

Japan to France, 31-08-1940

Japan to France, 19-09-1940

Following its successful coercive diplomacy earlier that summer (see case Japan to France, 19-06-1940), the Japanese government continued to put more demands to France. Commanders of the Southern Japanese Army played an important role in pressuring their political leaders in Tokyo to do so. This time the Japanese government demanded from France that it open its airports to Japanese military aircraft and allow Japanese forces to be transported through Tonkin. On 2 August 1940, Foreign Minister Yosuke Matsuoka presented these demands to French Representative Arsène Henry in Tokyo adding that if the French did not comply, Japan would no longer respect French sovereignty.¹ Like on the previous occasion, neither Great Britain nor the US offered any tangible support. Amidst severe discord amongst the senior leadership of the Vichy regime, the softliners prevailed. While rejecting the threat, the French government agreed to negotiations. These eventually produced a preliminary agreement on 30 August 1940. In the agreement France acknowledged Japan's regional political and economic dominance and offered Japan virtually free rein in the Tonkin area. Japan, in return, pledged to respect French sovereignty over Indochina. Precise details about the number of Japanese forces in Tonkin were left to local military officials in Hanoi to work out, which is where the troubles continued.² There, on 31 August, the Japanese General Nishihara presented French Governor General Decoux with a document which he demanded to be signed forthwith or else he threatened to attack on 5 September.³ After French protests in Tokyo the Japanese government repudiated the ultimatum. Nevertheless, the negotiations continued and another preliminary agreement was reached allowing for the transportation of 25,000 Japanese forces, the use of three airports, and the placement of a Japanese war vessel at Haiphong harbour on 4 September.⁴ After an attack from a Japanese contingent on 5 September, an attack that was unauthorised according to General Nishihara, the government of France decided to break off negotiations.⁵

Japan was still unwilling to publicly commit to French sovereignty over Indochina.⁶ Talks dragged on with a constant flow of messages between Hanoi, Vichy and Tokyo. When General Nishihara made even greater demands on 17 September, the government of Vichy France rejected these outright. Then, on 19 September, the Japanese government issued a second ultimatum, behind closed doors,⁷ which was delivered both in Tokyo (by Ohashi) and in Hanoi by Nishihara. The ultimatum demanded that 32,000 Japanese forces would be allowed into Tonking. Failing compliance, Japan would enter Indochina on 22 September. Japan dispatched warships to the Gulf of Tonkin as well as an entire division to the border nearby. Despite the looming threat, France rejected the ultimatum fearing it would lose all control over French Indochina.⁸ The Japanese government then again retracted the ultimatum. On 22 September 1940, Japan and France signed the agreement in which France consented to the stationing of 6,000 Japanese forces on three airports in Tongking, and the right of passage for up to 25,000 to enter the Chinese province Yunan.⁹

¹ Bussemaker, *Paradise in Peril*, 2001, 534. Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs, 1939-1946: The Initial Triumph of the Axis*, 614.

² Bussemaker, *Paradise in Peril*, 2001, 536.

³ Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs, 1939-1946: The Initial Triumph of the Axis*, 617.

⁴ James William Morley, *The Fateful Choice: Japan's Advance Into Southeast Asia, 1939-1941: Selected Translations from Taiheiyō Sensō E No Michi, Kaisen Gaikō Shi* (Columbia University Press, 1980), 177–80.

⁵ Morley, 182–83.

⁶ Bussemaker, *Paradise in Peril*, 2001, 536–37.

⁷ 'Japanese Ultimatum to Indo-China', *The Courier-Mail*, 21 September 1940.

⁸ Bussemaker, *Paradise in Peril*, 2001, 538. Morley, *The Fateful Choice*, 215.

⁹ Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs, 1939-1946: The Initial Triumph of the Axis*, 618.

Japan acknowledged French sovereignty over Indochina. Despite the agreement, a division of the Japanese South China Army attacked the French at Langson, inflicting considerable damage before the Japanese emperor ordered them to cease the attack and withdraw.¹⁰ The clashes caused approximately 300 casualties and fatalities on the part of the French and approximately 700 on the part of the Japanese.¹¹ The leadership of the Army was removed and the division was redeployed.¹² However, the Japanese forces continued to be stationed in Tongkin.

¹⁰ Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina, 1940-1955*, 22–23. Bussemaker, *Paradise in Peril*, 2001, 572–74. See also Morley, *The Fateful Choice*, 215.

¹¹ Bussemaker, *Paradise in Peril*, 2001, 572–74.

¹² Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs, 1939-1946: The Initial Triumph of the Axis*, 619.