came to the fore in the succeeding years. In part the soldiers owed their prominence to the regime’s dependence on military power for its perpetuation; in part it reflected the appeal of militarism at a time when Italy, Germany, and Japan were on the march. An ambitious young artillery officer, Phibun Songkhram, emerged as Thailand’s leader, assuming the premiership in December 1938 after the retirement of an older and less ambitious military man, Phraya Phahon Phonphayahasena, who had presided over the factionalized ruling group since 1933.

Phibun’s strongest support came from a clique of army officers who espoused an ultranationalist program inspired by the European Fascist/National Socialist regimes. As in Italy and Germany--not to mention China and Japan-two other Asian countries similarly influenced --
the ultranationalists in Thailand aimed at militarizing and thereby mobilizing the Thai masses. The leading ideologue and spokesman for this group was a civilian, Luang Wichit Wichitwathakan, head of the Thai Fine Arts Department and a prolific writer and skilled propagandist. An irredentist program to recapture territories "lost" to the European colonial powers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries became a central element in the program to awaken and strengthen nationalist sentiment in Thailand.

The French became the chief target of the ultranationalists since territories they had seized in Laos and Cambodia were seen as more essentially "Thai" than the Malay states which had been surrendered to Britain. Moreover, the French had repeatedly humiliated Thailand in the process of wresting these territories from Bangkok's control.

When war broke out in Europe in September 1939, the French had pressed for a non-aggression pact with Thailand. Although initially reluctant, the Thais agreed to consider such a treaty in the hope that France might agree to long-sought, minor modifications in the Mekong River boundary separating Thailand and Laos. After protracted negotiations the French accepted a plan to set up a joint commission to settle the issue and the non-aggression pact was signed in early June 1941.

The treaty would remain unratified, however, as France's surrender to the Germans later the same month made such a minor concession seem inadequate from the Thai perspective. Not only Phibun, Wichit, and the ultranationalists, but the Thai leadership in general, saw this as a golden opportunity to press for additional border adjustments.\(^2\)

Thailand's Diplomatic Offensive

In a diplomatic offensive, believed to have been directed by Prince Wan Waithayakon, advisor to the Thai Foreign Ministry, and launched in August 1940, the Thais sought international support for--or at least understanding of--an effort to extract greater concessions from the French. They now called for the return of two tracts of land on the west bank of the Mekong River, opposite the Laotian towns of Luang Prabang and Pakse, arguing that the river was the natural boundary between Thailand and Indochina. The Germans and Italians offered no objection to the Thai plan, while the Americans, standing on the principle of upholding the status quo in a time of world disorder, expressed firm disapproval. The British called for restraint, but took a slightly more flexible stance than the Americans because of a keen awareness of Thailand's strategic importance to the defense of Burma and Malaya and concern about a possible Thai defection to the Japanese side.3

The Thais viewed Japan's position as critical to the hope of achieving the desired territorial adjustment, as Japan was concurrently pressuring Indochina from the other side and appeared ready to move against the weakly defended colony. Phibun's chief liaison man with the Japanese, Wanit Pananon, had gone to Tokyo in July to guage the attitude of the newly-formed Konoe Cabinet and the Thai premier himself was actively discussing the issue with Japanese representatives in Bangkok.4 The Thais clearly preferred to obtain the desired territory directly from the French before the Japanese advanced, but if this failed they knew they could achieve their goal only with Japanese approval.

The effort to bring Indochina under Japan's control had immediate priority in Tokyo, but the army general staff, spurred on by the efforts of the activist military attache in Bangkok, Colonel Tamura Hiroshi, had already begun looking ahead to the matter of obtaining Thai cooperation.

Army planners considered access to Thai airfields and the southern seaport of Songkhla as critical to the success of an assault on British Malaya. This perception, coupled with the need to maintain access to Thai resources, had inspired stepped up efforts to boost Japan's influence in Thailand. Tamura, who had developed a friendly personal relationship with Phibun, was been a key figure in this effort. He and other Japanese officials encouraged the Thai irredentist movement, viewing it as a means to stir-up anti-European sentiment. During a visit to Tokyo in August, Tamura indicated that support for Thai territorial aspirations offered the best hope for getting the desired military cooperation, perhaps even a military alliance.\(^5\)

However, Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke, who desired to control the pace of southern advance, was in the midst of negotiations with the French and considered army schemes in Thailand premature. Throughout the dispute between Thailand and Indochina, Matsuoka would advocate a more accommodating policy toward the French than the army desired. As a result of such disagreements within the Japanese leadership, when a high-level Thai delegation visited Tokyo in September its members received mixed signals and no solid indication that Japan would strongly support Thailand's claims.\(^6\)

**Phibun's "Commitment" to Japan**

At the same time they were sounding out other countries, the Thais were also appealing directly to the French. The Thai delegation enroute to Tokyo had stopped in Hanoi and had suggested that if France would return the desired territories Thailand would cooperate with Indochina in resisting Japanese pressures. However, the authorities in Indochina brusquely rejected this possibility.\(^7\) The French

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government in Vichy proved equally intractable when, on September 12, the Thai government advised that it would ratify the non-aggression pact only after return of the west bank territories.\(^8\)

Such French obstinance and Japan's movement of troops into northern Indochina on September 22, 1940 dashing hopes that Thailand might achieve her territorial goals without Japanese involvement. Moreover, the September 27 signing of the Tripartite Pact with Germany, and Italy strongly reinforced Japan's prestige.\(^9\) Fully committed to the irredentist program which he hoped would insure his stature as a national hero, Phibun moved quickly. The day after the conclusion of the Axis alliance he sent word to the Japanese Naval Attaché Torigoe Shin'ichi that he had made up his mind to cooperate with Japan.\(^10\)

From his previous contacts with the attachés Phibun knew well what the Japanese wanted, so two days later he personally advised Torigoe that he would allow the passage of Japanese forces through Thai territory in return for Japanese support of Thai irredentist claims. Although Tokyo subsequently pressed for a written pledge, Phibun resisted this, citing the need for complete secrecy and the danger of inciting a pre-emptive action by the British, but he assured the Japanese that he could keep his promise. This led the Japanese general staff to adopt a plan, on October 15, to mediate the Thai-French border dispute,

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9. The impact of these events can hardly be overstated. W.A.M. Doll, advisor to the Thai Finance Ministry, wrote to Frederick Dolbeare, former advisor to the Thai Foreign Ministry, that the Japanese advance had convinced the influential Prince Wan that "France was done" and that the Tripartite Pact "brought him definitely down on the side of the Axis." Doll added that the army and general public were betting at 10-20 to one odds on an Axis victory. Doll to Dolbeare, Nov. 19, 1940, 892.00/217, Record Group (hereafter RG) 59, U.S. National Archives.
with the object of paving the way for the establishment of bases in Thailand.  

One might interpret Phibun’s move as merely the first clear step toward his eventual alliance with the Japanese in December 1941 and as confirmation of Western suspicions that he sympathized with the Japanese cause. However, parallel moves make clear that the duplicitous Phibun could not be taken at his word and that he had not intended to burn any bridges. His “commitment” to Japan remained a closely held secret and there is little doubt that he considered it an expedient pledge, one which he had little desire to fulfill.

Evidence of this is the fact that within a week of his promise to Torigoe, Phibun had personal emissaries engaged in secret talks in both Hanoi and Singapore. The content of the approach made in Hanoi is not clear, but in the latter city an officer with close ties to Phibun urged that the Thai and British work out joint defense plans against the very Japanese attack via southern Thailand for which the premier had just given the green light. The emissary assured a wary British commander that the Thais were determined to resist any Japanese intrusion, but would need help in doing so.

Stirring The Pot

Phibun had used the specter of British intervention to justify his unwillingness to formalize his promise to Japan, but on a separate track he had been playing on Western fears of the Japanese. By doing so he hoped to frighten the United States and Britain and induce them to convince Vichy and the Indochinese authorities to adopt a more flexible policy. For example, in early September he had told Western diplomats

that the Japanese had agreed to give him what he wanted in Indochina, but that he was holding back in hopes of attaining his goal through direct negotiations with the French. At the end of the month he had claimed in a conversation with Sir Josiah Crosby, the British minister, that if the Japanese took over Indochina they would give him Laos and possibly Cambodia, too. In early October he informed French Minister Paul Lépissier that the Germans and Japanese had assured him that they would guarantee the ultimate success of the effort if he moved to seize the desired territories.\(^{13}\)

In a related campaign, the Thai authorities made every effort to convince Western diplomats that public sentiment for return of the "lost territories" had grown so irresistible that the "moderate" prime minister could not swim against the tide. The government controlled media portrayed carefully orchestrated demonstrations-staged initially by university students in Bangkok led by members of the Yuwachon, the military youth corps--as evidence of the popular fervor. Also, various Thai government figures indicated to Lépissier, Crosby, and American Minister Grant that extremist officers were forcing the premier's hand. If he resisted, Phibun told Grant directly, he might be eliminated and replaced by a less reasonable, pro-Japanese army man.\(^{14}\)

These efforts had the desired effect on Crosby and Lépissier, both of whom favored a flexible approach and indeed had come to consider Phibun a moderate. However, the hardline authorities in Indochina, who had great influence on the Vichy regime's policies in the region, trusted neither Lépissier--who had already been notified of his recall and would soon depart to join DeGaulle's Free French--nor

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Crosby. In Grant's case, the Thai campaign worked too well, as he judged the situation already lost. Convinced that the Thais were sure to join the Japanese in any event, Grant advocated stiff adherence to the principle of maintaining the status quo. In the end, despite the best efforts of the Thai, neither Vichy nor Grant could be swayed.

The Thais had much better luck in manipulating the Japanese. Although in early November the Japanese leaders had agreed to attempt mediation of the border dispute, they had made no immediate move to do so. Dissatisfied with the pace of events, the Thais set about to stir up some action.

On November 14, Asada Shunsuke, the Japanese chargé d'affaires in Bangkok, urgently reported information from a "reliable" Thai government source that the Thai cabinet had swung away from Japan and was leaning toward the British and Americans. Apparently the Thais also leaked the story to the Dōmei correspondent in Bangkok, as on November 18 it broke with big headlines in the Japanese press, with the papers publishing details of an entirely bogus alliance proposal which was supposedly under negotiation between the Thai and the Anglo-Americans.

The Thai, American, and British governments promptly denied and denounced the Japanese press reports and Crosby and Grant judged it all as nothing more than a foolish trial balloon floated by the Japanese in an effort to bully the Thais. However, as an official in London with access to intercepted Japanese diplomatic messages realized, this could not have been the case since Asada had reported the matter with serious

16. Matsumoto and Andō, Nihon gaikōshi, nanshin mondai, pp. 270-271 and Japan Times and Advertiser, Nov. 18, 1940.
concern before it reached the Japanese press. Clearly, the Thais had generated the story for their own reasons.\textsuperscript{17}

As Phibun had hoped, the planted story built a fire under the Japanese. After urgent conferences, on November 20, Matsuoka ordered the Bangkok Legation to advise Phibun of Japan’s intention to mediate the dispute. The Four Ministers’ conference adopted a supplementary plan the next day, one which called for swift mediation and an approach based on restoration of the west bank territories and economic and military support for Thailand. To induce Indochina’s cooperation, Japan would promise to limit Thai territorial claims and encourage them to seek the return of British-held regions instead. In the event that either side proved recalcitrant, the Japanese would threaten to favor the rival state.\textsuperscript{18}

Phibun hastened to accept the Japanese proposal, and secret negotiations followed on detailed arrangements between the two sides. These successfully culminated at a meeting between Asada and Phibun on November 28. On that very day Grant cabled Washington with a report “\textit{from one of the highest and most reliable authorities in the Thai Government}” that the Japanese had proposed a five-point program to the Thais, including a military alliance, Thai recognition of Manchukuo and the Wang Ching-wei regime in China, Thai cooperation in the construction of the New Order in East Asia, establishment of a barter trade, and elevation of the two countries’ legations to embassies.\textsuperscript{19}

In fact, the contents of Grant’s report strongly suggest that the Thais had once again purposefully leaked distorted information. The version of the Japanese proposal given to Grant matches neither Tokyo’s

\textsuperscript{17} Crosby to London, Nov. 22, 1940, FO 371-24757-6538 (F5718); Grant to Washington, Nov. 28, 1940, 792.94/69, RG59; and Memorandum to Sterndale-Bennett, Nov. 22, 1940, FO 371-24752-9106 (F5506).

\textsuperscript{18} Matsumoto and Ano, \textit{Nihon gaikōshi, nanshin mondai}, pp. 271-273.

\textsuperscript{19} Grant to Washington, Nov. 28, 1940, 792.94/69, RG 59.
plan at that time nor a subsequent British report--obviously based on radio intercepts--of the Asada-Phibun meeting.\(^\text{20}\) Also suspicious is the fact that his Thai source told Grant that Phibun, who not long before had been stressing his powerlessness and vulnerability, was now "very strong with the Thai army" and "could stop the propaganda on behalf of the Thai territorial aspirations if he wanted to."\(^\text{21}\) This suggests a ploy to throw the Western nations into a panic, yet make them feel that a Thai tilt toward Japan was not irreversible since a now "in control" Phibun could still pull back if the price were right.

Once again, however, the Thais failed to induce Grant to moderate his position and Vichy, too, remained adamant. The French continued to refuse direct concessions to the Thais and also politely rejected Japan's mediation proposal. Moreover, a December 14 public statement by Phibun urging a negotiated settlement seemed to have little impact.\(^\text{22}\)

The resort to arms

With diplomatic efforts stalled and his position strengthened by shipments of military supplies from Japan and news from an emissary in Europe that Germany and Italy remained sympathetic to Thai Territorial claims, Phibun resorted to military force. Beginning an offensive on January 6, 1941, Thai troops successfully occupied the lightly defended territories on the west bank of the Mekong River and another force advanced into Western Cambodia. A French counterattack on January 16 failed to dislodge the invaders, but on the early morning of January 17 a motley collection of old French warships ambushed the main force of the Thai navy off Trat Province. They knocked the Japanese-built

\(^{21}\) Grant to Washington, Nov. 28, 1940, 792.94/69, RG 59.
gunboat *Thonburi* out of action and sank two torpedo boats before steaming homeward.²³

This crushing naval defeat created near panic among the few in Bangkok who knew the truth about the engagement. The defeat raised the specter of a repetition of the 1893 incident when French warships sailed up the Chao Phraya River to threaten Bangkok. Moreover, Phibun knew the fundamental weakness of his army and the difficulties it would face in a protracted campaign. Now that the naval defeat had undermined Thailand's bargaining position, prompt Japanese mediation offered the best hope for saving the situation.

Phibun summoned the newly-arrived Japanese Minister, Futami Yasusato, to an urgent meeting and warned that the Thais could hold out for only two more weeks before facing possible military disaster. Adding a further note of urgency, Phibun claimed that the British were plotting to intervene. Just to make sure that Futami had gotten the message, Phibun sent Wanit to wake him in the middle of the night with a trumped up account of British scheming. Wanit claimed that Crosby had called that morning and proposed British mediation, citing comments by a French military emissary, who had secretly visited Singapore in late December, as evidence of French willingness to give up the disputed territories.²⁴

The alarmed Futami dispatched an urgent message to Tokyo calling for quick action to impose a ceasefire. He also urged support for Thailand's territorial claims in order to rescue the Phibun government from its predicament. The Japanese service attachés added their voices to the clamor for prompt intervention.²⁵

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Although Phibun had once again utilized the bogey of British interference to stir up the Japanese, in actual fact he had told Crosby on December 28 that while he preferred direct negotiations with France, he wanted the British and Americans working in the background to facilitate matters. The British had seized upon the idea and proposed joint action to the United States. In doing so they had cited the visit of the emissary from Indochina as a hopeful sign of French flexibility on the territorial issue, but if one reads their summary of what the French naval officer had actually said, one can only conclude that they were grasping at straws. After studying the situation, the State Department had taken a pessimistic view of the chances for success and had seen no reason to pursue the matter.26

In the interim, direct talks had resumed in Bangkok between the Thai Deputy Foreign Minister and the new French Chargé d’affaires Roger Garreau. However, Garreau had received word that the Vichy government would not accept his compromise proposal that France agree to discuss the return of the west bank territories, but only after peace was restored. Garreau had promptly passed this discouraging information to Crosby, who had remarked that the situation was hopeless if the French refused to compromise on the territorial issue.27 This was just three days before Wanit’s visit to Futami.

Fanciful as Phibun’s claims were, he succeeded again in prompting a new and more urgent Japanese mediation attempt. This time strong pressure through Berlin forced Vichy’s acceptance and set the stage for a cease-fire conference in Saigon and subsequent peace negotiations in Tokyo.

The results of mediation

For their efforts in effecting the mediation, the Japanese expected gratitude and cooperation from the Thai side which had requested it, but they were to be sadly disappointed. The government controlled Thai press had created the impression that Thai forces had achieved a string of unbroken victories, thus raising public expectations. In keeping with the government line, but contrary to fact, Phibun claimed that he had accepted the mediation only after the French had done so and there seemed no alternative. Moreover, when the chief Thai negotiator, Prince Wan, arrived in Tokyo he shocked the Japanese by tabling a demand for the return of the entirety of Laos and Cambodia.

Although the Thais had successfully occupied the west bank territories and expected favorable treatment from Japan, it would seem that they had no reason to anticipate such a great windfall and one might dismiss their opening position as nothing more than a bargaining ploy. However, Prince Wan stubbornly pressed the Thai claim and it is quite apparent that the Thais had real hopes of gaining Japanese support for their demands.

Phibun knew how highly the Japanese military authorities valued his promise of free passage and he understood how concerned they would be about insuring his continuance in office. Therefore, reversing his previous effort to convince the British, Americans, and French that he was a moderate facing the imminent danger of being thrown out of office by a "pro-Japanese" faction, Phibun now let Tokyo know that he and the rest of the "pro-Japanese" faction were on the verge of ouster by a "pro-British" faction. The gullible Naval Attaché Torigoe--whose continued presence in Bangkok Phibun had specifically requested in November--arrived in the Japanese capital to report that the

29. Flood dissertation, p. 476-477,
Thais were making sweeping demands *only* because of Phibun's weak position in the government. Torigoe warned that Japan must support the Thai demands in order to save the embattled "*pro-Japanese*" faction.\(^\text{30}\)

At a time when the British were, by Minister Crosby's own admission, "*in shock*" over Japan's success in imposing mediation and the discouraged British Minister was awaiting London's response to his offer to resign,\(^\text{31}\) Torigoe argued:

> *It is common knowledge that conditions in Thailand do not permit optimism. Important above all are relations with Great Britain. Seventy percent of Thailand's trade is with the Sterling Bloc and British economic pressure might cause a financial panic. Thus it might bring the downfall of the Phibun regime and the pro-Japanese clique.*

> *For this reason we should give increased aid to Thailand and show strength. Accordingly, giving fair and just treatment and equal handling to Thailand and French Indochina is not appropriate to the actual situation. Whatever the circumstances, it is particularly essential to avoid measures which would weaken the pro-Japanese clique.*\(^\text{32}\)

Military authorities in Tokyo were inclined to accept Torigoe's insistence on tilting the mediation heavily in Thailand's favor, but while the obstinate Grant had proved a stumbling block for the Thai schemes of the previous fall, Matusoka emerged as a new fly in the Thai ointment. After fighting a long bureaucratic battle with the military services over the pace and direction of southern advance, Matsuoka had no inclination to give in and take up the "*pro-Thai*" course urged by his

adversaries. Also, his already minimal regard for the Thais hit a new low when their impossible demands complicated the mediation procedure.\textsuperscript{33} 
Thus, just as Grant had confounded Thai hopes by utilizing a perceived Thai tilt toward Japan to support his argument for standing pat, Matsuoka cited the predominance of British influence to back up his contention that an all out attempt to woo Thailand was premature.\textsuperscript{34}

As a direct result of Matsuoka's stubbornness, the Thais had to reduce their demands. Although, after much difficult haggling, they did eventually manage to get a portion of western Cambodia in addition to the west bank territories and gained this without making military concessions to the Japanese, the results were disappointing to the Thai people, who had been misinformed by their government's propaganda.

However, long before it became apparent that the Japanese would not support Thailand's extravagant claims, Phibun had begun scrambling to rehabilitate his relations with the British and thereby restore a diplomatic balance. In early February he replied in reassuring terms when Crosby sent a stiff warning against granting Japan military bases or making concessions harmful to British interests. A few days later Phibun sent Crosby a message emphasizing that Thailand had entered into no military agreements with Japan, intended to remain neutral, and would resist any Japanese invasion. He called on the British to strengthen their naval, air, and land forces in Malaya as a deterrent against a Japanese advance. Although three weeks before, while attempting to stir up the Japanese, Phibun had accused the British of trying to foist a loan on Thailand, he now asked for one. Maintaining neutrality cost money, he pointed out, suggested that Britain and the United States might provide cash, arms, and oil. This would "\textit{win the}

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 156 contains one such example, when Matsuoka estimated British influence in Thailand at 70 percent and Japanese at 30 percent.
hearts of Thai soldiers” and overcome the advantage Japan had achieved by sending military supplies.35

When Phibun met Crosby on February 27, he pointed out that Thailand wished to remain neutral, but might have to yield if there was no alternative to the “suicidal” course of fighting Japan alone. Expressing a desire to obtain as much weaponry as possible during the public excitement over the border war, he stated that since Japan had not supplied weapons in the quantities he desired, he would like to balance these with supplies from America and Britain. Phibun claimed he was praying for and end to the war in Europe, so that the Europeans could effectively check the Japanese. He denied any pro-Japanese sentiments, declaring, seemingly with great conviction, that he could not recognize Japan’s claim to leadership in Asia since she was “deceitful, self-seeking, and parsimonious and she had no true friend in the world.”36

Thus the slippery Phibun played diametrically opposed roles in his talks with the rival sides. To the Japanese he portrayed himself as a true believer in Japan’s New Order, restrained in meeting Japan’s desires only by domestic political opposition and the specter of British financial pressures. But when meeting Crosby, he ridiculed the Japanese and called for a strong Anglo-American deterrent to block their southward advance. He also pleaded for arms, money, and oil so that Thailand could maintain her neutrality. Phibun would maintain this Janus-like posture to the very last minute, thereby maximizing his room for maneuver between the rival sides.

In this diplomatic game the Japanese representatives in Bangkok were particularly susceptible to Phibun’s blandishments because of their own wishful thinking. In a series of postwar articles Asada acknowledged that he had misjudged Thai motives, noting ruefully:

35. British Embassy to State Department, Feb. 10, 1941, 792.94/179, RG 59 and Crosby to London, Feb. 13, 1941, FO 371-28135-7978 (F918).
"Because of Prime Minister Phibun’s friendly attitude toward Japan—or as one could probably say, his human charm—I trusted him almost unreservedly."37 As they accepted Phibun’s protestations of sympathy for Japan’s cause, Asada and Tamura came to view a Japanese show of force as the cure-all for Phibun’s “weak position” and Thai reticence about joining the Japanese camp.38 Yet, when the Japanese occupied southern Indochina and moved troops up to the Thai border in July 1941, this merely exacerbated the public’s suspicion of Japan and led the Thai government to issue stronger affirmations of neutrality.

The way in which wishful thinking clouded Japanese perceptions comes through with particular clarity in a contemporary book written by Miyahara Takeo, director of the Mitsui-sponsored Thai Room research organization and an advisor to the Foreign Ministry. Miyahara had been in Thailand during early 1941 and recognized that government expressions of gratitude for the Japanese mediation—such as the joint display of Thai and Japanese flags in Bangkok—were merely gestures. In truth, he admitted, “there was no sign of gratitude toward Japan.” He then realistically suggested that the Thais had drawn closer to Japan simply because of a shift in the balance of power and a desire to gain as much advantage for themselves as possible in the border dispute with French Indochina. But as the Japanese propaganda line insisted that the Thais were Asian “brothers,” Miyahara could not abandon the notion that the Thais were essentially “pro-Japanese” so he retreated from the logical implications of his own astute observations. If the Thais attitude seemed unsatisfactory, he rationalized, it must be the fault of the Europeans. “Probably in their hearts”, Miyahara wrote of the Thais, “they desired to trust and rely on Japan,” but failed to support Japan’s cause because of British pressure and propaganda.39 If only such

38. Ibid. and the Tamura message of July 8, 1941 quoted in Matsumoto and Ando, Nihon gaikōshi: nanshin mondai, p. 375.
Western influence were removed, he suggested, the Thais would certainly show their true "pro-Japanese" colors.

In reality, of course, the wide discrepancy between Japanese propaganda and performance provides ample reason for distrust, and although Thailand did ally with Japan in December 1941, neither Phibun's "commitment" of October 1940 nor a sense of obligation for the Japanese mediation of the border dispute preordained this outcome. In fact, Phibun ultimately failed to keep his promise of free passage, disappearing from Bangkok on the day of the Japanese invasion to permit a brief, initial resistance. In the end the Japanese brought the Thais into their camp simply because the British and Americans were in no position either to provide meaningful assistance to Thailand or to deter the Japanese advance. While a zero-sum competition between the Japanese and the Anglo-Americans had previously given the Thai unprecedented diplomatic leverage, the December 1941 Japanese assault left them no room to further maneuver. The Japanese effected their alliance with Thailand by the successful application of military power, not through superior diplomacy, effective propaganda, or the machinations of schemers like Colonel Tamura. In no way can it be said that the Japanese outwitted the Thais. In fact, if there was a "fox" in this cabbage patch it was surely Thailand, not Japan.