12 The French Expansion Westwards into Southeast Asia

Later, proponents of an active French policy in Southeast Asia and China would deplore the fact that after establishing a protectorate over Tonkin France had lost interest in colonial expansion. Étienne (1897: 20) wrote about France having become 'indifferent if not hostile for such a long time' towards colonial adventures. Ferry (1890: 5), in his effort to defend his past policy, detected an 'anticolonial monomania' in France, while a Lyon trade mission to the south of China would deplore the almost complete lack of interest in and enthusiasm for French endeavours abroad (Chambre 1898a: 443).

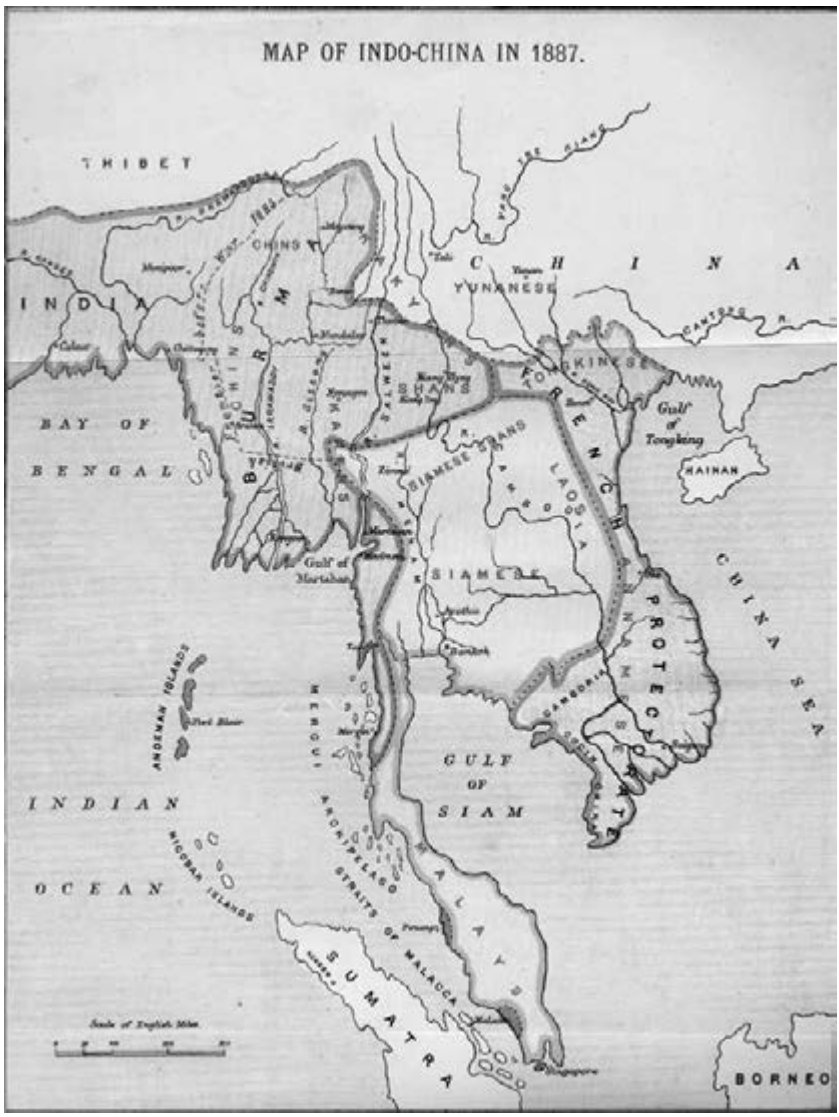
The reality was a little different. After Annam had become a French protectorate and Great Britain had annexed Ava, Thailand, or Siam as it was called in those days, became the arena of Anglo-French rivalry. Newspapers in Saigon urging for the annexation of Thailand or turning that country into a protectorate fed British misgivings (Scott 1885: 376). Thailand, considered an easy prey by both the French and British, was so terrified of France that Bangkok would avoid anything that might cause the French offence and provide Paris with an excuse to invade the country. Scott (1885: 376) would even write of 'the terror of irritating the French'. Initially, attention focused on Laos and the Upper Mekong. Having established itself in Vietnam and Cambodia, France aimed at an expansion westwards into Laos. Gaining Laos would bring the French right up to the eastern border of Upper Burma, a gateway to India as the fearful British would stress.

Laos was disputed territory. According to the British, it formed part of Thailand 'by right of conquest for nearly a century'.[1] France disputed this. Laos, the French had to admit, was economically dependent on Thailand, but it had been a tributary of Hué and was usurped by Thailand, making use of years of civil war in Annam. The French based their position, it was stressed, 'on the incontestable rights of Annam which had been exercised for several centuries'.[2] In October 1891 France publicly staked its claim to Laos and alerted the British when its Minister of Foreign Affairs,

1 Lord Lamington in House of Lords 15-6-1893 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1893/jun/15/questions-observations).

2 Dufferin to Rosebery 7-2-1893 (cited in Norman 1900: 470).

Figure 13 Continental Southeast Asia after the annexation of Ava in 1886



Source: Browne 1888

Alexandre Ribot, announced in Parliament that the Upper Mekong should be the boundary between the French and British spheres of influence (Chandran 1977: 13). In case London might have missed the signal, Paris informed London of its intention in May 1892; suggesting that the river 'should be a boundary across which neither the French westward nor the

British southwards [from India through Burma] will expand their sphere of influence'.[3]

Its designs would bring France on a collision course with Great Britain. It gave the British the impression that besides Russia yet another enemy was encroaching on its colonial possessions. The persistence France showed in its efforts to have Bangkok yield to its territorial demands at one point made Salisbury and other British politicians ponder that a partition of Thailand might be near, and even that when Great Britain did not stand its ground France might take the whole of Thailand within a decade.[4]

The consequences of such a French advancement would be great. In Thailand British economic interests were paramount; or, as the then Foreign Secretary Rosebery expressed it in August 1893, Great Britain possessed 'practically a monopoly of Siamese commerce'.[5] Again according to Rosebery, British shipping in Bangkok accounted for 87 per cent in tonnage and 93 per cent in value of the whole shipping.[6] Great Britain, as Lord Lamington observed, 'could not for one moment allow any other European supremacy in Siam proper than her own'.[7] For France it was exactly this British economic preponderance in Thailand that was an additional reason not to accept Thai control over Laos and the Mekong, 'because "Siamese property" was tantamount to "British property" in view of the predominant British influence at Bangkok' (Thio 1969: 286).

Diplomacy would concentrate on the east bank of the Mekong, but the region France claimed was not that far away from Bangkok and the fertile Menam (Chao Phraya) Valley, making the prospect of a French forward move all the more alarming, because, as Lamington pointed out in the House of Lords, there was 'no natural frontier between the Mekong and the Menam' that could prevent the French from moving on.[8] The terrain was flat and there were no mountains to cross. British policy in countering French intentions hinged on three principles. Firstly, the territorial integrity of Thailand, as a whole or at least the territory located west of the Upper

3 Minute by Salisbury 10-5-1892 (cited in Chandran 1977: 21).

4 Kimberley to Rosebery 25-7-1893 (cited in Chandran 1977: 64), Salisbury to Chamberlain 21-9-1895 (cited in Chandran 1977: 184), Salisbury to Curzon 3-12-1895 (cited in Chandran 1977: 214).

5 Rosebery to Gladstone 26-8-1893 (cited in Chandran 1977: 79).

6 Rosebery in House of Lords 27-7-1893 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1893/jul/27/questions).

7 Lord Lamington in House of Lords 15-6-1893 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1893/jun/15/questions-observations).

8 Ibid.

Mekong (opinions about this differed), should be maintained to allow the country to serve as a buffer between the French and British territories in Southeast Asia. A French Thailand would, in the words of Rosebery, mean 'another great military power' on India's border.[9] Rosebery, portrayed by the historian Chandran (1971a: 108) as a man 'who possessed a morbid suspicion of French intentions', even appears to have judged this to be a more realistic threat than a Russian invasion of India, though there were others who thought the fear of French troops marching towards India through Thailand to be 'the most foolish of all the bugbears that the panic-mongers' had come up with.[10] Secondly, in the south of Thailand, in the Kra Isthmus, no other power should receive special concessions.

Thirdly, the land between the northern boundary of Thailand and the southern one of China should also not fall into French hands. There a kind of Thai-Chinese buffer had to be created between Upper Burma and the approaching French, necessary, Britons argued, because of 'the French aggression in Siam' (Morrison 1895: 241). The 'empty land' located there comprised a number of small Shan states. Two of these, Meung Lem (Munglem) and Keng Hung (Kiang Hung), should go to China on the condition that China would not cede them at any later date to France; as, in fact, they would under the Convention between Great Britain and China relative to Burmah and China, 1 March 1894.[11] A third state, Keng Cheng (Kyaing Chaing, Kyaing Cheng, Kaing Khen), should be added to the territory of Thailand. Edward Grey, at that moment Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, explained that Great Britain had 'feudal rights' over it because of the incorporation of Ava; but, as Salisbury would state two years later, in China and 'to some extent in France' there was 'a tendency to underrate the claims and rights of her Majesty's Government'. Much more Salisbury could not say, except that Keng Cheng, which was indeed claimed by China, was 'a country of which we know so little'.[12] Thailand accepted Keng Cheng in mid-1892, but in May 1894 London cancelled the transfer.

9 Rosebery to Gladstone 26-8-1893 (cited in Chandran 1977: 79). See also Rosebery to Elgin 18-6-1895 (cited in Chandran 1977: 151).

10 Sir William Harcourt, Chancellor of the Exchequer, to Kimberley 25-3-1895 (cited in Chandran 1977: 134).

11 At least of Keng Hung some British initially were of the opinion that it belonged to Burma; but, as Grey phrased it, 'found' that it was 'under Chinese administration' (Grey in House of Commons 2-4-1894, hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1894/apr/02/kiang-hung).

12 Grey in House of Commons 19-6-1893 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1893/jun/19/the-french-in-siam), Salisbury in House of Lords 30-8-1895 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1895/aug/30/the-franco-chinese -treaty).

In April 1893 London, in the name of 'the national independence of Siam', declined the French proposal that the Upper Mekong River should form the boundary between the French and British spheres of influence in that part of the world.[13] Disregarding what London thought about such aggrandisement of French colonial territory, and at the same time suspicious that in the north Great Britain wanted to expand its control east of the Burmese border – and thus also east of the Mekong, moving in the direction of south China (Chandran 1971a: 6, 1977: 20-1) –, France was prepared to go to war to enforce its claim. It was, as Taylor (1971: 344) asserted, France's 'substitute for a great war in Europe'. On the British side, then and later, there was the suspicion that the French lusted after the whole of Thailand, with the added complication that should they succeed, France and Great Britain would share the large Burmese-Thai border, something the British wanted to avoid at all costs (Temple 1902: 46). Thailand should remain a buffer.

The Franco-Thai war

By 1893, due to heightened tension with Great Britain over territorial expansion in Africa – and a desire to outdo the British and the Germans – the mood in France had become different from the one which Lanessan and other French colonialists had so criticised. Illustrative of this was that Ferry's self-vindication, which at the same time was an attack on those opposing an active colonial policy, published in 1890, became an instant bestseller with at least fourteen editions before the year was over. An organised colonial lobby had also come into existence. First, the Comité de l'Afrique française was formed in 1890, followed by the establishment of the Groupe Coloniale de la Chambre (Colonial Group in Parliament) in 1892 and the Union Coloniale française in 1893. Together with a variety of other similar but less influential groups, some in fact having more in common with learned societies than pressure groups, collectively known as the 'parti colonial', a deceptive name that created the impression of more unity of purpose than there actually was. Though the Germans acquiring their Pacific Islands and the Italian exploits in the Horn of Africa were mentioned as reasons why Paris should embark upon an active policy of colonial expansion, Great Britain was the main adversary but also the example to follow. The call was for chartered companies, which the British again were establishing – the Royal Niger Company of 1886, the (Imperial) British East Africa Company of 1888, and the

13 Rosebery to Waddington 3-4-1893 (cited in Chandran 1977: 46).

British South Africa Company of 1889 – called into being through a government decree. Or, as the leading figure of the movement, the chairman of the Groupe Coloniale, Eugène Étienne, Under-Secretary of State of the Colonies[14] in 1887 and again from 1890 to 1892, argued – and even more forcefully so after the cabinet of Charles de Freycinet, of which he was a member, fell in February 1892 –, France should support its commercial companies, which wanted to exploit foreign territory in the same way Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands had done so successfully (Étienne 1897: 18). Everywhere European powers were expanding their overseas territory. France could not lag behind. It should regain the status of the mighty colonial power it had once been and seek compensation for past reverses. Frenchmen stressing this latter point could and did point to many examples: the Peace of Paris of 1763 after the Seven Years' War, which had robbed France of its colonial possessions in North America and would make Great Britain the dominant foreign power in India; the lost Franco-German War of 1870-71; the Suez Canal and Great Britain taking control of Egypt in 1882. More generally, it was argued that where it concerned colonial expansion Great Britain had always tried to frustrate French plans. Newspapers, still optimistically writing about the strength of the French navy, joined in in creating a bellicose patriotic spirit. At the end of 1893 *Le Stéphanois* (22-12-1893) would gloat over the alarm in the British press over the strength of a combined Franco-Russian fleet, boasting that the French warships were more numerous, better armed and faster than the British ones.

Étienne and his political friends did not get what they wanted. The Freycinet government decided against them, not wanting to bypass Parliament, which might not be in favour of such chartered companies and could refuse to pass a law to call them into being. The hesitance shown by the French government was indicative of the weakness of the leading protagonists of French colonial expansion. They might have excellent connections with the ministry in charge of the colonies, but less so with that of Foreign Affairs (which was against their idea of creating chartered companies by decree). Acting primarily as lobbyists, they also do not seem to have aimed at influencing the press or the larger public (Grupp 1980: 19, 43). If colonial sentiments did flare up, it was in response to international developments, not to a campaign by protagonists of colonial expansion.

Though Africa was the immediate cause, the colonisation of mainland Southeast Asia also received renewed attention. A bellicose press campaign demanded the occupation of Laos and pressure on the government to act

14 There was not yet a Ministry of the Colonies; this would be instituted in 1894.

firmly gathered steam. At the Foreign Office in London, Permanent Under-Secretary Philip Currie observed in March 1893 that in France people were 'working themselves up into a state of excitement against Siam with the view of plundering her'.[15] In March 1893 the French minister resident in Bangkok, Auguste Pavie, a war horse, demanded that Thailand should withdraw the troops from Laos it had sent there to call to order restless refugees from Yunnan.[16] To add force to the ultimatum, the French gunboat *Le Lutin* was directed to Bangkok. There she anchored 'with her decks cleared for action and her guns trained on to the place'.[17] The Thai government was warned that a French fleet had been dispatched to Saigon, from where it could sail on to Bangkok if necessary.[18] To avert a French attack, Bangkok, as it had done before in the previous months, tried to gain British diplomatic support by alerting London to the danger of Thailand becoming a French protectorate, but London did not commit itself. The following month, in April, troops from Indochina marched into Laos.

Great Britain did take its precautions. In mid-April the gunboat HMS *Swift* was dispatched to Bangkok on the suggestion of the Commander of the China Squadron. The British navy also went in search of a suitable place for a coaling station in the Gulf of Thailand; a decision which may have been taken with both Germany, suspected of wanting to acquire a coaling station in Thailand, and France in mind. In June London directed a second warship from Singapore to Thailand; a third one was soon to follow. In French eyes, these ship movements were meant to encourage Thailand to resist. Consequently, Paris warned Bangkok not to turn to other powers for help.

On 13 July hostilities started with the so-called Paknam Crisis or Paknam Incident, or to quote a patriotic French contemporary, Fournereau (1998: 7), with the 'glorious Paknam affair'. Two gunboats, the *Comète* and the *Inconstant*, forced their way up the Menam River to Bangkok, 'the weak point of the Siamese Empire'.[19] When these French warships disregarded a warning not to sail the Menam and crossed the Paknam bar, guns located at the local fort, guarding the entrance to Bangkok, opened fire. The Franco-Thai War of 1893 had begun. Still the same day, the two warships anchored

15 Currie to Rosebery 7-3-1893 (cited in Chandran 1977: 45).

16 www.paknam.com/history/paknam-incident-1893.html (accessed 8-8-2012).

17 Gibson Bowles in House of Commons 29-6-1893 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1893/jun/29/the-french-in-siam).

18 Grey in House of Commons 29-6-1893 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1893/jun/29/the-french-in-siam).

19 Rosebery to Jones 18-11-1892 (cited in Chandran 1977: 33).

off the French Legation in Bangkok. The next day, 14 July, the Thai Minister of Foreign Affairs congratulated the commander of the French gunboats upon their sailing on to the city and 'all the Siamese vessels in the river were dressed with flags, the tricolour at the peak, in honour of the French national *fête*' (Norman 1900: 467).

London did not even protest.[20] In view of their disputes over Africa, the British government did not want to disrupt Anglo-France relations by coming to the support of Thailand. In Africa there was a danger of British control over Egypt being destabilised, in particular after the death in January 1892 of the Khedive, Tewfik Pasha, the son of Ismail, and a British ally. In identical statements in both Houses, Rosebery and Grey clarified that it was government policy to do nothing that would 'aggravate the situation in any way' and to 'consider justly and dispassionately the present position of affairs between France and Siam'. Further, they explained that Thailand's independence and integrity was 'a subject of grave importance to the British, and more especially to the British Indian Empire'.[21] Ten days later Rosebery left no doubt that London did 'not feel called upon to pronounce an opinion' and had 'scrupulously avoided giving any advice to the Siamese Government, beyond, when they have asked for it, urging them to come to terms as quickly as possible with their powerful neighbour'.[22] Bangkok could do worse than follow such suggestions, because, as Kimberley, at that time Foreign Secretary, later wrote to the British minister to Bangkok, Maurice de Bunsen, otherwise the outcome might be 'the more or less complete extinction of Siamese national existence'.[23] This was the rationale behind London's advice, afraid as British politicians were that if Bangkok resisted, Thailand might cease to exist or be forced to hand over some of its more important provinces to France; both eventualities Great Britain wanted to avoid.

On 19 July Paris issued an ultimatum to Bangkok. Among other things, Paris demanded that Thailand should recognise 'the rights of Annam and Cambodia on the left bank of the Mekong and over the islands in that river' (Chandran 1977: 57). To the French, the Mekong was a French river, and not just for geographical reasons. As a leading French colonialist and

20 Grey in House of Commons 19-6-1893 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1893/jun/19/the-french-in-siam).

21 Rosebery in House of Lords and Grey in House of Commons 17-7-1893 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1893/jul/17/question-observations, hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1893/jul/17/france-and-siam).

22 Rosebery in House of Lords 27-7-1893 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1893/jul/27/questions).

23 Kimberley to De Bunsen 27-10-1894 (cited in Chandran 1977: 118-9).

former Governor-General of Indochina, Doumer (1905: 30), would write, the Mekong was also French from a historical point of view. It was the French who had explored the river and had presented the outcome of their famous work to the world.

When Thailand refused to comply, a French naval blockade, which even before it became effective drew protests from Foreign Secretary Rosebery and created an uproar in Great Britain. This was particularly true after 30 July, when news reached London that the British warships anchored at Bangkok had been ordered to leave the blockade area. The Siam Crisis of 1893 was born. Rosebery feared that war could erupt at any moment. He even went as far as to inform the German Emperor, who at that moment was visiting Great Britain, via Queen Victoria, about the seriousness of the situation. The news made Wilhelm II agonise over the possibility of a European war with Russia siding with France, and how Germany – which, he thought, if it really was a world power had to join – would perform in it (Carter 2010: 164).[24] German support, diplomatically or otherwise, turned out not to be necessary. The crisis was defused within a day when Paris attributed the order to leave the blockade area to a misunderstanding of instructions (Chandran 1977: 68-9).

Urged to do so by both France and Great Britain, Bangkok yielded to the French demands. A Franco-Siamese Treaty and Convention was signed on 3 October. Bangkok had to pay an indemnity. Laos, about one third of Thailand's territory, became a French protectorate. As a token of its might, a French gunship was stationed permanently in Bangkok. Lorin (1906: 356) observed that the French naval expedition had made the Thai court panic, and a decade later boasted that it could well have turned Thailand into a French protectorate, but had settled for less. France might have won, but the war did not make it win friends in Thailand. Lorin (1906: 356) concluded that their lenience cost the French dearly. French nationals were molested, the French minister was jeered and, more importantly, functions in the public administration went to other foreigners, not to Frenchmen. Great Britain, for instance, provided a police force for Bangkok made up of Sikh soldiers from India, commanded by British officers.

24 His Chancellor, Count Leo von Caprivi, had other considerations. He hoped that if it came to an Anglo-French War Germany could be 'certain of expanding the triple into a quadruple alliance'; that is with Great Britain joining the Triple Alliance or *Dreibund* of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy which had been formed in 1882, among other reasons, as a defensive pact against France (Taylor 1971: 343).

Continued British-French rivalry

After Thailand had yielded to the French ultimatum tension was far from over. London remained suspicious of a joint Franco-Russian offensive. It was even deemed possible that a Russian naval squadron would sail to the French naval base of Toulon, protecting France in Europe and giving the French freedom to act in Thailand. Both sides prepared for the worst. With possible French actions in Southeast Asia in mind, Rosebery urged, a number of times, for an increase of the British naval presence in Singapore. Thailand could still 'be eaten like an artichoke, leaf by leaf', he observed in October 1894.[25] In October 1895 (when Salisbury had become Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary) London indicated that it was prepared to have its Indian Army march into Thailand should France resort to gunboat diplomacy, and sent its warships to Bangkok; though privately Salisbury doubted whether the British were prepared to take such a step (Chandran 1971a: 44). In the same months, the French government discussed a military response should Great Britain somehow succeed in extending its sphere of influence over the heartland of Thailand, i.e. Bangkok and the Menam Valley (Chandran 1977: 192-3).

A bone of contention remained the Anglo-French border in the north. On 31 July 1893, London and Paris had seemingly come to an understanding. Nowhere along the Upper Mekong should there be a joint frontier. This was agreed, an Anglo-French Protocol of that date stated, 'with a view to obviating the difficulties which might arise from a direct contact' and required 'mutual sacrifices and concessions' (ibid.: 71). A few months later, at the end of November, London and Paris agreed on the conditions of mapping out the frontiers of the buffer to be; these, a young Edward Grey, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, explained in the House of Commons in December, could not yet be fixed in absence of 'further geographical and ethnographical information'.[26]

The French almost immediately backtracked. Complicated negotiations between London and Paris and much bickering were the result. The French preference for a mutual frontier gave rise to the suspicion in London that the French intended to move on and might try to incite the population on the British side of such a border. The French, from their side, still hoping that the Mekong might be made navigable, regarded the British insistence

25 Rosebery to Kimberley 21-10-1894 (cited in Chandran 1971: 151).

26 Grey in House of Commons 7-12-1893 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1893-dec/07/siam).

on a buffer state as an effort to obstruct any future French trade route into Yunnan (Chandran 1971a: 105).

The issue briefly brought the Shan states along the Mekong, almost as remote and uncharted as the Pamirs, to the centre of world attention. London was adamant that they should form part of a buffer; preferring this above a 'neutral zone', which would provide less of a safeguard. A conterminous French-British border in mainland Southeast Asia 'would involve both States in great military expenditure and cause constant liability to panic'.[27]

A buffer, a status quo region between the Nam Hou (Nam U) and Mekong rivers, the exact frontiers of which still had to be determined, was to be created. To Rosebery it did not matter much whether the newly created buffer was to be governed by China or Thailand, as long as it came into being. Discussions centred on Keng Cheng ('as much ours as the Channel Islands', a British diplomat would state[28]) and Keng Hung to its northeast, with the complicating factor that the territory of both extended eastwards over the Mekong river – land France aimed at. Keng Tung was also caught up to the west. London and Paris differed in opinion about whether its territory transgressed the Mekong or not. London wanted to keep Keng Tung out of the buffer. It 'was in feudatory relations with the Indian Government'.[29] The proposed buffer made little impression in Great Britain. In the House of Commons Balfour spoke about 'a small, powerless buffer'.[30]

Both sides took steps, military and otherwise, to assert their presence in the Upper Mekong region, especially in the eastern, trans-Mekong part of Keng Cheng. In January 1894, when the new French government of Jean Casimir-Perier indicated that it did not feel bound to the buffer agreement, London, in an effort to assert that Keng Cheng was British, reacted by sending an army officer and a small detachment of soldiers to its capital, Mong Sing (Muong-Sing), located on the left bank of the Mekong, to collect tribute from its ruler (Chandran 1977: 99). Mong Sing also had the attention of the French. At the end of 1894, when J.G. Scott, the chief British representative in the joint committee to decide on the border, reached Mong Sing, he was greeted with a view of the French flag flying over the palace of its ruler,

27 Rosebery in House of Lords 27-7-1893 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1893/jul/27/questions).

28 Phipps to Sanderson 27-9-1894 (cited in Chandran 1977: 123).

29 Grey in House of Commons 19-6-1893 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1893/jun/19/the-french-in-siam).

30 Balfour in House of Commons 2-8-1893 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1893/aug/02/civil-services-and-revenue-departments).

whom the British suspected of French sympathies anyway, or at least of being anti-British. The flag was immediately lowered (ibid.: 129, 156, 187).

The situation deteriorated to such an extent that London ordered Calcutta to prepare for a military expedition to Keng Cheng in February 1895. This posed some problems. The disputed part of Keng Cheng was 14 to 21 days' distance from the nearest British military post, and seven weeks from the nearest point on the railway; and 'cut off from communication with Burmah and India during the rains', Curzon would later explain.[31] Such conditions already made the Indian government hesitant to comply. An additional reason for its reluctance was that it was the time of the Chitral crisis, and Calcutta considered a Russian aggression on India's northwest frontier to be a much more realistic threat. The reaction prompted Rosebery (now Prime Minister) to lament that the British in India did not realise the dangers posed by France, 'a great military power at least as unscrupulous and aggressive as Russia is represented to be'.[32] Others went even further. At the India Office in London, George Hamilton, the new Secretary of State for India, wrote that the French were 'more hostile' and 'more likely to come into active hostilities' with Great Britain than Russia.[33]

Mong Sing was occupied on 5 May 1895. The crossing of the Mekong by British troops created an uproar in France. The French government protested. The British occupation held the danger that Great Britain would block one of France's chief objectives – using the Mekong as a commercial waterway into south China. Paris reacted by ordering a gunboat, the *Grandière* (named after the former Governor of Indochina), up the Mekong some months later. In response, London took the decision to station a military garrison in Mong Lin in Keng Tung, which at that moment appeared to be the target of a French military expedition (Chandran 1977: 199-200).

Another conflict area lay to the south. Politicians in London were suspicious of France demanding additional concessions from Thailand to make Bangkok stick to the peace conditions. The possibility of a further French encroachment was considered very likely. France might even aim at the Southern Thai provinces, bordering the British sphere of influence in the Malay Peninsula. Soon, as it was phrased some ten years later, Luang Prabang (Louangphrabang), Battambang, Angkor and Chantaboon (Chantabun, Chantaburi, Chantaboum) would become as familiar to British

31 Curzon in House of Commons 27-3-1896 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1896/mar/27/france-and-siam).

32 Rosebery to Steward 13-6-1895 (cited in Chandran 1977: 147).

33 Hamilton to Elgin 23-8-1895 (cited in Chandran 1977: 179).

'mouths as household words'.[34] One of the first new requirements France had made was that Bangkok would allow, much to the dismay of the British, a temporary French occupation of the port and river of Chantaboon in the province of the same name. Other provinces might well follow. Part of the province of Luang Prabang, which the French claimed was under their protection, had, in fact, already been acquired by France, despite protests from London. But Paris wanted more, and intended to claim its west bank portion as well. Angkor and Battambang, originally Cambodian regions, might also be swallowed by France. Though in the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1867 Paris had recognised Thai suzerainty over these two provinces, they were claimed by Cambodia, and thus, by extension, could also be claimed by France. London left no doubt that for economic and political reasons they should remain Thai. Them becoming French, Rosebery was sure, would 'produce a deplorable effect' in Great Britain.[35] The Singapore Chamber of Commerce had warned Rosebery that Thailand surrendering Angkor and Battambang would be a serious blow to British trade. In the familiar pattern of British distrust of foreign annexations the Singapore Chamber of Commerce highlighted the high tariffs the French would impose. Both provinces, moreover, were located not far away from Bangkok, which in the eyes of the British added an additional threat to them becoming French. Annexing them, Paris was made to understand, would not only be an invasion of the integrity of Thailand, but would in view of the proximity of these provinces to Bangkok put an end to Thailand's independence.[36] London attached so much value to the two provinces that at the end of July 1893 the prospect of France acquiring them had been behind London's suggestion to Bangkok to yield to French demands; otherwise, Thailand might lose Angkor and Battambang (Chandran 1977: 65). Having Bangkok meet the French conditions was the only way, Rosebery had thought at that moment, in which Great Britain could strike a 'fatal blow' to French territorial ambitions in Thailand.[37] Whatever his motivation might have been, the impression in Great Britain and abroad was that Bangkok had yielded to France following the advice of London.

In its 1893 ultimatum France had not asked for Angkor and Battambang, but it had insisted that France should receive the tax farming rights in

34 Gibson Bowles in House of Commons 1-6-1904 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1904/june/01/the-anglo-french-convention-bill).

35 Rosebery to Duffer 23-7-1893, 30-7-1893 (cited in Chandran 1977: 62,70).

36 Dufferin to Rosebery 9-7-1893 (cited in Theo 1969: 292).

37 Rosebery to Dufferin 1-8-1893 (cited in Chandran 1977: 73).

the two provinces in case Thailand could not pay the indemnity agreed upon. As an additional condition, France also demanded that Thailand should withdraw its army from Angkor, Battambang and a 25-kilometre zone west from the Mekong, expanding French influence still further. The zone became a serious point of contention between London and Paris, London eventually hoping to use it as leverage to get France to meet some of the British demands.

In France the government was spurred on by public opinion demanding further expansion. In London the government was confronted with an equally belligerent mood; with complaints about sacrificing Thailand and the British commercial interests there, and the damage done to British prestige in the wider world, including Southeast Asia. One member of the opposition in the House of Commons, evoking the fear of Russia approaching India from one side and France from the other, pointed out that 'large sections' of the public 'felt considerable anxiety' and spoke about the 'grave apprehension' that the British had about France absorbing the whole of Thailand.[38]

Another bargaining chip London had was the buffer in the north. In his last months as Foreign Secretary, Kimberley, impressed by the determination of France, had begun to doubt the feasibility of such a buffer hoping that concessions on this point, especially parting with East Keng Cheng, would lead to a more general understanding with France, which would extend to the Anglo-French disputes in Africa (Chandran 1977: 143). The new government of Salisbury was not disinclined. Assuming that control over the whole left bank of the Mekong was an overriding French desire, handing over Keng Cheng might, for instance, induce the French to abandon the 25-kilometre demilitarized zone west of the Mekong and a pleased Bangkok might consent to the British getting hold of Kelantan and Terengganu on the Malay Peninsula (Thio 1965: 295). Prepared to abandon the buffer idea, British politicians and senior civil servants suddenly began to belittle the importance of the Shan states concerned. In Calcutta the new Viceroy of India, Lord Elgin, wrote to Rosebery about the 'remote and unpleasant region on the banks of the Mekong' and the 'unhealthy and difficult districts' one had to traverse to reach it.[39] In London the India Office agreed. These states, in the words of one of its officials, Steuart

38 R. Temple in House of Commons 30-3-1894 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/commons/1894/mar/30/france-and-siam).

39 Elgin to Rosebery 7-7-1895 (cited in Chandran 1977: 160).

Bayley, were 'distant, worthless and inaccessible bits of territory'.[40] The qualifications were taken over by politicians. A few months later Prime Minister Salisbury wrote about Keng Cheng: 'It is distant, it is unhealthy, the access to it is roadless, the governor is in the jungle'.[41]

An additional reason for British politicians to change their minds was that the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) had shown that China might not be strong enough to defend a buffer. The Far Eastern Triple Alliance that had been formed in the wake of it made China seem an unreliable partner of the British. France had outwitted Great Britain by coming to the rescue of China in its effort to deny Japan territorial gains on Chinese soil; something London had refused to do.

The Anglo-French Declaration

Within a month of Salisbury becoming Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary in June 1895, he indicated that he could agree with the Mekong forming the boundary between Burma and French Indochina. Six months later an agreement was reached. In the Anglo-French Declaration of London regarding Siam, the Niger and Tunis (15 January 1896), Great Britain and France pledged 'not to advance their armed forces' into most of Thailand as we know it nowadays.[42] The Mekong became the border between Upper Burma and Laos (Art. 3). Not included in the deal, and thus open to future diplomatic and armed manoeuvres, though both the British and French government denied that they harboured any such intentions, were some of the French and British immediate desiderata. On the French side these were Angkor, Battambang, Chantaboon, Luang Prabang and the 25-kilometre zone on the right bank of the Mekong. The British had their eyes on the Kra Isthmus and the Malay Peninsula.

London accepted reality. British troops left Mong Sing and the section of Keng Cheng situated on the left bank of the Mekong was transferred to France. The British government soothed itself with the idea that it had rescued that part of Thailand that was most vital to the country's own prosperity and to British commercial interests. What remained of Thailand, as Curzon, co-responsible for the deal, was to stress in 1896, was 'that part of the kingdom which was most important to British interests, and … most

40 Minute by Bailey 15-6- 1895 (cited in Chandran 1977: 149).

41 Memorandum Salisbury, October 1895 (included in Chandran 1977: 340-2).

42 Anglo-French Declaration 15 January 1896, Art. I (see, for instance, Chandran 1977: 350-1).

essential to the security, prosperity, and development' of Thailand.[43] An additional argument, Curzon asserted, mirroring the generally held belief in those days, was that up north the Mekong was unnavigable for steamers; though the French, of course, would make every effort to improve its navigability.[44]

Neither in France nor in Great Britain was the Declaration greeted with much enthusiasm. For expansionists in France it was not easy to come to terms with the fact that France could not proceed further into Thailand (Thio 1969: 302). To some, like Darcy (1904: 202), Thailand also became a case to demonstrate how selfish the British were and that Great Britain would never allow France the expansion of its Empire it was not only entitled to, but even needed in order to survive on the world scene; also complaining about the British who never had any qualms about presenting themselves as victims of French ambitions. In Great Britain, the 1893 Franco-Thai agreement had already been received with little enthusiasm because of the territory France had gained. Then and in subsequent years, the press had lashed out at Rosebery for not being firm enough. He and his cabinet had made 'very grave blunders'.[45] Salisbury was well aware that the Anglo-French Declaration would receive similar treatment in the press and in Parliament. It did not help that there had been a change in government in London. The Declaration provided the Liberal politicians, now in opposition and themselves accused of having saddled Great Britain with numerous diplomatic defeats, the chance to hit back. Curzon, now Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, mockingly spoke of 'Lord Rosebery going up and down the country talking of the surrender of Siamese territory and the sacrifice of British interests'.[46] By surrendering part of Keng Cheng, the new Conservative government had seriously blundered, Rosebery and other Liberal politicians argued. Curzon said he did not understand such a line of reasoning. Only a trivial concession had been made. It concerned a 'small slice of territory', a 'small physical protuberance on the frontier of India'.[47] The area handed over to France was just '1,250 square miles … inhabited by about 3,000 people'; so there was no 'great sacrifice' that the opposition

43 Curzon in House of Commons 27-3-1896 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1896/mar/27/france-and-siam).

44 Ibid.

45 Ashmead-Bartlett in House of Commons 27-3-1896 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1896/mar/27/france-and-siam).

46 Curzon in House of Commons 27-3-1896 (hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1896/mar/27/france-and-siam).

47 Ibid.

was talking about.[48] Similarly, Salisbury, in a letter to Chamberlain, wrote about a 'worthless territory'.[49]

The provinces of Angkor and Battambang, not included in the Declaration and thus still exposed to any plans France might have, and the city of Chantaboon, still occupied by French troops, also figured prominently in the discussion. Critics could point out that in 1893 Curzon had still considered Angkor and Battambang essential to Thailand, and had insisted that Chantaboon was important to British trade. Apart from all this, there were doubts that by concluding the Declaration Great Britain had gained much elsewhere for the concession it had made regarding Thailand.

48 Ibid.

49 Salisbury to Chamberlain 7-6-1897 (cited in Chandran 1977: 230).