Paradise in Peril. Western colonial power and Japanese expansion in Sout-East Asia, 1905-1941

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Summary

This dissertation is about the political and military developments in S.E. Asia during the interbellum, 1919 - 1941. The main policy of the colonial powers, the United States, Great Britain, France and The Netherlands was to maintain the status quo, as had been agreed with Japan in the Four Power treaty of Washington signed on 4 February 1922. In the following years, however, changes in foreign policies of China, the Soviet Union, Thailand and in particular of Japan, gradually ground down that status quo. In shifting their aggression from Manchuria (1931) to China (1937) and thereafter to French Indo-China (1940), Japan was becoming a serious threat to western colonial powers in S.E. Asia.

For the first time in a historical study, the ways in which the United States, Great Britain, The Netherlands, Australia and France reacted to Japanese expansion and to each other are compared within the same geographical context, making this dissertation unique. In each of the aforesaid western countries, internal political factors initially made it impossible to react adequately to the Japanese challenge and certainly to be able to do so in cooperation with one another. An important occurrence, which was not discerned at all at that time, was the nonviolent transfer of power from the superpower in decline (Great Britain) to the United States, which were emerging, but still reluctant to take over, being at the time still very isolationist. This fact blocked any combined action against the Japanese aggressor in China until 1939. When Germany defeated the three West European colonial powers in 1940, Japan was presented with a golden opportunity in S.E. Asia. This highlighted the indispensable role the very reluctant United States had to play as it was the only power who could possibly halt Japanese aggression. President Roosevelt, however, rose to the occasion, and power in S.E. Asia was peacefully transferred from Great Britain to the United States in 1941, three years earlier than in Western Europe.

Of course, much attention is paid to the Dutch side, giving insight into Dutch diplomacy and defence preparations made by both the Dutch colonial army and the Dutch navy. The Dutch government in exile did not recognize the emergence of the United States as a super-power for quite some time. They also failed to succeed in harnessing the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, who acted fairly independently, causing the allies of the Dutch to be considerably confused. Internal developments both within The Netherlands and in their East Indies possessions, determined Dutch foreign policy. This dissertation gives unique insight into the interplay of all these factors, based on Dutch source material which has not been published before.

A number of less well-known subjects have also been included in this study, such as the relation between France, Japan and Thailand. The French way of coping with Japanese aggression is compared to the way the Dutch reacted. French policy was less moralistic and more pragmatic than Dutch policy and was more effective in terms of saving human lives under Japanese occupation. Japan's history has also been incorporated, outlining western policies which resulted in radicalizing the Japanese military, who took their civilian government into hostage. Thus a balanced picture is presented about what went wrong with Japan.

Much attention has been paid to the strategic military and naval developments in each of the six countries covered by this study, illustrating the internal cohesion between military and naval potential and the diplomatic policies upon which they were based. By the nature of this comparative study, the author has been able to present valuable insights into crucial military and diplomatic developments in that part of the world during the interbellum, such as the way most western countries universally underestimated Japan's military prowess.