BRILL

MANUSYA: JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES 25 (2022) 1–18

MANUSYA
Journal of Humanities
brill.com/mnya

"Bad Luck for the Chinese": France and the Transit of War Materiel to China During the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1939)

Alexandre Barthel
Postdoctoral fellow, Department of History, Chulalongkorn University (2018-2020), Bangkok, Thailand; Associated Researcher, French Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia (IRASEC), CNRS, Bangkok; Lecturer in French Language, Department of Western Languages, Ramkhamhaeng University, Bangkok
alexandre.barthel@hotmail.fr

Received 22 September 2020 | Revised 2 February 2021 | Accepted 21 June 2021

Abstract

The attitude of France towards the Sino-Japanese War that started in 1937 has given rise to various judgments. Officially neutral, France is often presented as having taken, at least morally, a favorable attitude toward China. Yet the French government had officially prohibited the transit of war materiel en route to China across the Indochinese border. This issue became increasingly important as the Japanese blockade of China progressed and conditioned the capacity of Chiang Kai-shek's government to continue the fight. The diplomatic archives of the United States, greatly concerned by the situation in China, shed more light on France's policy in East Asia. By comparing historical accounts produced by contemporaries and historians with the diplomatic archives of the United States, this article intends to bring more evidence relating to the issue of French "neutrality" during the Sino-Japanese War.

Keywords

Sino-Japanese war – France – Indo-China – appeasement – *Le Temps*

1 Introduction

In the second volume of the collective work entitled *Histoire de la diplomatie française*, Georges-Henri Soutou argues that French foreign policy from 1924 to 1939 was dominated by the concept of "collective security". This policy was supposed to guarantee the security of the country which implemented it by means of various treaties or agreements concluded with, rather than against, potential adversaries. Soutou adds that from 1930 on, collective security would have been "interpreted in an increasingly paralyzing way" and would have become "an absolute dogma." According to Soutou, the "obsession with collective security" was the main factor in "the failed attitude of Paris towards Hitler" (Allain et al. 2007, 318–319). "The History of French Diplomacy" never mentions the attitude of France towards the Sino-Japanese War. No doubt, as Pierre Renouvin (1946, 399) notes, French policy in the face of Japanese expansion remained "in the background": "It is because France [had] no direct interests in the regions which [were] the immediate issue of the Sino-Japanese conflict; it is also that it did not have, with China, economic ties comparable to those of Great Britain and the United States." The small importance of French economic interests in China therefore seems to have been a factor in the appeasement policy pursued towards Japan.

Since the signing of the 1907 treaty, under which the "governments of France and Japan, agree to respect the independence and integrity of China (*Le Temps*, 17.06.1907)," Franco-Japanese relations had essentially been "friendly". These relations began to deteriorate in the early 1930s, when Japan engaged in a policy of expansion to the detriment of China. With the occupation of Manchuria, from 1931 on, access to the raw material resources of the south became all the more important for Japan during the decade. Japan first intended to increase its trade with Southeast Asia and, faced with the decline of its exports to China and the United States, Japanese authorities advocated free trade but without being able to affect the protectionist orientation taken in the Western colonies (Michelin 2003, 10–12). As for French policy in the Far East after the First World War, Paris was following London and Washington's main orientation. The French government failed to "define a clear policy" and took shelter "behind international organizations." In the 1930s, Paris felt that if the Japanese attitude were to assert itself in aggressive imperialism, "only a united front" of the Westerners could be effective. The absence of such a front would then have confirmed the French government "in its intention to pursue a policy of neutrality in the Far East." The deterioration of Franco-Japanese relations, before the start of the Sino-Japanese war, was observable when, following the signing of the Franco-Soviet treaty of 1935, some Japanese

newspapers (*Kaizo, Yomini, Nichi-Nichi*) advised France to reverse its decision while former Council Chairman Wakatsuki saw the treaty as a threat (Binoche 1989, 266–271).

When the Sino-Japanese hostilities began, France was already facing the war raging in Spain with a policy of "non-intervention," despite the active participation of Italy and Germany in this conflict on the nationalist side. France limited itself to "sometimes" smuggling war materiel intended for the republican side. That attitude did not constitute aid and even, according to Jean-Baptiste Duroselle (1979, 318), favored Franco. From the French point of view, what was at stake both in Spain and in China was of the same nature: French diplomacy had to decide if it would allow regimes close to Germany to settle on its rear flanks.

Taking into account this context, this article aims at studying the attitude of France towards China and Japan during the war between these two countries from 1937 until France entered the war against Germany in 1939. By examining the issue of the cross-border traffic of war materiel from Indochina to China, this research intends to discuss whether the attitude of France towards China was friendly, or if France did provide assistance to China as it has been asserted elsewhere. The first part of the article will examine how French attitudes are presented in the literature which mentions the issue of relations between France, China and Japan during the period concerned, and which, more particularly raises the problem of the transit of war materiel from French Indochina to China. The second part will present the perception that US diplomats had – in order to have an outside perspective which was also primarily interested in the evolution of the situation in the Far East – on French policy with regard to the issue of the transit of war materiel. This part will propose a chronology showing the evolution of the French attitude.

2 The Different Views on the French Attitude Concerning the Transit of War Materiel from Indochina to China

The issue of war materiel traffic from French Indochina to China during the Sino-Japanese war has been raised on multiple occasions. In a book on the history of French Indochina, Pierre Montagnon (2016, 223–224) wrote that by "authorizing its supplies", France had decided "resolutely" in favor of China. Before him, Philippe Grandjean (2004, 15–16) had however specified that "[t]his traffic was, 'in principle', clandestine for years because contrary to French commitments," even if "[i]n fact, it sprawled in broad daylight." This is also what Franck Michelin (2003, 5–31) underlined when he wrote that "France

had prohibited the transport of arms between Indochina and China in order to counter the Japanese threat," but "while closing the eyes on the reality of active smuggling." Jacques Valette (1995, 9), who provides more details on the aspects of the traffic between Indochina and China in the 1930s, only indicates that France had authorized it. With the exception of Montagnon, none of these authors mentions any aid or support provided by France to China. They recognize, however, that in fact, from 1937 to France's entry into the war, Paris had maintained Sino-Indochinese cross-border traffic. The ban on the transit of war materiel had been nothing but a practical measure aimed at appeasing Japan. Contrasting with these positions, Jacques Binoche (1989, 263–275) considered that France had, at the beginning, "morally" approved China but, in order to safeguard its interests in East Asia, it had "gradually" sacrificed its principles, but did not specify how.

General Catroux reported that French aid had been provided by the Minister of Colonies, Georges Mandel. According to Catroux (1959, 8–10), Mandel's "support" for China was expressed firstly by the opening of traffic at the Indochinese border and secondly by the dispatch of a French officer's mission to the Chinese General Staff. This assertion implied that the traffic had been closed until Mandel took charge of the Ministry of Colonies. The Minister of Colonies therefore opened in response to "orders for supplies made abroad" by the Chinese government the port of Hai Phong and the railway of the Red River. Catroux added that: "For two years and until June 1940, this road indeed debited materials and especially a considerable volume of trucks and fuel coming from a Sino-American barter agreement, and essential to the pursuit of the operations." When he was at the head of Indochina, Catroux himself maintained cross-border traffic. Catroux's report does not clearly state whether, under Mandel, war materiel crossed the border. However, according to the military, France, through its Minister of Colonies, had supported China by opening the Indochinese border to the passage of materiel intended for the government of Chiang Kai-Shek.

The issue of cross-border traffic was also mentioned in the book of another French military official published anonymously a few years after the end of the Second World War. According to him, France had no "clearly defined policy" (Général X 1947, 32–33). While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs "fled with the greatest care everything that could arouse Japanese susceptibility," the Minister of Colonies Mandel "considered that if having to choose between Chinese and Japanese, it was better to opt for the former" (79–80). As for the extent of Mandel's "support" given to the Chinese mentioned by Catroux, the author of the book gives a more limited idea: the Minister of Colonies only allowed "transport and medical equipment" to pass through. This policy was

"strictly observed by the local authorities" (80). The author also observed a change in attitude on the part of France after the landing of Japanese troops in Hainan in January 1939. If the Minister of Colonies decided to provide "more effective aid" to China, that did not however consist in authorizing the transit of war materiel to China (82–84).

Based on a 1944 official report, Valette pointed out that cross-border traffic between Indochina and China increased from 1937 to 1939. According to this report, rail traffic to Yunnan included "war materiel, gasoline and trucks." In 1938, the advance of Japan towards Guangzhou led to an increase in the volume of goods passing through Indochina. The tonnage per kilometer, which represented more than 67,000,000 tons in 1938, rose to more than 126,000,000 tons in 1939. The outflow proved to be insufficient and in the summer of 1939, some 20,000 tons of goods were stranded in Hai Phong (Valette 1995, 14–15).

In 1939, Roger Lévy wrote that "a few weeks after the beginning of the hostilities, the Japanese Ambassador to Paris transmitted his government's warnings to the French government, sometimes in a comminatory tone" about "the role played by the Indochina railways with regard to the southern provinces of China" (Lévy 1939, 103–4). Regarding cross-border traffic, Lévy (105) provides some details concerning French policy before Mandel's arrival at the Minister of Colonies:

> "[T]he French government understood, in October 1937, that Japanese pilots could easily destroy the large and numerous works of art on the [Yunnan] railway [...]. In a spirit of extreme conciliation he decided that between Indochina and [Yunnan], only the arms trade which had been shipped before October, or ordered before the start of the conflict (July 1937), would be authorized."

Nevertheless, in view of French opinion as expressed in the pages of the unofficial newspaper *Le Temps*, it seems difficult to follow Binoche when he wrote that France had, initially, morally approved China. *Le Temps* – organ, according to Jean-Noël Jeanneney, of the "most established" bourgeoisie, read by those "who, abroad, [wanted] to know the positions of French diplomacy" and which had been bought, at the end of the 1920s, by François de Wendel, the "rich maître des forges" (*Le Temps*, the Swiss newspaper, April 9, 2018) – was, throughout the month of July 1937, very understanding of Japan.

The newspaper showed a pronounced taste for euphemisms with headlines such as "The Sino-Japanese Incident" at the top of the section devoted to the war in the Far East. The first article in this section, "very nuanced", after Jeanneney's words, published on July 9, 1937, gave way entirely to the Japanese

point of view with the exception of a sentence at the end of the article which summarized the "Chinese point of view." The next day, in the *Bulletin du jour* of the July 10 edition, *Le Temps* explained that the clashes were only the result of a Chinese misunderstanding and spoke of the "sang-froid" shown by Tokyo in such a context. In the July 14 edition of the *Bulletin*, the "advanced circles" of the Guomindang were depicted as "rather excited" while the Japanese were only acting out of prudence. And the "mistake" theory reappeared in the columns of the newspaper: "following a new misunderstanding, hostilities resumed on various points and the conflict became acute, with a rather disturbing political aspect." The *Bulletin* never mentioned the Chinese point of view. As for the Japanese demands, they were not satisfied only because of subversive anti-Japanese activities carried out by "extremist elements willingly under the influence of outside forces." According to *Le Temps*, Japan had too much to lose in such a conflict and the real perpetrators of the conflict were not to be found in Tokyo: "The worrying point in China is undoubtedly the conduct of certain revolutionary elements which Russian Bolshevism has constantly encouraged and which perpetuates a permanent disturbance against the Japanese influence […]." The issue of the alleged role of the Soviets then became a sort of leitmotif in the columns of the newspaper.

A Chinese point of view appeared for the first time in the July 15 edition of *Le Temps*. But the *Bulletin du jour* of July 20 highlighted again the Japanese positions. Above all, the newspaper disputed the fact that the Japanese government was necessarily seeking to extend its control to northern China. But, despite Japan's obvious economic interests, particularly in terms of raw materials, how was it possible to believe such assertions when they were "categorically denied by an official Japanese source"? … *Le Temps* did not recognize Japan's expansionist aims until July 29. Even on that date, the newspaper did so only halfheartedly. In the same way, the newspaper did not contest the Japanese point of view until the Tianjin 'incident' during which Japanese troops violated the neutrality of the foreign concessions and attacked French soldiers posted at the eastern station of the city. The incident did not, however, prevent *Le Temps* from publishing, on August 3, 1937, an article by its journalist André Duboscq, with the usual racist hints in the pages of the newspaper ("It may all sound very 'Chinese' to us, but what would we want it to be?"), who claimed that none of the adversaries wanted war. The attitude of French diplomats and

1 Gabriel Péri, 1902–1941, was a journalist, who commented on international news in the newspaper *L'Humanité*. He was also a Communist deputy for Seine-et-Oise. A resistor, he was arrested by French police and shot as a hostage by the Germans at the fortress of Mont-Valérien.

Le Temps was mocked by Gabriel Péri[1] who, in the newspaper *L'Humanité* dated August 2, wrote that the heart of the secretary general of the Quay d'Orsay was beating "in unison" with the Mikado, that the correspondent of *Le Temps* in Tokyo was singing "the glory of the Japanese invaders every day" and that the French ambassador to Japan was considering himself the "spokesman" of the Japanese militarism.

Le Temps contested the existence of Japanese expansionist plans throughout the month of July 1937 and privileged the expression of the Japanese point of view in its columns. As Duroselle (1979, 317) observed, in the context of the first year of the Spanish Civil War, the newspaper let appear an "underestimation of the threat emanating from dictatorships." But the word "underestimation" may not be the right one. In fact, the French Embassy in Tokyo had reported since the middle of July 1937 that the Japanese government "was making every effort to drum up war spirit for a large scale war. The French Ambassador in Tokyo was extremely pessimistic and believed that the Japanese were determined to take over North China as far as the Yellow River plus Shantung." Nor did the French foreign minister appear to have shown any kind of support or encouragement towards China either (USDS 1954a, 173):[2]

> "Both Delbos and Phipps [the British ambassador to France] expressed the opinion that it would be disastrous to the League of Nations if China should call on the League to deal with this question. The League would be unable to refuse to take up the matter but the absolute impotence of the League would once more be demonstrated. Delbos added that in his conversation with the [Chinese] Ambassador on this question, he had remarked, 'You might as well call on the moon for help as on the League of Nations.'"

3 The Perception of the Situation by US Diplomats

In order to better understand what France's attitude towards China and Japan was, it seems useful to observe it from an external point of view. The standpoint of the United States seems all the more relevant since they had considerable interests in China. William Appleman Williams stressed that in the 1930s the interests of the US in China dated back several decades, at least to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, when US President Grover Cleveland

2 "The Ambassador in France (Bullit) to the Secretary of State," Paris, July 15, 1937–5 p.m.

told the Congress that this conflict deserved "our gravest consideration by reason of its disturbance of our growing commercial interest" ([1959] 1962, 30–31). The attack launched by Japan against China on July 7, 1937, had a considerable impact on American decision-makers. The fact is that, since the end of the 19th century China had appeared as an "Eldorado" for the overseas economic expansionism of the United States which had led to the implementation of the open door policy. Williams stressed the importance of China to American leaders in the following way: "by 1937," the "commitment to China was much greater than the identification with any European power except England – and possibly France" (190).

US diplomats carefully observed France's attitude towards the Sino-Japanese War and particularly French policy with regard to the transit of war materiel to China via the Indochinese border. In a report dated April 4, 1939, the Chargé d'affaires of the United States in Paris, Wilson, made a summary of the attitude of France on the issue of the transit of war materiel en route to China since the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war (USDS 1955, 746).[3] He distinguished three periods. He began by recalling that in August 1937, the French government had prohibited by decree the cross-border transport of ammunition from Indochina and of a certain number of goods likely to be used for military purposes, such as planes, that had not been ordered before the start of the conflict.

The first period observed by Wilson was that included under the Foreign Ministers Delbos and Paul-Boncour, from approximately July 1937 to April 1938. This period corresponds, militarily, to a succession of disasters for China. During the first half of November 1937, Japan captured Shanxi province. The same month, after three months of fighting, Shanghai was occupied. In December, it was Nanjing's turn to fall. The Chinese government took refuge in the interior. At the end of March 1938, Japan formed a collaborating government. Mitter (2014, 96) observed that by "bringing the war to Shanghai, Chiang Kai-Shek forced the world to take notice." The author added that "Chiang's great hope was to gain foreign cooperation for the war: in his diary he wrote that he hoped 'every country would be angry at the enemy, and … encourage the US and Britain to take part in the war along with the USSR'."

Wilson reported that during this first period, the August 1937 decree was applied in a manner "favorable" to China. This perception needs to be clarified. At the beginning of April 1938, the Chinese ambassador in Paris, Wellington Koo, reported that, since Blum's (short-lived) return at the head of the government on March 13, several recent models of military aircraft had indeed

3 "The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State," No. 4092, Paris, April 4, 1939.

4 "The Chargé in France (Wilson) to the Secretary of State," Paris, April 5, 1938.

been delivered to China and he also reported that permits for the passage of war materiel from Indochina were easier to obtain (USDS 1954b, 135–136).[4] Koo added that heavy war materiel of Soviet origin arrived in China through Hong Kong and Indochina. Two-thirds of the tanks and artillery that appeared at that time in the Suzhou area, east of Shanghai, arrived in China from Indochina. Koo acknowledged that the French government did not make any problems with transporting planes from Indochina, but also said that it had limited the passage of war materiel on the Yunnan railway. Still, according to the ambassador, if China had in fact benefited from certain facilities regarding the assembly of aircraft in Bordeaux, it was interrupted with the new Chautemps government of January 18, 1938. From this date, the French authorities increased difficulties regarding the passage of war materiel from Indochina to China. Wellington Koo finally added that:

> "the French Government was still apprehensive about permitting shipments to go over the railway but that he had recently been given permission to have important shipments of war materiel which had been held up in Indochina transshipped and transported through territorial waters of Indochina to Southern China."

A memorandum from the Far East Affairs Division of the State Department dated April 20, 1938, stated that according to an "American military observer", "[s]ince February 7 an embargo [had] been established on shipments by rail of munitions from other than French sources." After March 1, this embargo also included French materiel. The Colonial Ministry authorized the transport of ammunition, but the Governor General hesitated, "for fear of Japanese reprisals." The memorandum added that the embargo did not apply to articles which could have been classified as commercial. "Under this liberal interpretation, airplane engines, engine parts, gasoline, oil and many other articles may be shipped (USDS 1954b, 595–597)."[5] It appears that over the period extending from the start of the Sino-Japanese conflict to April 1938, France essentially let orders placed before the start of hostilities, French aircraft and heavy war materiel of Soviet origin pass through the Indochinese border. In April 1938, according to Wellington Koo, France had delivered little equipment (135–136).[6]

As for the newspaper *Le Temps*, throughout this first period, it was extremely discreet about the issue. Since August 27, the newspaper did mention the establishment of a maritime blockade and the Japanese government's

5 "Memorandum Prepared in the Division of Far Eastern Affairs," Washington, April 20, 1938.
6 "The Chargé in France (Wilson) to the Secretary of State," Paris, April 5, 1938.

intention not to allow war materiel to arrive in China, but it seems that the question of the transit of war materiel from Indochina to China was only mentioned once in the December 13 edition, when reporting the threatening words of Viscount Ishii to the *Sunday Times*, the Japanese government's extraordinary ambassador to Europe: "France has been informed that if the transit of arms through Indochina continues, Japan may find it necessary to bomb the French railway lines leaving from Hanoi and going to Nanning and Yunnan." *Le Temps* did not comment on the statement made by Ishii. The royalist newspaper *L'Action Française* – whose founder, Charles Maurras, was considered a great man by nationalist Spain (Duroselle 1979, 317) – seems to have been one of the first newspapers which, on November 3, raised the issue of the transit of war materiel across the Indochinese border. *L'Action Française*, through the letter from a "friend" from Indochina, aligned itself with the Japanese views and accused the government of supporting China by letting war materiel transit from Indochina. In doing so, the French government was risking the ire of Japan. The traffic mentioned by the "friend" of *L'Action Française* probably consisted mainly of orders placed before the beginning of hostilities. On the opposite side of the political spectrum, the newspaper *L'Humanité* raised the issue of the traffic of war materiel over the Indochinese border several times. The position of the newspaper was consistent with that which it had adopted with regard to the war in Spain. As Duroselle wrote, *L'Humanité* daily condemned the "alleged neutrality" observed by France which "leads to … the massacre of our Spanish brothers (1979, 315)." Moreover, the position of the French Communist Party on the colonial issue had evolved: "The Communist party [was] anti-colonialist by doctrine […]. Later, it [evolved] in front of the rise of the colonial claims of the fascist states (235)." On November 9, Gabriel Péri questioned the government about the reality of the ban on arms trafficking by rail between Indochina and China. Subsequently, he condemned the government's attitude of not responding to Japanese threats. On November 19, he wrote: "The French government seems to conclude that, therefore, the best is to wait and let it go. We profess a different opinion."

As for the second period defined by the chargé d'affaires Wilson, it began when Daladier became President of the Council with Bonnet as Minister of Foreign Affairs. In China, this period was marked, in October 1938, by the capture of Wuhan and Guangzhou by Japanese troops. The conflict then went through a prolonged stagnation phase. According to Wilson (USDS 1955, 746),[7] under Daladier's government, border control became "very rigid."

7 "The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State," No. 4092, Paris, April 4, 1939.

> "A few months ago we were told by a colleague in the Far Eastern Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the 1937 decree was being strictly enforced, and that as orders placed prior to August 1937 had been almost completed, very little in the way of munitions was passing through Indochina. His statement was confirmed by the Assistant Military Attaché of the Chinese Embassy."

However, on May 9, 1938, the Ambassador of the United States reported that Édouard Daladier, President of the Council of Ministers since April 12, had declared that "he had given orders to the French authorities in Indochina to open the railroad completely to all shipments of planes and munitions to China (USDS 1954b, 164)."[8] Towards the end of June 1938, the British Ambassador to Japan, Craigie, observed "that there can be no question but that great quantities of arms and ammunition are coming into China from French Indochina by different routes, a considerable amount being smuggled by Chinese junks (207)."[9] According to an August 19, 1938 report from the Vice Consul of the United States in Saigon, John Peabody Palmer, "war materials are continuing to be received at Haiphong and to be dispatched from there across the border into China." Palmer said it was likely, "because of an agreement with the Japanese" that no ammunition was transported on the railroad to Yunnanfu. Airplanes and gasoline were not prohibited. The ammunition was transported by rail to Lang Son, at the border. From there, they were sent by truck to China. Traffic appears to have been extremely heavy over this route (605)."[10]

In June 1938, a Japanese press campaign accused France of helping China. The newspaper *Le Temps* – which had remained quiet about the issue since the beginning of the conflict – nevertheless reported, on June 19, the disclaimer of the French ambassador in Tokyo to the Japanese allegations. The Japanese accusations had been taken up, on June 10, by *L'Action Française*. The newspaper included it in its anti-Judeo-Bolshevik propaganda that specifically targeted the minister of the Colonies: "Mr. Mandel once again obeys orders from Moscow." As for the newspaper *L'Humanité*, on June 19, Marius Magnien pointed out that France no longer respected its vote in Geneva. Magnien condemned the capitulation of the French government "to the blackmail of Japanese fascism," which was "developing in virtual complicity with the slaughterers of civilians in Canton, in Nanjing!"

8 "The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State," Paris, May 9, 1938.

9 "The Ambassador in Japan (Grew) to the Secretary of State," Tokyo, June 28, 1938.

10 "The Vice Consul at Saigon (Palmer) to the Secretary of State," Saigon, August 19, 1938.

Reports from the US Embassy in Paris do not show any tightening of cross-border traffic control until after the signing of the Munich Agreements, and in the context of the Japanese offensive in the direction of Guangzhou. On October 13, 1938, the director of the Far East branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Henri Hoppenot, declared to the chargé d'affaires of the United States, Wilson, that he had replied to the Japanese that "for the past 2 months not a single rifle had been carried" on the Yunnan Railway. Wilson (USDS 1954b, 318)[11] also reported this conversation:

> "I asked Hoppenot if it were really true that the French were not letting any shipments of war materiel go over the railway to Yunnan. Hoppenot said that this was absolutely true. I remarked that this was bad luck for the Chinese. He said that it was indeed bad luck but no matter how much the French might love the Chinese they could not risk war with Japan on their account."

Hoppenot (USDS 1954b, 350)[12] had stated that "even materiel ordered by China before the outbreak of hostilities was not allowed passage." On November 8, 1938, the US Consul General in Hong Kong informed Washington that the French consul had verbally notified the transportation companies that the transit of war materiel through Guangzhouwan and Hai Phong had been suspended (USDS 1954b, 608).[13] In the middle of the month, the US ambassador to China reported that "the French having stopped the transshipment through French Indochina of arms and munitions destined for China, the Chinese Government has made representations to the French Government pointing out that such a measure in effect constitutes in [an?] application of a form of sanctions against China (609)."[14] On November 16, the Chinese ambassador in Paris told the US chargé d'affaires that "his Government would be greatly concerned over the closing of the French Railway in Indochina to the passage of war supplies." Wellington Koo added that "[w]ith the cutting of the Canton-Hankow Railway the French Railway becomes of vital necessity to the Chinese Government." He had spoken "at various times" to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Henri Bonnet, and requested "that some way be found to

11 "The Chargé in France (Wilson) to the Secretary of State," Paris, October 13, 1938.

12 "The Chargé in France (Wilson) to the Secretary of State," Paris, October 29, 1938.

13 "The Consul General at Hong Kong (Southard) to the Secretary of State," Hong Kong, November 8, 1938.

14 "The Ambassador in China (Johnson) to the Secretary of State," Chongqing, November 15, 1938.

15 "The Chargé in France (Wilson) to the Secretary of State," Paris, November 16, 1938.

permit in secret the passage of supplies". Bonnet had promised to do so with the President of the Council, Édouard Daladier, but on the 10th of this month, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs "had informed him that it would be impossible for the French to permit any war materiel, even that ordered before the outbreak of hostilities, to pass over the railway (609)."[15]

The following year, in February 1939, it seems that the situation did not really improve for China. The Chargé d'affaires of the United States in China, Peck, reported that the general manager of the Yunnan railway had gone to Chongqing and had affirmed to the officials of the national government that the annual transport capacity of the line was 120,000 tons and that arrangements had been made for the purchase of additional cars and locomotives. This step was to result in an increase from 30 to 40% of the transportation within 3 to 6 months. The chargé d'affaires added that, according to reliable information, "restrictions on the shipments of goods through French Indochina to China have been relaxed to some extent." Peck pointed out, however, that "little if any arms and munitions are being shipped on this railway at present (USDS 1955, 616)."[16]

Finally, the third period distinguished by Wilson followed the occupation of Hainan by Japan, a move that directly threatened French Indochina and which would have led to a change of attitude on the part of the French government, but this evolution is not sure at all. On the evening of February 21, George Mandel, the French minister of Colonies, told the US ambassador that there were no restrictions on transportation of any kind on the railroad between French Indochina and China (USDS 1955, 618).[17] However, a few days later, on February 26, Marius Magnien called out the Minister for Colonies on France's attitude towards China in *L'Humanité*: "Why does Mr. Mandel still accept today that the French authorities in Indochina prohibited, on February 26, the landing, in Haiphong, of shipments of arms arriving on eight foreign ships and intended for the Chinese army?"

On March 6, 1939, the Chinese Ambassador informed his US colleague that France would no longer apply the 1937 decree but Chapter 1 of the 1925 Geneva Convention. This was done. The change allowed the transit of any materiel that could be used in peacetime. And in its April 11 edition, *Le Temps* published the plea of its correspondent in Tokyo, François Chevallier, concerning the attitude of France towards Japan. The journalist admitted that Chiang Kai-Shek had received arms through Indochina. However, the French government had "first regulated, then limited and finally prohibited this traffic, alone of all

16 "The Chargé in China (Peck) to the Secretary of State," Chongqing, February 8, 1939.

17 "The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State," Paris, February 22, 1939.

governments." And Chevallier underlined how little the armaments which had crossed the border with Indochina had weighed in the balance.

The author of *Aux Heures Tragiques de l'Empire* (Général X 1947, 82) also reported that following the landing of Japanese troops in Hainan, Mandel would have decided "to provide the Chinese with a more effective aid" but that the head of Foreign Affairs "remained hesitant to say the least" (Général X 1947, 82). The author also reports that the Chinese ambassador "was a regular visitor to Mr. Mandel's office." It seems that the talks between Mandel and Koo often focused on the supply of war materiel and on the freedom of transit of war materiel through Indochina. The last and most important issue was that of a military alliance or agreement between France and China. However, on the specific question of the transit of war materiel, the author specified that it "gave rise to numerous negotiations." But, "ultimately, no war materiel passed to China" (83).

In the middle of the summer of 1939, the French position on the transit of war materiel remained unchanged. On July 21, the French ambassador in Washington read to US Under-Secretary of State Welles, a note sent by the French ministry of Foreign Affairs dated June 15 and intended for the British Embassy in Paris (USDS 1955, 540).[18] Welles reported the contents of the note as follows:

> "The French Government points out that the most effective means of rendering assistance to China at the present time is through the furnishing of arms and ammunition. [...] If transshipment through French Indochina is to be undertaken, France insists that such opening of French Indochina to transshipment must be recognized by Japan as the result of an agreement in this regard on the part of several powers most concerned in order that Japan will clearly recognize that such a policy on the part of France is undertaken only with the assurance of support from Great Britain and the United States. It is emphasized repeatedly in the note that France will not agree to any measure of this character nor to any measure of retaliation or reprisal against Japan without assurances from the United States. The French Government states that this is a *sine qua non*."

18 "Memorandum of Conversation, by the Under Secretary of State (Welles)," Washington, July 21, 1939.

19 Telegram. "The Secretary of States to the Ambassador in the United Kingdom (Kennedy). The same, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Ambassador in France as No. 830, September 8, 3 p. m." Washington, September 8, 1939–4 p. m.

The US archives tend to show, however, that the ban on the transit of war materiel was not total, as most of the materiel from the United States continued to pass into China through French Indochina until the outbreak of the war in Europe (USDS 1955, 757).[19] It remains to be seen whether the fact that France allowed the smuggling of war materiel to China should be considered as a form of aid or not. Dealing with the case of Spain, Pierre Vilar ([1986] 2004, 115) asked whether to respond positively to the Republican government's request for the delivery of military equipment, "under existing agreements" and "against payment," constituted an "intervention" or not. Vilar believed that it is "rather the refusal that would be one."

4 Conclusion

It is possible to consider that the ban on the cross-border transit of war materiel was ultimately only formal. It should nevertheless be borne in mind that from 1937 to 1939, France continuously prohibited the transit of war materiel from Indochina to China by rail, which, despite the passage by road and by sea, could only harm China by complicating the supply. That supply, according to the chargé d'affaires, Wilson, was also hampered by the tariff policy of the French authorities, to the point that, at the beginning of 1939, Burma became the main transit point for goods en route to China (USDS 1955, 747–748).[20] Wilson also reported the difficulties the Chinese faced, in late 1938 – early 1939, in obtaining and transporting war materiel from Europe:

> "At that time General Yang Che, Chinese Ambassador to the Soviet Union, had been living in Paris in strictest seclusion for the past three months for the purpose of buying armaments. The French, we were told, would sell him nothing, but he had purchased rifles and field pieces, mostly of obsolete pattern, from Belgium, Switzerland, Lithuania, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. These arms were shipped from northern European ports as the French Government would not permit their shipment through Marseille, which would have been cheaper and more expeditious."

20 "The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State," No. 4092, Paris, April 4, 1939.

21 "The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State," No. 4092, Paris, April 4, 1939.

If we turn now to France's attitude with regard to trade in the direction of Japan, we see that there were, as a matter of fact, few attempts to impose restrictions. However, it was not before the occupation of Hainan and "the 'war materials' involved were principally iron and copper ores and coal". The French government "professed" its "inability to place an embargo on the export of war materials from Indo-China to Japan" (USDS 1955, 748).[21] And France never applied any embargo on exports of war materiel to Japan. As for the suspension of iron exports from Indochina to Japan, by mid-1939 this was no longer in question (USDS 1955, 538).[22]

Such an attitude on the part of France seems to have rather hindered the Chinese war effort, even though France had officially forbidden herself to do so before the League of Nations. Appeasement dominated French foreign policy and, as Jean Chesneaux (1955, 224) wrote, "the 'Munichist' orientation also triumphed in the Far East."

As for the reasons which pushed France to behave in this way, due to a lack of sources, they are not the object of this study. At most, we can emphasize that the successive French governments between 1937 and 1939 at no time considered themselves able to oppose the pressure exerted by Japan. US archives show on numerous occasions the official thesis of French diplomacy which said that it could do nothing without a guarantee of support from the United States. It should be added that there was an important current of opinion in France, among certain intellectuals and elements of the political class, which considered that the preservation of peace could well go through the sacrifice of a few colonies (Duroselle 1979, 237–238). On April 7, 1935, with the Rome Agreements, Pierre Laval, then Foreign Minister, had already conceded to Mussolini "more than 100,000 square kilometers" on the Libyan border. These agreements never came into force, but their realization "could have constituted a military danger" for the neighboring French colonies (Vernier 1947, 188–200). This tendency to consider the appeasement of the anti-Comintern pact powers by means of colonial concessions was also existent among officials of the Quai d'Orsay, and included the Asian possessions of France. On July 31, 1939, Bullitt reported that, according to Léger, "the present situation in the Far East was governed by new conditions. Both the French and British Governments had decided to withdraw from every position and possession that they held in the Far East if necessary to avoid war with Japan (USDS 1955, 698)."[23]

22 "Memorandum of Conversation, by the Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Hamilton)", "[Washington,] June 5, 1939."

23 Telegram. "The Ambassador in France (Bullitt) to the Secretary of State," Paris, July 31, 1939–4 p. m.

Acknowledgements

This article is a result of Dr Barthel's postdoctoral fellowship (2018–20) at the Department of History, Chulalongkorn University, under the supervision of Wasana Wongsurawat, and generously supported through the Ratchadapisek Somphot Fund of the Graduate School of Chulalongkorn University.

References

Allain, Jean-Claude, Autrand Françoise, Bély Lucien, Contamine Philippe, Guillen Pierre, Lentz Thierry, Soutou Georges-Henri, Thèse Laurent, and Vaïsse Maurice. (2005) 2007. *Histoire de la Diplomatie Française II : De 1815 à nos Jours*. Paris: Perrin.

Binoche, Jacques. 1989. "La Politique Extrême-Orientale Française et les Relations Franco-Japonaises de 1919 à 1939." *Revue Française D'histoire D'outre-mer* 284–285: 263–275.

Catroux, Georges. 1959. *Deux actes du Drame Indochinois. Hanoï: Juin 1940; Dien Bien Phu: Mars-Mai 1954*. Paris: Libraire Plon.

Chesneaux, Jean. 1955. *Contribution à L'histoire de la Nation Vietnamienne*. Paris: Éditions sociales.

Duroselle, Jean-Baptiste. 1979. *La Décadence: 1932–1939*. Paris: Imprimerie nationale.

Général X. 1947. *Aux heures Tragiques de L'empire* (*1938–1941*). Paris: Office Colonial d'Édition.

Grandjean, Philippe. 2004. *L'Indochine face au Japon: 1940–1945, Decoux – De Gaulle, un malentendu fatal*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Lévy, Roger. 1939. *La Politique Française en Extrême-Orient: 1936–1938*. Paris: Paul Hartmann Éditeur.

Michelin, Franck. 2003. "La Rencontre de deux destins. L'expansion vers le sud du Japon et l'Indochine Française en Juin 1940." *Ebisu* 30: 5–31.

Mitter, Rana. 2014. *China's War with Japan, 1937–1945: The Struggle for Survival*. London: Penguin Books.

Montagne, Pierre. 2016. *L'Indochine Française: 1858–1954*. Paris: Tallandier.

Renouvin, Pierre. 1946. *La question d'Extrême-Orient, 1840–1940*. Paris: Hachette.

USDS (United States Department of State). 1954a. *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1937: Volume III, The Far East*. Washington: United States Government Printing Office.

USDS (United States Department of State). 1954b. *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1938: Volume III, The Far East*. Washington: United States Government Printing Office.

USDS (United States Department of State). 1955. *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1939: Volume III, The Far East*. Washington: United States Government Printing Office.

Valette, Jacques. 1995. *Indochine 1940–1945: Français contre Japonais*. Paris: CDU SEDES.

Vernier Bernard. 1947. "Le statut du Fezzan." *Politique étrangère* 2: 188–200.

Vilar, Pierre. (1986) 2004. *La guerre d'Espagne*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.

Williams, William Appleman. (1959) 1962. *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*. New York: Delta Book.