SOUTHWARD ADVANCE OF JAPANESE EXPANSIONIST MOVEMENT: HAINAN AND THE SPRATLY ISLANDS

793.94/14683: Telegram

The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State

Tokyo, February 10, 1939—5 p. m.
[Received February 10—11:25 a. m.]

83. It is officially announced that at 3 o'clock this morning the Japanese Navy and Army landed troops and occupied the Island of Hainan. A statement issued later by the Foreign Office spokesman says that the action does not violate the Franco-Japanese Agreement of 1907 but beyond declaring that the operations are for the purpose of exterminating the Chinese military forces on the Island the statement contains no explanation relating to future policy in connection with the occupation.

Although the Japanese have for some time been in possession of the Island of Waichow from which base the routes leading into China from Indo-China can be reached by aircraft without difficulty while traffic can be controlled in the Gulf of Tongking, the occupation of Hainan is of greater tactical and strategic importance in connection with the present conflict and, if converted into a well equipped naval and air base, this Island will dominate the whole coast of the mainland between Hong Kong and the southern tip of the Indo-China peninsula. Its holders can check all traffic into and out of Hanoi if a blockade were desired and possession of it by the Japanese would have a great effect on the matter of control of the South China Sea between the mainland and the Island of Luzon as well as limiting the sphere dominated by Singapore.

A further possible consideration is the relation which the occupation of Hainan may have on the Japanese southward advance policy.

In examining the political aspects of the occupation of Hainan, this action while it may be an exaggeration to look upon it as a direct reply to the American, British and French notes of October and

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1 See also Foreign Relations, Japan, 1931–1941, vol. 11, pp. 277 ff.
2 See Foreign Relations, 1907, pt. 2, pp. 754 ff.
3 For the undeclared war between Japan and China, see pp. 124 ff.
November last,\(^4\) can be considered as a perfectly sure indication of the indifference with which the Japanese regard the recent rumors of Anglo-American joint action against Japan.

My French colleague has merely informed his Government of the announcement and will take no action unless instructed.

GREW

793.94/14691: Telegram

The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State

PARIS, February 11, 1939—10 p. m. [a. m.].
[Received February 11—11: 55 a. m.]

263. [Here follows report on press comment regarding Japanese occupation of Hainan Island.]

Last night a pessimistic view of the matter was expressed to us by Lagarde who, as Chief of the Levant Section of the Foreign Office, is closely in touch with the Mediterranean problem. Lagarde said that in his personal opinion the occupation of Hainan constitutes the most sinister sign of recent weeks. He interprets this move by the Japanese, who he believes are well informed as to the Berlin-Rome time-table, as one of the final steps preparatory to the precipitation of events by Mussolini.\(^5\) He said that the French Government would probably make a strong protest jointly with the British Government but that as France has weakened her naval forces in the Far East to strengthen her position in the Djibouti area she could not at this time hope to speak to Japan with any effect.

BULLITT

793.94/14692: Telegram

The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State

PARIS, February 11, 1939—2 p. m.
[Received February 11—12: 48 p. m.]

264. We inquired this morning at the Foreign Office concerning the French reaction to the occupation of Hainan by a strong Japanese naval force. Hoppenot,\(^6\) informs us that the seizure came as a brutal surprise to the French who were given no advance notification nor have they since been informed by the Japanese of the reasons for the action. Hoppenot referred to the informal understanding of over a year ago between the French and the Japanese which contemplated a *status quo* in Hainan on condition that the French would not permit the ship-

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\(^4\) For American representations on October 6, November 7 and 21, 1938, see *Foreign Relations, Japan, 1931–1941*, vol. 1, pp. 785, 794, and 808.

\(^5\) Italian Prime Minister.

\(^6\) Head of the European Section of the French Foreign Office.
ment of munitions over the Indo-Chinese Railroad to China. Hoppenot maintains that the French have faithfully observed their obligation under the arrangement and that there has been no shipment of munitions to the Chinese of any importance via Indo-China during the intervening months. Under the circumstances the French obviously regard the agreement with Japan concerning the transit of munitions across Indo-China as terminated. He believes that the Japanese action was taken at this time principally to rekindle the waning enthusiasm in Japan for the continuance of the war in China. The fact that Germany and Italy received advance notification is disturbing to the French who are not sure what interpretation should be placed upon it. He said that the French Embassy in Tokyo is being instructed to submit an energetic protest and that similar action will be taken by the British. According to Hoppenot’s information the British situation is identical with that of the French in that the former have not been consulted in advance nor advised of the reasons for the Japanese action. Other than this diplomatic step, no other démarche is contemplated at the moment. Hoppenot said that effort was being made to obtain further details of the occupation but communication with the French Consul in Hainan had apparently been cut.

BULLITT

793.94/14690 : Telegram

The Chargé in China (Peck) to the Secretary of State

CHUNGKING, February 12, 1939—noon.
[Received February 12—11:38 a.m.]

98. Following is semi-official Central Daily News version of reported replies of General Chiang Kai Shek to interrogatories of foreign correspondents at Chungking on February 11 in regard to Japanese invasion of Hainan Island:

"Question: What is the intention of the Japanese in effecting a landing of their troops at Hainan Island?

Answer: In order to apprise [evaluate?] the significance of the Japanese landing at Hainan Island and its repercussions, we should consider the question of the Pacific Ocean as whole. Hainan Island is an important strategical point between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Should the enemy occupy the Island, not only would communications between Hong Kong and Singapore and also between Singapore and Australia be interrupted, but also the security of the Philippine Islands and Indo-China would be threatened. This would be the beginning of Japan’s naval dominance on the Pacific Ocean.

When the Island has come under Japanese control, the Japanese Navy would be able to make its influence felt in the Mediterranean"

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[South China?] Sea to cut the connection between the American and British naval bases in Singapore and Hawaii. Therefore the present Japanese movement at Hainan Island in reality is in the nature of a reply to the visit of the American warships to Singapore last year.

Question: Why is it that the Japanese landing at Hainan Island is considered a prelude to Japan's attempt at the control of the Pacific Ocean?

Answer: We all know that Japan has in mind three important strategic points in the Pacific: Saghalien Island in the north, Hainan Island in the west and Guam in the east. With a view to her complete naval domination of the Pacific, she has been keeping a covetous eye on all of the three bases. Should all these fall into her hands, both Hawaii and the Philippines would be as good as Japanese occupied territory. Having got possession of one-half of Saghalien Island, Japan is now trying to occupy Hainan Island in the hope of frustrating any possible concerted action that might be taken by the British and American Navies in the Pacific. If such a scheme goes on unchecked, Japan will next attempt to place herself in a position to control Guam. Eventually she would be able not only to hamper the westward movement of the American Fleet, but also to cut the line of communication with the Philippines.

For the furtherance of her southward expansion and the dominance of the Pacific, Japan for 30 years has been scheming to build a strategic triangle out of the three Islands. In 1936, when she provoked the Pakhok incident, her intention was to use this as a pretext to establish herself on Hainan Island. For fear of international complications she dared not go any further than this. Now Japan, regardless of consequences, has invaded the Island. This move is the last desperate military attempt at the conquest of China if it is not for the purpose of inciting a world war. After several decades of hesitation, what Japan is now doing is the most important event since the commencement of the Chinese-Japanese hostilities, but it is also the turning point in the history of the Pacific Ocean. Japan has thus revealed her inordinate ambition. I do not see how those countries which have vital interests in the Far East can watch with unconcern these dangerous developments. To the Japanese Navy Hainan Island is the first line of advance in the Pacific in the west as Guam Island is in the east.

Question: Where then is the second line of advance? Smiling, the Generalissimo said that the people in Europe would be able to answer the question and that particularly the Americans well know the answer.

Question: To what extent would the Japanese occupation of Hainan Island affect peace in the Far East?

Answer: The attempt of the Japanese to occupy Hainan Island on February 10 may be considered a counterpart of their occupation of Mukden on September 18, 1931. In other words, by attacking the Island Japan has created another Mukden outrage in the Pacific. The effect from this is the same irrespective of the fact that one was committed on the land and the other in the sea.


It may be recalled that during the Mukden outrage all the statesmen of the world with the exception of Colonel Henry L. Stimson, then American Secretary of State, failed to give it serious consideration. This enabled the Japanese to extend its scope of invasion continuously. Eight years have passed, and during that period, Japan has created for herself a dominating position in the Orient and has hypnotized herself into the belief that she is able to conquer the world. Should she be permitted to hold Hainan Island following the invasion of it, I believe that in a short time the foundation for her planned new air and naval base will be laid. As a consequence the international situation in the Pacific would undergo a great change. Even if France should then wish to establish a naval base in Indo-China, and the United States of America should desire to defend Guam, I fear that they would not have the needed time for doing so.

In making the present southward move Japan does not intend to use it for the termination of the Chinese-Japanese hostilities, but obviously she has made up her mind to run the risk of sowing the seeds for a war in the Pacific.

Question: What defensive measures has the Chinese Government taken in the Island?

Answer: Because of her lack of naval forces China has not given much consideration to the defense of her coast line, but her land forces have made sufficient preparations and would do their utmost to prevent the enemy occupying the Island. As to the possible Japanese attack on Pakhoi, we have taken necessary precautionary measures and are ready to offer strong resistance. All military observers hold the same opinion that the enemy’s attack on Pakhoi would only lead to it being placed in a more disadvantageous position without compensating benefits in its war of aggression.

Question: What is the effect of the Japanese landing at Hainan Island on the Chinese-Japanese hostilities?

Answer: No, it has little effect on our war of resistance. The issue will be fought out on land. The occupation of an island is inconsequent[	extsuperscript{[1]}].”

The Chinese press on February 11 commented at length on these moves of Japan, professing to see therein an added threat to the position of Great Britain, France and the United States in the Far East and calling for positive action on the part of these Powers to check this activity. The Sao Tang Pao regards the invasion of Hainan as a step in Japan’s southward expansion policy while the Sin Hua Jih Pao believes it was undertaken with a desire to prepare a base for attacks on Kwangsi. The China Times says Japan’s move on Hainan has three motives being: (1) to control Tongking Bay and threaten communications between Hong Kong and Singapore and encircle the Philippines as a “prelude to a diplomatic backmail”; (2) to intimidate France and force the latter to suspend transportation facilities through Indo-China to China; and (3) the hope of severing one of China’s international communication lines under the allusion [illu-
sion?] that this will bring Japan one step nearer to scoring a speedy victory.

Repeated to Peiping.

Peck

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793.94/14697: Telegram

The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State

Tokyo, February 14, 1939—noon.
[Received February 14—3:17 a.m.]

88. Acting under instructions from their respective Governments the French Ambassador 11 yesterday and the British Ambassador 12 today inquired orally of the Minister for Foreign Affairs 13 as to the purpose, character and duration of the occupation by Japanese forces of Hainan. The Minister replied that the purpose of the occupation was to intensify the blockade of the South China coast, that the character was military and that the duration would depend upon military considerations.

Arita added to Craigie that the occupation would not be permanent.

Grew

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793.94/14710: Telegram

The Consul General at Hong Kong (Southard) to the Secretary of State

Hong Kong, February 14, 1939.
[Received February 16—9:30 a.m.]

Following from Saigon.

"February 13, 4 p.m. Local press editorials of yesterday emphasize increasing uneasiness of the French here due to the occupation of Hainan and possible threat to the commerce of French Indo-China and Kwangchow. Occupation described as step toward another forced Munich Agreement 14 to the detriment of French prestige and interests in the Orient. Concerning reported instructions received by the Japanese Navy to refrain from all action which might strain French-Japanese relations, high Government officer stated to me today Japanese Government had assured French Ambassador [at] Tokyo last year that Hainan would not be occupied. Well informed opinions here are that strategic advantage gained by the Japanese might have been obviated had France made timely public declaration that such would not be tolerated when it became evident following Japanese

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11 Charles Arsène-Henry.
12 Sir Robert L. Craigie.
13 Hachiro Arita.
attacks on Yunnanfu, Nanning and Pakhoi that objective of Japanese military authorities was to close commercial routes to Kwangsi and Yunnan. High Government officers emphasize necessity of material moral support of France and England by the United States to obviate further encroachment by Japan pending solution of conflict. Governor General of Straits Settlements flew from Saigon to Hue by French military airplane February 10 to confer with the Governor General of French Indo-China. Admiral in command French war ships in the Orient now at Saigon. Information contained in the telegram from the Consul at Yunnanfu to the Department January 23, 6 p. m.,13 still unconfirmed. Press of yesterday reported Wang Ching-wei16 at Dalat. Governor of Cochin-China could not confirm the report today."

Saigon requests that the Department furnish a confidential code which is considered necessary there. Relaying of this message has been delayed because no United States naval vessel is now in Hong Kong.
Repeated to Chungking.

SOUTHARD

783.94/14713a : Telegram

The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Japan (Grew)

WASHINGTON, February 15, 1939—8 p. m.

40. The Department desires that, unless you perceive substantial objection, you seek an early interview with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and make, as under instruction from your Government, an oral statement substantially as follows:

The Government of the United States has not failed to note the statements which the Japanese Government has from time to time made that Japan has no territorial ambitions in China. With reference to the recent announcement of Japanese occupation of the Island of Hainan, attention is invited to the fact that there are substantial American missionary and educational interests and numerous American residents, chiefly missionaries, in the Island and that the American Government maintains no consular representation in Hainan. In view of these circumstances and having in mind also the general question of the relationships among the powers, including the United States, which have important interests in and with reference to the Pacific area, relationships which have formed the basis of various international agreements, the Government of the United States would be glad to be informed as to the intentions of the Japanese Government in connection with the occupation of Hainan.

HULL

13 Not printed.
16 Recently deputy leader of the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) at Chungking.
The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State

PARIS, February 16, 1939—5 p. m.  
[Received February 16—4:55 p. m.]

300. The Foreign Office tells us that they “do not believe for a moment” the Japanese assurances that the occupation of Hainan is merely a temporary measure taken for military reasons. Chauvel, Chief of the Far Eastern Division, said that if the primary purpose of the Japanese was to shut off foreign supplies from reaching China via the southwest coast this could have been accomplished much more effectively by seizing Pakhoi and pushing on to Nanning. He believes that the occupation of Hainan is part of “Axis policy” and that the Japanese have no intention of abandoning their hold on the Island.

The French Government, however, does not contemplate taking any further step at present and while placing no reliance in the Japanese assurances is at least glad to have them on the record for possible use in the future.

Chauvel said that since the occupation of Hainan the French Government had modified somewhat its instructions regarding the passage of supplies over the Indo-China Railway and that certain material which had hitherto been held up was now going forward.¹⁷

Chauvel said that upon hearing that a United States destroyer had left Hong Kong to investigate the situation of American missionaries in Hainan, the French had proposed to the British that they should each send a vessel as well, believing it helpful to show “the three flags” there at this particular time. No reply has yet been received from the British.

BULLITT

The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State

 TOKYO, February 17, 1939—7 p. m.  
[Received February 17—7:08 a. m.]

95. Department’s 40, February 15, 8 p. m. Instructions carried out in an interview with the Minister for Foreign Affairs this afternoon.¹⁸

The Minister said that the purpose of the occupation of Hainan Island is to strengthen the blockade of the South China coast and to

¹⁷ See also pp. 736 ff.
¹⁸ For Ambassador Grew’s memorandum of February 17, see Foreign Relations, Japan, 1931–1941, vol. 1, p. 830.
hasten the suppression of the Chiang Kai Shek "regime". Arita repeated the former statements of the Japanese Government that Japan has no territorial ambitions in China and added that the occupation "will not go beyond military necessity".

GREW

793.94/14737 : Telegram

The Chargé in China (Peck) to the Secretary of State

CHUNGKING, February 21, 1939—2 p. m.
[Received February 21—11 a. m.]

128. Reference Embassy’s telegram No. 98, February 12, noon. It is the Embassy’s observation that far from exhibiting general trepidation over the Japanese invasion of Hainan, Chinese official circles are viewing the matter with a minimum of concern if not with a certain amount of complacency. These impressions on the part of the Chinese may be ascribed to (1) a belief that the Japanese landing on Hainan will have no material effect on the war on the mainland but will rather keep a certain number of Japanese troops occupied on the Island, and (2) a conviction that the Japanese invasion of Hainan is a diplomatic blunder which cannot but result in exacerbation of relations between Japan and the United States, Great Britain and France.

There appears to be no unanimity of opinion in Chungking in relation to Japanese motives in occupying Hainan. One popular view is that it was the consummation of a step in the development of the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis, another is that occupation was undertaken with a view to gaining an added bargaining point in future diplomatic negotiations, a third that it was executed with a view to bringing pressure on France and a fourth that the operations were undertaken to propitiate the Japanese Navy in its desire for expansion to the south.

Repeated to Peiping for mailing of code text to Tokyo.

Peck

851G.014/8 : Telegram

The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State

Tokyo, March 31, 1939—4 p. m.
[Received March 31—9:45 a.m.]

158. Our 157, March 30, 9 p. m. 29

1. The Japanese Government has just announced to the press that Spratley Islands, lying between Indo-China and the Philippine Islands, have been placed under the jurisdiction of the Governor of Taiwan. This step appears to be tantamount to annexation.

29 Not printed.
2. The French Ambassador was called to the Foreign Office this morning and informed of this step.

3. Announcements to the press by the spokesman of the Foreign Office that my British colleague and I were also to be summoned have been retracted and reissued with bewildering rapidity. It does not now appear that we are to be called.

4. Both Great Britain and France have claimed title to Spratley Islands but when Japan also laid claim the British withdrew in favor of the French while impressing on the French the importance of stoutly defending their title against the Japanese. The French Government recently offered to arbitrate the case but the Japanese Government refused, expressing intention to annex the Island on the basis of prior occupation by Japanese fishermen. My British colleague considers this a serious development because the Islands are of strategic importance as a post of observation of naval and aerial movements from Singapore.

5. The report is current but not substantiated that the Paracel Islands are also about to be occupied by Japanese forces.

Repeated to Hong Kong for Chungking.

Grew

8516.014/8: Telegram

The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Japan (Grew)

WASHINGTON, March 31, 1939—7 p. m.

79. Your 158, March 31, 4 p. m.

1. In the absence of the Japanese Ambassador in Habana, the Counselor called this morning on an officer of the Department to communicate under instructions from the Japanese Government information in regard to the Sinnan Islands.²⁰

2. He left a paper ²¹ which, in brief summary, contains information as follows:

The Sinnan Islands comprise small coral reefs which roughly lie between 7 degrees and 12 degrees north latitude and 111 degrees and 117 degrees east longitude (the paper gave an exact statement of latitudes and longitudes). The Japanese names of the principal coral reefs of the Sinnan Islands are given, among which is included a group described as Spratly Islands. The Islands were “no State’s land” until 1921 when a Japanese phosphate company built permanent establishments for the development of the Islands with the full authorization of the Japanese Government which despatched a naval survey ship to the Islands in 1929. In 1931 the Japanese settlers were obliged to leave the Islands, but the work of development was resumed.

²¹ Ibid., p. 278.
in 1936 and has continued to date. In 1933 the French Government despatched a warship and publicly proclaimed acquisition of the Islands and sent a notification to that effect to the Japanese Government. The Japanese Government made friendly representations to the French Government to the effect that proclamation should be withdrawn and made it clear that it does not recognize the French claim to the Islands, and that it has taken all necessary measures to insure Japanese acquisition thereof. Japanese naval vessels were despatched to the Islands each year from 1935 to 1938. In 1937 the French Government again claimed sovereignty of the Islands and in 1938 despatched a merchant vessel to the Islands which landed materials and men who commenced to build establishments. The Japanese authorities on the Islands demanded the withdrawal of the French and objected to the hoisting of the French flag and the landing of goods on the Islands. The concluding paragraph of the paper sets forth the Japanese Government’s position as follows:

“(5) The Japanese Government, basing their action on the close connection that has existed between the Islands and the Japanese Empire and on the right deriving therefrom under International Law, and motivated by their desire to avoid the possibility of further complications with the French Government, incidental to the hitherto vague administrative status of the Islands, have incorporated the Sinan Islands in the territory under the jurisdiction of the Government-General of Formosa as of the 30th of March, 1939.”

3. In connection with a map which the Counselor left with the paper, the observation was made to him that the Islands seemed to be quite near to the Philippines. In reply to an inquiry, the Counselor stated that the Islands were primarily useful because of the deposits of phosphate on them. The Counselor indicated, in response to an inquiry, that his Government was communicating the information contained in the paper informally for the information of the Department in view of the fact that on March 30 the Islands had been incorporated by action of the Japanese Government in the territory under the jurisdiction of the Formosan Government-General. He was informed that the information would be studied by the Department.22

Hull

851G.014/7: Telegram

The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State

Paris, April 1, 1939—3 p.m.
[Received April 1—12:25 p.m.]

613. We have inquired at the Foreign Office what information they have received regarding the Japanese “annexation” of Spratley

22 A shorter account was sent to the Embassy in France as telegram No. 238, April 5, 5 p.m. (851G.014/7).
Islands. The Foreign Office received this morning a note cabled from Tokyo by the French Ambassador to whom it was delivered yesterday by the Japanese Government. The Japanese note was written in reply to a French note of early this year. The French note proposed the settlement of the long standing controversy over the ownership of the Islands by submission to arbitration. The Japanese note answers with the announcements that Japan has assumed jurisdiction over Spratley Islands on March 30, 1939.

Officials of the Far Eastern Division of the Foreign Office with whom we talked take a serious view of the matter. It is the first time the Japanese have formally occupied French territory. It is being discussed in Cabinet meeting this morning. They explain that by a decree of 1933 the Islands were declared a French possession complement to Indo-China. The Japanese contested the French claim and the dispute has been carried on with a long exchange of notes each party basing its title to ownership on prior occupation. At present the Islands are occupied by both Japanese coolies and fishermen and by French Annamite militia. Although the latter possess a wireless, the Foreign Office does not yet know whether any further Japanese occupation has accompanied the declaration of assuming jurisdiction.

Our informants see in the Japanese move not only evidence of ill-will toward France but a two-fold purpose: 1, to place their claim on a parity juridically with the French “annexation”; 2, acquire the Islands for use as a seaplane and submarine base at a time when the other powers whose interests are vitally affected are powerless to prevent it. They point out that Japanese action was taken at a moment when France and Great Britain were faced with a most critical situation in Europe.

Bullitt

8516.014/11: Telegram

*The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State*

Paris, April 6, 1939—8 p. m.
[Received April 6—7:30 p. m.]

662. Reference our 613, April 1, 3 p. m. Chauvel, Chief of the Far Eastern Division at the Foreign Office, showed us this afternoon a cable sent April 3 to the French Ambassador at Tokyo containing the text of the note which he was instructed to deliver to the Japanese Government in reply to the Japanese note of March 30.

The French note expresses surprise that the reply of the Japanese to the French proposal for arbitration concerning the Spratley Islands
should be the announcement of Japanese annexation of the Islands. The French Government protests energetically against the Japanese action and declines to recognize that French rights have been affected in any way thereby. The French Government points out that the Japanese action is hardly in accord with the spirit of mutual recognition of rights and interests as set out in the 1907 Treaty between Japan and France. The note closes by stating in effect that if this recent Japanese action is to be interpreted as an indication of the Japanese attitude towards France then the French Government will be compelled to reexamine the reasons which had led to the adoption in the past of its attitude toward Japan.

Chauvel said that one minor result of the Japanese action was that the French Government would decline henceforth to reply to any further communication from the Japanese Embassy alleging that the Yunnan Railway was being used to transport military supplies. The Japanese Government has continued to protest from time to time on this subject. Two or three days ago the Japanese Chargé d’Affaires delivered another note along this line. Chauvel will telephone him tomorrow or the next day and will state that the French Government is the sole judge of what use may be made of the railway, that it declines to take under consideration any further communications on the subject or to make any reply to them.

Chauvel stated that information from Japan indicated that the move to declare the annexation of the Island[s] by Japan had come not from the Admiralty but from the Foreign Office and that it might have been done in an effort to build up the waning prestige of Arita. There is no indication yet that the Japanese intend to occupy the Islands effectively and construct seaplane and submarine bases there.

Bullitt

851G.014/18

Memorandum of Conversation, by the Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Hamilton)

[WASHINGTON,] April 11, 1939.

The French Ambassador 23 called at his request. He said that several days ago he had mentioned to the Secretary the subject of the Japanese action in reference to the Spratly Islands and that the Secretary had informed him that FE 24 was studying the matter. The Ambassador then handed me the attached aide-mémoire 25 containing

23 Count de Saint-Quentin.
24 Division of Far Eastern Affairs.
25 Not printed.
a record of the action taken by the French Government in regard to
the claim by Japan of sovereignty over the Spratly Islands. I
thanked the Ambassador for the information contained in the aide-
mémoire.

The Ambassador then inquired whether the Japanese Government
had given us any information in regard to its action. I replied in
the affirmative and said that the Japanese Embassy here had given us
informally a statement setting forth the Japanese claim to the Islands.
I said that the Japanese, according to the information which they
had given us, were claiming an area considerably larger than the area
which the French claimed and that the Japanese referred to the
Islands as the Sinnan Islands, among which there was included the
Spratly group.

The Ambassador inquired whether we were going to take any action
in the matter. I replied that we still had the matter under study.

The Ambassador then asked what basis there would be for action
on the part of the American Government in case the Japanese should
take French Indochina or Hong Kong. When I replied that it seemed
to me that the same considerations which would influence this Govern-
ment in regard to forceful acquisition of territory in Europe would
apply to the forceful acquisition of territory by Japan such as Hong
Kong or French Indochina, the Ambassador raised the question
whether there was any distinction between seizure by Japan of Hong
Kong or French Indochina and seizure by Japan of the Spratly
Islands. I replied that it seemed to me that there might be a distinc-
tion in that there was no question as to British ownership of Hong
Kong or as to French ownership of French Indochina, whereas there
were two claims, a French claim and a Japanese claim, to ownership
of the Spratly Islands. I said that of course I was not undertaking to
pass on the merits of the respective claims; and that I did not have
sufficient knowledge of the facts to place me in a position to do that
even should I so desire. The Ambassador said that he realized that
we were talking in purely an exploratory and speculative way. He
pointed out that France had made an offer to Japan to arbitrate the
question of ownership of the Islands; that Japan had replied by an-
nouncing Japanese jurisdiction over the Islands; and that this type
of forceful action was very unfortunate from the point of view of
adherence to international law. I indicated agreement with this
observation.

M[AXWELL] M. H[AMILTON]
The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State

Tokyo, April 17, 1939—3 p. m.
[Received April 17—7:08 a. m.]

179. Our 167, April 6, 4 p. m., Spratley Islands. The British Chargé d’Affaires has just made available to me a copy of a note which he addressed on April 10 to the Minister for Foreign Affairs relating to the Japanese action concerning the Spratley Islands. The last paragraph is as follows:

“I am instructed to inform Your Excellency that His Majesty's Government are unable to admit that the claim of the Japanese Government has any legal foundation and that they deplore the procedure adopted by them in this matter as it can only complicate still further the situation in the Far East.”

Grew

The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State

Tokyo, April 26, 1939—2 p. m.
[Received April 26—7:46 a. m.]

202. Our 190, April 20, 8 p. m.

1. The Secretary of the Netherlands Legation informs us that according to the Netherlands Consul at Shanghai now visiting in Japan the Netherlands Consul General at Shanghai received information from what he considered to be a reliable source to the effect that the Japanese Fleet had received orders to proceed “in the event of war in Europe” to the Netherlands East Indies under the guise of carrying out routine maneuvers following which certain demands would be presented to the Netherlands East Indies Government; but that the orders did not contemplate the immediate occupation of Netherlands territory.

2. This statement differs in one important respect from the report brought to the Department by the Netherlands Minister; namely, the contingency of war in Europe.

3. Without knowing the source of the Netherlands Consul General’s information, we are not in a position to weigh the accuracy of such information. However, in view of the secrecy which surrounds the movements of Japanese naval vessels, we are inclined to believe that his information is probably in the nature of a shrewd forecast of developments in the contingency of a European war.

Grew

Not printed.
The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State

PARIS, May 15, 1939—6 p. m.
[Received May 15—1:25 p. m.]

945. Leger \textsuperscript{29} said to me today that he was somewhat fearful that Japan might be thinking of some sort of aggressive action against French Indo-China. Six times in the last week Japanese airplanes had flown over portions of Indo-China and had dropped bombs. The Japanese Government had been informed that any Japanese plane flying over any portion of Indo-China in the future would be shot at immediately. Since this warning no Japanese planes had flown over French Indo-China.

Bullitt

The Secretary of State to the Chargé in Japan (Dooman)

WASHINGTON, May 19, 1939—4 p. m.

133. Department’s instruction 1705, April 11, 1939.\textsuperscript{30} On May 17 the Department addressed to the Japanese Ambassador a note in which reference was made to the memorandum left by Mr. Suma on March 31 and in which it was stated \textit{inter alia} that the Government of the United States does not consider that all islands or reefs within the extensive area delimited in the Japanese memorandum could properly be treated as one island group or that the action of Japan in blanketing within the territory of Japan islands or reefs with respect to which the Japanese Government has heretofore exercised no acts which might properly be regarded as establishing a basis for claim to sovereignty has any international validity.

Text of the note is being mailed.\textsuperscript{31}

Hull

The Chargé in Thailand (Chapman) to the Secretary of State

BANGKOK, July 4, 1939—2 p. m.
[Received July 4—8:40 a. m.]

23. There has been a surprising and unmistakable recent trend toward reversal of the oft repeated neutrality policy of the Siamese

\textsuperscript{29} Secretary General of the French Foreign Office.

\textsuperscript{30} Not printed; it transmitted copies of the two documents of March 31 printed in \textit{Foreign Relations, Japan, 1931–1941}, vol. ii, pp. 277 and 278 (851G.014/8).

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 280.
Government. A group of army and navy officers having strong pro-Japanese sympathies, who surround the Prime Minister, seem now to dominate the present policy of the Government. This group understands only arguments of force. Members of the Cabinet gravely fear that some rash commitment to Japan is imminent. I am convinced that departure from policy of strict neutrality by Siam in favor of Japan might be disastrous for Siam and would be inimical to American interests. The French and British Ministers are much concerned over the situation, they fully share the same views in relation to the interests of their own countries and they are in communication with their Governments accordingly. I earnestly and respectfully suggest that a useful purpose might be served if the Secretary were personally to inform the Siamese Minister substantially that great sympathy exists in the United States for democratic governments and for the cautious role of Siam, that any departure therefrom would not fail to cause concern in the United States and that communication of these views to his Government by telegraph would be appreciated.

CHAPMAN

792.00/36

Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State (Sayre) of a Conversation With the Thai Minister (Abhidal Rajamaitri)

[WASHINGTON,] July 25, 1939.

In pursuance of instructions from the Secretary, I made an appointment to see the Thai Minister at his summer cottage at Osterville, Massachusetts, telling him that I had to be in New England on other business but was anxious to talk over a personal matter with him.

I reached Osterville at 5:43 p. m. on July twenty-fifth and took dinner with the Minister and spent the evening with him. As I know the Minister intimately, I allowed the visit to seem more of a social than an official one.

After dinner I had a long talk with the Minister and told him that I had heard certain disquieting reports about the possibility of the Thai Government abandoning its traditional policy of detachment and strict neutrality and told him of my concern lest pressures emanating from Japan should become so strong that Thailand might become involved in the struggle now in progress between Japan and China. The substance of my remarks is set forth in the accompanying cable memorandum.

In reply, the Thai Minister told me that so far as his advices are concerned he believed the reports to be ill-founded and without justification. He told me in strict confidence that the Thai people funda-
mentally mistrusted the Japanese. He went on to say that the Thai Cabinet, of which he was a former member, felt strongly that Thailand should continue its policy of strict neutrality. As an instance of this policy, he told me, in the strictest confidence, that Thailand had been approached by Great Britain and I understood him to say that Great Britain had undertaken to defend Thai ports in return for a promise by Thailand to side with Great Britain in the event of war. This offer had been refused by his Government on the ground of its traditional policy of strict neutrality.

As a matter of fact, however, I feel that the Thai Minister, being out of direct touch with what is currently going on in Bangkok, has no direct knowledge of the most recent developments and that his opinion, sincere as it is, is not therefore to be relied upon.

At the close of our friendly and intimate conversation I read over to the Thai Minister a statement which I had prepared in the form of a cable in order succinctly to set forth the thoughts which I had expressed to him. He asked me to leave a copy of this statement with him and promised to send it to his Government by cable. A copy of this statement is attached herewith.

F. B. S[AYRE]

[Enclosure]

Draft Telegram

Kalyan had long and friendly talk informally with me today not as American government official but as former adviser and friend of Thailand. He said in substance following:

"I feel sure you are confident of my disinterestedness and genuine concern and affection for Thailand. I have been much concerned over recent disquieting rumors of possibility of Thailand's abandoning its traditional policy of strict neutrality toward powerful rival governments struggling for ascendancy and yielding to insistent pressure for permitting use of Thailand facilities for assisting designs of Asiatic power. I sincerely hope reports untrue. Thailand's independence and welfare in past have been based largely on its steadfast policy of detachment and independent neutrality in rivalry between Great Britain and France. Today a struggle of even larger scope is in progress between two Asiatic powers with European powers vitally concerned in outcome. I feel keenly that independence and welfare of Thailand depend even more vitally than in past on its scrupulously maintaining a position of strict and impartial neutrality in this pending struggle. Once this policy is sacrificed I fear Thai independence may be seriously threatened and Thailand lose its ancient heritage."

Mr. Sayre.
He hopes I will make his concern clear to Thailand Government and emphasize that he is prompted not by desire of officious meddling but solely because of his affection for Thai people and his concern lest any other course lessen or impair the respect and sincere regard which American people hold for Thai people.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{Memorandum by Mr. Laurence E. Salisbury of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs} \textsuperscript{34}

\textbf{[Washington,] November 29, 1939.}

[Here follows report on Japanese press references to renewed interest in Japanese expansion southward.]

Japanese interest in military or economic expansion southward is not a new development. There are in Japan the school of continental expansion, largely centered in the army group, and the school of southward expansion, principally advocated in naval circles. The most recent concrete evidence of the policy of southward expansion was the announcement last spring by the Japanese Government of the incorporation of the so-called “Spratly Islands”. The marked development in recent years of Japanese trading, fisheries and general economic exploitation activities in the Netherlands East Indies has been a source of serious concern to the Netherlands authorities.

Forward movements on Japan’s part in the direction of expansion have in the past been timed to coincide with occasions when the European powers have been seriously involved nearer home. It can warrantably be anticipated therefore that, as the European war progresses, Japanese thought will turn increasingly in the direction of the “South Seas” and that the likelihood of a forward movement in that direction by Japan would grow pari passu with British, French, and Netherlands involvement in the West.

An important factor in the situation, however, is Japan’s uncertainty as to what the attitude of the United States would be in the face of fresh Japanese aggression in the “South Seas”. If at such time as Japan may seriously be considering a further advance southward the

\textsuperscript{35} The Chargé in Thailand, in his telegram No. 28, August 11, 11 a.m., reported the Thai Minister for Foreign Affairs had “issued emphatic denial [of] rumors of change in neutrality policy and reaffirming policy of equal friendship with all powers alike.” (792.00/32)

\textsuperscript{34} The Adviser on Political Relations (Hornbeck) attached comment, dated December 5, as follows:

“Japan has staked her reputation on the adventure in China. She has spent a ‘whale of a lot’ of money and of blood on that venture. She is not likely to withdraw from it in order to start some other adventure. And, she is not likely to start another until she ends it—either with success or with failure.”
United States has not already imposed stringent embargoes on exports to Japan, then it might be expected that Japan would be influenced in some degree toward inaction through fear that the United States might in retaliation impose embargoes. On the other hand, if prior to a fresh southward advance on Japan’s part the United States were to institute important restrictions on American-Japanese trade, Japan might be precipitated by American action into further aggression southward. It would seem, for example, that the imposing of an embargo on the export of oil from the United States to Japan might increase the temptation felt by Japan to seize the Netherlands East Indies where there are important sources of oil. However, even though Japan would unquestionably react strongly to an American embargo, she might be deterred from attacking the Netherlands Indies by a realization that, as indicated by the imposition by the United States of an embargo, American-Japanese relations were progressively deteriorating and that as an outcome thereof a Japanese attack against the Netherlands Indies might carry the United States and Japan into war.

In considering the question of the likelihood of Japanese aggression in the “South Seas”, it is to be recalled that in the past it has consistently been Japan’s policy to avoid armed conflict with any of the Western powers. It would seem, therefore, that such aggression would probably not occur (a) until and unless Japan becomes convinced that Great Britain and France will be defeated in the present war and (b) unless Japan is convinced that aggression will not cause the United States to adopt measures seriously impairing Japanese interests or unless Japan feels certain that aggression will not place the United States in such position that it will be eventually forced by circumstances to consider that armed conflict with Japan might be inevitable.

The possibility that circumstances might so develop as to increase the likelihood of Japanese expansion southward raises the question whether the present policy of the United States toward Japan should be modified in any way. Present American policy in the Far East is the outgrowth of belief in a number of fundamental and traditional principles with particular reference at this time to the application of those principles to the situation in China. It would, of course, be a matter for regret if adherence by the United States to the policy of continuing to support the principles to which this country is committed should result in the taking by Japan of any forthright action which might adversely affect the interests of other powers, such as the effecting by Japan of a rapprochement with the Soviet Union or the seizure of the Netherlands East Indies. The possibilities of Japan

*For additional correspondence on this subject, see pp. 475 ff.
taking such action, however, would not seem to be sufficient warrant for the United States to compromise on matters of principle or to abandon a policy which in its essentials is designed in the long run to demonstrate to Japan that that country cannot with impunity continue to violate those principles for her own advantage and to the disadvantage of other powers. The question is a long-range question. The chief hope that the Government and people of the United States can entertain that the world will in general some day return to a sane and orderly procedure of international intercourse based on principles of justice and fair dealing between and among nations is that the foreign policy of the United States, by adhering consistently and continuously to the fundamental principles to which we are committed and in which we believe, can exert its influence to bring about a desired order out of the present international disorder. It follows, therefore, that surrender or compromise of those principles in any given case would act merely as the breaking of a link in a chain which must depend for its strength as a whole upon the strength of its individual component parts.