Why was Thailand never colonized?

Thailand owes this fact due to its diplomatic efforts when caught between the two superpowers of the time. History shows us that Thailand gained its current form, and staved off colonialism, by negotiating with England and France, to keep them from attacking.

Before we get to the story, first a note about 19th century Southeast Asia.

Most of SEA followed a political system close to that of feudalism in medieval Europe. Powerful rulers in large cities commanded the neighboring territories, and their influence got weaker and weaker the further one went from the capital. Formal borders were non-existent, as spheres of influence waxed and waned. Weaker rulers paid tribute to stronger rulers in exchange for some military protection and to avoid being gobbled up completely.

In the 19th c. Siam (name not changed to Thailand until 1939) was the largest and strongest power in the region with its sphere of influence nearly double what it is today.

European expansion began roughly in the mid century, with Britain consolidating its hold on the various independent kingdoms now known as India, and moving into the area that is now known as Myanmar. (That country was composed of many different ethnic states. The first ethnic group that the British encountered (and conquered) were the Burmese, so the British named the entire territory after that one ethnic group, ignoring the Shans, Was, Karins and a multitude of others. But that’s another story)

The French were coming in from the east. They had solidified their hold on what we now call Vietnam and were moving westwards from there. Siam was caught in the middle between these two great powers.

France and England had been fighting for a thousand years or so by this time, with the battles often occurring far from their home lands. They had fought in Canada, had been on opposing sides in the American War of Independence, and had even tussled in India when England was trying to get the French off their base in Pondicherry.

But when they approached Siam, they had different strategies. England believed in the concept of “buffer states” where a neutral territory was created or maintained in order that the two warring countries were not directly in contact with each other. France was less concerned about this.

France conquered Saigon in 1859. They then turned their eyes to areas that owed allegiance to Siam, specifically what we now call Cambodia, Laos, and the Malay Peninsula. In 1867 France sailed up the Mekong to Phnom Penh whose king protested to Siam’s ruler Rama 4, who then protested to Paris to no avail. Rama 4 then turned to the British for support, who refused to help.

Its important to note that at this time, Britain was Siam’s strongest ally. 88% of the shipping trade of Bangkok was controlled by the British, the British laid all the railroad tracks in Siam, controlled the mines, supplied Siam with most of its weaponry, ran its finances, did all its banking and held all of its gold reserves.

By 1890 the French were determined to take over all of Siam. They decided to start with the lands east of the Mekong and west of Vietnam. Eventually their plan was to take over the Lao speaking areas of the Northeast (Isaan today), weakening Siam with the aim of eventually taking over the entire country. In 1893 France pushed into the jungles of what we know as Laos, and since the Siamese figured out what France was up to, they attacked. France countered attacked the Siamese troops and demanded that Siam give to France all their lands east of the Mekong.

Rama 5, having taken over the country on the death of his father, again appealed to the British for help which was again refused. In fact, Britain was happy with the French grabbing control of Siamese territory due to a new concept known as “The Doctrine of Compensatory Advantage.” Simply put, France would be allowed to take eastern Siam in return for not protesting when the British took over the rest of the Burmese territories.

With France in Laos and Cambodia, and the British in Burma, the British had achieved a regional alignment they were happy with, with Siam forming a buffer state. The British thus told Rama 5 to give in to French demands, but the King refused. This was a difficult thing to do in the face of a much mightier force.

The French, to force the issue, sent their gunboats to Paknam at the entrance to the Chao Praya River and Bangkok. The British sent a note to the King saying that his refusal to give in would result in the “complete extinction of the Siamese national existence.”

Faced with the refusal of Britain to support it, Rama 5 eventually conceded and was forced to give up more territory to the French.

Now the stage was set for the French to take over all of Siam. In 1896 the British and the French foreign ministers met in Paris with the French aiming to take over what was called the Korat Plateau (now called Isaan). In formal talks, the French proposed to divide Siam into two parts. They proposed that the Chao Praya River be the dividing line, and that the French hold all of Siam to the east, and that Britain take all of Siam to the west including all of the peninsular lands down to what is now Malaysia. This would connect the British held territory of Burma to their Straits Settlements (Malaysia and Singapore).

If the British had agreed, all of Isaan and Pattaya would be French and Phuket would be British.

Britain rejected this, wanting to continue with the buffer state so France countered with a second proposal. This new idea was close to the first, with the one distinction being that the Chao Praya River Valley would remain independent.

Since the Siamese weren’t invited to these meetings, the Siamese Ambassador to Europe pulled off a back door lobbying effort, negotiating with the British directly, telling them that the entire country of Siam should be used as a buffer zone. The British finally agreed to this. Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, wrote about the French “we particularly desire to avoid them as neighbors.”
So in 1896 the two countries signed a treaty saying they would support the independence of Siam against any third party (Russia, and especially Germany, were both nosing around Siam, seeing what parts they could pick off.)

This was a major diplomatic triumph for Siam, which managed to keep its independence although France was determined to take it over. Although Siam had to give up some territory that it had previously held sway over, it managed to retain its freedom, a majority of its land, and al of the land inhabited by Thai language speaking people. (The lands it conceded were mostly Khmer, Malay or Lao).

Of course, the two signatories couldn’t keep their hands to themselves, and so in 1907 France picked off a bit more territory to add to Cambodia (specifically Battambang and Siem Riep), and the British two years later grabbed a bit more land for Malaysia and created the boundary of what is today the border line between Thailand and Malaysia.

This map below illustrates these land losses: