

Japan and Siam

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Otto Corbach (1877-1938) was a German journalist and publicist.

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I

After losing territory to the British and especially to French Indo-China, Siam had become small enough for the two European colonial powers to grant her, for the moment, an idyllic and independent existence. In renouncing for the present the partitioning of the remaining parts of Siam, they had the advantage of remaining at a respectful distance from each other. They could hardly have foreseen that Japanese imperialism would so soon be able to push into the gap. As a matter of fact, Japanese policy has been making stupendous progress in recent years in penetrating into Siam noiselessly and peacefully. The harmless buffer state suddenly threatens to become the scene of action on which the Empire of the Rising Sun may occupy undisturbed the most important strategic positions in the struggle for hegemony in Asia.

The leading Siamese circles quickly yielded to Japanese blandishments. They felt too much hemmed in by the close proximity of the French and British not to regard a veiled Japanese protectorate as the lesser evil when compared to mere toleration by the European colonial powers. To France Siam lost great parts of her northern provinces. England took her share from the southern ones. And besides this, Siam had to grant generous concessions within the possessions remaining to her. Thus her railroad system, her mines and her forests came under British control, while the gold mines in South Siam got into the hands of the French. In addition, it was easy for other foreign interests to gain a foothold in the weakened organism. The Belgians and the Danes were permitted to create and exploit various industrial developments. About 500,000 Chinese poured in and grabbed off almost all trade for themselves. No wonder, therefore, that the native population of about 13 million became almost totally dependent upon foreign economic interests.

Japan especially crept into the confidence of the Siamese by enabling them, through supplying goods cheaply, to enjoy the advantages of all sorts of things which their limited purchasing power had formerly put beyond their reach. Last year this resulted in exports from Japan to Siam amounting to about 40 million yen, while Japan only imported to the value of 800,000 yen from Siam. But on the other hand Japan is now beginning to turn Siam into a cotton-producing country of first rank, from which the Japanese textile industry will buy an unlimited quantity of cotton. American experts have stated that cotton-growing conditions in Siam are as favourable as in

Texas. As Siam is very sparsely populated, at least one third of the arable land is available for cotton-growing. Within the next six years Siam is expected to be in a position, under Japanese supervision, to export cotton to the value of about 200 million yen, mainly at the expense of American exports to the Far East. Japan, as the main customer, would therefore be able to improve her trade balance with the United States, which has been mostly negative, on account of the decrease in the consumption of raw silk.

The chance to turn Siam into a source of one of the most important raw materials will enable Japan at the same time to arm at a great rate this friendly country, so important for strategic purposes. In September the Chief of Staff of the Siamese army spent some time in Japan. Some time earlier a military mission of fifteen Siamese officers had been there and had placed an order for two battleships. In addition, a group of sixteen Siamese politicians, as well as a group of naval officers, has paid a friendly visit to Japan in the course of the last few months.

II

The pro-Japanese attitude of the Bangkok population was more drastically than tactfully revealed last year, when French, English and Japanese warships arrived in the port of the capital to compete for the favour of the Country of the White Elephant. A Japanese practice squadron had earlier announced its visit, whereupon British and French fleets hastened to anticipate the Japanese. The French squadron appeared first: ten Siamese army planes took the air to greet the guests. Then the English ships arrived. This time 20 airplanes droned their welcome. Curiosity grew as to the reception the Japanese ships were likely to get. When they appeared, more than 100 airplanes flew out to meet them, circled above them, and expressed the general delight of the country over the arrival of the guests of honour.

Phra Mitrakam Raksa, Siamese ambassador in Tokyo, recently received a representative of the greatest English newspaper in the Far East, the [North China Daily News](#), published in Shanghai.

“Why,” asked the interviewer, “does Siam value Japanese friendship so highly, when Japan had restricted the import of Siamese rice so sharply?”

“We have convinced ourselves,” said the ambassador, “that Japan was forced to restrict the import of rice by her agricultural crisis. But Japan is doing whatever she can to compensate us for this in the future, and the prospects look excellent. Until now Siam has exported only small quantities of raw cotton, lumber and minerals; at present the greatest efforts are being made to open her natural resources, which have so far hardly been exploited—especially in the field of cotton-growing. Siam is an independent country and will not let herself be influenced by countries at whose expense Japan is expanding her trade in Siam. As long as Japan is able to supply us with better and cheaper products, we shall buy from her.”

The self-possessed manner of this Siamese diplomat toward the representative of a publication which is authoritative for British public opinion in the Far East is certainly significant in showing how cocky even the small nations of Asia, under the protectorate of Japan, feel toward western colonial powers.