

# **The Pacific War Begins in Indochina: The Occupation of French Indochina and the Route to Pearl Harbor**

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## **Introduction**

Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were given “independence” after the Japanese army overthrew the French in Indochina with “Operation Meigō” on 9 March 1945. Many historians consider that the Japanese occupation of French Indochina was an important cause of the First Indochina War (Anti-French Resistance War in Vietnam, 1946–54). However, very few people have argued that this Japanese occupation was also a major cause of the outbreak of the Pacific War itself. This paper will focus on the second issue.

### **1. The reasons to study this topic**

The Japanese army occupied French Indochina. This fact is widely known. But the Japanese occupation has not been widely studied by historians. Generally, works on the Pacific War have tended to ignore its importance. As a consequence, the historical point of view held by the people who were directly involved in the event is more widely diffused than the historians’ analysis.

The Japanese occupation of Indochina was a very important turning point in the history of the Asia-Pacific region. It was directly and indirectly part of the origins of the Pacific War, Vietnam’s independence, decolonization in East Asian countries, as well as the First and Second Indochina Wars. Nevertheless, after the Pacific War started, Indochina became less important for Japan than other countries such as the Philippines, Dutch Indies, Malaya and Burma. Therefore, historians have paid little attention to the case of Indochina.

When I started studying the Japanese occupation of Indochina, I was mainly concerned with bilateral relations between France and Japan. However, the more I studied, the more I realized it was a topic of international relations, which involved not only France, Japan, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, but also China, Thailand, the UK, the USA, the Netherlands, the USSR, and Germany. Therefore, I thought it necessary to study the historical process from June 1940 to December 1941 from as many angles as possible. Without sufficient analysis of the steps, causes, characteristics, and results of the Japanese occupation of northern and southern Indochina, one cannot fully understand the later developments in

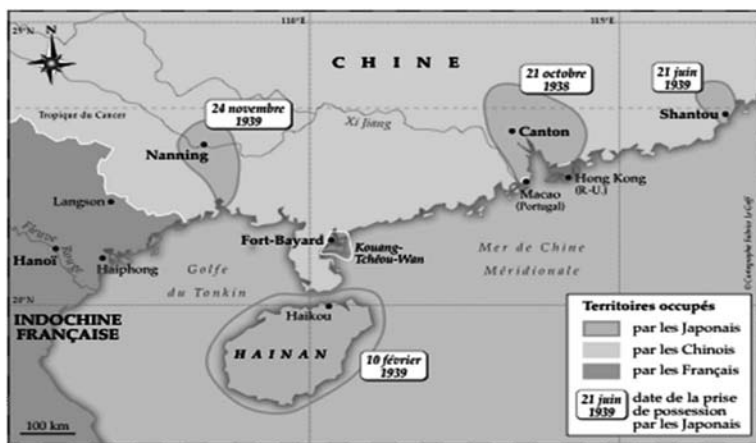
Indochina, including the independence of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and the outbreak of the First Indochina War.

## 2. Southern expansion

Until the summer of 1940, Japanese foreign policy and strategy focused on Northeast Asia; therefore, no serious friction occurred between Japan and the USA. If American public opinion began to be hostile toward Japan after the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Washington's reactions were limited to simple objections in order to maintain the status quo and respect the Open Door principle. At that point US policy in Asia was, in fact, favorable towards Japan, for this reason, but also because Japan could fight China using American oil, iron, and money. It is likely that the Pacific War would not have started if Japan had limited its military operations to China, instead of moving southward.

The southward expansion became a national policy in Japan in 1936. Nonetheless, initially it was a mere hypothetical option. Because the Japanese initiated a full-scale conflict in China in the next year, they had to concentrate their efforts on the continent, not in the "Southern seas" (*Nanyang/Nanyo*). Even so, as the war expanded, the Japanese forces extended their operations to the southern part of China. By 1938, any prospect of a fast victory over China having vanished, Japan found it necessary to blockade the entire Chinese coast far as the border with French Indochina. The consequence was that Japan began to apply direct pressure on Indochina.

The year 1939 marked the first turning point towards Japan's southward expansion. In that year, the Japanese army suffered a serious defeat at the hands of the Soviet army at Khalin Gol (Nomonhan). Furthermore, the conclusion of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Non-Aggression Pact isolated Tokyo. Further Northward expansion became impractical while the war in China became a quagmire. Japan began seeking other opportunities in the South. However, Southeast Asia and Oceania were almost entirely



Source of the map: Bōei Kenshūjo Senshishitsu, *Daihon.eirigunbu, Daitōa Sensōkaisenkei.i* (Imperial Headquarters, Section of the Ground Army: Section de l'Armée de Terre de l'état-major impérial: an account of the outbreak of War in Greater East Asia), vol. 1, Tokyo: Asagumo Shuppansha, 1973.

under the control of Western powers.

The second turning point occurred in May 1940 with the German victories over the Netherlands and France. These two countries were occupied and the invasion of Great Britain seemed to be only a matter of time. In short, the German victory in Europe provided an opportunity for Japan to advance to the south. Prior to this, the southward expansion had been merely a phrase in Japanese military plans. However, Japan now decided to quickly seize the new opportunities created by the changes in the world order.

In June 1940, Konoé Fumimaro formed his second cabinet and adopted the “Outline of Measures to cope with the Changing Situation in the World.” This document laid the foundation of a new policy for southward expansion and the alliance with Germany. The occupation of French Indochina was its first step, and the use of military force for that purpose was authorized. The alliance with Germany was the second pillar in the plan. The adoption of this policy was a major turning point and generated the crisis with the USA that led eventually to the Pacific War.

The French surrendered to Germany in June 1940. The Japanese mindset was “Don’t miss the bus.” Japan took this chance to advance southward. From this time onward, southward expansion would be the main guideline of Japanese foreign policy. One consequence was that the principal potential enemy would be the USA instead of the USSR.

### 3. A deliberate decision to resort to armed force

The idea that the invasion of French Indochina by the Japanese army in September 1940 was the outcome of a conspiracy of a small group inside the military, i.e. the local army and some staff members of the Tokyo headquarters, is still widely accepted, not only in Japan but also in France. I will re-examine this question below.

First, we need to raise the question of the terms used to describe this event. The expression still being used in Japan, “*Futsuin Shinchū*” (Advance into French Indochina), is a euphemism. Like the expressions “*Daitōa Kyōeiken*” (Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere), “*Daitōa Sensō*” (Greater East Asia War), or “*Tōa Shinchitsujo*” (New East Asian Order), it was created by the Japanese government and armed forces. The problem is that the term “*Futsuin Shinchū*” is still used commonly today, often without quotation marks. Its literal meaning is that the Japanese army entered Indochinese territory and was garrisoned in the colony. This term does not imply the use of violence, thus giving the impression that Japanese troops entered Indochina peacefully. Thus, it conceals the historical truth that the Japanese invaded Indochina using armed force.

When I was writing this paper, I remembered the legal action taken by Japanese historian Ienaga Saburō against the Japanese government. This legal dispute began when Ministry of Education officials demanded that the term “*shinryaku*” (侵略 *xâm lược*, invasion) be changed to “*shinchū*” (進駐 *tiến trú*, military advance) in Ienaga’s history textbook draft. If the pronunciation of each first character is identical, the Chinese characters themselves are completely different, the first meaning “intrusion,” the sec-

and “advance.” It is quite interesting that even today; the Japanese government carefully avoids using the word “*shinryaku*” to describe the military operations in Asia from 1931 to 1945. It seems that this word has become a kind of taboo for many politicians and officials.

Let us return to the topic of French Indochina. It is true that several treaties and agreements were signed between France and Japan concerning Indochina. This is why the image of a good collaboration between the two countries during the Pacific War is still alive. It is also true that the Japanese army used direct violence against Indochina only once before March 1945. However, this collaboration was fundamentally unequal. Japan’s position was overwhelmingly stronger than that of France. Japan could set its own terms for the agreements, interpret them the way it wanted, or ignore them altogether.

In order to understand the reality of the Franco–Japanese relations in Indochina during the Pacific War, it is essential to consider how this particular relationship was set up before the war broke out. When the talks started between a military mission sent from Tokyo and the Government-General of Indochina in July 1940 in Hanoi, the threatening attitude of the Japanese negotiators made the French authorities deeply concerned about the security of the colony and their ability to resist Japanese demands.

Japan could have very easily taken over Indochina by force if it had wanted to do so. However, despite its overwhelmingly strong position, Tokyo decided to start negotiation with the French government. This option had two benefits. First, Japan could avoid retaliation from the United Kingdom and the USA, at least for the moment. Second, it could use the French authorities to exploit the colony economically. Putting Indochina under direct Japanese control would be extremely complicated since they lacked information about this territory and could only count a limited number of collaborators among the local population. The “League for the restoration of Vietnam” (Việt-Nam Phục Quốc Đồng Minh Hội) of the pro-Japanese Cường Để had very weak influence inside of Vietnam and would not be very useful for Japan. Thus, exploiting the colony through the French authorities was the most effective way. Japan wanted to use French Indochina to prepare and launch a war against the UK and the USA. Using French administration system in the colony was the easiest and the most effective way at that time.

Nevertheless, one benefit could be derived from the use of violence: it demonstrated Japanese military power and determination to the French authorities, discouraging attempts at resistance. In fact, Japan decided deliberately to use both negotiations in the first phase and military force in the second one. The Japanese leaders, while negotiating with France, also allowed a small group of local army officers and the General Staff members resort to violence. Later they could officially place the blame on this small group.

It is true that General Staff member Tominaga Kyōji and Commander of South China Expeditionary Army Andō Rikichi were dismissed, but they were not summoned to martial court. Their careers did not suffer, either. One year later, Andō was appointed to be the general-in-chief of the armed forces in Taiwan. Six months later, Tominaga was appointed to be the head of the Human Resources Bureau in the Ministry of the Army, playing an important role in assisting Tōjō Hideki. Another leader of this in-

cident, Satō Kenryō, from the headquarters of the South China Expeditionary Army, was not punished at all, and he later became the head of the Military Affairs Bureau in the same ministry, serving Tōjō as well.

It is generally believed that these three officers were responsible for formulating a plan to invade French Indochina, thus disrupting cooperation between the Army and the Navy, and that they were punished because of the emperor's ire. If this story were true, it would have been unlikely that they would then be promoted to more important positions. This apparent contradiction can be solved if we admit that the use of military force against French Indochina was not an incident fomented by a small group of hardliners, but a stratagem set up by the central authorities of the Japanese army. The military clash around the Vietnamese town of Lạng Sơn, near the Chinese border, was the outcome of this deliberate stratagem. The historical truth has been generally ignored.

#### **4. The start of the crisis between Japan and the USA**

There were only 14 months between the Japanese occupation of northern French Indochina and the start of the Pacific War. Relations between Japan and the USA worsened quickly during this short period. Of course, Japan and the USA had experienced many conflicts and troubles during their long mutual relationship, such as the opening-up of Japan forced by Commodore Perry's Black Ships, the tough negotiations at the Washington Naval Conference of 1921–1922, the US Immigration Act of 1924 and Japan's second war with China. Nevertheless, the Japanese policy toward French Indochina was the most decisive factor worsening the two countries' relationship.

Japan's occupation of Indochina was not meant to directly threaten American interests in the region. Rather, the Japanese direct targets were the Dutch and British colonies. Japan was particularly concerned about the British territories, as was the USA. Since the UK was the only country still fighting against Germany, it was necessary for the USA to prevent a British defeat. Washington therefore felt it necessary to sustain the essential part of the British Empire, i.e. their territories in Asia. For this purpose, the USA should deter the Japanese southward expansion.

As a result, the brutal Japanese policy toward French Indochina provoked a fierce American reaction and increased Washington's mistrust of Japan. After the invasion of Indochina, every step taken by Japan aiming at tighter control over the French colony worsened their relations with the USA, such as the intervention in the war between Indochina and Thailand, Japanese economic policy towards Indochina and, finally the occupation of the southern part of the colony.

The "Darlan-Katō agreement," which was signed to formalize the conditions for the occupation of southern Indochina, was particularly decisive. The Americans deciphered the Japanese secret code and confirmed that Japan's true intentions by that point were to prepare for war with the UK, USA, and the Netherlands. Washington decided to adopt much stronger attitude against Japan.

Along with strict economic sanctions, the USA made various demands, including a Japanese withdrawal from Indochina. As American demands became more and more severe, the Japanese govern-



Barrie and Frances Pitt, *The Chronological Atlas of World War II*, London: Macmillan, 1989, p. 63.

ment firmly believed that good relations between the two countries could not be restored. Japan concluded that the only way to maintain its military power and not to yield to US supremacy in the Pacific was to seize the resources in Southeast Asia, especially the Dutch East Indies' oil.

### Conclusion

The occupation of northern French Indochina was the first step in Japan's southward expansion. It was carried out with a deliberate plan of invasion. Japan's aim was to use Indochina through the French administration to fight against the UK and the USA. Indochina became a de facto Japanese colony.

The outbreak of the Pacific War was by no means a sudden accident. The real cause of the war was not the Japanese occupation of southern Indochina, which took place four months before the Pearl Harbor attack. The real starting point of the crises was the Japanese occupation of northern Indochina. In other words, the starting point of the road to the Pacific War was located in Lạng Sơn, where the Japanese troops launched attacks against the French army and began an invasion of northern Indochina on the night of September 23, 1940.

As Japan intensified her control over Indochina, the crisis with the USA reached its apex. US concerns over Japanese intentions in Indochina were well-founded. From December 7/8, 1941, it was from Indochinese soil that most of the Japanese attacks against British and Dutch territories would be launched.