

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE STUDY NUMBER 4

OFFICE OF STRATEGIC SERVICES
RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS BRANCH

R & A 2998S
30 MARCH 1945

JAPANESE SEIZURE OF FRENCH INDOCHINA

On 9 March the Japanese, impelled by mounting distrust of the French administration and by rapid Allied advances in Burma and the Philippines, seized full control in Indochina. Heretofore, preferring to use the existing French administrative machinery, the Japanese had postponed the outright annexation of the country. Even now they are apparently anxious to prevent a complete administrative breakdown, and are encouraging all French officials and technical workers in the government or in private companies to remain at their posts "to work under the same conditions as before." To strengthen their position, the Japanese have made an intensive effort to promote a rift between French and native resistance elements, and to enlist native support with promises of "independence" as soon as conditions permit.

Indochina is of vital strategic importance to Japan in the defense of her continental holdings. Japanese military control in Indochina, besides facilitating Japanese operations in China, will protect important escape routes for over 600,000 Japanese troops still stationed in the Netherlands East Indies and continental Southeast Asia. For some time the Japanese have been aware that Governor-General Decoux has been in contact both with the French Government and the Allies. They have accused French Indochinese forces of failing to fire on American aircraft, harboring enemy airmen shot down over Indochina, and helping Allied submarines in their raids on Japanese shipping along the Indochina coast.

The Japanese have hesitated to take the drastic step of complete occupation ever since they moved into Indochina with Vichy consent in 1940. Tokyo was not encouraged by the administrative difficulties encountered by the Japanese Military Administration in Malaya and Java, and it did not have enough trained personnel to handle the administrative problems resulting from the racial and linguistic complexity of Indochina. Moreover, the Japanese probably felt that French assistance in exploiting the area for food and raw materials would be valuable.

These considerations did not prevent the Japanese from being suspicious of Decoux' pledge of allegiance. During the initial stage of Japanese penetration of Indochina, Decoux, unable to get outside aid, was forced to yield to Japanese demands. But when the Japanese became involved in far-flung Pacific operations at the end of 1941, their hold on Indochina relaxed somewhat. Decoux was quick to take advantage of the opportunity to fortify his precarious position by raising a private army, an Indochina branch of the pro-Petainist *Legion des Combattants*. He

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: JAN 2002

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

was able apparently by stressing its totalitarian character to secure arms and ammunition from the Japanese. One of the most effective French Government obstacles to Japanese control was a liaison agency, the *Mission Franco-Japonaise*, established in 1942. Actually this body created a bottleneck which operated to slow up action in Japanese demands by multiplying opportunities for discussion and compromise.

Franco-Japanese relations underwent a critical strain during the Allied invasion of North Africa in 1942, because the Japanese feared Decoux might offer assistance to the Allies in the Far East paralleling Darlan's *coup* in the West. The tension eased when Decoux apparently managed to assure Tokyo of his loyalty to Vichy. After the liberation of metropolitan France, however, Japan became increasingly apprehensive over Decoux' openly expressed admiration for De Gaulle and over signs of French Indochinese duplicity in the face of Allied advances.

When on 9 March Vice-Admiral Decoux refused Japanese demands for control of Indochinese troops and police and all communications, the Japanese promptly proclaimed a state of martial law, began disarming French Indochinese troops, and took members of the French administration and military staff into "protective custody." In addition they took over key industries, barracks, airfields, Government residences, police stations, railroad stations, and utilities. This action abrogated the Joint Defense Agreement of 20 July 1941, under which the French retained control of the civil administration, the principal communication facilities, and small garrison forces.

Although the Japanese are minimizing the resistance being offered by French garrisons, fighting was still going on in northern Indochina two weeks after the Japanese *coup*. Much of the colonial army, numbering 40,000-50,000 troops of which less than a third are Frenchmen and the majority are Annamites, apparently remains loyal to the French. The China-based 14th United States Airforce has come to the assistance of the hard-pressed troops, and a guerrilla movement of French and Annamites reportedly is in the process of organization. Neighboring Thailand has been ordered by the Japanese to close her Indochina border, to seize the arms of all French soldiers seeking refuge in Thailand, and to arrest all Indochinese and French residents in Thailand. Thailand reportedly has not yet complied in full with these demands and is still negotiating with the Japanese.

In taking over Indochina the Japanese have already made efforts to arouse local anti-French sentiment by sponsoring the "integrity" and "independence" of the five Indochinese provinces. Furthermore, the hard-pressed Japanese probably cannot at present afford the manpower to undertake radical changes in the local governments. Therefore, although some replacements have been made on the cabinet level, they are trying to enlist the support of the present officials as an emergency procedure. King Bao Dai of Annam and King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia have proclaimed the "independence" of their kingdoms, abrogating their treaties with France, and pledging to support the Greater

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The local government of Laos also is reported to have been left in the hands of the present ruler. In Tonkin and Cochin China, the Japanese apparently are retaining the French administrative system, except on the policy level. As early as 9 March Domei radio announced that pro-Japanese independence organizations in Tonkin had formed a federation to support independence for Indochina and cooperation with Japan.

Despite the current Tokyo insistence that Japan has no territorial ambitions in French Indochina, and is "now able to extend wholehearted cooperation to the people . . . who have been groaning . . . under foreign oppression," the Indochinese natives are not likely to show real enthusiasm. When the Japanese first occupied Indochina the majority of the natives responded to Japanese Greater East Asia slogans and promises of cheap goods and considerate treatment. They quickly became alienated by the brutal treatment they received and by the rapid deterioration of their economy under Japanese exploitation. The Decoux Government has been able to exploit this situation. By permitting the establishment of local industry, lowering existing race barriers, and granting the natives a larger share in the administration, it has improved French-native relations, and encouraged the development of a native anti-Japanese movement under French leadership.

Copy No. 83

3

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~