

**Worthy of better Memory:  
The Royal Navy and the defence of the Eastern  
Empire 1935 - 1942**

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**Volume 1 of 2**

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## **Abstract**

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### **Worthy of better Memory: The Royal Navy and the defence of the Eastern Empire 1935 - 1942**

This thesis proposes major revisions to the history of the naval defence of Britain's Eastern Empire during the critical period 1935 – 42 as the Royal Navy (RN) sought to manage the increasing risks posed by three potential Axis enemies across divergent theatres. It challenges the prevailing historical interpretation which explains the successive defeats suffered by the RN at the start of the war with Japan as the inevitable consequence of resource weakness and imperial overstretch already evident in a deeply flawed pre-war strategy "Main Fleet to Singapore". The dominant narrative argues that: Britain never had the naval resources to protect a two hemisphere Empire let alone cope with a triple threat from Germany, Italy and Japan; it certainly could not pose any effective counterweight to Japan once it was fighting for its life in Europe; and it compounded resource weakness by consistently underestimating the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) and failing to recognise the potential of modern airpower at sea. Britain's strategy for defending its Eastern Empire through naval power therefore rested on convenient self-deception regarding Japanese intent and the balance of relative capability whereas in reality the RN was decisively outmatched. Furthermore, most historians suggest that, while Britain's initial war with Japan ended in ignominy, this had little impact on the overall global struggle against the Axis because Britain's role in the East was essentially irrelevant to the Allied cause whatever the losses to its own imperial standing.

This thesis contends that the dominant narrative is neither satisfactory nor sufficient and reflects important gaps in the historical record. But it also argues that the historiography of the last 50 years has defined the RN role in protecting the Eastern Empire in very narrow terms, focusing almost exclusively on the defence of the Far East territories and the prospects of deploying a fleet to Singapore. In reality, the Eastern Empire encompassed a much wider area and it faced existential threats on its western boundary as well as in the east. Ensuring the security of this wider area had profound implications not just for Britain's own war-making potential but for the overall Allied cause too. The thesis therefore offers an interpretation which, for the first time, investigates thoroughly the inter-dependencies between different theatres of war hitherto viewed principally in their own terms. By taking this wider perspective, it demonstrates that not only was there more coherence and continuity to RN policy and strategy towards the Eastern Empire in this period than historians have traditionally accepted but that it also reflected greater realism about what truly mattered and where naval resources should best be concentrated at any given time. In doing so, it shows how and why prevailing accounts are defective.

The thesis proposes five main arguments across the period 1935 – 1942. First, it shows that the RN of 1939 was stronger, more capable, more innovative, and more ambitious in its strategic goals than the mainstream accounts of its inter-war history have generally

accepted. It is simply not the case that meeting the demands of a multi-theatre war over the next three years as the output of the rearmament programme became available was out of reach as many have argued. It then demonstrates that British strategy to ensure adequate security through naval power for the core territories of the Eastern Empire in the face of the Triple Threat was more flexible and realistic, and better directed at what would prove to be the critical points in the first half of the war, than the prevailing historical narrative recognises. Thirdly, by looking at all relevant theatres simultaneously, it argues that Britain's investment in the Middle East, and the RN commitment to the Eastern Mediterranean, from 1940 – 42, were essential both to protect the Eastern Empire and its resources and to enable it to generate maximum war potential. This commitment also vitally influenced the security of the Atlantic lifeline. It was not a diversion but an essential complement to meeting the threat from Japan.

The thesis then re-examines the disasters suffered by the RN in the first phase of the war with Japan. It argues that promises of US naval support in the Atlantic and exaggerated expectations of the deterrent power the US could exercise against Japan allowed Britain's war leadership to believe it could maintain a forward defence strategy in the Middle and Far East theatres simultaneously. This goal was never realistic with the resources Britain was able and willing to deploy overseas; yet it was the Admiralty, rather than the Prime Minister, who showed a reckless disregard for the resulting risks in the immediate run-up to war. In reality, the exercise of naval power to secure what mattered in the Eastern Empire did not ultimately depend on holding Singapore.

The final line of argument is that it is simply not possible to reach a secure judgement on the eastern theatre without a proper understanding of how it interacted with the other war theatres and how this then influenced the decision-makers of the day. The thesis shows how the entry of Japan into the war confirmed that the Indian Ocean was an inescapable defence commitment, critical not just for Britain but also the wider Allied cause, ranking indeed second only to the Atlantic lifeline in importance. Despite the defeats suffered in the first months of the Far East war, the thesis demonstrates how the RN could still generate sufficient power by mid-1942 to defend this theatre against any naval force Japan was likely to deploy.

The 1935 start date for the thesis marks the point when the threats posed by a resurgent Germany, an increasingly hostile Japan, and unpredictable Italy, moved from theoretical to real. The end of 1942 is an appropriate finishing point because, as the thesis explains, it marks the end of any credible threat from the Axis to the core Eastern Empire through either the Indian Ocean or the Middle East.

## **Dedication**

**To all those in the Royal Navy who planned and fought to defend the  
British Eastern Empire in this period and are worthy of better memory**

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I also thank my supervisor, Professor Gwythian Prins, and my Director of Studies, Professor John Adamson, for all their support and guidance in preparing this thesis.

## Abbreviations

ABC-1	American British Staff Conference No 1
ACNS	Assistant Chief of Naval Staff
ADB	American Dutch British
AMWIS	Air Ministry Weekly Intelligence Survey
ASV	Air to Surface Vessel Search Radar
CAS	Chief of Air Staff
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
CinC	Commander in Chief
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations in the US Navy
COS	Chiefs of Staff
DRC	Defence Requirements Committee
DCNS	Deputy Chief of Naval Staff
D of P	Director of Plans
DMI	Director of Military Intelligence
DNI	Director of Naval Intelligence
EF	RN Eastern Fleet
FAA	Fleet Air Arm
FEA	Far East Appreciation
FECB	Far East Combined Bureau
<i>Force G</i>	RN Task Force comprising battleship <i>HMS Prince of Wales</i> and escorts
<i>Force H</i>	RN Task Force established mid-1940 to guard Western Mediterranean
<i>Force Z</i>	RN Task Force renamed from Force G on 8 December comprising the battleship <i>HMS Prince of Wales</i> , battle-cruiser <i>HMS Repulse</i> and escorts
FSL	First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff
GC&CS	Government Code & Cypher School
IJN	Imperial Japanese Navy
IJNAF	Imperial Japanese Naval Air Force
IJAAF	Imperial Japanese Army Air Force
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee

JPC	Joint Planning Committee
JPS	Joint Planning Staff
JN25	Japanese Navy Cypher
KGV	<i>King George V</i> class battleships
NEI	Netherlands East Indies
NID	Naval Intelligence Division
OIC	Operational Intelligence Centre
PM	Prime Minister
R-class	<i>Royal Sovereign</i> class battleships
RAF	Royal Air Force
RN	Royal Navy
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service
USN	US Navy
VCNS	Vice Chief of Naval Staff
WIR	Weekly Intelligence Report

#### **Additional Abbreviations used in References**

ADM	Admiralty
AIR	Air Ministry
AT	Admiralty Telegram
CAB	Cabinet Office
CCA	Churchill College Archives, Cambridge
FO	Foreign Office
IWM	Imperial War Museum
JM	Japanese Monograph
NMM	National Maritime Museum, Greenwich
PREM	Premier
TNA	The National Archives
UCI	University of California Irvine Libraries
WO	War Office

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## **Declaration of Originality**

I hereby declare that my thesis entitled “Worthy of better Memory: The Royal Navy and the defence of the Eastern Empire 1935 – 1942” is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text, and is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Buckingham or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or is concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma, or other qualification at the University of Buckingham or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

## **Word Count**

The text of the thesis contains 124955 words. In accordance with University of Buckingham regulations, this total includes the two appendices but excludes footnotes, tables, references, bibliography and preliminary pages i – xii.

A word limit of 125,000 was approved by Professor John Adamson, Director of the Humanities Research Institute, in his e-mail dated 27 January 2015 copied to the Registrar.

The Abstract, title and text only and counted separately, is 998 words.

# **VOLUME 1**

## **Introduction**

This thesis proposes major revisions to the history of the naval defence of Britain's Eastern Empire during the critical period 1935 – 42 as the Royal Navy (RN) sought to manage the increasing risks posed by three potential Axis enemies across divergent theatres. It argues that the historiography of the last 50 years has defined the RN role here in very narrow terms, focusing almost exclusively on the defence of the Far East territories and the prospects of deploying a fleet to Singapore. In reality, the Eastern Empire encompassed a much wider area and faced existential threats on its western boundary as well as in the east. Ensuring the security of this wider area had profound implications not only for Britain's own war-making potential but the overall Allied cause too. Drawing on primary sources which have been neglected or overlooked, the thesis therefore offers an interpretation which, for the first time, investigates thoroughly inter-dependencies between different theatres of war, hitherto viewed principally in their own terms. By taking this wider perspective, it demonstrates that not only was there more coherence and continuity to RN policy and strategy towards the Eastern Empire in this period than historians have traditionally accepted but that it was also grounded in greater realism about what truly mattered and where naval resources should best be concentrated at any given time. It also demonstrates how and why prevailing accounts are defective.

There is no question that, in the first six months of the war with Japan which began on 7 December 1941, the RN suffered a series of serious defeats at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN). These defeats contributed to the loss of Malaya and Burma and forced Australia and New Zealand to look primarily to the United States (US) for their protection, while the IJN incursions into the Indian Ocean in early 1942 threatened the security of India and the vital sea routes on which Britain's position in the Middle East, and a significant part of its war effort, depended. They are often presented as signalling the end of the RN's claim to be the pre-eminent maritime power on which the security of the British Empire rested.

A powerful and persistent historical narrative explains these RN failures in the East primarily as the inevitable consequence of resource weakness and imperial overstretch already evident in a deeply flawed pre-war strategy “Main Fleet to Singapore”. This dominant narrative argues that: Britain never had the naval resources to protect a two hemisphere Empire let alone cope with a triple threat from Germany, Italy and Japan; it certainly could not pose any effective counterweight to Japan once it was fighting for its life in Europe in 1940/41; and it compounded resource weakness by consistently underestimating the IJN and failing to recognise the potential of modern airpower at sea. The historiography which underpins this narrative is explored further in Annex 1. This shows that although recent revisions to specialist areas of the record suggest RN performance in the East should be judged against a more complex picture, no major historian has yet challenged the main thread of the existing narrative with its favoured explanations. The implication is that the ground has been exhaustively covered and that, despite the specialist revisions, there is little new to say about the overall picture. The prevailing view remains therefore that Britain could never find the naval resources to contain Japan once it faced an existential threat in Europe; and that its policy and strategy for the Eastern theatre consequently rested on a series of convenient self-deceptions regarding Japanese intent and the balance of relative capability whereas in reality the RN was decisively outmatched. Furthermore, most historians suggest that, while Britain’s initial war with Japan ended in ignominy, this ultimately had little impact on the overall global struggle against the Axis because Britain’s role in the East was essentially irrelevant to the Allied cause whatever the blow to its own imperial standing.

This thesis argues that the prevailing historical interpretation of these RN defeats and the perception of wider strategic failure in the East is neither satisfactory nor sufficient. The dominant explanation of “overstretch” is valid in so far as the RN certainly lacked the resources to provide fully competitive forces simultaneously against three major enemies in three divergent theatres. However, it could still choose where to concentrate. The fact the RN deployed a larger fleet to the Indian Ocean in 1942 than any other theatre to date suggests that to argue that commitments in the Atlantic and Mediterranean rendered defeat in the East inevitable is to oversimplify. The view that the RN was outmatched by the IJN

in the application of modern naval power also looks oversimplified when set against the revised views of RN strength and fighting capability established in the last 20 years as well as its early war record in other theatres. Finally, better understanding of the intelligence available in the Eastern theatre and how it was used, following releases since 1990, makes it harder to draw simple lines between “intelligence failure” and underestimation of the Japanese enemy.

In arguing that the long prevailing received account is defective, the thesis also shows in detail *how* that account is defective. It discovers and explores gaps in the historical record and highlights the puzzle of some striking omissions in the historiography which are discussed further below. It also records mistaken readings of documents by previous historians which have shaped some aspects of the account which this thesis now aims to correct. While these deficiencies and gaps in the existing account alone justify a fresh look at RN policy and performance in the East, the narrow terms in which the Far East problem has been defined further underlines how far the established narrative is based on a selective and incomplete picture. The use of naval power to defend the Eastern Empire was not just about Singapore. It involved managing competing risks to east and west and in the Indian Ocean. And events would demonstrate that the fate of Singapore and ability to deploy a fleet to the Eastern theatre were different things.

Against this background, the thesis proposes five main interlocking arguments across the period 1935 – 1942. First, it shows in some detail that the RN of 1939 was stronger, more capable, more innovative, and more ambitious in its strategic goals than the mainstream accounts of its inter-war history have generally accepted. It is simply not the case that meeting the demands of a multi-theatre war over the next three years as the output of the rearmament programme became available was out of reach as many have argued. It then demonstrates that British strategy to ensure adequate security through naval power for the core territories of the Eastern Empire in the face of the Triple Threat was more flexible and realistic, and better directed at what would prove to be the critical points in the first half of the war, than the prevailing historical narrative recognises. Thirdly, by examining all relevant theatres simultaneously, it argues that Britain’s



investment in the Middle East, and the RN commitment to the Eastern Mediterranean, from 1940 – 42, were essential to protect the Eastern Empire and its resources and to enable it to generate maximum war potential. This commitment also vitally influenced the security of the Atlantic lifeline. It was not a diversion but an essential complement to meeting the threat from Japan.

The thesis then re-examines the disasters suffered by the RN in the first phase of the war with Japan. It argues that promises of US naval support in the Atlantic and exaggerated expectations of the deterrent power the US could exercise against Japan allowed Britain's war leadership to believe it could maintain a forward defence strategy in the Middle and Far East theatres simultaneously. This goal was never realistic with the resources Britain was able and willing to deploy overseas; yet it was the Admiralty, rather than the Prime Minister, who showed a reckless disregard for the resulting risks in the immediate run-up to war. In reality, the exercise of naval power to secure what mattered in the Eastern Empire did not ultimately depend on holding Singapore.

The final line of argument is that it is simply not possible to reach a secure judgement on the eastern theatre without a proper understanding of how it interacted with the other war theatres and how this then influenced the decision-makers of the day. The thesis draws on the primary records to show how the entry of Japan into the war confirmed that the Indian Ocean was an inescapable defence commitment, critical not just for Britain but also to the overall Allied cause, ranking indeed second only to the Atlantic lifeline in importance. Despite the defeats suffered in the first months of the Far East war, the thesis demonstrates how the RN could still generate sufficient power by mid-1942 to defend this theatre against any naval force Japan was likely to deploy.

The 1935 start date for the thesis marks the point when the threats posed by a resurgent Germany, an increasingly hostile Japan, and unpredictable Italy, moved from theoretical to real. The end of 1942 is an appropriate finishing point because, as the thesis explains, it marks the end of any credible threat from the Axis to the core Eastern Empire through either the Indian Ocean or the Middle East.

The thrust of this thesis differs sharply therefore from the prevailing consensus. The absence of previous challenge to this consensus is surprising because, as already noted, there are striking gaps in the historical coverage. Indeed, as the research progressed, initial curiosity over the conviction which underpins the established explanations led first to genuine puzzlement over the failure to acknowledge important parts of the primary record and then to quite serious criticisms of how a very partial picture has been presented. It is striking here that, while there is a large literature addressing the performance of the RN in the Second World War, and a similarly large body of literature which examines the Pacific War from the vantage point of the US Navy (USN) and IJN, only a tiny proportion of this historical coverage deals specifically with the RN's performance in the Eastern war. Historians have generally tackled RN strategy and operations in the East within more general studies of either the RN or the war with Japan. Only Arthur Marder deals exclusively with the RN's engagement with the IJN from build-up to war through to the final operations in the Pacific in 1945.<sup>1</sup> Other naval historians who have addressed the field have generally focused either on the RN's pre-war planning for a Far East war, and the specific developments which led to the loss of *Force Z*<sup>2</sup> in late 1941, or the deployment of the British Pacific Fleet (BPF) in the final phase of the war in 1944 – 45. Marder apart, the period between the loss of *Force Z* in late 1941 and the build-up to the Pacific deployment in late 1944 has been barely touched outside general histories.<sup>3</sup> This includes the critical importance of Indian Ocean communications during 1942 in sustaining Britain's whole position in the war at that time and the implications

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur J Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies: The Royal Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1936-1945* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press 1981 – 1990). This appeared in two volumes: *Strategic Illusions 1936 – 1941* (1981); and *The Pacific War 1942 – 1945* (1990). Marder died in 1980 and Volume 2, *The Pacific War*, was completed by three of his students drawing on his notes and records. He produced drafts of the first six chapters which cover the period of this thesis. The value of the work lies in its specific focus on the RN, its wide sweep, and the depth of his research. For the latter he drew on the official British records released in the 1970s but also exhaustive tapping of surviving witnesses. As a Japanese speaker, he was also one of the first historians to draw extensively on Japanese sources. His account of the *Force Z* operation is definitive and much of his excellent and detailed coverage of the Indian Ocean in 1942 is not available anywhere else. He therefore provides an essential yardstick for further research.

<sup>2</sup> The battleship *Prince of Wales* and battle-cruiser *Repulse*.

<sup>3</sup> H P Willmott, *Grave of a Dozen Schemes: British Naval Planning and the War against Japan 1943 – 1945*, (UK: Airlife Publishing, 1996), is a partial exception here although this thesis does not accept all of Willmott's arguments.

posed by the IJN incursion against Ceylon.<sup>4</sup> A further gap is the rather limited biographical coverage of the RN officers who were most influential in policy and operations relating to the Eastern Empire in the period covered by this thesis. Only Cunningham has been comparatively well served.<sup>5</sup>

This comparative neglect of the RN's record in the East has had three consequences. First, as already noted, the naval defence of the Eastern Empire, and indeed the Eastern Empire itself, has been defined in very narrow terms. Attention has focused almost exclusively on the Far Eastern section of that Empire and the role of Singapore. However, this thesis argues that the Eastern Empire actually embraced all the territories and interests owned or controlled by Britain from Egypt in the west to Tonga and Fiji in the east. Its naval defence therefore embraced the Eastern Mediterranean and Indian Ocean as much as the South China Sea. The extent to which this much wider commitment influenced RN policy and planning across the period 1935 – 42 has been under recognised. Second, the key assessments and judgements regarding RN policy and performance in the East, first established in the official histories in the 1950s, have never been properly tested as new evidence has emerged. Finally, an examination of the RN record in meeting the challenge of the IJN sheds important light on overall RN strengths and weaknesses. The IJN proved

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<sup>4</sup> One of the very few historians to emphasise the centrality of the Indian Ocean to the overall British Empire war effort is Ashley Jackson, notably in *The British Empire and the Second World War*, (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), chapters 10 – 12. This book is of wider importance in describing the overall Empire as opposed to specific UK war contribution. Unfortunately, its impact is reduced by its episodic structure, too many factual errors, and poor editing. Professor Jeremy Black also emphasises the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean in 1942 in his article 'Midway and the Indian Ocean', (*US Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2009, Vol 62, No 4).

<sup>5</sup> There is no biography of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Ernle Chatfield who was First Sea Lord for most of the 1930s or of Admiral Sir Tom Phillips who played a central role in Far East strategy as successively D of P (1936 – 38), VCNS (1939 – 1941) and finally CinC Eastern Fleet. A recent book by Martin Stephen, *Scapegoat – The Death of the Prince of Wales and Repulse*, (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Ltd, 2014), contains some new background on Phillips drawing on family papers but essentially focuses only on the *Force Z* story where it seeks to exonerate him from blame. Robin Brodhurst has produced a recent biography of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound who was First Sea Lord from 1939 – 1943, *Churchill's Anchor: The Biography of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound OM, GCB, GCVO*, (UK: Leo Cooper, 2000). This is workmanlike but rather selective in its coverage. It does not address Pound's role in promoting the tilt towards the Mediterranean from late 1938 and coverage of the Eastern theatre during his time as FSL is confined to *Force Z* where Brodhurst accepts the standard interpretation. The only biography of Admiral of the Fleet Sir James Somerville is Donald MacIntyre's *Fighting Admiral: The Life of Admiral of the Fleet Sir James Somerville*, (London: Evans brothers, 1961). This is now more than 50 years old and drew on limited sources.

a first rank naval power able to deploy the full range of modern naval capability across two oceans and the ability to handle it therefore represents a key measure in overall judgements of British naval power and performance in this period.

An important theme in the preferred “Far East narrative”, used to reinforce the traditional “overstretch” argument, is that Britain sacrificed the Far East in 1941 to concentrate its military effort in the Mediterranean and Middle East. There is often an implication that this choice was discretionary and reflected Prime Ministerial prejudice rather than careful strategic calculation. However, the reasons for the commitment to the Mediterranean and Middle East from mid-1940 onward, the extent to which it reflected pre-war thinking, why British leaders perceived the balance of risk between Middle and Far East theatres in the way they did, and how priorities changed after the Japanese attack, are rarely addressed. Indeed, despite thousands of books written on the Middle East and Mediterranean campaigns in World War II, the rationale offered by most historians for Britain’s overall investment here prior to 1942 remains surprisingly opaque.<sup>6</sup>

That is largely due to the tendency of historians, whether critics or advocates of Britain’s Mediterranean strategy, to treat the theatre in isolation and to view it through the optic of developments in the second half of the war. Critics see the Mediterranean as a commitment largely irrelevant to the successful prosecution of the war with costs quite disproportionate to benefits.<sup>7</sup> Advocates emphasise the need to protect oil resources and Empire communications, as well as the need to engage the main enemy somewhere, but

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<sup>6</sup> This judgement even includes such seminal works as Michael Howard’s *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War*, (London: Greenhill Books, 1993). Ashley Jackson does give a good explanation for why the Mediterranean and Middle East was important to the overall British Empire war effort at the start of chapter 7 of *The British Empire and the Second World War*. However, he does not adequately distinguish between the factors identified by the British war leadership as most important at the time as opposed to those identified by historians, with the benefit of hindsight, afterwards. Nor does he adequately bring out how perceptions of relative risk changed over time.

<sup>7</sup> If the Mediterranean costs are judged disproportionate, then they certainly fell disproportionately on the RN. A post war Admiralty note estimated losses of RN ships in the Mediterranean theatre, either sunk or damaged beyond recovery, at one battleship, two carriers, 17 cruisers, 61 destroyers, 45 submarines, 13 escorts, and 234 minor war vessels. Admiralty Notes on the Mediterranean Effort 1939 – 1945, CAB 106/615, TNA. With the exception of capital ships, this was almost exactly half of all RN war losses in all theatres. For overall RN losses, see S W Roskill, *The Navy at War 1939 – 1945*, (London: Collins, 1960), Appendix p 449. If Admiralty estimates for ships seriously damaged in the Mediterranean are also taken into account (six battleships, four carriers, 31 cruisers, 66 destroyers) the adverse impact on fighting capability was far higher.

they struggle to explain why these factors were important when they present them within a narrow Middle East focus. No major history has yet adequately explored the complex interdependencies between the defence of the Middle East and Indian Ocean as they evolved over the period 1939 – 42 while critical issues such as the role of Persian oil and the Persian supply route to Russia are barely mentioned in even the best general histories of the war.<sup>8</sup>

From the purely naval perspective, the balance of historical coverage of the Mediterranean theatre is broadly the reverse of that for the Far East. Here, there is a substantial literature on the RN's operations in wartime but comparatively little on RN policy and planning before the war. There has been limited recognition that the tilt in priorities from Far East to Middle East originated in 1938/39 and was led by the Admiralty. The Admiralty's role is well described by the historians Lawrence Pratt<sup>9</sup> and Reynolds Salerno<sup>10</sup> whose work represents an important exception to the limited coverage of RN policy and planning in the Mediterranean before the war. Both focus on the period 1935 - 40 and cover similar ground though Salerno is more wide-ranging and draws on a more modern and extensive research base. They explain how and why the threat to the Middle East became more prominent in British strategic thinking in this period and why the Admiralty saw the Eastern Mediterranean as a critical area of both risk and opportunity, ultimately taking de facto priority over the deployment of a full fleet to Singapore.<sup>11</sup>

Many historians, who address RN policy and performance during the approach to the Far East war and its initial phase, especially the issues surrounding naval reinforcement in the autumn of 1941, imply Britain was making decisions in isolation. They make at most

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<sup>8</sup> See for example three high profile general histories published since 2009: Max Hastings, *All Hell Let Loose: The World at War 1939-45*, (London: Harper Press, 2011); Anthony Beevor, *The Second World War*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2012); Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War*, (London: Allen Lane, 2009). Only Roberts suggests Middle East oil was important though without really explaining why. None of the three comment on the Persian supply route to Russia.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence R Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez*, (Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Reynolds M Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935-1940*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> The work of Pratt and Salerno becomes even more compelling when the Middle East is viewed as part of the overall "Eastern Empire" stretching from the Egyptian/Libyan border in the west via Hong Kong and Australasia to the British Pacific Ocean territories in the east.

only passing reference to US influence on RN plans for managing the naval risk from Japan whereas the US position was in reality fundamental. This missing US dimension reflects important gaps in the historical coverage of the Anglo-US naval relationship in 1940 - 42. There are good specialist studies which chart the development of the relationship from the mid-1930s through the first eighteen months of the European war to the conclusion of the first American – British staff talks known as ABC-1 at the end of March 1941.<sup>12</sup> But only one historian has looked in detail at the subsequent period from ABC-1 to the outbreak of war with Japan in December and there is almost no specialist coverage of the Far East dimension to naval relations during 1942.<sup>13</sup> More generally, there is an inevitable tendency by naval historians to treat the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Pacific theatres within separate compartments with the result that critical interdependencies between the theatres for British-US naval relations receive insufficient attention. The difficulty the two powers experienced in reaching agreement on Far East naval defence during 1940 – 41 can only be understood by recognising the primacy they both gave to Atlantic security. Equally, explaining the despatch of British naval reinforcements to the Far East in autumn 1941 requires awareness of the compromise agreement reached at ABC-1 whereby the US assumed RN responsibilities in the Atlantic in order to release RN forces for an Eastern Fleet. Meanwhile the ambitious US plans initiated in autumn 1941 to reinforce the Philippines with air power to contain Japan have been largely ignored by historians of Britain's war in the East. Yet US plans here gave the emerging Allied policy of deterrence and containment more credibility than has so far been recognised even if the measures proved too late and too ill coordinated to be effective.

Two other striking gaps in the historical coverage raise important questions about the way the RN contribution to the defence of the Eastern Empire during the first phase of the war with Japan has so far been presented and perceived. The first concerns the established

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<sup>12</sup> These include: James R Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy: Anglo-American Naval Collaboration, 1937 – 1941*, (USA: University of North Carolina Press, 1977); Greg Kennedy, *Anglo-American Strategic Relations in the Far East 1933 – 1939*, (London: Frank Cass, 2002); Malcom Murfett, *Fool Proof Relations: The Search for Anglo-American Naval Cooperation during the Chamberlain Years 1937 – 1940*, (Singapore University Press: 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Ian Cowman, *Dominion or Decline: Anglo-American Naval Relations in the Pacific 1937-41*, (Oxford, UK and Dulles, VA. USA: Berg, Oxford International Publishers, 1996).

picture of the debate and decisions over naval reinforcement in the autumn of 1941 which led to the deployment of *Force Z*. Starting with Roskill in 1954, this has been, and continues to be, portrayed as an argument between the Naval Staff favouring the gradual establishment of a defensive force based in the Indian Ocean and a domineering Prime Minister pushing for a modern battleship to be deployed direct to Singapore as a political deterrent. This interpretation, however, ignores substantial and unambiguous documentary evidence in Admiralty and Cabinet records demonstrating that the Naval Staff shifted in September from their previous cautious defensive strategy in the Indian Ocean to the concept of a forward offensive strategy based on Singapore and potentially Manila. This offensive strategy is the direct opposite of that ascribed to the Admiralty by Roskill and almost all subsequent historians. It raises a puzzle comprising three elements. First, why has this change, which the Admiralty certainly saw as important at the time, been ignored by historians with just one notable exception?<sup>14</sup> Second, what caused the shift? The documents record that it took place but do not adequately explain why. Third, did it matter? Did it affect the fate of *Force Z* and subsequent events?

The second gap concerns the strategic status of the Indian Ocean in 1942. It can reasonably be argued that, for the first six months of that year, the COS saw the possibility of losing control of the western half of that ocean as the greatest single risk to the British Empire war effort and indeed the Allied war effort as a whole. As the Joint Planning Committee (JPC) stated, the consequences that would follow if this risk were realised, the loss of Persian oil, the whole position in the Middle East, India and potentially Australia and New Zealand, were “incalculable”. For a while such a scenario seemed entirely possible and yet this aspect of the war has received surprisingly little attention from historians.<sup>15</sup> Those that do cover the naval position in the Indian Ocean offer a picture of an RN Eastern Fleet hastily cobbled together out of aging warships not required elsewhere, quite inadequate to take on the Japanese, but rendered irrelevant by American

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<sup>14</sup> The first historian to focus on this offensive strategy, and the only one to explore it in detail, is Ian Cowman in *Dominion or Decline*. The new material is described in Chapter 5, p 244 onward. The relevant documents are in ADM 116/4877, TNA.

<sup>15</sup> Two significant exceptions are: H P Willmott, *The Barrier and the Javelin: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies February to June 1942*, (Annapolis, USA: Naval Institute Press, 1983), and *Germany and the Second World War*, Volume 6: The Global War, p181-3 and 848-50, edited Horst Boog, Werner Rahn, Bernd Wegner, and others (OUP: 2001).

successes in the Pacific. The implication is that this was a sideshow of little consequence. Perceived RN weakness and irrelevance here has also fed the wider theme of chronic overstretch and RN inability to keep up with the demands of modern air warfare at sea. However, in neglecting the Indian Ocean theatre and its strategic significance in 1942, historians have failed to address important questions about the critical war priorities perceived by Britain's leadership in the Eastern theatre and Britain's need, will and ability to use the RN to defend them. They have also tended to emphasise snapshots of RN weakness in particular places at particular moments which are not representative of underlying RN strength and resilience. The RN faced a far more diverse set of geo-strategic challenges in 1942 than did either the US Navy or IJN and its success in shifting critical force quickly and flexibly between theatres to meet changing priorities deserves more attention. It is hoped that this thesis contributes to that end.

The most important source material for the thesis is inevitably the full range of official British Government records in the National Archives, especially the Cabinet and Admiralty series, but also, and crucially for some of the corrections in interpretation of plans, priorities and conduct in 1941 - 2, the wide range of intelligence files released since the early 1990s. In interpreting the British official records, the author has been able to draw on more than 30 years of experience within HM Government dealing with foreign and defence policy.

A key facility now available in the National Archives, not available to previous generations of historians, is the electronic catalogue and access to many documents in digital form, making it possible both to identify new documents and make connections that others have missed. The internet also makes it easier to identify relevant material in other archives, both government and private collections. This has greatly helped with US, Japanese and German<sup>16</sup> records. The lack of primary Japanese material available in English is a serious constraint but extensive use has been made of the Japanese

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<sup>16</sup> The multi-volume German history of WWII, *Germany and the Second World War*, which has achieved the status of an "unofficial" Official History, and has been steadily translated into English over the last 20 years, is especially helpful in identifying and summarising primary German sources and there are many references to this work in this thesis.



Monographs produced by US debriefing of Japanese sources in 1945.<sup>17 18</sup> While digitisation of records is still patchy everywhere, a surprising amount of primary source material has now been published and is readily accessible as never before. The digital revolution has also transformed the ability to search and access the secondary literature, including not only specialist articles and unpublished theses by professional historians, but also much valuable material from amateur enthusiasts on new specialist websites. All this new access has greatly helped the thesis pursue an inter-disciplinary approach. It seeks not only to break new ground but better to inform the big strategic picture by drawing together recent research in distinct areas such as: tactical innovation; comparative operational effectiveness; productive capacity; and intelligence.

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<sup>17</sup> The 187 Japanese Monographs were produced under US Far East Command direction from 1945. Most were written by former Japanese officers and draw on many primary documents as well as witness testimony. They were revised and published by the Office of the Chief of Military History, US Army. Many are now available online. The Monographs cover specific policy and operational topics. Their coverage is partial and mainly focused on areas of US interest. However, for this thesis, items on pre-war political strategy, military production, and operations against Malaya and in the Indian Ocean have been very useful. The US Strategic Bombing Survey also conducted extensive debriefing of Japanese officers post war and these include many IJN related items processed by the US Navy as NAV Notes.

<sup>18</sup> The Japanese Official History of WWII, *Senshi Soshō*, comprising 102 volumes, published from 1966 – 1980, unfortunately remains almost entirely untranslated and therefore inaccessible to non-Japanese speakers. One important exception is the translation of two volumes, sponsored by the Australian War Memorial, which focuses on the Papua New Guinea Campaign in 1942 – 43. *Japanese Army Operations in the South Pacific Area: New Britain and Papua Campaigns 1942 – 1943*, translated by Dr Stephen Bullard, AWM, 2007. Most of this is not relevant to this thesis but it does include some valuable insights into overall Japanese strategy at the start of 1942. An increasing number of secondary sources, including some important books by Japanese historians available in English, have also drawn significantly on *Senshi Soshō* and are referenced in this thesis.

## Chapter One

### **The Royal Navy 1935 – 39: Rearming for a two hemisphere war**

This chapter begins by examining the state of the RN, with its inherited strengths and weaknesses, at the beginning of 1935. This date is an appropriate starting point for the thesis for three reasons. First, it marks the moment when the risks to Britain's maritime security from a resurgent Germany in Europe and from Japan in the Far East began to move from theoretical to real. By the end of the year, a third potential enemy, Italy, was in view as well. Second, it marks the beginning of a naval re-armament programme, designed both to address the new risks but also deficiencies in naval investment accumulated since the late 1920s. Finally, it marks the time when the naval limitation structures which had been in place since the Washington Treaty of 1922 began to break down. From this 1935 start point, the chapter examines the RN's response to the emerging threats to Britain's naval security. It scrutinises the RN rearmament programme, the industrial capacity to support it, what it hoped to achieve, whether its goals were realistic, and how well it met RN requirements for the war it ultimately had to fight from 1939 through to the end of 1942. The final part of the chapter assesses RN strengths and weaknesses by 1939 and its overall operational effectiveness then compared to its future enemies. The evolution of RN strategy and planning during this period for a global war against three potential enemies will be addressed in Chapter Two.

For some 50 years after the Second World War, the picture presented by mainstream historians of the RN in the inter-war period was one of decline and decay modified by acknowledgement of a late (and from the political perspective reluctant) spurt of rearmament. Kennedy, Marder, Barnett, and, to a large extent, Roskill, all promoted this view and, outside a few specialist works, it remains dominant to this day.<sup>1</sup> Their picture

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<sup>1</sup> See: Paul, Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*. Chapter ten is titled "The Years of Decay (1919-39)"; Arthur Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran: Studies of the Royal Navy in War and Peace 1915-1940*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), chapters two and three; Corelli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, Part I, *Britannia Lets the Trident Slip*, chapters one and two; and, S W Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars*.

stresses not only the rapid decline in size of the RN, both absolute and relative, from its zenith in 1919 but a failure of the RN leadership to learn the lessons of the First World War and especially to address the implications of air and submarine power. Barnett is typically abrasive, describing the RN at the start of the 1930s as “technologically obsolescent, truncated by treaty, no longer a war hardened fighting service, but once again a kind of fashionable yacht club more apt for elegant displays of ship handling and Royal Tours of the Empire than for battle”.<sup>2</sup> While other historians might find his language florid and overstated, their picture of the RN is similar. Virtually all emphasise a service fixated on fighting another Jutland and, at best, technically and tactically conservative, if not backward, compared to its USN and IJN peers.<sup>3</sup> A recent historian highlights a fascinating example of the historical “group think” underpinning this picture of the inter-war RN in the endless repetition of the claim by Roskill that “not one exercise in the protection of a slow moving mercantile convoy against sea or air attack took place between 1919 – 1939”. He notes how “this seeming extraordinary assertion” has been taken without question as fact by most of Roskill’s successors.<sup>4</sup> As this chapter will demonstrate, Roskill’s claim is not true and one of many enduring myths.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, p 24. Barnett, perhaps the leading proponent of the declinist version of Twentieth Century British history, is viewed by many as a divisive historian partly because he can rarely resist a polemical turn of phrase. *Engage the Enemy More Closely* is nevertheless an important work because of its sheer sweep, its command of detail and sources, and because it introduced important new dimensions such as the role of Ultra. Although now 20 years old, it is the most recent one volume history of the RN in WWII that carries weight and its judgements have arguably shaped the way RN performance in WWII is viewed as much as Roskill. This thesis differs from Barnett on many points but recognises he has set out arguments and perceptions that must be addressed.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Bell, writing in 2000, noted that some historians had begun to challenge this negative view of the inter-war RN. New scholarship suggested the decline of Britain’s power in general and seapower in particular had been exaggerated. Revisionist studies of the inter-war navy pointed to an officer corps more farsighted and professionally competent than conventional accounts suggested. However, Bell noted that the image of a reactionary, intellectually deficient service remained pervasive. *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), p xvi.

<sup>4</sup> George Franklin, *Britain’s Anti-Submarine Capability 1919-1939*, (London: Routledge, 2003), p 2.

<sup>5</sup> Roskill made this claim in *Naval Policy between the Wars*, Vol 1, p 536. There were at least some early challenges to the claim. Writing in 1974, in *From the Dardanelles to Oran*, p 38 - 39, Marder described Roskill as “off the mark” in a literal sense though he accepted that a general disinterest and disregard for convoy operations was correct. A more striking reference, suggesting a more complex picture, appeared in Lawrence Pratt’s *East of Malta, West of Suez* published in 1975. At p 119, Pratt stated: “Under Pound’s supervision, British combined naval and air forces had carried out slow and fast convoy operations in the central Mediterranean and in the Atlantic west of Gibraltar in August 1937 and March 1938. Those exercises had confirmed Pound’s pessimism regarding wartime naval movements through the Mediterranean: in the face of hostile Italian air power and submarines, a simple convoy from Malta to Egypt would become a major fleet operation”. Pratt was drawing here on records in ADM 116/3900. His highlighting of a prescient judgement by Pound seems to have been missed or ignored by naval historians

## The evolution of the RN from 1919 - 1935

It is important to place RN strength in 1935 in proper context. At the start of that year, it remained the largest navy in the world whether judged by total warship tonnage or by numbers of major warships.<sup>6</sup> Leaving aside the USN where there was broad parity, it had a significant margin over any other single naval power, at least in quantity, in every category of major warship except submarines where Japan and France had larger numbers. It had the three largest, and arguably most powerful capital ships in the world, with two built in the 1920s to a design more modern than any contemporary.<sup>7</sup> The RN also possessed a network of global bases that made it the only navy genuinely deployable on a worldwide basis though, until the Singapore base was complete, which was still some years away, there were no dockyards capable of heavy repair east of Suez and the Cape which would constrain any long term fleet deployment in the Far East.<sup>8</sup>

Detailed analysis of British naval policy from 1919 – 1935 is outside the scope of this thesis but the key factors during this period that determined the size and composition of the RN in 1935 need summary. For the first 15 years after the end of the First World War, there were certainly no immediate risks to the maritime security of the British Empire and

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both then and since. Interestingly, however, Roskill certainly did read Pratt because he reviewed the book in *International Affairs*, Vol 52, No 2, (April 1976), p 274 – 275. It did not cause him to qualify his original claim.

<sup>6</sup> Admiralty figures prepared for the 1937 Naval Estimates put RN warship tonnage in 1935 at 1.136 million tons compared to 1,019 for the USN. The combined tonnage total for the three future Axis powers in 1935 was 1.296 million tons so the RN was not far below this figure. The Admiralty figures were mainly based on data provided under the various Naval Treaties and can be assumed to be an accurate guide. Interestingly, the same Admiralty tables show that the USN did surpass the RN briefly in total warship tonnage in 1929. See: “Comparative Table of Tonnages and Personnel of Naval Powers”, NID paper dated 16 February 1937, for the 1937 Naval Estimates, ADM 116/3596, TNA.

<sup>7</sup> The three were the battle-cruiser *Hood* completed in 1920 which would remain the largest and fastest capital ship in the world until the completion of the *Bismarck* in late 1940 and *Nelson* and *Rodney*, the extra capital ships permitted to the RN under the 1922 Washington Treaty and completed in 1927. Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, p 24, refers to the *Nelsons* as “a flawed compromise design”. The implied disparagement is not justified. The ships had their faults but all battleships involved difficult trade-offs between gun power, protection, and speed. The *Nelsons* had the heaviest armament in the world until 1941, most experts argue they were also the best protected until the new generation capital ships of the early 1940s, and they were two knots faster than any of the contemporary US battleships though not the two Japanese *Nagatos*.

<sup>8</sup> The Singapore base would not be fully complete until 1940 and even then its capacity for heavy repair remained limited.

arguably no credible risks at all. Despite naval rivalry and some economic tensions, war with the US was inconceivable. Germany was effectively disarmed and other European powers were friendly. Japan, with the third largest navy in the world, posed a theoretical threat to British interests and territories in the Far East but, until the early 1930s, it was hard to see how serious conflict would develop in practice. Against this background, the size and composition of the post war RN through to 1935 was shaped by three factors. These were: the strength inherited at the end of the war and the historic experience and assumptions that had created and sustained that strength; subsequent political judgement on the size of navy appropriate to a global empire dependant on secure global maritime communications; and an international environment that, until the early 1930s, favoured measures promoting peace and disarmament.

The key issue for the British political leadership, contemplating naval policy for a post war world without obvious security risks, was whether to sustain the historical status of an RN stronger than all other powers risking a ruinous competition with a US Navy set on parity. Their decision, which reflected a broad political consensus, and reluctant acceptance from the RN leadership, was to adopt a “one power Standard”. This standard, first defined in 1921 and confirmed by the Cabinet in 1925, required that *“our fleet, wherever situated, should be equal to the fleet of any other nation wherever situated”*. Since the US Navy was the next largest after the RN, it became the new standard against which RN strength was assessed. The British Naval Staff accepted this relationship because it granted them a virtual “two power standard” over Japan, the only credible threat to British interests in the Far East, and France as the largest European naval power.<sup>9</sup> The RN therefore acquiesced in broad parity with the USN from 1921 and this parity was underpinned by the Washington Naval Limitations Treaty negotiated at the end of that year.<sup>10</sup> The “one power standard” was, however, interpreted flexibly. It was a target not a

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<sup>9</sup>Joseph A Maiolo, ‘Admiralty War Planning, Armaments, Diplomacy, and Intelligence Perceptions of German Sea Power and their influence on British Foreign and Defence Policy 1933 – 1939’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, Department of International History, London School of Economics and Political Science, March 1996), p 22-23, which references a wide range of sources.

<sup>10</sup> The Washington Treaty text contains no direct reference to parity but British Government willingness to concede this was arguably a crucial factor in making the Treaty possible. It is worth noting, however, that although the limits established for capital ships came close to parity, the RN came away with a slight advantage in both permitted tonnage (about 6% greater) and numbers (20 to 18). Interestingly, the USN

precise measure. The RN leadership always stressed that Britain had “absolute” naval requirements, notably the security of Empire communications, that dictated RN strength as well as the “comparative” requirements relative to other powers. British stakeholders generally accepted therefore that the RN could not slavishly copy the USN, or accept parity across all categories of warship. This flexibility of interpretation was inevitably used by the Admiralty to push for larger investment and by the Treasury to rein it in.<sup>11</sup> The commitment of successive Governments to the “one power standard” through the 1920s and the Great Depression 1929 – 31 reflected the consensus that the continued security and wellbeing of the Empire rested on the perception by both friends and potential enemies that Britain intended to remain the dominant maritime power. But it was also due to the success of the Admiralty in portraying Japan as a plausible future opponent and using this as a focus to frame plans, budgets and political debate in a practical way.<sup>12</sup>

The concept of a “one power standard” suited British needs well enough during the 1920s when other European navies were in decline and the international situation was benign. It also suited the RN which, through skilful negotiation with the Treasury, won rather more investment than parity strictly required and arguably ended the decade with its superiority over the USN enhanced. However, by the early 1930s, as the risk of naval conflict with Japan became more credible, the argument used to set the standard of strength shifted. By 1932, the Cabinet had effectively recognised, though not formally agreed to fund, a

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calculated at the end of 1922 that the RN had come away from Washington with a much greater superiority, perhaps 30%, in the effective fighting strength of its capital ship fleet. See US Navy General Board to the Secretary of the Navy, Item 37, Michael Simpson, *Anglo-American Relations 1919 – 1939*, Naval Records Society, (Ashgate Publishing, 2010). The text of the Washington Treaty (and subsequent inter-war Naval Limitations Treaties) can be found on the website: [www.navyweaps.com](http://www.navyweaps.com).

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Bell ably shows how the meaning of the “one power standard” was adjusted across the inter-war period to meet the needs of different stakeholders. At p 1 of *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, he quotes a comment by the then Director of Plans Captain T S V Phillips in a July 1937 minute – “The term “One Power Naval Standard” is extremely vague and means different things to different people”. Phillips’ minute is in ADM 116/4434, TNA.

<sup>12</sup> See Andrew Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939: Planning for a war against Japan*, (London: Frank Cass, 2004), Conclusion. See also: Christopher Bell, *Churchill and Seapower*, (OUP, 2012), chapter 4; and, John H Maurer, ““Winston has gone mad’: Churchill, the British Admiralty and the Rise of Japanese Naval Power”, (*Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2012, 1 – 24, First Article).

modified standard proposed by the Admiralty.<sup>13</sup> This recognised that security in Europe might be threatened while most of the RN was fighting a Far East war with Japan. It therefore stated that “*we should be able to retain in European waters a ‘deterrent force’ to prevent our vital home terminal areas being commanded by the strongest European naval power while we took up a defensive position in the Far East and brought home the necessary units for home defence*”. The growth of the French and Italian navies initially drove this change more than concern over Germany. It clearly fell short, at this stage, of a “two power standard” excluding the US. It was a move in this direction but still a limited and achievable objective. The change enabled the RN to bid for more resources but it had little practical effect on RN funding before FY 1935.<sup>14 15</sup>

The application of the “one power standard” defined against the US and the subsequent “two power standard” excluding the US were complicated by the inter-war Naval Limitation Treaties. These set internationally agreed limits on naval strength, both quantitative and qualitative, and also defined relative strengths between the naval powers. The treaties confirmed the general concept of British and US parity but did not initiate it. They rather endorsed a comparative balance that the two parties had already agreed for their own reasons. They therefore allowed Britain to pursue a “one power standard” up to the ceiling set for the USN but, with some exceptions, not to exceed it. The treaties also constrained the flexibility with which Britain interpreted the “one power standard” by setting common limits on certain warship categories that did not suit Britain’s particular needs. While the treaties set upper limits, they naturally did not define minimum levels of strength. Britain invariably built up to her permitted limits while, during the period 1925 – 35, the USN often failed to do so.<sup>16</sup> The RN therefore retained an advantage in major

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Gordon, *British Seapower and Procurement between the Wars: A reappraisal of Rearmament*, (Annapolis, USA: Naval Institute Press, 1988), p 107 – 8.

<sup>14</sup> It should be stressed that neither the RN nor others within the British government system ever used the term “two power standard excluding the US”.

<sup>15</sup> This paragraph and the preceding one draw on the Admiralty historical commentary in “A New Standard of Naval Strength”, D.P. (P.) 3 forwarded to the CID on 29 April 1937. A copy of this is included in C.P. 316 (37), Defence Expenditure in Future Years, December 1937, CAB 24/273, TNA. For an excellent exposition of the inter-war “one power standard” and indeed the wider history of standards as a measure of RN strength, see Christopher Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, chapter 1, and also his *Churchill and Seapower*, chapters 3, 4 and 5.

<sup>16</sup> The Washington Treaty allowed the RN to build two new battleships as soon as it wished but there was no requirement to commence construction immediately or indeed at all. Nor was it obvious that the RN would

surface units well into the 1930s and, as already noted, was still some 10% larger here than the USN in 1935.<sup>17</sup>

The RN in 1919 contained a huge number of warships in all categories completed or laid down during the war which were less than five years old. Those laid down later in the war were often of innovative design reflecting war experience. These ranged from the battle-cruiser *Hood* (arguably the world's first "fast battleship"<sup>18</sup>) to the *V and W class* destroyers, the most advanced of their day. The RN completed 29 cruisers and 79 destroyers from mid-1917 onward, 17 and 31 of these after the war ended. Apart from *Hood*, completed in 1920, 16 capital ships had been completed during the war and were four years old or less. All these vessels had a normal lifespan remaining of at least 15 – 20 years.<sup>19</sup> Early replacement was hard to justify in threat terms but the Admiralty recognised that, without steady investment, it faced a block obsolescence problem down the line. The RN therefore had a very modern core through the 1920s enhanced by two new battleships and the substantial number of cruisers completed at the end of the decade under the Washington Treaty terms.<sup>20</sup> But the core was aging steadily by the 1930s. Two

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be in a position of immediate inferiority without them for some years to come. In the event, the RN got immediate political backing for the ships and laid the two *Nelsons* down within ten months of the Treaty. The RN similarly laid down 15 heavy cruisers between 1924 and 1928 compared with just eight by the USN. In general, the ambitions of the USN leadership to achieve parity with the RN never received the necessary political and financial backing in this period.

<sup>17</sup>Michael Simpson provides an excellent overview of the four interwar Naval Limitation Conferences (Washington 1922, Geneva 1927, London 1930 and London 1936) in his covering commentaries on the collection of papers on *Anglo-American Naval Relations, 1919 – 1939*, produced for the Naval Records Society, (UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2010). His overall judgement on the Treaty process at p 160 is: "In sum, limitation treaties probably prevented Japan from building as large a navy as she would have done otherwise, while, at the last, allowing the democracies just enough scope and time to construct barely enough ships to save the day come Armageddon". That seems reasonable. The history of the Treaty process is also well summarised in an Admiralty paper produced as part of the 1937 Estimates package. This provides a rationale for the shift from quantitative to qualitative measures under the 1936 agreement and sets out the perceived advantages to Britain. "Naval Disarmament since the War", ADM 116/3596, TNA.

<sup>18</sup> Although classified by the RN as a "battle-cruiser", *Hood* had protection superior to the *Queen Elizabeth* class battleships until their reconstruction in the late 1930s. R A Burt, *British Battleships 1919 – 1945*, (Barnsley UK: Seaforth Publishing, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> The Washington Treaty assumed capital ships had a life span of 20 years.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Bell agrees that, throughout the mid-1920s, the RN still possessed the world's largest and most modern fleet and led the world in new construction". "Even in 1929, the RN was still the strongest navy on earth, more powerful than the USN and with a comfortable margin over the IJN and any European navy." *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, p 25. Professor N A M Rodger sees the RN through the 1920s consistently outspending other naval powers and "increasing its lead in both quantity and quality". "The Royal Navy in the Era of the World Wars: Was it fit for purpose?", (*The Mariner's Mirror*, 97:1, February 2011, p 272 – 284), p 274.



thirds of the cruisers and destroyers, and almost all the capital units, in the RN fleet at the start of 1935 derived from wartime investment. Given treaty limitations and economic stringency, implementing a programme through the 1930s that combined modernisation with increased strength to meet new threats was certainly challenging. However, this chapter argues that, despite the political and economic limitations it faced, through a mixture of good foresight, shrewd political management, and some luck, the RN achieved sufficient of the right capabilities at the right time to protect Britain's most critical maritime interests through the first and dangerous half of the coming war.

In reviewing the factors that determined the strength of the RN in the 1920s and into the early 1930s, the "Ten Year Rule" requires mention. This gained some notoriety among historians in the 1970s and 1980s seeking reasons for Britain's apparent lack of preparedness for World War II. The "rule" was effectively Treasury guidance to the three armed services that, in preparing annual estimates, they should assume no major war for ten years. The rule was theoretically in force for much of the period from 1919 to 1932 when it formally lapsed and it moved forward on a rolling basis so that the ten years started again each year. The concept was not, however, applied in a consistent fashion nor did the Treasury always get Cabinet backing when it tried to use it to restrain specific investment projects. In the 1920s, the benign international environment made the rule a reasonable assumption and it was perhaps even defensible in assessing the outlook for Europe as late as 1932. It is best seen as a further weapon for the Treasury negotiating hand, especially against the RN as the biggest spender on major capital items. It is doubtful that it had much practical effect, compared to the other factors already discussed, in determining the frontline strength of the RN. If the Treasury had been fully successful in applying the rule, then logically the *Nelson* battleships would have been postponed and the *County* cruiser programme emasculated. It did, however, have an impact on support services, war stores and reserves, and, above all, on the arguments over the Singapore base. To that extent therefore it impeded the RN's global mobility as well as its immediate readiness for war.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Andrew Gordon quotes the outgoing First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Frederick Field, in his pre-retirement "Review of Naval Policy" in 1932 where he stated: "The Ten-Years-No-War formula has mainly effected the reserves of ammunition, torpedoes, mines, fuel and stores for the Fleet, and provision for the

Writing in 1997, the Canadian historian John Ferris, whose research has emphasised the continuing RN supremacy in the 1920s, acknowledged that, in 1934, British maritime power remained considerable. The RN maintained the largest force of warships, the quality of RN personnel and fighting doctrine was high, and weaponry and equipment in most areas was at least competitive. British shipbuilding and naval support industries had lost significant capacity since the mid-1920s but were still the largest in the world. Ferris, however, stressed that these continuing strengths covered serious weaknesses. He made three linked points. First, that the provisions of the Treaty of London in 1930, the second major Naval Limitations Treaty, were especially ill suited to British interests and weakened the RN more than any other naval power. He acknowledged that the RN's immediate strength slipped only marginally but argued that the Treaty, by limiting new build, exacerbated the problem of block obsolescence facing the RN in the mid-1930s.<sup>22</sup> Second, the combination of a restricted building programme resulting from the Treaty and the impact of the 1929-31 depression decimated the naval industries, reducing capacity by around half between 1929 and 1936. Ferris' view here is supported by Andrew Gordon who provides an even bleaker view of the decline of naval industries from 1925 to 1935.<sup>23</sup> Finally, the combination of obsolescence and reduced industrial capacity hit the RN just as potential enemies were growing significantly in strength. Ferris therefore argues that, while in 1929, the RN could handle any combination of likely threats with ease, by the mid-1930s many German and Italian warships were better than British ones and either Fleet combined with Japan was a match for Britain.<sup>24</sup> While the RN could rearm once free

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auxiliary services such as Armed Merchant Cruisers, Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships, mine-sweepers and all types of anti-submarine measures". *British Seapower and Procurement between the Wars*, p 123. Christopher Bell, *Churchill and Seapower*, chapter 4, also has a good summary of the politics and impact of the rule.

<sup>22</sup> A copy of the London Treaty can be found at [www.navweaps.com](http://www.navweaps.com). The key points of the new Treaty were an extension of the ten year bar on new capital ship construction established at Washington for a further five years and much more extensive quantitative limits on cruisers and destroyers.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Gordon, *British Seapower and Procurement between the Wars*, chapter 8.

<sup>24</sup> Ferris' claim that many German and Italian warships were better than British ones is dubious on the basis of either comparative paper specification or, more important, subsequent war performance. The six German light cruisers completed between 1925 and 1935 were arguably superior to the RN light cruisers designed during World War I (e.g. "C" and "D" classes) which still dominated the RN light cruiser force in 1935 but were inferior to the new *Leander* class commissioning from 1933 onward and vastly outgunned by the 15 modern heavy cruisers of the *County* and *Exeter* designs, completed between 1928 – 31, and the future *Southampton* class which started to appear in early 1937. The Italian heavy cruisers of the early 1930s were

of Treaty obligations and pursue a new two power standard excluding the US, the capacity cuts in British industry meant it could not do so quickly.<sup>25</sup>

In explaining these weaknesses, Ferris emphasises an obvious point that the declinist school does not adequately acknowledge, namely that political support for naval investment in this period was inevitably shaped by perceptions of the existing risks to British Empire security. Here historians who argue that RN strength was allowed to decline to a dangerous level tend to view the first half of the 1930s through the optic of hindsight, their knowledge of what happened in the second half. They effectively suggest political and naval leaders should have anticipated future risks at a point when these were not reasonably foreseeable. Given the time lag involved in most naval investment, a more substantial modernisation and replacement programme to have better capability in place by 1935 would have required decisions in 1929-31. At that time there was still no credible naval threat to Britain from European powers while that from Japan remained theoretical, dictated by her position as the world's third naval power, rather than any immediate evidence of hostile intent. Ferris argues therefore that, by the late 1920s, Britain could no longer sensibly calibrate its navy and industry to existing threats. Britain's leadership must either continue supporting a much larger navy than it needed or it must get smaller. In the context of the great depression, and the continuing absence of any foreseeable challenge to British seapower, some reduction was inevitable. At the political level, US attitudes and developments were also influential here. For all the aggressive talk in US naval circles of achieving parity with the RN, it proved impossible to win political support in Washington for even a modest replacement programme in the 1920s let alone for an increase up to Washington Treaty limits.<sup>26</sup> Only with the arrival of the Roosevelt administration in

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better armoured than the *County* class because they significantly exceeded the Washington Treaty limits but it is doubtful they were better all-round ships.

<sup>25</sup> J R Ferris, "It is our business in the Navy to command the seas": The Last Decade of British Maritime Supremacy, 1919-1929", essay in *Far Flung Lines – Essays on Imperial Defence in Honour of Donald Mackenzie Schurman*, edited by Greg Kennedy and Keith Neilson, (London: Frank Cass, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> The USN had completed only two post Treaty warships by the end of 1929, the two heavy cruisers of the *Pensacola* class. A further eight heavy cruisers would join the fleet by the end of 1933 by which time the RN had completed 15. No US destroyers were laid down until 1934. The premier post war historian of the USN, Samuel Eliot Morison, claims that the Hoover administration (1929 - 1933) had the sad distinction of being the only one since the eighteenth century in which not a single naval combatant ship was laid down. Morison, *The Two Ocean War: A Short History of the United States Navy in the Second World War*, (USA:

1933, would significant investment start. From the vantage point of 1930, if the US was not spending, why should Britain not also accept reductions?

The key issues for the British political leadership, as they weighed the balance of advantage in the London Treaty negotiations, were whether to insist on retaining the 1931 start on capital ship replacement envisaged at Washington, and a global cruiser force sufficient for all contingencies, or to accept reductions that would effectively freeze the status quo with the US and Japan but with a risk of a reduced margin of superiority in Europe. Given the lead the RN had retained through the 1920s despite supposed adherence to a “one power standard”, and the new investment it had only recently received with the *Nelsons* and *County* class cruisers, it is not really surprising that in a still benign international environment the British leadership opted for the latter.<sup>27</sup>

Comparative expenditure between the RN and USN across the inter-war period requires further comment here.<sup>28</sup> Looking across the ten fiscal years 1925 – 1934, Roskill has demonstrated that USN expenditure was about 26.5% greater than the RN in this period. Roskill and other historians have inevitably argued that this discrepancy, which continued through the later 1930s, underlines low investment and under-resourcing of the RN. Some of the higher US spend clearly relates to higher average USN manpower which exceeded that of the RN by about 17% across these years. This is largely explained by the USN’s much larger air arm. By 1936, the USN had 15,000 personnel in its air arm operating nearly 1000 aircraft. RN personnel numbers here were well under 1000 although, beyond this, comparisons become difficult because of the British dual control system at this time and the resulting RAF contribution to personnel and aircraft together with its responsibility for shore-based maritime support. Dominion expenditure and manpower, which, for practical purposes, came under the strategic direction of the RN, and supported ships which were included in RN strength, should also be added to the RN for a true

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Little, Brown & Co, 1963). That charge is not literally true since two *Portland* class cruisers were laid down in 1930 but it is nevertheless representative of the sad state of USN building.

<sup>27</sup> There is an excellent set of essays which assess the implications posed by the 1930 London Treaty on all the main naval powers in *At the Crossroads between Peace and War: The London Naval Conference of 1930*, edited by John H Maurer and Christopher Bell, (Annapolis USA: Naval Institute Press, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Roskill provides relevant figures at Appendix D and E in *Naval Policy between the Wars*, Vol 1. His figures appear correct and his exchange calculations to convert USD into GBP also seem reasonable.

comparison. Admiralty figures suggest the combined contribution of Australia, New Zealand and Canada to Empire Naval Defence was about £6.7M per year and 6,500 personnel by 1935, representing therefore about 10% of RN expenditure. When these two factors are taken into account, it appears non air investment and running costs were not very different between the two navies though it might also be argued that the British tax payer got rather better value for money given the larger size of the RN surface fleet.<sup>29</sup>

While Ferris offers a compelling interpretation of the changes in the RN's comparative strength and underlying resource base in the middle decade of the inter-war period, several important qualifications are needed regarding the RN's position at the start of 1935. First, the financial impact of the reductions from FY 1930-31 onward was modest. The headline drop in expenditure over the five fiscal years 1930-34 compared to 1925-29 was 8.6%. However, the earlier period included the exceptional expenditure on the new battleships *Rodney* and *Nelson*.<sup>30</sup> If this is removed, the reduction was around 6.8% and much of this was accounted for in a fall of manpower between the two periods of about 10%.<sup>31</sup> While reductions are always painful, this fall is modest compared to other reductions in defence expenditure during the Twentieth Century in periods of perceived low risk.<sup>32</sup> The impact of these financial cuts on effective fighting strength over the period 1930 – 35 was also modest. The ships removed from the line following the London Treaty were either already obsolete or would be by the end of the decade while manpower had returned to the level of the late 1920s as early as FY 1936-37.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> 1935 information here is drawn from papers prepared as part of the 1937 Naval Estimates, ADM 116/3596, TNA.

<sup>30</sup> The combined cost of these battleships was £13.0M. See: Ian Johnston and Ian Buxton, *The Battleship Builders: Constructing and Arming British Capital Ships*, (Barnsley, UK: Seaforth Publishing, 2013), p 239. They were laid down in FY 1922 and completed in FY 1927. It is reasonable to assume that half the combined cost i.e. £6.5M fell into the 1925 – 29 period.

<sup>31</sup> Financial calculations here are largely based on Roskill's figures in Appendix D of *Naval Policy between the Wars*, Vol 1. A substantial part of the fall in manpower was the result of decommissioning five old capital ships following the London Treaty.

<sup>32</sup> In terms of GDP, the fall in naval expenditure here was about 0.1% from 1.35% average in the late 1920s to 1.25% in the early 1930s. Naval expenditure in this period was just under half of all UK defence expenditure. By contrast overall UK defence expenditure fell by 1.0% GDP from 1990 – 1997 following the end of the Cold War and by a further 0.5% over the next ten years to 2007. Figures from: [www.ukpublicspending.co.uk](http://www.ukpublicspending.co.uk).

<sup>33</sup> Ferris states that the London Treaty "gutted" RN power in capital ships reducing numbers from 16-18 available in the 1920s to 11-12 in the mid to late 1930s. In strict numerical terms this was true but the five retired ships of the pre WWI *King George V* and *Iron Duke* classes were old, slow (burning a coal/oil mix),

Ferris is correct in arguing that the continuing bar on the building of new capital ships and the tonnage limitation on aircraft carriers, under the London Treaty, presented the RN with a block obsolescence problem for these categories in the late 1930s.<sup>34</sup> However, the problem applied equally to Japan which was the RN's primary naval threat and of course the USN.<sup>35</sup> And while France and Italy enjoyed some freedom to build new capital units, their construction only proceeded slowly and war with the former was anyway unlikely.<sup>36</sup> The Treaty also severely curtailed the RN's cruiser allocation at a time when revisionist naval powers were starting to invest heavily in this category. Over the five years 1930-1934, the three future Axis enemies completed a combined total of 19 cruisers (11 heavy<sup>37</sup> and eight light) and the US 13 (all heavy) while the RN completed only six (with two heavy). However, the RN had invested significantly in cruisers during the 1920s

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under-gunned and under armoured compared to their later foreign rivals. They would have been of little military value in fighting the IJN and yet were manpower intensive and increasingly costly to maintain. Indeed the deletion of these vessels alone arguably covered most of the 1930-35 manpower fall. Robert Craigie, the chief Foreign Office negotiator for the London Treaty, pointed out in a 1934 note to the Admiralty that the five capital ships retired at London had to be scrapped anyway by 1936 under the original Washington Treaty terms. Given the benign international environment, advancing this a few years posed no serious security risk and saved £4M. "Effect of the London Treaty on British Naval Strength", ADM 116/3373, TNA.

<sup>34</sup> If the original Washington terms for restarting capital ship build had held at London, then Britain was permitted to lay down one or two ships per year with a total of eight allowed by the end of FY 35. The RN could thus have had eight more modern ships on the strength in 1939 but would almost certainly not then have undertaken any reconstructions so the net increase in actual fighting strength needs to allow for this. With eight new ships appearing from 1935, it is also unlikely five ships would have been laid down (as the *KGVs* were) in FYs 1936 and 1937 perhaps further reducing net availability in 1941. The upshot is that a steady investment programme from 1931 would almost certainly have given the RN more modern or modernised capital ships units in 1941 but the difference in numbers compared to historical reality might have been rather less than many historians imply. Whether such an increase would have proved a good use of resources, or was what the RN really needed in 1941, is a different issue.

<sup>35</sup> Historians rarely focus on the IJN block obsolescence problem. The IJN solution was of course the *Yamato* super-battleship of which they planned to build five but the third was not planned for completion until 1945 and the others even later. The programme was already stretching Japan industrially by late 1941. By 1945, eight out of ten pre-*Yamato* ships would be 30 years old and militarily useless. By contrast, in 1938, the RN planned to have ten new ships complete by 1944 and to lay down at least one per year in addition from FY 1940. Most battleship specialists doubt the *Yamatos* had much advantage over the *Lions* in practical battle conditions. The Controller's belief, expressed in a minute dated 26 September 1936, that the RN could always out build Japan was justified. ADM 116/3382, TNA.

<sup>36</sup> The French battle-cruisers of the *Dunkerque* class were laid down in 1932 but did not complete until 1938. The Italian *Vittorio Veneto* was laid down in 1934 but did not complete until 1940. The first two German warships which can be properly classified as capital ships, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, were not laid down until mid-1935.

<sup>37</sup> Included here are the first two German Pocket battleships of the *Admiral Scheer* class. Although armed with 11 inch guns, their displacement and protection fit them better into the heavy cruiser category. In its estimates of comparative strength, the RN normally counted the three Pocket battleships as equivalent to one RN capital ship.

(completing a total of 21 with 13 heavy) and had a further 13 under construction during 1935 (including 5 heavy<sup>38</sup>).<sup>39</sup> By the time these 13 were complete at the end of 1937, the RN was steadily reducing the cruiser deficit even before its main rearmament programme kicked in. It would lay down a further 24 cruisers before the outbreak of war, far more than the combined total of its Axis enemies. Meanwhile an important point rarely noted by historians is the scale of RN investment in minor war vessels in the lean period of the early 1930s.<sup>40</sup> Over the five years 1930-1934, it completed 43 modern destroyers (the first laid down since 1919), 16 assorted ASW vessels and 20 submarines. The three future Axis enemies completed a combined total of 37 destroyers in this period, no ASW vessels and only 16 submarines. Strikingly, the USN completed only three destroyers and four submarines. The RN also had as many destroyers building as the combined Axis group in 1935 and would continue to match them.<sup>41</sup> Only in submarines would it rapidly lose ground as German production began.

Table 1, which sets out the new warships commissioned by the main naval powers between January 1922 and December 1934, illustrates many of the points made in this chapter. The start date is chosen because wartime construction and adjustments were broadly complete by this time and it also coincides with the signing of the Washington Treaty.

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<sup>38</sup> These were the *Southampton* class. Although armed with 6 inch guns, the classification “heavy” is justified by the number of guns and displacement.

<sup>39</sup> Under the 1930 London Treaty, the RN was permitted 91,000 tons of new cruisers by the end of 1936. It in fact only reached this target three months later in March 1937. However, it laid down a further five cruisers prior to the signing of the next Limitations Treaty in March 1936 on the assumption that its ceiling would be successfully negotiated upward.

<sup>40</sup> An important exception here is Orest Babij, “The Royal Navy and the Defence of the British Empire 1928 – 1934”, essay also in Greg Kennedy, *Far Flung Lines*, *ibid.* Babij presents a good defence of the RN leadership during this period and argues they won crucial concessions at the London Treaty, sufficient for a steady replacement programme of which the new destroyers were a key part.

<sup>41</sup> The RN had 25 destroyers and ten other ASV vessels under construction in 1935 compared with an Axis total of 28 destroyers and 18 destroyer escorts.

**Table 1**

**Warships commissioned by the main naval powers January 1922 – December 1934**

	Britain	US	France	Germany	Italy	Japan
Capital Ships	2	0	0	0	0	0
Aircraft Carriers	4	3	1	0	0	4
Heavy Cruisers	15	15	9	2	7	12
Light Cruisers	11	10	4	6	6	10
Destroyers	48	9	51	0	53	58
Submarines	35	44	57	0	47	56

Notes: The Heavy Cruisers listed for Germany are the Pocket Battleships *Deutschland* and *Admiral Scheer*. The Admiralty considered three of these to be equivalent to one capital ship.

Assuming Britain was not going to renounce its Treaty Obligations which was implausible (and whatever the shortcomings of the Treaty structure in specific areas, objective analysis suggests they brought her more benefit than loss overall<sup>42</sup>), where might more money have been spent if there had been political willingness to support a somewhat higher level of naval funding in the five years after 1929?<sup>43</sup> There are perhaps four obvious areas. More capital ships could have been modernised; specifically the long refits of *Barham* (1930 – 33), and *Royal Oak*, *Malaya* and *Repulse* (1933 – 36) could have been exploited to increase the range of their guns<sup>44 45</sup> and reconstruct the latter two to the same standard as

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Simpson, *ibid*.

<sup>43</sup> Net expenditure on the RN in FY 1929-30 was £55.99M. This was somewhat less than the average for the period 1925-29 but more than in FYs 1923-24 and 1924-25. From 1929 it dropped to a low point of £50.16M in FY 1932-33 before rising again to £56.62M in 1934-35, the last year before serious re-armament began. If 1929 levels of funding had been sustained for the next five years, the RN would have had an extra £16.5M representing about 6% of total expenditure from 1929-34. Full modernization of two battleships would have cost an additional £4M, six additional cruisers, perhaps £12 M, and an additional aircraft carrier about £3.75M. Expenditure figures are taken from Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars*, Vol 1, Appendix D.

<sup>44</sup> Increasing gun range here involved extensive turret modifications to raise the elevation of the 15 inch guns from 20 to 30 degrees. This increased maximum range from 23,000 yards to 32,000 yards using the new streamlined 6crh shell introduced in 1938. 12 US capital ships and all IJN capital ships received



*Warspite* which was in dockyard hands at the same time.<sup>46</sup> War stores, infrastructure and support services could have been better maintained and upgraded where appropriate, including the acceleration of the Singapore base. More money could have gone on airpower both accelerating the carrier replacement programme and building up overall FAA strength. Finally, more investment could have been made in anti-submarine warfare upgrading older destroyers and purchasing asdic sets to facilitate rapid expansion in wartime.<sup>47</sup>

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increased elevation in the late 1920s and 1930s. The RN only implemented this for four ships, *Warspite*, *Valiant*, *Queen Elizabeth* and *Renown* during rebuilds conducted from 1934 to 1940. In addition, *Hood* and the two *Nelsons* had all been built with high elevation guns.

<sup>45</sup> During 1940 – 1942, some of the unmodernised battleships had their gun range extended by fitting them for “supercharge” firing. As the term implies, this increased range not through increased elevation but by increasing the power of the discharge. At their maximum elevation of 20 degrees, this increased the range from 23,734 yards to about 26,000 yards with the pre-1939 4crh ammunition and 28,732 yards with the new 6crh ammunition. *Barham* was the first battleship equipped for supercharge firing during the first half of 1940. See the US Naval Attaché record, “Notes on conversation with the First Sea Lord”, 19 November 1940, ADM 199/691, TNA. R A Burt states that *Repulse* was modified to take 6crh supercharge shells (20 rounds per gun) by end June 1941. *British Battleships*, p 228. It is likely *Malaya*, *Resolution*, and *Royal Sovereign* were also modified during their refits in the course of 1941. A D of P minute to the FSL of 29 October 1941 stated that *Ramillies* would not be modified prior to deployment to the Far East on 30 November. This rather implies the other *R-class* ships had been modified by that time. ADM 205/11, TNA. Further details on “supercharge” firing can be found in [www.navweaps.com](http://www.navweaps.com)., under the entry for the RN 15inch/42 Mark 1 gun.

<sup>46</sup> *Warspite*’s modernisation involved a virtual rebuild with new engines, boilers, armour, AA armament, and new fire control as well as increased elevation for the 15 inch guns. The subsequent modernisations for *Valiant*, *Queen Elizabeth* and *Renown* were even more comprehensive. R A Burt, *British Battleships*. At over £3M, they cost about 45% of the predicted cost of a new capital ship (According to Ian Johnston and Ian Buxton, *The Battleship Builders*, p 239, £7.4M for a *KGV* by 1937) but provided perhaps 70% of the capability of a new ship. Had war not broken out in 1939, the Admiralty also planned comprehensive reconstructions of *Hood* and possibly *Barham* to complete by the end of 1941. Significant upgrades were also planned at this time for the two *Nelsons*. Many historians argue that the RN implemented far less capital ship modernisations than the IJN (all ten ships) or the USN (ten out of 15). A fairer assessment is that the four RN reconstructions implemented from 1934 to 1940 were more comprehensive than any of those done by the IJN or USN while two other RN ships (*Royal Oak* and *Malaya*) received partial modernisations comparable to the early upgrades carried out by the IJN and USN on their ships. Jon Tetsuro Sumida states that, in 1933, the Admiralty had reports that the USN had spent five times as much as the RN on battleship modernization though he does not quote a source. See his essay, “British Naval Procurement and Technological Change, 1919 – 1939”, in *Technology and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, edited by Phillips Payson O’Brien, (London: Routledge, 2007). However, Admiralty figures in early 1937 suggest that the USN actually spent just under twice the RN total on capital ship refit and modernization between 1922 and March 1937. The USN undertook no further major modernisations after this time while the RN had three just commencing at a total cost of some £10.5M. This suggests that, by 1940, when their last reconstruction finished, the RN had spent rather more across the whole interwar period 1922 - 39. “Vessels Modernised”, paper prepared with 1937 Naval Estimates, ADM 116/3596, TNA.

<sup>47</sup> Anti-submarine warfare was emphasised as an important priority by Field in his 1932 First Sea Lord Review. A copy of this Review with subsequent comment from Plans Department can be found under “Review of Naval Policy and Investigation of Deficiencies in War Equipment and Stores 1932 – 35, ADM 116/3434, TNA.

More and earlier modernisation of capital ships would have enhanced RN fighting strength and reduced the level of risk in the late 1930s when the RN had three ships absent from the frontline simultaneously for reconstruction. However earlier investment here might just have meant less later meaning that the real impact on capability in 1940 – 41 would have been limited.<sup>48</sup> The stores and support shortfall was broadly rectified from 1934 – 1939 under the deficiencies programme associated with rearmament and there is no guarantee that doing this earlier would have released funds for other purposes. The same argument applies to ASW where Admiralty strategy was to create a core capability to facilitate rapid expansion in wartime. As discussed later, the effort here over the five years 1934 – 39 was proportionate to the threat as it appeared at that time. By contrast, better and more consistent investment in naval airpower from 1930 would certainly have significantly enhanced the effectiveness of the RN from 1939. Carriers laid down annually from 1932 - 35 (instead of the single *Ark Royal* laid down in 1935), would have transformed RN carrier capability in the first years of the war.<sup>49</sup> However, it is important to acknowledge here that the first generation of RN carriers, converted from battle-cruisers, were only completed gradually through the 1920s and only reached critical mass at the very end of the decade.<sup>50</sup> Replacing them almost immediately with new carriers was hard to justify.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the experience of the next few years was important to determining future carrier design and undoubtedly ensured the comparative success of *Ark*

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<sup>48</sup> See minuting started by D of P Captain E L King on 3 August 1935 and subsequent minuting by his successor, Captain T S V Phillips, initiated on 25 May 1936, on options for modernising capital ships and the risks of having three ships out of the frontline at one time. These minutes suggest that if earlier modernisations or reconstructions had been carried out, e.g. *Malaya* and *Repulse*, then plans to reconstruct *Valiant* certainly and *Queen Elizabeth* possibly would have been shelved. In the event, the reconstructions completed on *Valiant* and *Queen Elizabeth*, by taking place later, were more comprehensive and made them more valuable units. ADM 116/3382, TNA.

<sup>49</sup> Under the 1930 London Treaty, the RN was subject to an overall limit of 135,000 tons for its carrier force until the end of 1936. Its existing fleet left space for one additional carrier of around 23,000 tons which was used for *Ark Royal* but all existing carriers were classed as experimental and could be replaced subject to the overall limit at any time.

<sup>50</sup> *Eagle*, converted from the Chilean battleship *Almirante Cochrane*, was completed in 1923, *Furious* in 1925, *Courageous* in 1928 and *Glorious* in 1929.

<sup>51</sup> It is also important to emphasise here that the commissioning rate for the RN first generation of carriers was no slower than in the USN or IJN. The USN only commissioned the *Lexington* and *Saratoga* conversions in late 1927 and the IJN commissioned *Akagi* and *Kaga* in 1927 and 1928 respectively. All of these were broadly comparable in size and capability to the RN ships at this time. There was thus no overseas experience or incentive for the RN to start investing in a completely new carrier building programme. In addition, by 1929, with four large carriers, the RN had twice as many as the USN and IJN.

*Royal* when she arrived in 1938.<sup>52</sup> Investing earlier might have led to a wrong turn.<sup>53</sup> Finally, the scope for upgrading and increasing the size of the RN air arm in order to make such a carrier force effective was constrained in the early 1930s by the politics of dual control with the RAF and again there is no guarantee earlier investment would have been directed to the right type of aircraft. Restoring RN control, finally achieved with the Inskip report of 1937, was almost certainly not achievable in the economic environment of the early 1930s and arguably also needed the accumulated experience of carrier air operations in the years after 1930 to enable the RN to win the argument.<sup>54</sup> Overall therefore it is doubtful, given Treaty constraints, that more money spent in the first half of the 1930s would have made a decisive difference to RN performance in the coming war given the course it took, and the assets that proved most relevant, and nor, for practical purposes, to its comparative standing in 1935.

Against this background, the Ferris view that, by 1935, only in the best of cases could Britain fight an effective war in the Pacific against Japan, and would be hard pressed to win a war against any two naval powers<sup>55</sup>, has some substance but can also be overstated.<sup>56</sup> The overwhelming comparative advantage the RN enjoyed in the 1920s had certainly eroded although, as Table 1 demonstrates, by rather less than Ferris and other

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<sup>52</sup> *Ark Royal*, as the first purpose built RN Fleet Carrier, was almost an exact contemporary of the first purpose built US Fleet Carrier *Yorktown* although the latter commissioned a year ahead. The two were comparable in almost all respects. The IJN's first purpose built fleet carrier *Soryu* also commissioned in 1937 although, at 16000 tons, she was significantly smaller than the other two. All three navies were thus pursuing a broadly similar path of carrier development up to this point.

<sup>53</sup> Arguably both the USN and IJN took such a wrong turn by investing in a light carrier, *Wasp* and *Ryujo* respectively in the early 1930s.

<sup>54</sup> For a fascinating counterfactual history of the consequences of the RN re-acquiring control of its air arm in 1932 as opposed to 1937, see David Row, *The Whale Has Wings*, published as an e-book on Amazon in three volumes in 2012/13. It envisages how Fleet Air Arm, and wider RN, history might then have differed over the period 1932 - 42. Its weakness is that, by exploiting the benefit of hindsight, it assumes perfect anticipation and decision-making by the RN leadership along with trouble free development of aircraft etc. Nevertheless, it does offer a plausible view of the maximum FAA capability the RN might have achieved within the limits of British economic resources.

<sup>55</sup> Ferris is not specific about the "any two" here but, for practical purposes, it should be taken to mean Japan and a European power excluding France.

<sup>56</sup> The Naval Sections of the COS 1933 Annual Review, which argues that virtually the whole of the frontline RN would be required to ensure an adequate margin over the IJN fleet and secure Empire communications, certainly offers some support for the Ferris judgement here. However, the Review paints a worst case picture of the balance of forces and is partly drafted to make the case for additional resources. It overstates the strength the IJN could deploy under any practical scenario at this time and takes no account of the logistic challenges an IJN fleet would face contesting the South China Sea some 3000 miles from Japan. CID 1113-B, paras 35 – 41, and 68 – 70, CAB 16/109, TNA.

historians suggest.<sup>57</sup> But the strength of potential enemies remained at this time limited. The German Navy at the beginning of 1935 was little more than a nuisance force and this would remain the case for some years yet.<sup>58</sup> The Italians had gathered a more impressive navy at least on paper but their battle-fleet was tiny and heavily outgunned by RN ships and they had no carriers. And, while they might disrupt Britain's communications through the Mediterranean, they posed little threat to the UK base. Under any likely scenario, the RN could still deal comfortably with either of these and simultaneously deploy a competitive defensive force in the Far East if it had to.<sup>59</sup> This was indeed essentially the Admiralty assessment a year later in mid-1936.<sup>60</sup> A fairer judgement of the relative standing of the RN in 1935 is therefore that, excluding the US and France, it still retained a broad two power equivalence, had enough construction already underway within existing Treaty limits to sustain this for the next two years, and had also prioritised its scarce resources in the first half of the decade on exactly the types of warship, modern destroyers, general purpose cruisers, and a fleet carrier, that would prove most relevant in the war it would eventually fight.<sup>61</sup> There was sufficient base here from which to ensure

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<sup>57</sup> Other historians who have recently emphasised the comparative decline of the RN in the 1930s and the difficulty in achieving adequate rearmament include: Daniel A Baugh, 'Confusions and Constraints: The Navy and British Defence Planning 1919 – 39' and Corelli Barnett, 'The Influence of History upon Sea Power: The Royal Navy in the Second World War', (both in: *Naval Power in the Twentieth Century*, edited N A M Rodger, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); and Duncan Redford's new *World War II* contribution to the *History of the Royal Navy* series sponsored by the National Museum of the Royal Navy, (London: I B Tauris, 2014). Barnett's essay develops themes already evident in *Engage the Enemy More Closely*.

<sup>58</sup> In 1935 it had two Pocket battleships operational, six light cruisers, a handful of coastal escort vessels, and no submarines. It could thus conduct a limited raiding campaign on Britain's trade but no more.

<sup>59</sup> The word "competitive" is carefully chosen here. It is intended to reflect the formula used by Admiral of the Fleet Lord Chatfield speaking as Minister for Defence Coordination to the CID in 1939. Here he stated: "The view was strongly held in many quarters that, as the British Fleet could never by itself carry out offensive operations which could be militarily effective against Japan, the Admiralty intention to send a fleet to the Far East in the event of war with Japan was unsound. The Naval Staff, however, held firmly to the view, which was shared by the COS, that the role of the fleet in the Far East was not designed to seize control of the Sea of Japan but rather to provide a defensive "fleet in being" so that before Japan could attack our main imperial interests she would have first to defeat our fleet under disadvantageous conditions". Quoted from D.P. (P.) 60, para 8, in N H Gibbs, *Grand Strategy*, Vol 1, Rearmament Policy, Chapter X, *Naval Strategy 1936 – 39*, p 378.

<sup>60</sup> See minuting initiated by D of P on 25 May 1936 covering a paper "Modernisation of the Battle fleet". This considered whether the risks of having three capital ships simultaneously absent from the fleet for modernization during the period 1937-39 were acceptable. The paper argued that two battle-cruisers were sufficient to deal with the German surface threat until the arrival of *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* expected in mid-1938. ADM 116/3382, TNA.

<sup>61</sup> Roskill has useful Table giving overall comparative strengths of the six main naval powers at 1 January 1932 at Appendix B of *Naval Policy between the Wars*, Vol 1. If his figures are interpreted alongside those in Table 1, they help underline the argument that a "two power equivalence" remained in place three years later.

the RN remained adequate to protect Britain's vital maritime interests so long as the Government and RN leadership made the right choices in the coming years.

Ferris' argument regarding block obsolescence, while certainly valid for capital units<sup>62</sup>, is also overstated if extended to the RN as a whole. By the outbreak of the European war in September 1939, two thirds of the cruiser and destroyer force was less than 12 years old and one third was less than five years old. Two of the battleships were under 12 years old while three others had just completed rebuilds which provided capability close to modern design, and a new fleet carrier had also just joined the strength. Most of this 1939 strength comprised units laid down before the main re-armament effort started in FY 1936. In addition, one new battleship, one rebuilt battleship, two fleet carriers, seven cruisers, eight destroyers, ten escort destroyers and some 50 escort vessels were within 12 months of completion.<sup>63</sup>

Equally important, Ferris and Gordon exaggerate the damage done to naval industries by the reduced orders for major warships from 1929 to 1934 although their view is more balanced than the grim declinist picture painted by the likes of Barnett.<sup>64</sup> Recent work by David Edgerton demonstrates that these industries were much more resilient and effective in restoring capacity than previous historians have argued.<sup>65</sup> Their success is demonstrated by highlighting some key points from their delivery record. Britain laid down the extraordinary total of nine capital units in the single calendar year 1937, five *KGV* battleships of 35,000 tons and four *Illustrious* class carriers of 23,000 tons. This was a far greater scale of complex armoured vessels than anything attempted in a single year before 1914.<sup>66</sup> Seven were complete by the end of 1941 and at least one more would have

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<sup>62</sup>Defined here as embracing both battleships and fleet aircraft carriers.

<sup>63</sup> RN strength in September 1939 is taken from Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars*, Vol 1, Appendix B, with completion calculations then based on dates in H T Lenton, *British and Empire Warships of the Second World War*.

<sup>64</sup> Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, p 37 – 38.

<sup>65</sup>David Edgerton, *Warfare State*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p 33-41.

<sup>66</sup>Jon Sumida has produced a table comparing major warship (battleship, carrier, and first class cruiser) tonnage for the pre-WWI and inter-war periods. The tonnage of 201,900 in FY 1937 was only exceeded in 1909 when it was 219,540. Over the three FYs 1936 – 1938, total tonnage was 533,900 compared to 405,930 for the years 1911 – 1913 at the height of the pre-WWI naval race. "British Naval Procurement and Technological Change, 1919 – 1939", Table 8.2.

been if work had not been suspended for six months in 1940 to release resources for escort vessels.<sup>67</sup> Over the same five calendar years, Britain produced, that is laid down and completed, 13 cruisers, 41 fleet destroyers, 44 escort destroyers, 128 ASW corvettes, and 45 submarines. The final 18 months of this productive effort took place against a background of severe disruption from bombing and diversion of resources to repair war damaged vessels.<sup>68</sup> Warship tonnage in hand and tonnage launched tripled in just three years between December 1936 and December 1939.<sup>69</sup> A minute from the Controller, Rear Admiral Bruce Fraser, to the First Sea Lord dated 3 February 1940 underlines the strength of the production record compared with the previous war and therefore provides confirmation for the Edgerton view.<sup>70</sup> He stated that it was planned to complete 440,000 tons and 530,000 tons of warships respectively in the first two years of the present war,

<sup>67</sup> It was customary for historians writing in the 1960 – 1990 era to emphasise the delay and difficulty in resurrecting the specialised resources for battleship construction with negative consequences for the availability of the *KGVs*. In fact *KGV* was completed in just under four years, *Prince of Wales* just over and *Duke of York* in four and a half. This compared with five years for the two *Nelsons* 1922 – 27 when British warship building was still supposedly at the height of its powers. US contemporary battleships to the *KGVs* e.g. the *North Carolinas* were completed rather quicker, in about three years, but did not suffer any of the disruption of a wartime environment. In tendering for the first two *Lions* on 31 January 1939, the two winning companies, Vickers-Armstrong and Cammel-Laird both offered a 42 month delivery and, in July, despite news of slippage in the production schedule for the main armament, the former still expected to complete *Lion* in February 1943 i.e. four years. Ian Johnston and Ian Buxton, *The Battleship Builders*, p 45.  
<sup>68</sup> It is worth noting that despite the disruptions of wartime the *KGV* battleships were completed rather faster than had been anticipated at the last pre-war progress review in August 1939.

Ship	Dates for Completion	
	August 1939 Estimate	Actual Achieved
<i>KGV</i>	Jan 1941	Oct 1940
<i>Prince of Wales</i>	Aug 1941	Mar 1941
<i>Duke of York</i>	Jan 1942	Oct 1941
<i>Anson</i>	Feb 1942	Jun 1942
<i>Howe</i>	Aug 1942	Aug 1942

The first three ships therefore gained between 3 – 5 months on the August 1939 target dates and the last two much the same when allowance is made for the six month halt in construction during 1940. August 1939 estimates from CID 361<sup>st</sup> Meeting, CAB 2/9, TNA. Actual completion dates from H T Lenton.

<sup>69</sup> See: N H Gibbs, *Grand Strategy*, Volume 1, Rearmament Policy, Table 9, New Shipbuilding, p 358. Figures given are:

Year	Tonnage in hand	Tonnage Launched
1936 (Dec)	375,740	90,260
1937 (Dec)	547,014	92,090
1938 (Dec)	544,000	60,980
1939 (Sep)	904,500	256,730

It is striking that the tonnage in hand on the outbreak of war was equal to 75% of the overall tonnage of the 1935 RN.

<sup>70</sup> ADM 205/5, TNA.

compared with outcomes of 340,000 tons and 500,000 tons for the same years of the previous war.<sup>71</sup> In addition, merchant shipping output was planned to rise from a pre-war average of 0.75M tons per annum to a war target of 1.5M tons per annum. This compared with a fall from a pre-war average of 1.5M tons to a wartime average of 0.6M tons in the last war. By any standard, this was hardly a moribund and ineffective industry.

### **New risks, the Defence Requirements Committee and rearmament**

If, as this chapter has argued, the RN still enjoyed just sufficient comparative advantage at the start of 1935 to meet its 1932 modified standard, what threats did the RN leadership now see to the continuing maritime security on which the British Empire depended? How confident were they that naval advantage could be maintained? The most authoritative answer to these questions is in the deliberations of the Defence Requirements Committee (DRC) during 1934 and 1935. The Government established the DRC at the end of 1933 when it formally acknowledged that Britain faced potential new security risks from Japan and Germany, as revisionist powers set on changing the international status quo. It accepted the COS advice that these risks might require additional defence resources<sup>72</sup> and directed the DRC to identify key deficiencies.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> The actual figures achieved for warships were: 263,000 tons in 1940; and 437,000 tons in 1941. These tonnages exceeded total Axis output in both years. US output was only 52,600 tons in 1940 and 219,000 tons in 1941. Merchant ship output from British yards was: 810,000 tons in 1940; 1,156,000 tons in 1941; and peaked at 1,310,000 tons in 1942. R A C Parker, *The Second World War: A Short History*, (Oxford University Press, 1989), p 135. These were some way short of the Controller's targets but the combined total still compares favourably with WW1 output and also needs to be weighed against the considerable resources that had to go into repairing damaged ships (much greater than WW1) and the disruption to British yards from air attack etc which the Controller could not anticipate in February 1940.

<sup>72</sup> The need to consider two potential enemies in widely divergent theatres posed obvious difficulties in managing the distribution and rapid redeployment of forces. From the naval perspective, as the COS stated, *"the ability of the 'one power standard' to satisfy our strategic needs is dependent on a sufficient margin between the strength of the power on which the standard is calculated and the strength of the next strongest power"*. By end 1933, the margin over the next power, Japan, increasingly hostile and set on naval expansion, looked insufficient when set alongside the future naval potential of a resurgent Germany. N H Gibbs, *Grand Strategy*, Vol 1, chapter X.

<sup>73</sup> The origins and initial Terms of Reference for the DRC are set out in the introductory paragraphs to its first report dated 28 February 1934, CAB 16/109, TNA. The immediate spur to the Cabinet to establish the DRC was the COS 1933 Annual Review, CID 1113-B also in CAB 16/109. Gordon, p 112, also offers useful context. The DRC was chaired by the Secretary to the CID, Sir Maurice Hankey. The other members were the three Chiefs of Staff, and the Permanent Secretaries of the Foreign Office and Treasury. The DRC was directed to make no provision for defence expenditure aimed specifically at countering attack from the USA, France or Italy.

The DRC began with a narrow mandate but its role expanded steadily through 1934 and 1935 as the scale of German rearmament became apparent and the British response shifted from the limited programme to address deficiencies towards a comprehensive programme of modernisation and expansion for all three services. The DRC was clear from the start that, while Britain faced no imminent military threat in 1934, Germany was the “ultimate enemy”, the only country that might pose an existential risk to the UK homeland, and therefore the main focus for long term defence planning. It accepted that the defence of British possessions and interests in the Far East remained the primary naval commitment but saw the objective here as restoring credible deterrence, “showing a tooth” to draw Japan into a more constructive relationship. Effective deterrence meant restoring the global mobility of the Fleet eroded by the “Ten Year Rule”, enhancing the Fleet Air Arm<sup>74</sup>, and modernising capital ships to ensure the existing Fleet remained competitive with the IJN. In its first report, the DRC judged that a five year programme to make good current deficiencies and equip the RN adequately for a Far East war would cover the German naval threat as well.<sup>75</sup> However, by autumn 1935, there was a DRC consensus, reflected in their report at the end of the year, that the RN must be strong enough to fight a simultaneous war in the Far East and Europe. This meant moving to a “New Standard of Naval Strength”, effectively a “two power standard” measured against Germany and Japan. The Naval Recommendations in this DRC Third Report, and especially the concept of the New Standard, would underpin RN policy, planning and procurement for the remainder of the decade.<sup>76</sup>

Historians have described Britain’s national security policy and strategy from 1935 to the outbreak of the European war in 1939 under two themes, “appeasement” and “rearmament”, with the two invariably dealt with separately. The main history of

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<sup>74</sup> The DRC emphasised that, at the end of 1933, the RN was already inferior to the IJN in carrier borne air strength. The naval programme proposed in its first report was intended to restore equality by 1939. In the event the FAA fell well short of the 1940 target of 402 frontline aircraft deployable from carriers and the IJN had meanwhile moved further ahead.

<sup>75</sup> The initial DRC Report, dated 28 February 1934, and the meetings leading up to it are in CAB 16/109, TNA.

<sup>76</sup> The record of DRC meetings in 1935 and the Third Report forwarded by Hankey on 21 November 1935 is in CAB 16/112, TNA.



appeasement is a vast topic outside the scope of this thesis. However, it is important to recognise that the Admiralty, unlike the other two services, was a key player in one strand of appeasement, the use of judicious concessions to reduce, or at least bring within manageable limits, the number of enemies the RN would face. “Rearmament” meanwhile is a handy umbrella term, and was sometimes employed by policy-makers at the time but, for all three services, and especially the RN, it involved three distinct elements: modernisation; expansion; and re-positioning or re-deployment. Recognising these three elements is important because, while they inevitably overlapped, they involved different challenges as the DRC acknowledged during its debates through 1934 and 1935. “Modernisation” here means updating and adapting existing force levels, either through replacement or upgrading, to fit them for a defence environment which in the late 1930s was changing very fast. For the RN, obvious challenges were the impact of modern air and submarine power at sea but also recognising the opportunities and limitations of new electronic sensors such as radar and asdic. “Re-positioning” is about how Britain chose to redistribute its defence resources in the face of first two and then three enemies in three distinct theatres. For the RN, the initial challenge was to balance Europe and the Far East but in 1938 decision-makers increasingly saw a need to choose between the Far East and Eastern Mediterranean.

There is now an extensive historiography covering RN policy and strategy between 1935 and 1940 and, within this, the more specific story of rearmament.<sup>77</sup> This historiography embraces some significant revisions although the judgements in the first volume of the British official history *Grand Strategy* series, published nearly 40 years ago, hold up well. This thesis will not repeat ground already well covered by others but instead focus on specific questions that have either not been adequately addressed or not covered at all. These are:

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<sup>77</sup> The most authoritative and important are: N H Gibbs, *Grand Strategy, Vol 1, Rearmament Strategy*; S W Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars, Vol II, The Period of Reluctant Rearmament*; Andrew Gordon, *British Seapower and Procurement between the Wars*; G C Peden, *Arms, Economics, and British Strategy*, (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Joseph Maiolo’s thesis, ‘Admiralty War Planning, Armaments, Diplomacy, and Intelligence Perceptions of German Sea Power and their influence on British Foreign and Defence Policy 1933 – 1939’; and, David Edgerton, *Warfare State*.

- (i). Did the Admiralty make a reasonable assessment of the future naval risks to the Empire in 1935 and did it promote the right priorities within the DRC?
- (ii). Were Admiralty goals, assumptions and calculations for the “New Standard” of naval strength which emerged from the DRC process in 1936 reasonable? Were the defined goals ever achievable in any reasonable timescale?
- (iii). How does the RN re-armament record look if New Standard targets are adjusted to reflect the real rate of Axis build as opposed to what the Admiralty in 1936 thought they might build?
- (iv). Did the New Standard reflect adequate understanding of the modern air and submarine threat and the likely impact of new technology?
- (v). How close did RN rearmament over FYs 1935 - 39 get to the New Standard? Where would this investment have placed the RN compared to the Axis in 1942 without war losses?
- (vi). How well did 1935 -39 re-armament equip the RN for the war it actually ended up fighting? Could it have made better choices? Did the RN sacrifice ASW investment to big capital programmes? Did it recognise and understand the trade-offs here?

A useful starting point for assessing the approach taken by the RN leadership during the DRC process and through subsequent formulation of the New Standard is the interpretation offered by Joseph Maiolo. He argues that, by 1934, the RN, above all the new First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Ernle Chatfield, saw the risk of a new naval arms race in which Britain would struggle to compete if it had to modernise and expand simultaneously. This race would be driven primarily by the revisionist powers, Germany and Japan, but could be exacerbated by programmes adopted by France, Italy and the US. Given the limitations on British naval building capacity by the mid-1930s, where Maiolo accepts the Ferris view, the problem was therefore to ensure such a race did not outstrip

Britain's ability to win it. For Chatfield, winning meant building a new two power standard fleet, able both to beat the Japanese and simultaneously defend Britain against the largest fleet in Europe. To achieve this in an affordable way, mutually destructive competition would be prevented, or at least dampened down by a new Naval Treaty framework. Diplomacy would buy time, first for the RN to complete the capital ship replacement programme delayed by the 1930 London Treaty, build up the FAA and cruiser force, and then, from 1939 – 40, to expand towards a two power standard to be reached in 1943 – 44.<sup>78</sup>

For Maiolo, this thinking explains the Admiralty's ready acquiescence in the 1935 Anglo-German Naval Agreement which granted Germany the right to a fleet 35% of the size of the RN and its promotion of qualitative rather than quantitative limits at the new London Treaty negotiations which began the same year. The AGNA capped German naval strength at a level that left the RN sufficient capacity for a Far East war and the Admiralty judged Germany would anyway be unable to reach a 35% target before 1942. Maiolo argues that the RN also saw the AGNA as a means to encourage Germany towards a conventional fleet structure and naval strategy and away from an asymmetric "freak navy" directed at a trade war which the RN saw as much more dangerous. Qualitative limits meanwhile were designed to prevent an expensive one-upmanship competition and encourage naval strengths based on genuine national security needs. Overall, Maiolo sees Admiralty policy up to 1937, and even into 1938, driven by a long term vision for maritime supremacy by the mid -1940s rather than defeating Germany in a European war in 1939. He argues that Chatfield and the Naval Staff recognised this policy carried risk because it meant focusing on long term investment, especially capital units, at the expense of short term improvements in areas such as trade defence and ASW. It therefore required both time and some continuing international stability to work. Without these, the RN risked being caught with inadequate forces for an earlier conflict.

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<sup>78</sup>See both Maiolo's thesis, 'Admiralty War Planning, Armaments, Diplomacy, and Intelligence Perceptions of German Sea Power and their influence on British Foreign and Defence Policy 1933 – 1939', and his later book *Cry Havoc: The Arms Race and the Second World War 1931-1941*, (London: John Murray, 2011), especially chapter 6.

Maiolo's research has certainly brought an important new perspective to the AGNA and the Admiralty's whole approach to the German naval problem from 1934 to the outbreak of war.<sup>79</sup> But the evidence for his central thesis that the Admiralty, or at least Chatfield, had a clear goal for achieving RN supremacy based on a literal interpretation of a new "two power standard" from 1934 and then embarked on a comprehensive and consistent strategy to achieve this looks tenuous. Chatfield may well have harboured this as a private ideal but there seem to be no official papers which give this concept formal status or show how it was to be achieved prior to the completion of the Third DRC Report at the end of 1935. The detailed work on the "New Standard" was then done by the Naval Staff in the summer and autumn of 1936 and the final paper was not put to the CID until April 1937.<sup>80</sup> What comes across from the official record is a more pragmatic and flexible strategy to build up RN strength as quickly as possible to meet first two and then three emerging threats within the bounds of what was politically and financially feasible and within available capacity.

The records of successive DRC meetings through the summer and autumn of 1935 also argue against Chatfield having a preconceived vision for a "two power" RN. In July, he appeared more concerned by unforeseen naval commitments arising from British obligations under the League, and new problems associated with Italy, than Germany.<sup>81</sup> On 10 October, Chatfield, speaking to the Naval Requirements paper before the DRC, stated that the dual risk posed by Germany and Japan was an argument for increasing RN strength but he was not yet proposing this and it could not be done quickly. It was Hankey as Chairman and, surprisingly, Sir Warren Fisher from the Treasury who insisted present RN strength was insufficient.<sup>82</sup> The key meeting was on 18 October. Hankey proposed that the RN should be strong enough to deal with Germany and Japan and that "extra insurance" was needed to secure the Empire. Fisher agreed present RN strength

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<sup>79</sup> He demonstrates that the RN had a much better grasp of German naval thinking and capability than previous historians had supposed. He also convincingly refutes the view established by Wesley Wark that, in negotiating the AGNA the Admiralty was the victim of poor intelligence, showing that it was actually well informed on German construction and plans. For Wark's view, see *The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933 – 1939*, (USA: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>80</sup> See e.g. minuting originated by D of P on 25 September 1936, ADM 1/9729, TNA. The final report, "A New Standard of Naval Strength", is in DP (P) 3 dated 29 April 1937, CP 316/37, CAB 24/273, TNA.

<sup>81</sup> Record of DRC 14<sup>th</sup> meeting, July 1935, CAB 16/112, TNA.

<sup>82</sup> Record of DRC 17<sup>th</sup> meeting, 10 October 1935, Ibid.

was unsatisfactory and the Cabinet should be told that the UK homeland was being held at the expense of the Empire perimeter. RN strength should match the combined strength of Germany and Japan. Chatfield reiterated that resource and technical constraints would prevent RN expansion before 1942. The Fleet must be rebuilt before it could get bigger. Other powers were in a similar position and he doubted the comparative balance would change much in the interim. Pressed by Hankey, Chatfield admitted that, given anticipated German strength, the RN would struggle to find adequate resources for a defensive war in the Far East in 1939 and would have to rely on superior fighting efficiency. If the DRC were now to advocate a “two power standard”, he proposed this should:

- (i). *Enable us to place a Fleet in the Far East adequate to act on the defensive and protect our interests in that part of the globe.*
- (ii). *Leave in Home Waters a force able to meet a war with Germany at the same time.*

A formula based on combined numbers was not sufficient since a margin must be added for refits and the ability of the enemy to choose their selected moment to initiate hostilities. The Committee concluded that: the RN should be strong enough for “simultaneous war”; it could not expand before replacement; and that the Admiralty should investigate the implications of a “New Standard” formula including options for accelerating a building programme.<sup>83</sup>

Several points deserve emphasis from this discussion and the report that subsequently issued. Chatfield’s “New Standard formula” was a logical evolution of the 1932 formula but he clearly also intended it to provide flexibility in the way the standard was interpreted. His insistence that combined numbers were not necessarily sufficient was reflected in the language used in the Third Report. Clause (i) now became: *Enable us to place a Fleet in the Far East fully adequate to act on the defensive and serve as a strong deterrent against any threat to our interests in that part of the globe.* The terms “defensive” and “deterrent” are significant and the latter would cast a long shadow. There

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<sup>83</sup> Record of DRC 18<sup>th</sup> meeting, 14 October 1935. Ibid.

is no suggestion of a force sufficient to destroy Japan. This was a much more limited and achievable objective than many of the historians addressing RN Far East strategy imply. “*Leave*” in clause (ii) became “*Maintain in all circumstances*”. By placing the Far East commitment first, Chatfield implied that, for the Admiralty, Japan remained the primary enemy. Given that the DRC were clear that Germany was not only the “ultimate” enemy but rapidly becoming the most imminent threat, it would have been logical to insist the order was reversed. This is not a minor matter of drafting. It posed important questions about Britain’s real naval priorities and therefore future RN strength and composition. Placing Germany first would not only potentially effect the distribution of forces (emphasising superiority rather than a necessary minimum after the Far East was addressed) but also their composition. It might have encouraged an earlier shift towards investment directed at trade and ASW. Putting the Far East second would also have underlined the “defensive” role of the Fleet there and stimulated more discussion about what that really meant. A defensive force, and certainly a “deterrent”, could presumably be somewhat smaller in capital units than the IJN? Chatfield had therefore chosen a measure for RN strength that was risk driven rather than the traditional measure based on comparison with other naval powers. He did not, however, encourage his staff to explore the full logic of a risk based strategy. For the remainder of his tenure, he and his staff tended to default to programmes and plans based on comparative strength even when the arrival of Italy in the Axis camp reduced the size of force that could credibly be sent east.

While the DRC Third Report recommended adoption of the “New Standard”, its implementation required the Admiralty to work up a detailed requirement and then the Cabinet to approve it. The Naval Programme initially put forward therefore was a modernisation and replacement programme over the five years FY 1936 to FY 1941 designed to provide a fleet able to meet the original 1932 standard by mid-1942. This became known as the “DRC Fleet”. It is important here to understand what the distinction between the 1932 Standard and the proposed “New Standard” as strategic goals amounted to in practical terms. This is less straightforward than most historians, who translate these as “one power” versus “two power” standard, suggest. By 1936, the only “European power” likely to threaten “home terminals” under the 1932 formula was Germany. This

formula therefore required the RN to hold off a surprise German attack for long enough to bring back the bulk of the Fleet if it had been deployed to the Far East to deal with Japan. A defensive screen only would be left in the East while the Fleet re-focused on Germany. In theory therefore the difference amounted to main war plus defensive screen (1932 Standard) compared with simultaneous two theatre war (New Standard). However, as already emphasised, Chatfield's "New Standard" envisaged that the simultaneous war in the Far East would be conducted within a defensive framework so the difference was less stark than it appeared.<sup>84</sup>

The evolution of naval expenditure in FYs 1936 and 1937 following submission of the DRC Third Report was well summarised in a report by the Minister of Defence Coordination, Sir Thomas Inskip, in July 1938. The DRC Fleet was quickly approved but both the Ministerial Sub Committee on Defence Policy and Requirements and the Cabinet consistently deferred any decision on the New Standard presented in final form by the Admiralty in May 1937. They did, however, approve a substantial acceleration of the DRC Fleet virtually telescoping seven years planned investment into three.<sup>85</sup> The results are shown in Table 2. Over the three FYs 36 – 38, the RN ordered five large armoured carriers instead of the planned three (at least one to be of smaller type), 21 cruisers for 15, and double the number of destroyers and submarines. This new investment was accompanied by three capital ship reconstructions and extensive modernisation of one older carrier<sup>86</sup> and seven older cruisers converted into AA ships<sup>87</sup>. Overall, this was not only a much larger building programme than Chatfield had told the DRC was feasible at the end of 1935 but it was also much more balanced than he had originally proposed. The extra carriers and, above all, destroyers would prove critical in late 1941.

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<sup>84</sup> The "defensive" strategy envisaged for the Far East translated into a willingness to accept significant inferiority of numbers compared to the IJN. In late summer 1938, D of P anticipated that, with likely reductions to the New Standard target, then, in order to guarantee an adequate margin over Germany, the RN would deploy 25% less capital ships and 50% less carriers than the maximum likely IJN strength. There would be a similar shortfall in cruisers and minor war vessels. "Forecast of Strategic Situation End 1942. Maximum Attainable Strength?", ADM 116/3631, TNA.

<sup>85</sup> CP 170 (38) Naval Expenditure dated 12 July 1938, CAB 24/278, TNA. Inskip estimated that, over the three FYs 36 – 38, the Admiralty had received at least 75% of the budget originally proposed for seven years.

<sup>86</sup> This was *Furious* which had a partial modernisation in 1938 – 39 which made her the most capable of the older carriers.

<sup>87</sup> These were seven of the ten light cruisers in the *Ceres* and *Capetown* classes. Some of these were among the earliest ships to receive RDF (later known as radar).

**Table 2**

**Proposed DRC Fleet and actual orders compared**

Type	1936		1937		1938		1939		Completions 1941	
	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A
Battleships	2	2	3	3	2	2	0	2	5	3
Aircraft Carriers	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1 + (1)	3	4
Cruisers	5	7	5	7	5	7	5	0	15	16
Destroyers	9	18	0	16	9	0	0	16	18	50
Destroyer Escorts	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	20	0	20
ASW Corvettes	6	4	6	2	6	0	6	60	24	66
Submarines	3	10	3	7	3	3	3	0	12	20

P = Planned under DRC

A = Achieved

Notes:

(i). The 1939 orders are those placed up to 1 September 1939 and do not include the war emergency programmes.

(ii). Completions 1941 is units completed by the end of that FY i.e. 31 March 1942 which was the target of the original five year DRC programme set out in 1936. The Planned completions are inevitably an estimate based on a reasonable calculation of when planned (as opposed to actual) orders might have been completed.

(ii). The battleships ordered in 1936 and 1937 were the five *KGVs*. The last two were not completed until the summer of 1942, six months beyond the original DRC plan. This reflected periods of suspension in 1940 for more pressing war work. The ships ordered in 1938 and 1939 were the four *Lion* class. Only two had been laid down by the outbreak of war when work was suspended. All were later cancelled in favour of other priorities.

(iii). The DRC programme originally envisaged an order of one carrier per year from 1936 – 39 with “some of a smaller type”. The six carriers actually ordered were all large armoured fleet carriers of the *Illustrious* class. The additional carrier shown in parenthesis for 1939 is the maintenance carrier *Unicorn* which was comparable in many respects to a light carrier.

(iv). The original DRC programme did not envisage a separate category of Destroyer Escorts so none were planned.

(v). The category “ASW Corvettes” groups both dedicated ASW sloops ordered in 1936 - 37 and the new category of escort corvette ordered in 1939. The original DRC programme envisaged orders of 5 – 6 sloops per year but did not specify a role. 14 large minesweeping sloops were ordered in this period in addition to those units shown.



Against this background, the Admiralty's ultimate "New Standard" target can be seen in Table 3 below at Column C with the DRC Fleet for comparison at Column B. The New Standard total was built up from the comparative strength requirements set out in the Columns at A. The German strength assumed they would build to the maximum permitted under the AGNA by 1942. IJN strength was based on known building and what was judged achievable by 1942 following Japanese withdrawal from the 1936 Treaty of London.<sup>88</sup> As Germany could threaten the UK homeland, the New Standard allocated the RN a margin of superiority here while in the Far East it was willing to accept some inferiority given that war here would be fought within a defensive framework.<sup>89</sup> As Table 3 demonstrates, the New Standard was essentially therefore a formula based on predicted comparative numerical strengths with some simple risk weighting adjustment. Judged within these terms the proposed RN strength had logic but was perhaps generous.<sup>90</sup> In presenting the New Standard case, the Admiralty suggested modifications if some diplomatic understanding could be reached to reduce the risk from either Germany or Japan. It did not, however, think creatively about how the New Standard strategic goal might be achieved with fewer resources if diplomatic rapprochement was not feasible. There was, for example, the possibility of discouraging Japan from attacking British interests by deploying a quality deterrent force that could be smaller than that required for a full-scale defensive war.

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<sup>88</sup> A detailed summary of projected German and IJN strength in 1942, as anticipated in late 1938, is in C.P. 236 (38) dated 25 October 1938, 'Forecast of British Naval Strength on 31 December 1942, for Transmission to Germany under Terms of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement', CAB 24/279, TNA.

<sup>89</sup> It will be observed that, under the original 1937 New Standard, the willingness to accept inferiority applied to carriers, as discussed later in the chapter, and minor war vessels but not capital ships.

<sup>90</sup> In the event, the Admiralty seriously overestimated future German and IJN force levels for capital ships and in the case of Germany for cruisers and destroyers too. Their combined order and build rates fell well short of those of the RN. In the period between February 1936, which established the RN rearmament baseline, and the outbreak of the European war in September 1939, the actual combined orders for Germany and Japan were four battleships, four fleet carriers, and nine cruisers. Japanese figures from Paul Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy*, (London: Greenhill Books, 1998). German figures from Roskill, *War at Sea*, Vol 1. The four battleships were: the German *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz*; and the IJN super battleships *Yamato* and *Musashi*. The four carriers were the IJN *Hiryu* (completed 1939), *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* (both completed 1941), and German *Graf Zeppelin* (never completed). The IJN also began to convert a number of merchant ships into carriers with two commissioned by end 1941.

Source: CP 170 (38) Naval Expenditure dated 12 July 1938, CAB 24/278, TNA.

Table 3  
RN Expansion Options 1938 - 1942

A. Strategic Requirements.										B.	C.	D.
	Home.			East.			Trade.	Minimum British Total Requirements in 1942.	D.E.C. Fleet.	Proposed New Standard	Maximum British Total Attainable in 1942.	British Strength in 1942 under D.E.C. Proposals.
	Germany.	Britain	Difference	Japan.	Britain.	Difference						
Capital ships ...	4 + 3 <sup>a</sup>	8	+ 4	12	13	+ 1	—	21	15	20	20 <sup>a</sup>	15
Aircraft carriers ...	3	4	+ 1	8	4	— 4	5	13	8 + 4 aircraft depot ships 70	14	13	10
Cruisers ...	16	20	+ 4	38	25	— 13	45	80	38	98	68	64
Destroyer flotillas <sup>b</sup>	7	8	+ 1	16	7	— 9	6	21	10	21	19	16
Submarines ...	68	50	— 18	70	23	— 47	—	73	25	73	68	55

<sup>a</sup> 3 Destroyers count as 1 Capital ship.

<sup>†</sup> More battleships will be building but not completed.

<sup>‡</sup> Figures in column D exclude ships to be converted to A.A. ships.

All figures include vessels provided by the Dominions. Escort vessels, patrol vessels and auxiliary vessels, etc., are not included.

<sup>a</sup> 3 Deutschlande count as 1 Capital ship.  
<sup>b</sup> More battleships will be building but not completed.  
<sup>c</sup> Figures in column D exclude ships to be converted to A.A. ships.  
 All figures include vessels provided by the Dominions. Escort vessels, patrol vessels and auxiliary vessels, etc., are not included.

By the time Inskip reviewed naval expenditure in July 1938, overall pressures on the defence budget and the need to find additional resources for the Army and RAF against a fast deteriorating situation in Europe, meant the prospects for formal Cabinet endorsement of the New Standard strength were bleak. Inskip accepted the Admiralty deserved clarity but doubted a long term programme for a simultaneous naval war on the scale proposed was either feasible or appropriate given the pressing priorities of meeting an imminent German threat. Inskip was undoubtedly aware here that, as Column D in Table 3 demonstrates, there was now little difference in practice between the maximum attainable strength in 1942 under a New Standard programme and that achieved by now capping further investment in major units and focusing effort on escort vessels that could be completed quickly. Because the outbreak of war a year later did indeed bring this result, with the effective disappearance of the New Standard, historians, while conceding it dictated the pace of building for a while, have tended to dismiss the concept as always both unaffordable and unachievable in any reasonable timescale. The decision never to endorse the New Standard is then used to underline the sheer impossibility of conducting a viable Singapore Strategy at least after the mid-1930s and as evidence that Britain ultimately lacked the will and resources adequately to defend its Far East interests.<sup>91</sup>

This thesis contends that this interpretation underestimates the scale and effectiveness of naval investment from 1935, and the strength this then made available in 1941 – 42, and the Government commitment to maintaining a global naval capability. One way of demonstrating this is through the picture presented in Table 4 which compares the actual strength the RN would have achieved at 31 March 1942 without war losses compared to the various building targets considered by the Admiralty in mid-1938.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> See e.g. Barnett, p 37, and Haggie, pp 121 – 125.

<sup>92</sup> It is also worth comparing the projected cost of a New Standard Navy with the actual expenditure authorised for the RN up to autumn 1938. In April 1937, the Admiralty Board acknowledged that the building programmes in FYs 1936 and 1937 met those required for the New Standard. It also calculated that the “stabilised cost” of a New Standard Navy once achieved was £97M per annum at current prices. The final budget authorised for the RN under peacetime conditions was the £410M agreed by the Cabinet in July 1938 to cover the three FYs 1939 – 1941. The Cabinet was willing to provide therefore at this point an extra £40M pa above the 1937 New Standard stabilised cost, to maintain the momentum of new build and expansion. £40M was two thirds of the total naval estimates as recently as FY 1935 and the current RN “steady state” costs were still well below £97M. Admiralty Board Memorandum on the New Standard of Naval Strength dated 26 April 1937, ADM 1/9081, TNA. Included in the Naval Records Society publication, *The Collective Naval Defence of the Empire, 1900 – 1940*, item 322.

**Table 4**

**RN Strength at 31 March 1942 – Proposed and Achieved**

	A	B	C	D	E
	Maximum	British	Original	Adjusted	Total RN
	British Total	Strength	New	New	Completions
	Attainable	in 1942	Standard	Standard	actually achieved
	in 1942	under DRC			in 1942
Type					
Battleships	20	15	20	20	18
Aircraft Carriers	13	10	14	11	10
Cruisers	68	64	98	88	67
Destroyers (flotillas)	18	16	21	18	20
Destroyer Escorts	-	-	-	-	52
ASW Corvettes	-	-	-	-	134+75
Submarines	68	55	73	73	89

Notes:

(i). Columns A, B and C are lifted directly from the Admiralty figures incorporated in CP 170 (38) and shown in Columns C and D of Table 3.

(ii). Figures at Column D adjust the Proposed New Standard by taking real as opposed to hypothetical German strength in 1942 and then adjusting the Admiralty's required superiority margin as illustrated in Table 3.

(iii). Column E is total RN (including Dominion) strength achieved at 31 March 1942, incorporating new build from re-armament and war emergency programmes but without subtracting any war losses. The extra 75 corvettes were built in Canada but everything else in British yards. It represents therefore a measure of what British naval industry could achieve.

(iv). All the carrier figures omit the training carrier *Argus*. The figure of 13 carriers in Column A is assumed to include the Maintenance Carrier *Unicorn*.

The Table shows that the real building programme (Column E) missed the Admiralty's maximum attainable target for 1942 as estimated in 1938 (Column A) in two categories, battleships and carriers, but all other targets were equalled or significantly surpassed while there was also a huge investment in ASW vessels not envisaged in the peacetime

programme. The battleship target was only missed by six months so in effect a two year delay in the 1938 and 1939 programme carriers was traded for the extra destroyers and ASW vessels.<sup>93 94</sup> The Table also shows that if the original 1937 New Standard target (Column C) is adjusted to reflect the real German building programme for surface vessels, as opposed to the 35% ratio assumed by the Admiralty in 1938, as shown in Column D, then, with the exception of cruisers, the RN was close to this also in 1942. By mid-1944, the original date for the New Standard, the RN would complete two more fleet carriers and a further 13 cruisers as well as numerous minor war vessels.

There is a danger in taking this sort of statistical exercise too far and especially comparing wartime rates of building with peacetime programmes. However, the table does underline three important points. It demonstrates first the scale of building the British naval industry could deliver, before the impact of US lend-lease took effect, thus confirming Edgerton's view of its resilience and suggesting the Ferris and Gordon view is too bleak. Second, it demonstrates that the New Standard navy, capable of a two hemisphere war, was not only a more feasible proposition than most historians allow but was in many respects achieved. It is also worth emphasising here that, despite Inskip's doubts in July 1938, the New Standard rate of investment proceeded right up to the outbreak of war with two battleships and a carrier ordered<sup>95</sup> in the first five months of FY 39 and plans for a further fast build

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<sup>93</sup> In September 1939, the Naval Staff expected these two carriers, *Implacable* and *Indefatigable*, the fifth and sixth of the *Illustrious* class, to be commissioned in October 1941 and June 1942 respectively. The suspension meant they were delayed until mid-1944. Their availability in 1942 would have made a significant contribution to the RN's global commitments and made the RN the strongest carrier power until late 1943. See memorandum by Fifth Sea Lord, State of the Fleet Air Arm, 4 September 1939, ADM 116/3722, TNA.

<sup>94</sup> In fairness, it should be noted that there was an additional trade-off made here to provide adequate ASW capacity which was the suspension and later cancellation of the four *Lion* class battleships. The first two were laid down in July 1939 and would have been available by about mid-1943.

<sup>95</sup> H T Lenton has the second pair of *Lion* class battleships (*Conqueror* and *Thunderer*) ordered on 16 August 1939 and the carrier *Indefatigable* on 19 June 1939. However some sources dispute whether the battleships were ever actually ordered. The Admiralty intent at the end of March was to invite tenders on 9 June and then follow with orders in October and November, although they were also considering replacing the second ship with a new battle-cruiser concept – see footnote 96 below. Board Memo of 29 March, ADM 205/1, TNA. Ian Johnston and Ian Buxton state tenders for the second two *Lions* were indeed issued on 12 June and the submissions from John Brown and Fairfield accepted at the end of July with orders then placed in August. *The Battleship Builders*, p 45. By September 1939, it was evident that technical problems with the new gun mountings of the *Lions* were going to delay the programme and that work on the hulls could be suspended for up to 12 months without affecting their ultimate completion dates. This suspension would create much needed capacity for extra destroyers. The Admiralty Board therefore agreed the suspension on 28 September. ADM 167/103, TNA.

battleship using spare gun mountings well advanced.<sup>96</sup> Admiralty planning papers for early 1939 not only demonstrate the continuing commitment to a two hemisphere navy but also that, if war had not intervened, this goal would have achieved real credibility as early as 1942.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, if war had not broken out in 1939, then by FY 40, the RN would have achieved sufficient lead in major war vessels to reduce to a rate of one battleship and carrier per year.<sup>98</sup> Finally, the Table underlines that heavy investment in capital ships and carriers did not come at the expense of investment in trade protection and ASW to the extent that Maiolo and many other historians<sup>99</sup> suggest. It is true that investment in specialist ASW vessels did not begin until 1939 but the new fleet destroyers were ASW capable too and overall the RN programme was far better balanced across different capabilities than its Axis competitors.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> This additional battleship would eventually become *Vanguard*, laid down in October 1941. The first reference to *Vanguard* is in a D of P minute dated 3 March 1939. The proposal is to build a modified *Lion* using spare 15 inch turrets and guns which will facilitate much faster (and cheaper) construction. The minute is of wider interest because it looks at the balance of battle-fleets in the event of a two hemisphere war in mid-1944. The minute argues that two *Lions*, five *KGVs* and three battle-cruisers will be needed to counter a German fleet estimated then at five new battleships, two *Scharnhorsts* and three Pocket Battleships, giving the RN a superiority of two. In the Far East, two *Lions*, two *Nelsons*, five *QEs* and three *R-Class* will face the existing IJN fleet of ten plus four new build battleships and perhaps two new battle-cruisers, giving an RN deficit of four. The *Vanguard* concept was designed to counter the supposed new battle-cruisers. ADM 1/10141, TNA. A Memo for the Admiralty Board at the end of the same month, 29 March, "Acceleration of Defence Programmes" suggested the new ship could be substituted for the fourth *Lion* in the FY 39 programme with the latter then joining the FY 40 programme. The ship would be ordered in November 1939. ADM 205/1, TNA.

<sup>97</sup> See e.g. minute by Director Naval Air Division dated 11 May 1939 giving proposed distribution of aircraft carriers in 1942 under different war scenarios. In the case of a "Far Eastern War", the carriers *Formidable*, *Illustrious*, and *Victorious* (each with 33 aircraft) would be based at home with *Furious* in a training role. *Ark Royal* (60 aircraft), *Indomitable* (45), *Implacable* and *Indefatigable* (each with 48 aircraft), and *Glorious* (24) would be at Singapore with *Courageous* (24) in the Indian Ocean. Nine battleships and thirteen cruisers would be with the Home Fleet, twelve battleships and fifteen cruisers in the Far East. Another scenario for an "Axis War" involving Italy gave priority to the Home and Mediterranean theatres with only one carrier allocated to Singapore. Navy Records Society, Volume 159, *The Fleet Air Arm in the Second World War, Volume 1, 1939 – 1941*, edited by Ben Jones, (UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), paper no 3 taken from ADM 1/10133, TNA.

<sup>98</sup> Roskill in *Naval Policy between the Wars*, Vol II, p 451, states that the Admiralty's initial shopping list for the three FYs 1939 – 41, after the budget of £410M was agreed for this period in July 1938, was: four battleships, three carriers, twelve cruisers, three destroyer flotillas, twelve submarines and eight escort vessels. This list accords with a "'Modified' New Standard Building Programme" produced by D of P in early 1938. ADM 116/3631, TNA. It was probably achievable within the allocated budget had war not intervened and consistent with a reduction to a steady state build rate of one battleship and one fleet carrier per year.

<sup>99</sup> Gordon, *British Seapower and Procurement Between the wars*, p 273, refers to the common criticism among historians that the rearmament programme concentrated on major fleet units to the exclusion of smaller ships.

<sup>100</sup> Professor N A M Rodger has recently argued that, because the RN aimed for a "balanced fleet" with its inter-war investment, it "spent less on battleships than other navies" and in consequence "an acute shortage

Another way to assess the effectiveness of the RN building programme from 1935 – 42 is to compare RN output in this period with that of its three Axis enemies as in Table 5.

**Table 5**

**RN Ships commissioned compared with the three Axis Powers 1 January 1935 – 31 December 1942**

	RN	Germany	Japan	Italy	Axis Total
Type					
Battleships	5	2	2	3	7
Battle-cruisers	0	2	0	0	2
Aircraft Carriers	5	0	6	0	6
Heavy Cruisers	10	4	6	0	10
Light Cruisers	27	1	4	7	12
Fleet Destroyers	117	33	51	21	105
Destroyer Escorts	82	4	10	42	56
ASW Frigates	13+2	0	0	0	0
ASW Corvettes	165+88	0	0	0	0
Submarines	91	550	49	66	665

Notes:

(i). RN totals include ships built for the Dominions.

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of fast modern battleships was the major constraint on British naval strategy for most of the war”. This argument does not stand up. First, expenditure on RN new build battleships (the *Nelsons* 1922- 27) and the *KGVs* (1937 – 39) easily surpassed that by other powers up to September 1939 while footnote 46 above has shown that the RN spent as much, if not more, than the USN and IJN on reconstructions. Second, while more modern or modernised battleships would certainly have been useful, and the RN of course planned to keep building them, it is hard to identify real scenarios in World War II where the benefit of extra fast battleships would have justified the price of fewer carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and above all Atlantic escorts. This thesis therefore maintains the view that, within its available budget, and shipbuilding resources, the RN achieved a better balance of investment here than others. “The Royal Navy in the Era of the World Wars: Was it fit for purpose?”, p 278.

- (ii). German Heavy Cruisers include the final Pocket Battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* and three *Hipper* class.
- (iii). RN destroyers do not include requisitions at the outbreak of war or the 50 US destroyers acquired in 1940 in the destroyers for bases deal.
- (iv). The + figures under RN Frigates and Corvettes are units built in Canada.

This Table demonstrates that, over the re-armament period, the first phase of the European war and the first year of the Far East war, the RN broadly matched the combined Axis total for capital units, cruisers and fleet destroyers. The RN completed less battleships, where it started with a large advantage, but double the number of light cruisers thus recovering the shortfall here in the early 1930s. Given that the RN entered this period as the largest navy in the world, and its primary enemy Germany entered it with no significant navy at all, RN re-armament did well equipping Britain for a potential two hemisphere naval war. Delivery of the major new RN fleet units was heavily weighted to the period 1940 – 42 but, for large units, that was true for the Axis also. This delivery weighting explains why, as the next Chapter shows, the Admiralty would constantly stress the period 1938 – 40 as a window of vulnerability. It needed the output available from 1940 onward to deal with more than one enemy with confidence.

The most striking difference between RN and Axis figures is the dramatic rise in RN investment in anti-submarine effort, destroyer escorts and other anti-submarine vessels, from 1939 onward and the corresponding rise in German U-boat production. For both countries this represented a major opportunity cost in the balance of naval investment. For the RN it meant a decision to delay or suspend all major capital units of the 1938 and 1939 programmes in the winter of 1939 - 40.<sup>101</sup> The benefit is evident in the output figures for ASW vessels, some 315 delivered over the three years 1940 – 42 (not including the 50 US destroyers provided in 1940). The RN shift to ASW production preceded the German shift to U-boats by about a year and meant that, from mid-1940 to end 1941, Britain was producing close to one ASW escort for every U-boat produced.<sup>102</sup> This arguably proved

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<sup>101</sup> This amounted to four *Lion* class battleships and the fifth and sixth *Illustrious* class carriers, *Implacable* and *Indefatigable*.

<sup>102</sup> German U-boat strength, at around 55 units, hardly increased in the first 12 months of the war. Only 50 submarines were built in 1940 compared to 199 in 1941 and 237 in 1942. The RN commissioned some 78 escort destroyers and corvettes in 1940 and 164 in 1941. The 50 destroyers acquired from the US in August 1940 also began to join the frontline in early 1941. To the end of 1941 therefore the RN was indeed matching Germany unit for unit. Most figures here are taken from Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War, The Hunters 1939-1942*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997).



decisive in enabling the RN to counter the advantage the Germans gained through access to French bases after the fall of France.<sup>103</sup> It is nevertheless striking that the RN could make this shift to ASW investment while still broadly meeting the combined outputs for Axis fleet units. It is also important to note that US support to naval construction in the period to end 1942 was limited and less significant than that of Canada which produced about 25% of ASW vessels. US support was of course still vital in meeting the rapid growth in German U-boat production from mid-1942. Annex 2 provides more detailed analysis on warship output by the main naval powers for the whole period 1930 – 1942.

### **The fighting effectiveness of the RN in the late 1930s**

In assessing comparative RN strength, this chapter has so far mainly emphasized quantitative comparisons. However, comparative strength also depended on wider measures of capability, the comparative quality of ship classes, weapons systems, personnel and doctrine. These do not permit easy measurement and are consequently harder for historians to judge. In building ships, RN designers usually aimed for a good balance of characteristics on a given displacement, i.e. armament, protection, speed, endurance, sea-keeping, and reliability, and generally achieved this. Other navies often emphasized particular characteristics at the expense of others. US battleships pre-1937 prioritised protection at the expense of speed, IJN heavy cruisers were powerfully armed but suffered hull stress and stability problems, IJN and German destroyers had powerful gun armament but were poorly equipped for anti-submarine work. In general, with the obvious exception of the two IJN *Yamato* battleships, it is hard to find examples where RN warships laid down after 1930 were significantly inferior to their foreign equivalents, whether judged on paper specification or, more important, comparative performance in battle during the war.<sup>104</sup> On specific design issues, the research conducted by D K Brown

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<sup>103</sup> Professor N A M Rodger indeed argues that, statistically, the decisive turning point for the Battle of the Atlantic was early 1942 rather than a year later as most historians contend. “The Royal Navy in the Era of the World Wars: Was it fit for purpose?”, p 281 – 282.

<sup>104</sup> It is worth emphasising that even Corelli Barnett, not noted for his support of British technology, endorses this view for at least the *KGV* battleships and the 1930s cruiser classes. *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, p 41 –43.

is a good guide.<sup>105</sup> He rates the RN well below the USN for quality of machinery, availability, reliability, and maintainability but ahead of most others in these areas. He scores the RN very high for sea-keeping but low, certainly compared to the USN, for habitability. RN weapons were, with few exceptions, at least competitive although there were too many different gun calibres and destroyers lacked a satisfactory high angle weapon. No RN weapon in use in 1939 suffered performance failures comparable to the torpedo problems experienced by both US and German submarines. RN surface fire control systems were excellent but it was behind the US, Germany and possibly the IJN in AA fire control. In the development and exploitation of modern electronic sensors, radar, asdic, and HF intercept, the RN was well ahead of everyone else in 1939.

Historians have focused on four main areas of weakness in the RN of 1939 which they argue reflected both general neglect throughout the inter-war period and insufficient attention during the specific period of rearmament. These were: an excessive pre-occupation with the classic battle-fleet engagement, i.e. re-fighting Jutland, which took insufficient account of how naval war was changing; failure adequately to recognize the implications of airpower at sea and to create an effective carrier capability; over-reliance on AA gunnery to protect the fleet compromised further by an ineffective high altitude control system; and failure to draw the right lessons from the German U-boat campaign in 1917 – 18, leaving the RN ill prepared for a new submarine campaign against British shipping. Roskill, Marder and Barnett all highlighted these failings and the last three were underlined again in a more recent essay by Jon Sumida.<sup>106</sup> Underpinning all of them is the wider charge that the RN was hampered by a conservative mind-set and a lack of innovation in recognizing and addressing the challenges of future naval warfare.<sup>107</sup>

The most frequent and persistent charge against the inter-war RN is that it remained gripped by the concept of large scale action between battle-fleets as the decisive arbiter in

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<sup>105</sup> D K Brown, *Nelson to Vanguard: Warship Design and Development 1923 – 1945*, (London: Chatham Publishing, 2006).

<sup>106</sup> Jon Tetsuro Sumida, “British Naval Procurement and Technological Change, 1919 – 1939”.

<sup>107</sup> Barnett, for instance, states that: “the RN’s responses to the technical and operational puzzles involved in refurbishing British seapower in the late 1930s suggest a narrow professionalism of outlook too much influenced by loyalty to tradition and too little blessed with innovative imagination”. *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, p 49.

achieving maritime control. The influence exerted by this theme on the mainstream historiography is well summarized by the American historian Jon Sumida.<sup>108</sup> The argument runs that sterile fixation on re-fighting Jutland stifled innovation, drew limited investment away from the new areas of naval warfare, and therefore exacerbated the other weaknesses highlighted above. Sumida accepts that the RN continued to see the battleship as a decisive factor in naval warfare but he rightly stresses that so did all the other naval powers and the offensive power of the carrier, so evident in 1942, was far from clear in the late 1930s. What Sumida disputes is that, for the RN, continued emphasis on the battleship meant conservatism. Indeed he demonstrates convincingly that financial stringency, far from imprisoning the service in the past, was a spur to new tactical thinking. He shows that the RN was well aware of the threat posed by IJN capital ship modernisation and their focus on long range fire.<sup>109</sup> With only limited funds for its own modernisation programme, it countered by exploring tactics for short range action and night-fighting. Using aircraft to destroy enemy spotters and disrupt with torpedo attacks was a vital part of achieving the desired short range solution. Meanwhile, under a succession of innovative commanders during the 1930s, night-fighting became standard in the Mediterranean Fleet.<sup>110</sup> Sumida also stresses important organisational and cultural changes which promoted initiative, flexibility and rapid response. By the late 1930s, the RN was not expecting to fight in a traditional Jutland style battle line manoeuvred rigidly by a single commander but rather in small divisional units able quickly to exploit opportunities offered by the enemy. It was also exploring the idea of the task force with its own integrated air component.

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<sup>108</sup>Jon Tetsuro Sumida, “‘The Best Laid Plans’: The Development of British Battle-Fleet Tactics, 1919-1942”, (*The International History Review*, 14:4, p 681-700, 1992). Sumida shows the extent to which this view pervades the thinking of Roskill, Marder and Barnett.

<sup>109</sup> See David C Evans and Mark R Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy*, (Annapolis USA, Naval Institute Press, 1997), pp 250 – 263, for a detailed discussion of IJN investment in “outranging” as a means of countering a superior enemy force.

<sup>110</sup> Cunningham confirms this in a revealing passage in his autobiography. He describes a 1934 exercise where the Mediterranean Fleet is tasked to intercept the Home Fleet simulating an IJN force escorting a convoy. It ends with the Mediterranean Fleet conducting a night attack. Cunningham states: “Bold and masterly tactics not only put an end to the exercise; but settled once and for all the much debated question as to whether or not British heavy ships could and should engage in night action against corresponding enemy units. At Jutland, night action was deliberately avoided. From now on it was an accepted principle that a highly trained and well-handled fleet had nothing to lose and much to gain by fighting at night.” His subsequent victory at Matapan admirably confirmed this. Cunningham, Admiral of the Fleet Viscount of Hyndhope, *A Sailor’s Odyssey*, (London: Hutchinson, 1957), p 159 - 161.

Sumida's assessment of the evolution of RN battle-fleet tactics is confirmed in the major fleet exercises of the inter-war period. However, a study of these exercises demonstrates that many wider problems and opportunities were being actively explored besides new ways of handling a battle-fleet.<sup>111</sup> Three themes stand out: the relevance of many of the exercise scenarios to the war the RN would fight from 1939; a growing culture of initiative and innovation, a fore-runner of the modern concept of "mission command"<sup>112</sup>; and the recognition that naval warfare now took place in a multi-threat environment requiring an integrated "all arms" response. The significant role played by carrier operations in these exercises from the mid-1920s onward, and the importance senior officers attached to this, is noteworthy.<sup>113</sup> This is particularly so given that the number of aircraft deployed was always comparatively small and multi-carrier operations were only possible after 1930.<sup>114</sup> The use of submarines for reporting and shadowing was also investigated as of course was the defensive potential offered by asdic. But, again, it is striking that, as early as 1929, important lessons were being learnt about anti-submarine search involving aircraft and asdic equipped destroyers working together.<sup>115</sup> The exercises certainly show Sumida's "divisional tactics" in operation but they also show the origins of the integrated task force with a carrier and battle-cruiser working together and

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<sup>111</sup> There are good summaries of these exercises, with some original records, in the following: Navy Records Society, Volume 158, *The Mediterranean Fleet 1919 - 1929*, especially Items 314 and 317, edited by Paul Halpern, (UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2011); Geoffrey Till, 'The Impact of Airpower on the Royal Navy in the 1920s', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1976); Philip Anthony Weir, 'The Development of Naval Air Warfare by the Royal Navy and Fleet Air Arm between the two World Wars', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, March 2006); Andrew Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939*, especially chapter 6 which covers strategic and tactical exercises relating to a Far East war; and, George Franklin, Britain's *Anti-Submarine Capability, 1919 - 1939*. This has detailed coverage of all inter-war ASW exercises but is especially interesting on convoy exercises which often included fleet cover.

<sup>112</sup> "Mission command" has been the dominant command philosophy in the US and UK military (and many others as well) for at least the last 30 years. In essence the overall commander sets out his broad intent, or key strategic objective, and then allows his subordinates substantial freedom as to how they achieve that intent and respond to enemy counter-moves to disrupt the intent.

<sup>113</sup> One of the earliest examples of an exercise involving carrier strike is Exercise MU conducted in the Mediterranean in August 1925 to explore an opposed transit through the Malacca Strait to relieve Singapore. The "IJN carrier" carried out a very successful torpedo attack which was judged to have damaged three of the RN battleships. Field, chapter 6, *ibid*.

<sup>114</sup> As noted earlier, the large fast carriers *Glorious* and *Courageous* were not completed until 1929.

<sup>115</sup> For early investigation of the potential of an asdic strike force with air spotting, see Report of Fleet Exercise NX dated 7 September 1928, paras 63 - 66 and 81, from ADM 186/144, Item 314, Navy Records Society, Volume 158, *ibid*.

anticipating the future *Force H* concept.<sup>116</sup> The pattern of exercises through the 1930s demonstrate that most, if not all, senior RN officers fully recognised the potential role of airpower both as facilitator of naval objectives and as a threat and there were few aspects of this potential left unexplored.<sup>117 118</sup>

The inter-war exercise programme demonstrates that the RN did recognise the importance of airpower and thought about it deeply. Nevertheless this evidence of increasing “air-mindedness” must be reconciled with a still predominant historical view that by the mid-1930s the RN was falling behind both the IJN and USN in carrier warfare and never really caught up.<sup>119</sup> As already noted, the RN was behind in the number of aircraft deployed in its carriers and well aware of this. It would barely reduce the shortfall over the rest of the decade.<sup>120</sup> Numerical weakness is invariably linked with a growing disparity in aircraft quality though the evidence here is less convincing.<sup>121</sup> Any comparison between the FAA

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<sup>116</sup> See Weir’s account of Exercise OP in 1930 at pp 145 – 148 of his thesis. He sees the genesis of the future carrier centred “Task Force” concept in ideas tried by Chatfield (as CinC Atlantic Fleet) and Pound (as Commander Battle-cruiser force). Weir stresses that it was not the first time a carrier and battle-cruisers worked as a unit but it was the first time the primacy of a capital ship was subordinated to the needs of a carrier.

<sup>117</sup> Weir has looked in great detail at the attitude of individual senior RN officers in the inter-war period to airpower at sea. He judges that all CinCs of the period were “air converts” to a greater or lesser extent and those who went on to become First Sea Lord were, without exception, both committed to the recovery of the FAA and making the service “air-minded”. The interest in and commitment to air among the rising generation of junior Flag Officers and senior Captains was even greater. He argues, with convincing evidence, that the legend of the “battleship admiral” utterly unwilling to contemplate the capabilities of aircraft should be firmly put to rest.

<sup>118</sup> Several historians have suggested that Vice Admiral Sir James Somerville’s success as commander of *Force H* in 1940 – 41 came about because he was uniquely air-minded implying therefore that other Flag Officers did not understand this territory in the same way. Weir’s analysis of individual backgrounds and attitudes as well as the actions of different Flag Officers in exercises suggests that Somerville was actually within the mainstream here rather than an aberration. True he was particularly able but that reflected all round talent rather than unique awareness of air potential.

<sup>119</sup> Barnett states that by the mid-1930s, the RN had fallen well behind the IJN and USN not only in the number of embarked aircraft, but also their capability, and, most important, in persisting with the belief that carriers were merely an adjunct to the battle-fleet rather than a potential long range strike force. *Engage the Enemy*, p 25. Till in *Airpower and the Royal Navy* states that, by 1939, the RN had “yielded to the IJN and USN in the race to develop airpower at sea”, but argues it was already falling behind much earlier.

<sup>120</sup> A major review of the FAA prepared for the Admiralty Board on 30 November 1938 shows that FAA frontline carrier capable air strength was expected to be only 168 TSR aircraft and 75 fighters on 1 August 1939 rising to 295 TSR and 110 fighters by 1 April 1942. The paper (optimistically) expected the FAA to be close to IJN carrier capable air strength by 1942 but acknowledged it would be still well short of the anticipated combined Japanese and German total. Memorandum for the Board, “Fleet Air Arm Reorganisation and Expansion”, ADM 167/103, TNA.

<sup>121</sup> Barnett and others are rather loose with their timelines here. There is a tendency to project IJN aircraft superiority in late 1941 back into the 1930s. The Kate B5N2 torpedo bomber did not start to reach the

and the IJN and USN air arms must recognise two linked factors that made the context in which British naval air power developed fundamentally different to the other two. First, Britain had in the RAF an independent air force with responsibility for all land-based airpower including that projected over the sea. It inevitably dominated air policy, strategy and procurement. Second, as mentioned earlier, until 1937, the RAF and RN had shared responsibility for the carrier fleet under a cumbersome dual control system.<sup>122</sup> By 1939, the RN had regained full control of the FAA but it remained dependent on the Air Ministry for procurement and inevitably lacked air expertise in many key areas especially at senior level.<sup>123</sup>

Several powerful arguments have been advanced to explain how the dominant role of the RAF promoted the comparative weakness of the FAA. First, that it encouraged the RN to view airpower as “ancillary”, an aid to traditional capability, rather than a weapon in its own right.<sup>124</sup> In Andrew Gordon’s words, the RN therefore lacked the visionary leadership that could think “air strategy” as opposed to “fleet tactics”.<sup>125</sup> This argument plays to the view that the inter-war RN was an essentially conservative force. Second, it meant the RN air constituency lacked the bureaucratic muscle needed to make a decisive case for sea-borne airpower and ensure it was adequately resourced and supported.<sup>126</sup> In consequence, it was poorly placed to compete for resources with the RAF and to manage the design and procurement of the advanced monoplane fighters and strike aircraft becoming available in the late 1930s and necessary to provide an air fleet comparable to

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frontline until 1939 and the Zero fighter and Val Type 99 dive-bomber until well into 1940. Until their arrival the difference in individual aircraft capability between RN and IJN was not significant although the IJN had the advantage of numbers. The same argument broadly applies to comparisons with the USN. RN torpedo bombers were superior to the USN until late 1942. The Wildcat, the standard USN fighter of 1942, was developed initially for the RN and reached it first. See Chapter Five. The USN Dauntless dive-bomber was superior to any contemporary RN aircraft but again did not arrive until 1940.

<sup>122</sup> Roskill provides a good summary of “dual control” and the problems it posed for the RN in Chapter 3 of *War at Sea* Vol 1.

<sup>123</sup> Till, *Airpower and the Royal Navy*.

<sup>124</sup> Till, *ibid*, first coined the term “ancillary”. His book drew on his earlier doctoral thesis which focused on the period 1919 – 29 and arguably some of his judgements were more appropriate to that period than the 1930s.

<sup>125</sup> Andrew Gordon, *British Seapower and Procurement between the Wars*, p 229.

<sup>126</sup> The lack of “bureaucratic muscle” derives from Caspar John, a junior FAA officer in this period but a future First Sea Lord in the early 1960s. Quoted by Till, *ibid*.

the IJN.<sup>127</sup> Finally, that it promoted a conservative approach to aircraft handling and operational management with the result that RN carriers operated less aircraft, did so less efficiently, and were slow to explore new ideas and technical innovations. While there is no doubt the policy of “dual control” did hamper the development of the FAA, the view that, at least by the mid-1930s, the RN leadership lacked a strategic vision for the place of airpower in naval warfare compared to the IJN and USN is unconvincing. It fails to take account of RN investigation of multi-carrier operations<sup>128</sup>, air strikes on enemy fleets in harbour, the threat posed by shore-based airpower on Mediterranean transit, and the impact of airpower, offensive and defensive, on the protection of trade.<sup>129</sup> It also credits the IJN and USN with strategic thinking at this time that only matured much later.<sup>130</sup>

The centrality of carriers for the RN by the mid-1930s, as a vital component of a modern fleet, is powerfully demonstrated in the planning papers for the re-armament

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<sup>127</sup>There is some truth in this but the picture is more complex. As Chapter Five will show, a good argument can be made that a more decisive factor was the extreme crisis Britain faced with the collapse of France in 1940. This forced an urgent reassessment of aircraft production priorities to the detriment of the next generation FAA aircraft.

<sup>128</sup>The RN had concluded that multi-carrier operations would be a key theme in future naval warfare as early as 1930. See: Director of Training and Staff Duties minute dated 7 July, 1930, ADM 116/2771, TNA. It led to the creation of the role of Rear Admiral Aircraft Carriers in 1931. The Admiralty instructions to the first holder of the post, Rear Admiral R G Henderson, dated 11 June 1931, stated that he was “to study and prepare a common doctrine for the tactical employment of the Fleet Air Arm” and that CinCs Atlantic and Mediterranean should collaborate to provide him with the opportunity “to operate the combined aircraft carriers of both fleets”. Also, ADM 116/2771, TNA. Norman Friedman, *British Carrier Aviation*, p 158, notes that Henderson did indeed conduct extensive research into multi-carrier operations following his arrival in post. These led to a complete operational doctrine with special procedures for flying off, forming up, and coordinating squadrons from different carriers. Separate exercises to investigate air defence from 1932 to 1934 led Henderson to consider the merits of carrier specialisation in particular roles.

<sup>129</sup> See Weir thesis. Roskill, interestingly, agrees with Till that, during the 1920s, the view that carrier aircraft were “ancillary” predominated. But he too saw the appointment of Henderson in 1931 as RA Carriers, beginning a decisive shift in attitude which gave carriers a much more central role. *War at Sea* Vol 1, Chapter 3.

<sup>130</sup> The best summary of emerging IJN doctrine is provided by Mark Peattie in *Sunburst: The Rise of Japanese Naval Airpower, 1909 – 1941*, (Annapolis, USA: Naval Institute Press, 2001), esp p 72 – 76, section “The Emergence of Japanese Carrier Doctrine”, which focuses on the late 1930s. Apart from having a much larger embarked force, it is not evident that IJN thinking was further advanced than the RN at this stage and nor was the IJN leadership any more committed to the carrier over the capital ship. The best summary of the evolution of USN thinking from the late 1930s through World War II is arguably provided by Thomas C Hone in his recent article ‘Replacing Battleships with Aircraft Carriers in the Pacific in World War II’, (*US Naval War College Review*, Winter 2013, vol 66, No 1). He demonstrates that emerging USN air doctrine in the late 1930s was certainly thoughtful and ambitious but again it is not evident that US thinking on the use of carriers, or the growing influence of land air power at sea, was ahead of the RN. A key contributor to US thinking in the late 1930s was Captain Richmond Kelly Turner in his role as Head of Strategy at the US Naval War College from 1935 – 1938. Turner features in later chapters of this thesis in his subsequent appointment as USN Director of Plans.

programme.<sup>131</sup> These develop a well-argued and realistic case for the airpower required to combat Japan and Germany but also to secure Empire communications. They show that, by mid-1936, the Naval Staff were committed to completing a force of eight new fleet carriers by 1943, with five of the existing older carriers retained for trade protection.<sup>132</sup> The planned building rate was equal to the new battleship programme and they would be delivered more quickly.<sup>133</sup> The size of this carrier programme was unequivocally dictated by the need to prepare for simultaneous two hemisphere war including the possibility of a simultaneous attack on trade.<sup>134</sup> Three points must be stressed regarding the Far East aspect of future carrier force planning. First, the assessment of IJN carrier strength, and its rate of growth, was broadly accurate for this date.<sup>135</sup> Contrary to the impression given by many historians, the RN was well aware that IJN carrier air strength was significantly larger than that of the RN and would remain so for some while.<sup>136</sup> The RN also knew IJN carriers had a much larger aircraft complement.<sup>137</sup> Second, the RN carrier requirement for simultaneous war assumed the Far East war would be fought on the defensive. It was consequently necessary adequately to counter IJN air capability not to equal it. Finally, RN calculations took account of differences in carrier design philosophy which D of P

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<sup>131</sup> The most important papers here are: D of P paper PD 05739/36, "Carrier Construction", undated but clearly summer 1936, ADM 116/3376, TNA; D of P note for FSL, "Aircraft Carrier Strength", dated 14 December 1936, ADM 116/3376; DNAD minute of June 1936, ADM 116/3376; and, the Admiralty submission, "A New Standard of Naval Strength", to which the above three references clearly contributed. DP (P) 3 dated 29 April 1937, CP 316/37, CAB 24/273, TNA.

<sup>132</sup> The eight planned fleet carriers included *Ark Royal* already under construction in 1936 and completed in 1938. However, D of P also recognised that there were too many uncertainties beyond 1939 to settle on a final size for the carrier fleet. It was the building rate that mattered. "Carrier Construction", *ibid*.

<sup>133</sup> By 1936, the Admiralty was planning a total of nine new battleships, the five *KGVs* and four *Lions*, though many details of the latter not least armament had yet to be decided. The first *Lions* under the FY 1938 programme were not expected until 1943. By contrast, as late as March 1939, the Admiralty still hoped to have seven new carriers in commission by mid-1942. (*Ark Royal* and six *Illustrious* class.) Fifth Sea Lord minute dated 4 March 1939, ADM 116/3722, TNA. Eight new carriers by 1943 was therefore an eminently achievable target from the vantage point of 1936.

<sup>134</sup> The attention the Naval Staff gave to the employment of carriers for trade protection is striking and was not mirrored in any other navy. The Staff recognised that carriers could potentially search large areas of sea much more effectively than cruisers for enemy raiders etc. They also recognised that the deployment of carriers made it possible to reduce cruiser numbers though more exercises were needed to test this. "Carrier Construction", *ibid*.

<sup>135</sup> The only error was to underestimate the displacement of the new carriers *Soryu* (1937) and *Hiryu* (1939) which the Admiralty put at 10,000 tons against the real figure of 16,000 tons.

<sup>136</sup> D of P assessed IJN ship-borne air strength in 1936 at 287 aircraft estimated to rise to 397 in 1939. RN FAA air strength was 176 in 1937 estimated to reach 248 in 1939, 356 in 1940 and 500 in 1942. "Carrier Construction" paper, summer 1936, *ibid*.

<sup>137</sup> D of P estimated IJN carrier *Ryujō* could carry one aircraft for every 240 tons whereas *Illustrious* would be one per 640 tons. "Carrier Construction", *ibid*.



argued made simple numerical comparisons misleading. The new RN carriers would be armoured. This meant a 50% reduction in aircraft capacity but made the carriers much less vulnerable to bombing or shelling. The IJN carriers had more aircraft but would not be able to manage their large air complements with the same efficiency and flexibility as the RN while lack of protection made them potentially vulnerable to a single hit.<sup>138</sup>

This carrier programme envisaged in 1936 was substantially executed. By mid-1939, only one of the planned new eight fleet carriers was complete but another six were building and the first two of these would commission the following year with another two in 1941.<sup>139</sup> When the outbreak of war forced the Admiralty to delay major warships to release resources for escort construction, they sacrificed the battleship programme first. Leaving the eighth planned carrier aside, had war not intervened, the RN would have had seven new fleet carriers by mid-1942 (six by end 1941), four large older carriers, earmarked for trade protection but capable of a fleet role, plus the old light carrier *Hermes* and the new “maintenance carrier” *Unicorn*. This was not only close to the ultimate “new standard” target but a far more substantial investment in airpower assets than either the IJN or USN made at this time. Even with war losses and delays in construction the 1936 vision gave the RN a vital margin at the most critical moment of the war in early 1942.<sup>140</sup>

In planning its future carrier programme, the RN made two linked bets about the future evolution of airpower at sea which, with the benefit of hindsight, arguably proved wrong. Exercises conducted through the early 1930s suggested that fighter defence mounted from a carrier against any substantial air attack, whether sea or land-based would be ineffective and inefficient because it was impossible to provide sufficient warning to get the fighters to the right place.<sup>141</sup> This led to the judgement that defence against air attack should rely

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<sup>138</sup> D of P “Carrier Construction”, *ibid.* The D of P who drafted this paper and oversaw the planning of the new carrier programme was Captain T S V Phillips, later VCNS and then CinC Eastern Fleet and commander of *Force Z*. Because of his role in *Force Z*, Phillips has often been cast as the typical “battleship admiral” oblivious to the new realities of airpower. This paper demonstrates that Phillips certainly grasped the importance of airpower at an intellectual level and was equally well sighted on IJN carrier capability.

<sup>139</sup> *Ark Royal* completed in December 1938, *Illustrious* and *Formidable* in May and November 1940 respectively and *Victorious* and *Indomitable* in May and October 1941. H T Lenton.

<sup>140</sup> As Chapters Seven and Eight demonstrate, the Admiralty was able to deploy three *Illustrious* class carriers to the Indian Ocean in early 1942, only one less than the plan prepared by D of P in 1936.

<sup>141</sup> See Friedman, *British Carrier Aviation*, p 158. Also Weir thesis, p 89 – 97.

primarily on armour and AA gun-power both for individual carriers and the wider fleet. It also led to the decision that future FAA fighters should be optimised for reconnaissance and long range fighter escort which meant a two-seater aircraft. These were rational decisions in 1936 but by 1940 the scale and quality of attacking aircraft began to outweigh the benefits of armour while the arrival of radar transformed the prospects for fighter defence. The result was that the FAA did not have a competitive single seat fighter to defend the fleet while the aircraft capacity price paid by its carriers was too high for the increased protection.<sup>142</sup>

The RN's critics link these "wrong turns" with a series of poor aircraft procurement decisions. They are held up as evidence that the RN was well behind the curve of carrier development compared to the IJN and USN.<sup>143</sup> The picture is more complicated. All three carrier navies were struggling to come to terms with the interaction of fast changing technology and ideas on how best to exploit it.<sup>144</sup> The armoured carrier ultimately was a dead end but it proved valuable while radar directed fighter defence was still developing.<sup>145</sup> RN emphasis on the need for an observer in its fighters reflected the

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<sup>142</sup> The trade-off between armour and aircraft capacity is a complex issue and remains a subject of some controversy between informed historians. The capacity gap was not as great as formal specifications and D of P's 1936 calculations suggest. The last three *Illustrious* class were redesigned with extra hangar space raising capacity to around 50 aircraft. The use of deck parking and outriggers would mean that all six ships were eventually able to operate around 60 aircraft and *Indefatigable* and *Implacable* up to 80. David Hobbs, *British Aircraft Carriers: Design, Development and Service Histories*, (UK: Seaforth Publishing, 2013), p 108. The largest IJN carriers could operate in excess of 70 aircraft but, apart from the Pearl Harbour attack, were rarely able to muster more than 55. Norman Friedman, D K Brown and David Hobbs have both looked in detail at the contribution flight deck armour made to resisting wartime damage. All of them judge that other design factors such as the way hangars were carefully isolated from the hull spaces were more important and that e.g. *Illustrious* in her 1941 bombing by the Luftwaffe off Malta would have survived without armour. They all acknowledge, however, that armour did enable the carriers to brush off kamikaze attacks in the Pacific in 1945.

<sup>143</sup> For a useful summary of different views here see: Douglas Ford, 'British Naval Policy and the War against Japan 1937-1945: Distorted Doctrine, Insufficient Resources, or Inadequate Intelligence', (*International Journal of Naval History*, Vol. 4, No 1, April 2005).

<sup>144</sup> Professor N A M Rodger has pointed out that all air forces, whether land or maritime, were having to adapt to a revolution in aircraft technology from the mid-1930s. This reflected dramatic improvements in engine power and radical new ideas in aerodynamics but also the arrival of D/F homing, VHF communications, IFF, and radar. All three major naval air forces had to make guesses about how naval air war would evolve against the context of these developments and all were to an extent constrained by the initial choices they made. Lecture given to MA Military History students, University of Buckingham, 17 December, 2012.

<sup>145</sup> N A M Rodger has coined the term "dead end" while acknowledging the RN had good reasons for taking this path. He also notes that the USN were so impressed with the design of *Illustrious* and the armouring concept, when she was under repair in the US in 1941, that they too diverted down the armour path with the

importance it placed on quality reconnaissance and navigation where it was superior to the IJN and USN.<sup>146</sup> The RN did make some poor aircraft choices but historians often exaggerate RN shortcomings here by comparing RN aircraft of 1939 with IJN aircraft of late 1941. The FAA frontline was much smaller than the IJN and USN in 1939, and the RN was acutely aware of this, but the capability of aircraft in all three navies at that time was broadly comparable. The FAA was growing fast and, had war not intervened, it can reasonably be argued that the aircraft in the pipeline or potentially available, would have kept RN capability competitive.<sup>147</sup> In the event, the stresses of war meant that, for a variety of reasons, FAA procurement suffered badly in 1940 – 41. The reasons for this are addressed in Chapter Five.<sup>148</sup>

The popular claim that the RN both underestimated and neglected the modern air threat has extended to its approach to Anti-Aircraft Gunnery between the wars. The charge is that it had unrealistic expectations regarding the effectiveness of AA firepower and that it made poor equipment choices. Roskill argued that the Admiralty made a fatal mistake in the late 1920s by adopting an AA Fire Control system based on estimation rather than measurement of target movement.<sup>149</sup> Barnett pursued this theme further, arguing that the resulting RN High Altitude Control System (HACS) was not only conceptually flawed but reflected cultural resistance in the Admiralty to scientific and technical advice, a tendency to ignore unwelcome evidence, and a backward British industry unable to design and

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*Midway* class carriers. Rodger lecture 17 December 2012, *ibid*. David Hobbs concludes that the *Illustrious* class were an impressive design and that the concept did indeed prove its worth in the period before radar direction became fully effective. Hobbs, *British Aircraft Carriers: Design, Development and Service Histories*, p 89.

<sup>146</sup> See Weir thesis, p 105 – 140 for detailed research on the development of FAA reconnaissance capability. He argues convincingly that the RN put more effort into this than any other navy and was better at it. This would be amply demonstrated in the coming war not least in the Indian Ocean in 1942.

<sup>147</sup> In July 1939, the Fifth Sea Lord expected the first 250 Barracudas (the successor torpedo bomber to the Albacore) to reach the frontline during 1941. Progress report on the FAA, 26 July 1939, ADM 116/3722, TNA. The reasons this did not happen are described in Chapter Five.

<sup>148</sup> Norman Friedman provides a very balanced assessment on all the key issues in this section. He judges the Admiralty's 1936 carrier programme to be ambitious and visionary and in advance of other powers but he also judges the RN suffered because it had to rearm on the basis of 1936 not 1940 technology. Overall, he sees the RN record, if properly read, as an outstanding one – strategically, operationally, and technically. He sees it as particularly ironic that the RN, who was alone in practising multi-carrier operations in the 1930s, was unable to do so in wartime because of the sheer range of its commitments.

<sup>149</sup> Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars*, Vol II, p 333. As a former Gunnery Officer, Roskill had strong views on this subject.

produce a tachymetric system like the US, Japanese and German navies.<sup>150</sup> In his view, the RN entered the Second World War “firing at enemy aircraft with the hopeful wildness of aim of a tyro shot trying to bring down fast flying grouse”.<sup>151</sup> Sumida offers a more sophisticated analysis suggesting that financial stringency caused the RN to set overambitious requirements in a bid to maximize the return on its investment. This caused delay, complications and unreliability. As a result, although he acknowledges a huge increase in the AA firepower mounted in RN warships of all types during the re-armament period, he judges that fire control deficiencies made overall AA capability far less effective than it would otherwise have been.<sup>152</sup>

There are several important qualifications to make here. The Barnett charge that the Admiralty was resistant to technical advice or operational analysis in dealing with the air threat is easily disputed.<sup>153</sup> Nor is he convincing in claiming that British industry was incapable of providing a tachymetric system since it did so for the Army and the Admiralty Fire Control Table for surface targets, introduced in the late 1920s, was also essentially a tachymetric system.<sup>154</sup> It seems rather that the initial choice of HACCS was because it could be introduced relatively quickly and, importantly, because there were

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<sup>150</sup> In simple terms, a tachymetric system computes a target solution direct from measured data inputs as opposed to estimates. The primary USN AA Fire Control System in WWII, the Mark 37, introduced from 1940, was a true tachymetric system and is generally considered the most effective AA system of the war. Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully in *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway*, (Washington, USA: Potomac Books, 2007), chapter 8, claim the IJN Type 94 was a tachymetric system comparable to the Mark 37 though they also admit it was slow and therefore ineffective against dive-bombers.

<sup>151</sup> Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, p 46 – 47. Barnett’s judgements, while trenchantly expressed, and in line with his well-known prejudices regarding the backwardness of British industry, rely heavily on Roskill’s sources and correspondence.

<sup>152</sup> Sumida, “British Naval Procurement and Technological Change, 1919 – 1939”. Sumida draws on Roskill’s comparative budget figures at Appendix E of *Naval Policy Between the Wars*, Vol I, to argue that the US “spent 50 percent more on its navy than Britain in the 1920s and more than a third more in the 1930s”, hence having much more funding for research. This thesis has already argued that these Roskill figures are misleading and that expenditure on the surface navies was about the same.

<sup>153</sup> See: Philip Pugh, “Managing the Aerial Threat: Provisions for anti-aircraft warfare during the 1930s”, in Richard Harding, *The Royal Navy, 1930 – 2000, Innovation and Defence*, (London and New York: Frank Cass, 2004). This looks in detail at the work of the RN AA Gunnery Committee of 1931. Pugh concludes that the RN’s technical analysis of the aerial threat to the fleet as perceived in 1931 was exemplary, exhibiting innovative methodology and achieving a standard of operational research which would have been difficult to better decades later. However, he also shows that the Admiralty fell into the trap of believing that the problem of air attack was capable of a once-for-all solution. It failed to anticipate sufficiently how the threat would evolve over the next decade and also tended to view the problem in rather limited operational scenarios.

<sup>154</sup> See: Allan G Bromley, *British Mechanical Gunnery Computers of WWII*, 1984.

doubts that a tachymetric system would be fast enough, or sufficiently reliable, in producing an effective target solution.<sup>155</sup> There has also been a tendency, starting with Roskill, to compare the HACS of 1939 with US systems deployed in 1942.<sup>156</sup> However, HACS was a constantly evolving system. It incorporated analogue computers, remote power control, and some tachymetric inputs in 1940<sup>157</sup>, and radar ranging and blind-fire capability, the first in any navy, from early 1941.<sup>158</sup> <sup>159</sup> Despite these improvements, most specialist assessments have indeed judged HACS to be inferior to the US Mark 37 and this was the RN's professional view when it could compare the two systems in late 1941 and 1942.<sup>160</sup> However, the evidence suggests that the difference in performance between the latest HACS and the latest US Mark 37 system in 1942, under real combat conditions, was less than the RN believed and certainly not enough to justify the savage strictures of Barnett.<sup>161</sup> From the admittedly incomplete statistics available, whether for naval AA claims over the war as a whole, or from evidence of individual engagements, it is hard to demonstrate that the Mark 37 consistently provided a decisive advantage over HACS.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Chatfield, who was always very focused on the air threat, was well aware of the desirability of a tachymetric system. Writing in 1937, following poor results in a Home Fleet AA exercise, he noted a tachymetric solution had been recommended during studies of the AA problem in both 1921 and 1931 but trials had so far been disappointing. Letter to Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse, dated 8 October 1937, CHT/4/1, NMM.

<sup>156</sup> The primary USN AA Fire Control System in WWII was the Mark 37. This was a tachymetric system which began development in 1936, first went to sea in 1940, but was only widely deployed from late 1941. At the battle of Midway in June 1942, only *Hornet*, the most modern of the three US carriers had the Mark 37. *Yorktown* and *Enterprise* had the much more basic Mark 33.

<sup>157</sup> It arguably became a "semi-tachymetric system" from this time.

<sup>158</sup> There is an excellent well sourced paper, "The British High Angle Control System (HACS)", dated 10 May 2009, by Tony D Guiliani, which is available under the Naval Technical Board section of the website [www.navweaps.com](http://www.navweaps.com). It includes a comparison with the US Mark 37 system. The paper describes the evolution of HACS through six successive variants ending with the Mark VI in 1942.

<sup>159</sup> The new battleship *Prince of Wales* had no less than nine AA fire control radars in 1941.

<sup>160</sup> The RN was able to make a detailed comparison when the Mark 37 system, combined with the US 5 inch/38 Mark 12 guns, was installed in the cruiser *Delhi* during refit in the US late in 1941. The RN was sufficiently impressed to order a further 82 systems which in the event could not be made available given USN demand following the outbreak of war. Guiliani, *ibid*.

<sup>161</sup> Norman Friedman in his definitive study of AA gunnery published in 2014 argues that the RN, so often criticised for lack of air mindedness, was actually the naval power most alert to the threat but that its systems were inadequate not because they were too primitive but because they tried to achieve too much. Norman Friedman, *Naval Anti-Aircraft Guns and Gunnery*, (UK: Seaforth Publishing, 2014).

<sup>162</sup> The USN claimed 246 aircraft shot down by AA fire in 1942 of which 60 were down to the Mark 37/5 inch gun combination at expenditure of 252 "rounds per bird". This was the best hit rate ever achieved by the Mark 37 system without VT ammunition. Expenditure of 500 – 1000 rounds to destroy an aircraft was more normal and this was probably close to the HACS rate. The 1942 5 inch figure of 60 compared with 82 accounted for by the 20mm Oerlikon which had no remote tracking and was the same as used by the RN. USN Anti-Aircraft Action Summary WWII, dated 8 October 1945, issued HQ CinC Fleet, Navy Department Library. It is often suggested that the shortcomings of HACS contributed to the loss of *Prince of Wales* and

The reality is that no WWII vintage AA fire control system was reliably able to deliver the pinpoint tracking to bring down a fast manoeuvring target with limited salvos from a limited number of guns.<sup>163 164</sup> Two things that did have a significant effect were the introduction of the Variable Time (VT) proximity fuse from late 1942 and the sheer number of guns available, especially of small calibre rapid fire.<sup>165</sup> The RN certainly made some poor weapon choices and had too many different calibres.<sup>166</sup> However, in 1939, and through to late 1942, it was far ahead of other navies in the scale of AA gun outfit allocated to its major warships especially new construction ships and rebuilds.<sup>167 168</sup> It can

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*Repulse* in December 1941. The evidence here is actually unconvincing. *Prince of Wales* damaged five out of eight IJN aircraft in the initial high level bombing attack for 108 rounds fired despite unfavourable manoeuvres by Admiral Phillips. Similarly five of eight aircraft were hit in the last attack by just six operational 5.25 inch guns while the ship was virtually sinking. Martin Middlebrook and Patrick Mahoney, *Battleship: The Loss of the Prince of Wales and the Repulse*, (London: Allen Lane, 1977), p 176 – 177 and 230.

<sup>163</sup> See: D K Brown, *Nelson to Vanguard: Warship Design and Development 1923 – 1945*, (London: Chatham Publishing, 2006), pp 207 – 209, for discussion of this. Brown notes that, in 1941, without the proximity fuse, even shore-based guns with tachymetric control, and in an optimum environment, needed 3000 rounds per kill. Brown agrees with Friedman that RN deficiencies were a consequence of trying to do too much too early before the technology was good enough and before key threats such as the Luftwaffe dive-bomber were really foreseeable. To put the naval AA problem in perspective, a WWII attack aircraft, moving at say 240 knots, would be in the effective engagement envelope for heavy AA guns for just one minute, the time to travel 8000 yards. If the maximum likely rate of fire was 20 rounds per minute, then ten guns in a battleship broadside would get off 200 rounds which was well below the most optimistic average kill rate estimated by the USN for just one aircraft. And the battleship could expect multiple attackers.

<sup>164</sup> Professor N A M Rodger sees one possible exception here, the Dutch Navy Hazemeyer system. This not only provided a stabilised tachymetric AA director but, uniquely, the gun mounting was slaved to the director. It could track modern high performance aircraft in three dimensions even at close range and was light enough for installation in small ships. “The Royal Navy in the Era of the World Wars: Was it fit for purpose?”, p 275.

<sup>165</sup> The US statistics suggest VT ammunition improved the 5 inch gun kill rate by a factor of two to three. However, the massed ranks of rapid fire close range 40mm and 20mm guns were always far more effective. USN AA Action Summary, *ibid*.

<sup>166</sup> Many RN destroyer guns at the start of WWII, although supposedly dual purpose, could not elevate above 40 degrees, quite inadequate for AA fire against dive-bombers, which proved the primary threat to the RN in the first years of the war. The modern 5.25 inch was too slow in both movement and rate of fire. The RN is also criticised for being slow to adopt the Bofors 40mm and Oerlikon 20mm to replace the two pounder multi-barrel Pom Pom dating from the 1920s. However, the Oerlikon was being widely introduced from 1939 and, overall, RN light AA armament was still more prolific and of better quality than any other navy. From the 1930s through most of WWII, the RN persisted with 4 inch, 4.5 inch, two different 4.7 inch, and 5.25 inch AA weapons each with several variants. The US by comparison standardised almost totally on the 5 inch.

<sup>167</sup> For example, the RN capital ship rebuilds, *Renown* and *Valiant*, completed in 1939 mounted 20 x 4.5 inch primary AA armament, 32 (4 x 8) two pounders (approximately 40mm), and 16 x 0.5 inch (4 x 4). The latest US modernised battleships had 8 x 5 inch, 4 x 3 inch, and just 8 x 0.5 machine guns. Even the new build *North Carolina* on completion in mid-1941, after two years of European war, mounted only 4 x 4 x 1.1 inch and 12 x 0.5 machine guns in addition to her main secondary armament of 20 x 5 inch. By 1941, this was a pitiful light AA armament for any major warship let alone a brand new battleship. The IJN *Yamato*, despite her great size, was no better armed than *North Carolina* when completed in late 1941. Instead of a

also be argued that, if AA success in WWII for practical purposes depended on the “barrage” and the “hosepipe”, then HACS was quite a good system for directing this. RN AA firepower would prove grossly inadequate for the scale of land-based air attack it faced in the Mediterranean in 1940 – 41 but, by 1939, its ships mounted far more firepower than any other navy at that time.<sup>169</sup> It was also implementing new tactical dispositions to counter the air threat based on the concept of a layered defence and had introduced the Air Defence Officer to control and coordinate AA fire and ensure it was prioritised against the right targets. Here too its thinking was ahead of its competitors.<sup>170</sup> The availability of a US style tachymetric system would undoubtedly have improved some aspects of fire control but, given Pacific experience in 1942, its overall impact against the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean would have been less than many historians suggest.<sup>171</sup>

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modern dual purpose secondary armament, she maintained an old fashioned split between surface and AA guns. For long range AA, she had 12 x 5 inch, just over half the battery of *North Carolina*, and a light armament of 24 x 25 mm and 4 x 13mm. By 1941, *Valiant* had added a further 24 x 20mm Oerlikons and a comprehensive AA radar suite to her 1939 armament. This comparison further underlines the comparative quality of the RN capital ship reconstructions. For RN ships, see: H T Lenton and R A Burt. For *Yamato*, Evans and Peattie, *Kaigun*, p 376.

<sup>168</sup> The improvement in AA outfit was not confined to new build and modernised vessels. A statement on Naval Deficiencies prepared for the CID in October 1938 reports that AA rearmament had been completed for nine battleships, one carrier, ten heavy cruisers, six light cruisers and five AA cruisers by that time. The programme had extended to most remaining major units by the outbreak of war. Statement on CID Questions, October 1938, ADM 167/103, TNA.

<sup>169</sup> Friedman places particular emphasis on this point. He states that, in 1939, the RN was better equipped for air defence than its contemporaries. Not only did its warships mount more powerful AA batteries than any other navy but it alone had made provision to protect merchant ships. However, he adds that war experience quickly demonstrated that even the RN's greater AA armament was insufficient. This created a particular problem for the RN. Because its designers had already sought to maximise AA armament, they had left little margin to accommodate the weight of further increases. Chapters 4 and 8, *ibid*.

<sup>170</sup> The layered defence included an outer ring of destroyers or other light units to provide surface warning with an inner ring of cruisers to provide long range AA fire. This defensive screen would deploy: long range fire to harass aircraft when first sighted; high altitude fire to harass bombers at the point of release; and close range “barrage” fire. See: “Progress in Tactics”, ADM 239/142, TNA and Friedman, p 94, *ibid*.

<sup>171</sup> A very interesting report on RN experience with AA gunnery in the first 11 months of the war to 31 July 1940 was produced by Admiral Sir Sidney Bailey as part of his package of reports prepared for use with the Americans (see Chapter Four for more context on the Bailey report). It stated that the results of long range AA fire under combat conditions had proved disappointing compared to pre-war expectations. It had accounted for only a small proportion of known enemy losses although it did have a useful deterrent effect. The poor performance was probably due to a mix of: lack of practice firing; lack of tachymetric control; range-taking inaccuracies; and poor calibration facilities. Naval AA fire could not alone protect a fleet anchorage, naval base or convoy from high altitude bombing. By contrast, while close range and barrage fire could not cope adequately with dive-bombers, a sufficiently powerful battery, well handled, gave considerable protection to individual ships against other types of air attack. The report included details of enemy aircraft losses to date from AA fire and ammunition expenditure. Bailey minute PD 06939/40 of 10 August, 1940, approved by FSL the same day, ADM 199/691, TNA.

The final area of perceived weakness, inadequate commitment to anti-submarine warfare, is important to this thesis for three reasons. First, it illuminates the quality of the RN's risk assessment, its priorities, and its capacity to innovate. Second, it is important to establish how far Chatfield and the Naval Staff deliberately neglected ASW investment in the period 1935 – 38 for the sake of capital units. Was the pursuit of the two hemisphere navy bought at the cost of heavy losses and near defeat in the Battle of the Atlantic in 1940 – 42? Finally, to what extent did the IJN submarine threat influence RN ASW? In the introduction to his ground-breaking research into RN anti-submarine capability and policy between the wars published in 2003, George Franklin neatly summarized the prevailing historical consensus.<sup>172</sup> The central theme of this consensus was that the discovery and deployment of asdic in the early 1920s caused the RN to be grossly complacent about a future submarine threat until almost too late. An embedded belief that asdic had mastered the submarine threat fed general disinterest in anti-submarine warfare. There was thus little new thinking about the problem, no new tactical development, no relevant exercises, no effective planning for the introduction of convoy and inadequate investment in appropriate ASW platforms. As Franklin states: "The picture emerges of an inter-war RN which, having developed asdic, was content to ignore ASW and concentrate on cocktail parties and battle-fleet exercises". "When war comes, and the Germans attack Atlantic trade, the RN is found blowing the dust off 1918 documents, learning how to do it all over again, and doing extraordinarily well in the circumstances."<sup>173</sup>

Franklin convincingly refutes all the main charges in the prevailing consensus. The RN did not rest on its laurels with the discovery of asdic. There were not only steady technical improvements throughout the inter-war period but, more important, asdic was incorporated in a wider ASW system. A new ASW branch was set up, new tactics were thoroughly explored and tested, and new platforms and weapons evaluated. Franklin shows that, from the mid-1920s, the Japanese threat was important to ASW development because it gave the RN a specific scenario to explore, namely the defence of the battle-fleet from submarine attack in contested waters. There were also regular convoy exercises

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<sup>172</sup>George Franklin, *Britain's Anti-Submarine Capability, 1919 – 1939*.

<sup>173</sup> Franklin, p 2, *ibid*. Compare here Barnett's scathing comment on the interwar RN referred to earlier.



with multiple escorts and multiple submarine attackers.<sup>174</sup> Some of these anticipated future U-boat wolf-pack tactics to a remarkable degree. Contrary to popular myth, the RN did not fail to spot the threat of night attack by surfaced submarines and highlighted this in its convoy instructions drafted as early as 1934. However, it saw no effective way of countering this problem prior to the advent of radar.<sup>175</sup> Franklin argues that RN prediction of both German intent at the strategic level for execution of a trade war and the methods adopted at the tactical level were broadly correct.

Barnett is especially scathing in his allegations of RN neglect over the possibility of a new German submarine offensive. The Admiralty's "most serious failure of judgement" between the wars was that "with eyes focused on the battle-fleet, it ducked until too late the enormous problems of setting up a convoy system".<sup>176</sup> The best single item of evidence which demonstrates that Barnett is fundamentally wrong and Franklin right is the Joint Planning Committee paper on the protection of seaborne trade produced for the COS at the end of 1936.<sup>177</sup> This examined the worst case scenario for an all-out German offensive against British trade in 1939. The estimate for the scale of attack was extraordinarily accurate and the assessment of how it would be applied prescient.<sup>178</sup> Contrary to Barnett's claims, the paper demonstrates that the Admiralty was not fixated solely on the surface raider threat though it rightly took this into account. It fully anticipated early resort to unrestricted submarine warfare but also correctly emphasized the likelihood of an air offensive against ports and coastal shipping. The commitment to

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<sup>174</sup> Early exercises invariably had a Far East scenario in mind but in the mid-1930s the focus shifted to Europe and the Mediterranean.

<sup>175</sup> See also George Franklin's separate article on this specific topic: "The origins of the Royal Navy's vulnerability to surfaced night U-boat attack 1939 – 40", (*The Mariner's Mirror*, 90:1, February 2004, p 73 – 84).

<sup>176</sup> Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely*, p 44 – 46.

<sup>177</sup> COS 535 (JP) of 15 December 1936, "Protection of Seaborne Trade, Part 1, War with Germany", CAB 53/29, TNA. This updated an earlier paper prepared in July. Barnett does acknowledge the establishment of the multi-Department Shipping Defence Advisory Committee in early 1937 though he suggests this came rather late. Since the Germans only started building submarines in 1935, and had just ten ocean going boats at that time, his view seems over critical.

<sup>178</sup> The paper assumed the German Navy would comprise by 1939: one battleship, two battle-cruisers, three pocket battleships, one carrier, three 8 inch cruisers, six 6 inch cruisers, 28 large destroyers, and 66 submarines. 24 of the submarines would be small coastal type and the rest ocean capable which would allow about 10 on station at one time. In the event the battleship and one 8 inch cruiser were not ready until late 1940 while the carrier would never be completed. Only 57 submarines were available in September 1939 of which 30 were the small coastal type. The force would barely increase over the first year of war.

countering the submarine and air threat through convoy was unequivocal and the paper addressed convoy routes, organization and resources in detail. Its calculations for the escort requirement were reasonable for the scale of threat anticipated.<sup>179</sup>

The JPC produced an update paper a year later which reviewed the threat to trade not only from a war with Germany but also the scenarios of a war with Japan and then a simultaneous war with both.<sup>180</sup> The paper judged quite reasonably that simple geography dictated that Japan could not exert decisive pressure through an attack on trade in the way Germany could, nor given the huge distances involved could she easily sustain submarines in the Indian Ocean. US reaction to unrestricted trade war would also be a factor. The paper was frank about the need to give over-riding priority to dealing with the German threat in the event of simultaneous war and it recognized that it might only be possible to adopt a limited defensive holding operation in the Far East for quite some while.<sup>181</sup> In reviewing how well the RN assessed the risks of a future German attack on Atlantic trade, Franklin rightly emphasizes that that what the Admiralty did not and could not reasonably predict was the fall of France. RN plans to counter the U-boat threat focused on UK coastal waters and the immediate Atlantic approaches. A sustained mid- Atlantic campaign was not regarded as feasible by submarines operating from Germany or Holland given the long dangerous transit. German access to the Biscay ports fundamentally changed the problem of trade defence.

Franklin demonstrates that the Admiralty never regarded it as financially possible or militarily sensible to maintain in peacetime ASW forces sufficient to counter a full-scale trade war on the British Empire. They envisaged rather the establishment in peace of a skeletal ASW organization capable of rapid expansion. This included developing designs for ASW vessels, and identifying production capacity, so that ships could be mass produced quickly in wartime. Although there was steady evolution of ASW sloops

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<sup>179</sup> The paper gave a figure of 107 naval escorts made up from seven flotillas of the over-age destroyers, 30 assorted sloops, ten patrol vessels, and seven AA cruisers. This was not unreasonable to counter an assumed attack force of ten U-boats confined to the continental shelf. It also assumed a significant RAF contribution to reconnaissance, anti-U-boat patrol and fighter protection.

<sup>180</sup> COS 640 of 26 November 1937, "The Protection of Seaborne Trade, CAB 53/34, TNA.

<sup>181</sup> It is important to underline that these papers refer to the situation in 1939 and not 1942 onward when the "New Standard" building programme would have better equipped the RN for a two hemisphere war.

throughout the inter-war period, and a small programme for these was included under the DRC fleet, these were built to naval not merchant specifications so could not be mass produced quickly. The *Flower* class corvette, based on the Southern Pride whale-catcher, has been presented by some historians as a hasty last minute Admiralty response to a requirement it had failed to anticipate. Others have criticized the design as inappropriate to the demands of the mid-Atlantic. In reality, the *Flower* class fitted exactly the concept of identifying in peace a prototype suitable for mass production in war. Highlighting their limitations for the mid-Atlantic ignores the point that the Admiralty could not foresee losing France.

## Conclusion

The main conclusion from this Chapter is that the RN of 1939 was stronger, more capable, more innovative, and more ambitious in its strategic goals than the mainstream accounts of its inter-war history have so far accepted. Despite the constraints imposed by the Naval Treaties and the damage wrought by the Great Depression, Britannia did not let the trident slip in this period. The RN remained the largest navy backed by the largest naval industry and, given the scale of its re-armament programme from 1935, appeared well placed to sustain this position for the foreseeable future.<sup>182</sup> More important, the RN's rate of investment was broadly matching that of the combined Axis navies and its strategic goal for 1942 of fighting an offensive war in Europe while holding a defensive position in the East seemed achievable in resource terms. The RN was not the conservative service portrayed by Barnett. It was fully alert to the risks and opportunities posed by air and submarine warfare. It was a powerful innovator in both these areas and in exploiting modern sensors and communications. The RN had weaknesses and did not get everything right but, overall, the naval investment put in place from 1935 onward was both far-sighted and substantial set against the risks visible at the time. It had also achieved a

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<sup>182</sup> Recent articles by Professor N A M Rodger and Joseph Maiolo endorse this overall judgement although on some specific issues their interpretations differ from that in this chapter. Rodger states that, by all reasonable measures, throughout the inter-war years, the RN remained "certainly the greatest naval power". For Maiolo, the inter-war period for the RN is "not a story of inevitable decline" but rather of "astonishing ingenuity and audacity in the face of mounting challenges". See: N A M Rodger, "The Royal Navy in the Era of the World Wars: Was it fit for purpose?"; and, Joseph A Maiolo, "Did the Royal Navy decline between the two World Wars?", (*The RUSI Journal*, Vol 159, No 4; p 18 – 24; August/September 2014).

better balance across the different areas of naval capability than its enemies had, including those most relevant to the coming war. Events would demonstrate that it had created sufficient margin to cope with the loss of the French ally in 1940 and later to hold the Indian Ocean against the Japanese in the worst of circumstances in 1942.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The naval defence of the Eastern Empire 1935 – 40: Managing competing risks**

The previous chapter assessed the state of the RN in 1939 and its capacity to conduct a simultaneous war in two theatres. This chapter now examines how RN strategy and plans for managing the naval risks to the British Eastern Empire evolved in the face of the emerging “Triple Threat” over the period 1935 - 1940. The chapter begins by summarising how the COS saw the security risks to the British Empire in the Far East in 1935. It then examines how the established plans to counter the perceived threat from Japan through naval power evolved in the face of the growing threat from Germany to the British homeland and Atlantic and from Italy in the Mediterranean. It assesses how far and why the RN prioritised its commitment to the Eastern Mediterranean over the Far East from late 1938, and whether this represented a de facto strategic withdrawal of the RN from the Far East, as many historians have argued, or a deliberate strategic choice to concentrate scarce resources on protecting the inner core of the Eastern Empire from threats at both ends. The chapter ends in mid-1940 with the fall of France. This was a strategic shock not anticipated pre-war which required a fundamental reappraisal of naval priorities discussed in Chapter Three onward.

#### **The risk from Japan in 1935 and RN capacity to meet it**

Throughout the inter-war period, Britain’s strategy for protecting its interests and territories in the Far East rested on three assumptions. First, that the primary security risk to the Empire in this theatre was a conflict with Japan that translated into an attack on British trade and possessions. Second, geography and distance dictated that, with the important exception of the concessions<sup>1</sup> in China, successful Japanese action against

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<sup>1</sup> These were territories ceded or leased to Britain (and many other Western powers) by China during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the 1930s, the main British concessions were Hong Kong, and parts of Shanghai and Tientsin.

Britain could only be prosecuted and sustained by sea. Finally, it followed that the only effective counter to Japanese action was to deploy sufficient naval power to assert maritime control and ultimately coerce Japan into a satisfactory settlement. The evolution of this strategy through the 1920s and 1930s, and certainly its endless scrutiny by historians since, has a theological flavour reminiscent of cold war deterrence theory. For financial and logistic reasons, Britain was not prepared to station some two thirds of RN strength permanently in the East as a deterrent to a putative Japanese attack which until the mid-1930s was hypothetical.<sup>2</sup> Deterrence therefore rested on assurance that a fleet could and would be sent when required. Assurance required a suitable base in the theatre to support a major fleet and Singapore was selected.<sup>3</sup> It also required a vast array of plans to mobilise the major part of the RN in a crisis and despatch it to the East. This became the “Singapore Strategy”.

Critics of the “Singapore Strategy”, including a plethora of historians through the 1970s and 1980s, argued that Britain always lacked the naval resources to counter enemies at home and deploy a credible fleet to the Far East able to overcome the world’s third naval power. They invariably quoted Admiral Herbert Richmond in 1925, who suggested the strategy rested on “the illusion that a Two Hemisphere Empire could be defended by a One Hemisphere Navy”.<sup>4</sup> For the critics therefore, the adoption of the “one power standard” of naval strength for the RN, described in the last chapter, as well as the logistic challenge of supporting a fleet on the far side of the world, rendered the strategy fatally

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All of these had slightly different legal status with Hong Kong effectively a Crown Colony. Britain had troops based in all three locations.

<sup>2</sup> Chatfield summarised the arguments for not basing a major fleet permanently in the Far East when briefing Dominion representatives at the Imperial Conference in June 1937. To be credible and effective, the Far East Fleet would need to be at least equal to that of Japan which would reduce the home-based fleet to a very small size. This policy would be hard to sell to the British public who paid for the fleet. It would mean two thirds or more of RN personnel would be on foreign service terms, presenting the Admiralty with an almost impossible financial and administrative challenge. Finally, the permanent presence of such a fleet might be interpreted by Japan as a hostile act complicating Britain’s ability to resolve differences by diplomatic means. COS 209<sup>th</sup> meeting of 1 June 1937, CAB 53/7, TNA.

<sup>3</sup> The reasons for selecting Singapore as a base are well covered in two books: David W McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base 1919 – 1942*, (London: Macmillan, 1979); and, James Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain’s Eastern Empire 1919 – 1941*, (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1981). Both books also offer a more balanced view of the “Singapore Strategy” than most other histories published in the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Alan Warren, *Singapore 1942: Britain’s Greatest Defeat*, (Hambledon & London, 2002), p 289. Also, Haggie, *Britannia at Bay*, p 11.

flawed from the outset.<sup>5</sup> Christopher Bell has provided both a powerful rebuttal of much of the critics' case and also an excellent overview of how RN policy and planning for handling a conflict with Japan evolved across the interwar period in a manner not easily reduced to a single "Singapore Strategy".<sup>6</sup> He argued that the prevailing historiography suffered from two failings. It focused on the size of fleet to be deployed and its passage to Singapore rather than the strategic outcome the Admiralty hoped to achieve. And it implied there was a single rigid strategy, a "sort of naval Schlieffen plan" when the reality was more flexible. Admiralty planners were never fixated on fighting another "Jutland" but anticipated a strategy of economic coercion designed to bring Japan to acceptable terms. They also considered a wide range of contingencies depending on available RN resources and how the strategic environment changed both globally and within the Far East theatre. Bell disputed that the "Singapore Strategy" was always flawed. He argued that Britain enjoyed sufficient naval superiority in the 1920s to deploy a large fleet in the Far East and still dominate European waters, that this position was only undermined by the emergence of the triple threat from the Axis powers in the late 1930s, and only precluded by the fall of France in 1940, an event that could not reasonably be anticipated. By the mid-1930s, the real question for British planners was whether they could send the ships required for an offensive strategy, or only enough for a defensive one. Bell suggests British naval strength was sufficient to allow a defensive posture in Europe and Far East simultaneously while, with a reliable ally (such as France) it might even be possible to take the offensive in one theatre.<sup>7</sup>

Bell's work is a powerful corrective to the traditional picture both in demonstrating that there was a coherent and rational framework underpinning British strategy and in providing a more accurate and balanced assessment of RN strength which is broadly

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<sup>5</sup> Malcom Murfett's essay 'Reflections on an Enduring Theme: The "Singapore Strategy" at Sixty', gives a good summary of the evolution of the Singapore Strategy and the critiques made by successive historians. In *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited*, edited by Brian Farrell and Sandy Hunter, (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Christopher M Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, Chapter 3 – "Far Eastern War Plans". He begins this chapter with a list of the main works critical of the "Singapore Strategy". Andrew Field's work, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939: Planning for a war against Japan*, (London: Frank Cass, 2004), offers much evidence in support of Bell's thesis.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Bell, p 93- 94.

consistent with that established in Chapter One. There are, however, three areas he does not address and which remain neglected by other historians too. The first is clarity on Britain's interests in the Far East. How did British decision-makers see these? Did they view some as vital and others more discretionary, not worth the risk of fundamental conflict? How did interests translate into an "offensive" or "defensive" strategy, indeed what did these terms really mean? The second is the relationship of the Mediterranean and ultimately the hostility of Italy to the Far East problem. Was the hostility of Italy viewed by decision-makers as another call on scarce military resources which therefore reduced capacity available for the Far East or did it change the strategic framework for defending the Empire in a more substantial way? The final issue is whether Bell understates the logistic challenge and opportunity costs faced by Admiralty planners in deploying a fleet and carrying forward the anticipated economic coercion strategy over a considerable period. Was this ever credible once Germany could threaten "home terminals" as she could from 1935?

An authoritative picture of how the RN leadership and COS saw the risk<sup>8</sup> posed by Japan and the means available to counter it at the beginning of 1935 can be gleaned from three papers circulated at that time to the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) readership. The first is a memo on the Far East prepared by the Foreign Office in mid-March to support a COS briefing for Dominion Prime Ministers. This saw Japanese ambition to achieve a dominant position in China as the key feature in the Far East landscape. While there was a risk this could clash with the interests of Britain and the US and lead to conflict, the FO judged this manageable. Japan's immediate focus was the consolidation of her position in Manchuria and she would avoid action that might leave her exposed to Russia. Britain should not impair relations with the US or China for Japan but could be conciliatory towards her reasonable economic interests and should avoid taking sides in disputes involving other parties where possible. The FO did not think Japan yet posed a threat southward towards the oil and rubber of the East Indies. She would calculate that

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<sup>8</sup> The term "risk" is widely used and abused. Where it is used in this thesis, it will generally follow the modern definition which defines "risk" as a combination of "threat", "probability" and "impact". "Threat" in turn comprises: "intent" and "capability". See Cm 7953, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy*, (London: HMSO, 2010).



the risks here outweighed the gains although the balance could change if Britain became pre-occupied in Europe, Russia was quiescent, or the US threatened her access to oil.<sup>9</sup> The second paper is the Admiralty response of early April which judged the FO view complacent. Japan was building up her forces and intended to dominate China, and perhaps other regions too, confident that she could prevent others from interfering. She recognised British weakness in the East and would therefore over-ride British interests in China and elsewhere whenever she judged she could get away with it. Distractions in Europe would only encourage her further. Britain's position in the Far East theatre could therefore "become delicate" at any moment.<sup>10</sup>

This exchange would have informed the third paper, the COS 1935 Annual Review, drafted during March and April.<sup>11</sup> This confirmed three main priorities for Imperial Defence: Defence of possessions and interests in the Far East; European commitments; and the Defence of India from the Soviet Union. It emphasised that, from the naval perspective, "the defence of our interests and possessions in the Far East is the greatest and most immediate of our commitments". The naval responsibility was summarised as "the provision and operation in emergency of a Main Fleet in the Far East sufficient to meet the Japanese Fleet at Japan's selected moment", and, secondly, under cover of this Fleet, protection of sea communications with the Dominions, India and the Colonial Empire. The execution of this responsibility required the use of Singapore and ideally Hong Kong. The Review emphasised that Japan was building up its strength rapidly with modernisation of its battle-fleet almost complete and significant investment in airpower. RN modernisation was lagging which meant 1936 would be a dangerous year.

The 1935 Review emphasised that war policy in the Far East would have to be "defensive". This judgement reflected both recognition of growing Japanese strength and

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<sup>9</sup> COS 368 of 16 March 1935, FO Memo "The Situation in the Far East", CAB 53/24, TNA. This was a good reading of genuine Japanese attitudes and priorities which would remain broadly valid until at least mid-1940. For the Japanese perspective, see JM 146, Political Strategy Prior to the Outbreak of War, Part II, OCMH, USA.

<sup>10</sup> COS 370 of 6 April 1935, Admiralty paper "The Situation in the Far East", CAB 53/24, TNA. Bell provides a useful summary of earlier RN views of the threat posed by Japan at p 61 – 62 of *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy*.

<sup>11</sup> COS 372 of 29 April 1935, Annual Review by COS for 1935 "Imperial Defence Policy", CAB 53/24.

the difficulty the RN would currently have generating sufficient forces to pursue a successful coercion strategy. Earlier COS assessments had been frank about the challenges posed by Far East deployment. In their 1932 Review, which followed the outbreak of conflict between Japan and China and a potential threat therefore to British interests in the latter, the COS stated: “We possess only light naval forces in the Far East; the fuel supplies required for the passage of the Main Fleet to the East and for its mobility after arrival are in jeopardy; and the bases at Singapore and Hong Kong, essential to the maintenance of a fleet of capital ships on arrival are not in a defensible condition. The whole of our territory in the Far East, as well as the coastline of India and the Dominions and our vast trade and shipping lies open to attack”.<sup>12</sup> A year later they judged the risks remained unchanged while there had been no progress in addressing deficiencies.<sup>13</sup> In their 1933 Review, the COS underlined the growing strength of the IJN, including in air power, and the scale of RN force required to “meet the IJN at her selected moment”. The RN would need all its immediately available capital ship and carrier force and most of its available cruisers, now reduced to 50 under the 1930 Treaty of London, although a reduction in the IJN capital ship force until its capital ship modernisation programme completed in 1937 provided some comfort. The COS emphasised not only the growth of Japanese air power but also that their equipment and training here were “approaching European standard”.<sup>14</sup> Several papers at the turn of 1933 considered how this air power might be applied and the British resources needed to counter it. Some of the thinking here, notably the possibility of surprise dawn strikes by carrier aircraft on bases like Singapore, was farsighted.<sup>15</sup> The RN’s poor state of preparedness to match growing IJN strength at this time was underlined in exchanges between Chatfield and the new CinC China Admiral Sir Frederick Dreyer.<sup>16</sup> The 1934 COS Review recorded further

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<sup>12</sup> COS Annual Review of Imperial Defence Policy 1932, para 13, COS 295 of 23 February 1932, CAB 53/22, TNA. An Annex “Situation in the Far East”, prepared by the Deputy Chiefs looked at the defence deficiencies here in more detail.

<sup>13</sup> “Situation in the Far East”, COS 305 of 31 March 1933, CAB 53/23, TNA.

<sup>14</sup> COS 310 of 12 October 1933, Imperial Defence Policy, Annual Review (1933), CAB 53/23, TNA.

<sup>15</sup> COS 314 of 14 October 1933 provides CAS views on prospects of a four carrier air strike. COS 317 of 11 January 1934 by the FSL explores the issue further. COS 327 of 20 April 1934 summarises “Air Requirements for Defence of Singapore”. All are in CAB 53/23, TNA.

<sup>16</sup> Dreyer was scathing about Far East war readiness when he arrived. He claimed there were no effective war plans and that the China squadron was in a poor state. Letter to Chatfield of 12 December 1933. Chatfield responded in letters of 2 February and 7 August 1934. He accepted the RN was currently poorly prepared for a Far East war but correcting deficiencies would take time. However, while not complacent, he

enhancements to Japanese strength. Seven out of nine IJN capital ships would be modernised by 1936, IJNAF strength was now 675 aircraft compared to 279 in 1932 and was expected to reach 1000 by 1940, strength in active personnel was above the RN, and fleet manoeuvres were following a higher tempo.<sup>17</sup>

From the 1933 Review onward, the COS underlined that despatching an adequate fleet to the East would leave very limited naval forces at home.<sup>18</sup> The 1935 Review accordingly stated that, given the increase in IJN strength, a “one power standard” for the RN was no longer satisfactory. “The existing margin is only sufficient on the supposition that France will not be our enemy in Europe and we are not without allies”. Nevertheless, the COS judged that, so long as France was an ally, and there was sufficient warning time to mobilise ships in refit, it would still be possible to provide adequate naval security against Germany for the “next three to four years” while “defending against Japanese aggression” in the Far East.<sup>19</sup> On a more positive note, the 1935 Review reported significant improvements to the Singapore defences.<sup>20</sup>

The COS 1935 Review did not explain what their “defensive policy” meant in practice, although a separate COS memo at the end of 1934 did offer some insight into how Britain aimed to conduct a Far East war at this time. The arrival of the Fleet in Singapore would ensure adequate maritime security to the west across the Indian Ocean and south towards Australasia. It should also enable the RN to exert some control over the South China Sea while the IJN was likely to control the area north of Formosa, leaving the space between

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doubted aggressive action by either Japan or Germany was imminent and this would give the RN space to rebuild its capability. The first phase of the Singapore defences had been approved and should complete in 1936. All in CHT/4/4/, NMM.

<sup>17</sup> Annual Review of Imperial Defence 1934, COS 357 of 30 November 1934, CAB 53/24, TNA.

<sup>18</sup> Annual Review of Imperial Defence Policy, COS 310 of 12 October 1933, CAB 53/23, TNA. This assessed that IJN strength to 1940 would average nine capital ships, four carriers, and 29 cruisers. To counter this, the RN required 12 capital ships, five carriers and 46 cruisers. In the event of trouble in Europe while the Fleet was away, the RN would rely on bringing back into service capital ships on long refit etc.

<sup>19</sup> Annual Review of Imperial Defence 1935, COS 372 of 29 April 1935, CAB 53/24, TNA.

<sup>20</sup> Annex 3 of Review, *ibid.* It was agreed in 1934, following submission of the DRC First Report, that work on these defences would proceed in two stages with only Stage I approved at that time. In mid-1935, the COS expected most of Stage I to complete by end 1936 and were finalising proposals for Stage II. “Singapore: Acceleration of Provision of Defences”, COS 386, of 9 July 1935. In October, the Defence Policy and Requirements Committee of the Cabinet approved part of Stage II following receipt of a gift of £500,000 from the Sultan of Johore. “Singapore Defences”, JDC 222 of 1 October 1935. Both are in CAB 53/25, TNA.

these areas in dispute. If the IJN avoided a fleet action, the RN would harass Japan's sea communications and apply economic pressure to bring her to terms though it recognised this could take considerable time and decisive success was unlikely without active support from the US and China.<sup>21</sup>

The ability of the RN to generate adequate forces to meet an emergency in the Far East, if one had occurred in the autumn of 1935, is illuminated by examining the deployments made against Italy during the Abyssinian crisis over the winter 1935 - 36. That autumn RN planners had to produce sufficient forces in the Mediterranean to facilitate an effective economic coercion strategy against Italy even if Britain was the only power prepared to act. The Italian Navy was significantly smaller than the IJN<sup>22</sup> but Italy's central position in the Mediterranean where she could operate on interior lines made the application of British naval power in the face of Italian land-based air power far from straightforward. There were some striking similarities to the Far East problem both in planning an economic blockade strategy and in finding adequate support and forward operating bases for the fleet to execute it. The RN also had to consider the security of the UK homeland against Germany while the bulk of the RN was in the Mediterranean although retrieving some or all of the Fleet from here was an easier proposition than getting it back from the Far East. The RN originally envisaged a total Mediterranean commitment of ten capital ships, three aircraft carriers, 14 cruisers and 54 destroyers but, without full mobilisation<sup>23</sup>, manpower limitations reduced this force by three capital ships and one carrier.<sup>24</sup>

The following spring, the German occupation of the Rhineland raised the possibility of war with Germany while the bulk of the navy was still in the Mediterranean, effectively

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<sup>21</sup> "Strategic Position in the Far East with particular reference to Hong Kong and air requirements for the Far East", COS 347 of 29 October 1934, CAB 53/24, TNA.

<sup>22</sup> The Italian Navy was much smaller in capital ship strength (four compared to nine) and had no aircraft carriers. However its strength in cruisers and light forces was substantial, at least on paper, amounting to about 75% of IJN strength in these categories. See Annex 5 of 1935 COS Review of Imperial Defence Policy, for a detailed breakdown of comparative naval strengths in 1935. COS 372 of 29 April 1935, CAB 53/24, TNA.

<sup>23</sup> This was ruled out on political and diplomatic grounds.

<sup>24</sup> COS Memo 392 of 9 August 1935, "Italo-Abyssinian Dispute", provides JPC figures for naval forces as originally planned. CAB 53/25, TNA. For actual strength achieved by late September, see Arthur Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran*, p 78.

therefore putting the “1932 standard” to the test. The COS initially reported that the minimum acceptable requirements for a naval war against Germany could only be met by withdrawing forces from the Mediterranean and jeopardising strategic goals against Italy. Risking war without such a withdrawal would be “thoroughly dangerous”.<sup>25</sup> A subsequent more detailed appraisal by the Joint Planning Staff (JPS) identified the total forces the RN could immediately generate on mobilisation for a war with Germany together with their global distribution.<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, it demonstrated that the combined RN forces in the Home and Mediterranean theatres vastly outnumbered Germany and the Joint Planning Committee (JPC) concluded there was no prospect of Germany winning a war at sea.<sup>27</sup> Although the paper did not say so, it also demonstrated that, on mobilisation, there were enough RN forces in the two theatres comfortably to match both Germany and Italy even without throwing the significant French forces into the balance.<sup>28</sup> By looking at these April 1936 estimates for RN force generation, the maximum force deployable for a Far East war at this time in the absence of a requirement against Italy can be estimated. In essence it would have comprised most of the forces deployed in the Mediterranean for the Abyssinian crisis together with the existing China Fleet. This comes to seven capital ships, three carriers, ten heavy cruisers, 20 light cruisers, eight destroyer flotillas and 25 submarines.<sup>29</sup> This figure is well short of the COS 1933 estimate for the force required to meet the IJN but would broadly equate to the

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<sup>25</sup> COS 442 of 18 March 1936, “The Condition of our Forces to meet the Possibility of War with Germany”, CAB 53/27, TNA. This paper stated that the only naval forces immediately available in home waters were: one 6 inch cruiser, 17 destroyers, and nine submarines. However, this force could be increased substantially by full mobilisation. Three battleships, one carrier, ten cruisers and 15 destroyers could then be added to the “immediate” forces within 14 days without affecting Mediterranean strength.

<sup>26</sup> COS 460 JP of 27 April 1936, “Situation in the event of unprovoked aggression by Germany arising out of the present crisis (March – April 1936)”, CAB 53/27, TNA.

<sup>27</sup> The combined total for the Home and Mediterranean based forces comprised: eight battleships, two battle-cruisers, three carriers, seven heavy cruisers, eight modern 6 inch cruisers, 14 other light cruisers, ten destroyer flotillas and 19 submarines. Only ten capital ships were available because *Warspite* was being reconstructed, *Malaya*, *Royal Oak* and *Repulse* were in two year extended refits, and one other was in short refit. *Queen Elizabeth*, *Valiant* and *Renown* would move into two to three year reconstructions during 1936-37 as *Malaya*, *Royal Oak* and *Repulse* became available. *Warspite* re-commissioned in early 1937.

<sup>28</sup> Roskill quotes COS 442 in *Hankey, Man of Secrets, Volume III 1931 – 1963*, (London: Collins, 1974), p 224, to argue that the naval picture here was “depressing in the extreme”. He does not mention the more balanced view evident in COS 460.

<sup>29</sup> This would have left about three capital ships, one carrier, three heavy cruisers, three light cruisers, three destroyer flotillas and ten submarines in home waters to counter Germany.

realistic maximum strength the IJN could generate for a war with Britain at this time.<sup>30</sup> It also compares well with the projected RN forces required for a defensive Far East war set out in the “New Standard” papers drafted by the Naval Staff in the autumn of 1936 and described in the previous chapter.<sup>31</sup> It would certainly be sufficient for the “defensive war” postulated in the COS 1935 Review.

The evidence summarised above, representative of a wide range of COS and Admiralty papers, leads to a number of conclusions. For the first half of the 1930s, Britain’s military leadership assumed a Far East war would be triggered by Japanese action against British interests in China which were essentially commercial.<sup>32</sup> What followed would initially therefore be a trade war, conducted primarily at sea, where each side sought to inflict enough damage to persuade the other to desist.<sup>33</sup> Such a war might be limited in both scale and geography but the RN anticipated the possibility of wider attacks on British shipping and possibly coastal raids towards Australasia and the Indian Ocean. It also expected Japan to inhibit British reinforcement through seaborne attacks on Hong Kong and Singapore and possibly sabotage of the Suez Canal.<sup>34</sup> The minimum British “defensive” objective was clearly to protect Empire territory and the key Empire trade and communication routes. Assuming Singapore was held, the 1936 force identified in the

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<sup>30</sup> The British estimate of IJN strength at the start of 1935 is available at Appendix 5 of the COS 1935 Review. This quoted: nine capital ships, four carriers, 14 heavy cruisers, 20 light cruisers, 104 destroyers, and 57 submarines. However, only seven capital ships were immediately available (two in modernisation) and only two of the carriers were large fleet units. 75% would then be a reasonable figure for maximum availability of the other forces.

<sup>31</sup> See Table 3 in Chapter One. The New Standard proposed a Far East requirement of 13 capital ships, four fleet carriers, 25 cruisers, seven destroyer flotillas and 23 submarines. However, this calculation was based on the estimated strength of the IJN in 1942 not the IJN of 1936 which was significantly smaller.

<sup>32</sup> Hong Kong was an obvious exception here being British owned or leased territory. There were also British troops based in the Shanghai and Tientsin concessions (a single battalion in each). COS 347 of 29 October 1934, “Strategic Position in the Far East with particular reference to Hong Kong and Air Requirements for the Far East, CAB 53/24, TNA.

<sup>33</sup> This is how the JPC would express the Far East problem in early 1937. “If war occurs, the basic cause is likely to be the conflict between Japanese policy and British interests in the Far East. We therefore assume that our object is to bring such pressure on Japan as to force her to desist from her policy.” COS 579 of 7 May 1937, COS Far East Appreciation, CAB 53/31, TNA.

<sup>34</sup> COS 305 of 31 March 1933, “The Situation in the Far East”, CAB 53/23 TNA, addressed the risk to Singapore and Hong Kong in trenchant terms. In regard to the former it stated: The Singapore Naval Base is “the pivot of our whole naval strategic position in the Far East”, until provided with adequate defences, it is “liable to capture or destruction by coup de main” before the main fleet can arrive, while its recapture would be a “major operation of the greatest difficulty”. Chatfield’s view of the risk to the Suez Canal is set out in a letter to CinC Mediterranean, Admiral Sir William Fisher, dated 24 January 1935. CHT/4/5/, NMM.

previous paragraph was sufficient to protect Malaya and secure the sea routes to the south and west. It would also offer a reasonable chance of relieving Hong Kong.<sup>35</sup>

There is no evidence that British planning for a Far East war ever contemplated direct attack on Japan itself and Chatfield dismissed this as “out of the question” in 1937.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, although none of the military planning documents say so explicitly, and no historian has adequately addressed the issue, the difference between a “defensive” war and an “offensive” war was essentially twofold. First, an offensive strategy was the only way to secure the British stake in China. Since British planners acknowledged the IJN would exert control north of Formosa, Britain could not hope to protect, or if necessary recover, its concessions in China without either inflicting a major defeat on the IJN fleet or strangling Japanese trade to the point it was obliged to sue for peace and restore the status quo ante. Second, it was the only way of bringing a war to a successful conclusion rather than acquiescing in a stalemate which might include the loss of Hong Kong. The RN could not credibly generate the scale of force, required over a sustained period, to conduct an offensive war after 1930 and certainly not once it needed a substantial deterrent force against Germany in home waters as opposed to minimum protection of “home terminals”. The China interest was not therefore defensible by military means.<sup>37</sup> This was certainly the private view Chatfield expressed to Sir Warren Fisher in mid-1934. The most Britain could hope for in the East was to have a sufficient Navy to go there in emergency not to threaten Japan but to prevent her threatening Australia and India. Chatfield did not think Britain could ever prevent Japan dominating China but he felt it should be possible to secure Britain’s commercial interests through diplomacy.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> COS 344 of 30 July 1934, “Hong Kong: Plans for Defence, Relief or Recapture”, CAB 53/24, TNA, examines this in detail. The paper does not address recapture but suggests this would be a formidable operation probably requiring the landing of a substantial expeditionary force.

<sup>36</sup> COS 209<sup>th</sup> meeting dated 1 June 1937, CAB 53/7, TNA.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Bell does provide an excellent summary of the evolution of Admiralty planning for a Far East war across the whole interwar period in Chapter three of *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy*. He emphasises the importance of economic coercion at the core of RN thinking and is perhaps the only historian to date to give this proper weight. While he certainly addresses the distinction between an “offensive” and “defensive” strategy, his analysis here focuses on “ways” and “means” rather than “ends”. He does not therefore sufficiently bring out the consequences and limitations of pursuing a defensive strategy as the above paragraph seeks to do.

<sup>38</sup> Chatfield letter to Sir Warren Fisher, PUS Treasury, dated 4 June 1934, CHT/3/1, NMM.

This raises the question of why the COS and, above all the Admiralty, devoted so much effort through the 1930s to planning for a war triggered by China interests they acknowledged implicitly, if not always explicitly, they could not defend. There is no simple answer to this. Britain's economic stake in China was substantial and undoubtedly viewed as more important at the time than through the perspective of historical hindsight. It represented 6% of Britain's overseas investment, was a key export market, and home to influential trading enterprises operating across the whole Far East region.<sup>39</sup> Britain was also a key stakeholder in the various international agreements that regulated external interests in China and the protection of China's rights under the League of Nations. Perhaps more influential for those charged with Empire security was the perception of a "domino effect" whereby successful Japanese control over Northern China would rapidly feed wider ambitions to expand southward and ultimately threaten Malaya and beyond. By 1936, there was a growing consensus that Japan aspired to long term control of Eastern Asia and the South Pacific and would exploit any British weakness to further its aims.<sup>40 41</sup> The threat here of course embraced non-British territories such as the NEI that were nevertheless vital to Britain's security.<sup>42</sup> The British stake in China was perceived therefore as strategic as well as economic. China was the Empire's first line of defence.<sup>43</sup> Two other factors influenced Britain's view of the strategic status of China. First, Hong Kong was located geographically in China but was British crown territory. The COS and Admiralty were obliged therefore to plan for its defence and no British Government could lightly contemplate its loss. The second factor was that, in a conflict triggered by

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<sup>39</sup> Anthony Best, *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbour: Avoiding War in East Asia, 1936 – 1941*, (London: Routledge, 1995), p 7.

<sup>40</sup> A memo covering the risk of Japanese aggression against India prepared by the Indian Army General Staff in late 1936 exemplifies this view. It stated that Japan's immediate aim was to dominate China, especially the North, for both economic and military reasons. It would then provide a base to attack Russia or move south. Ultimately, Japan aspired to the long term control of Eastern Asia and the South Pacific. COS 523 of 3 November 1936, "Vulnerability of Burma in a Far Eastern War", CAB 53/29, TNA. The following May, the COS stated that they endorsed this view of Japanese policy. COS 588 of 28 May 1937, CAB 53/31, TNA.

<sup>41</sup> This view and the official papers which propagated it was essentially supposition. It did not reflect any evidence of Japanese intent because at this time, and indeed up to 1940, no coherent intent to seize territories or interests south of China by force existed. JM 146, Political Strategy Prior to the Outbreak of War, Part II, *ibid*.

<sup>42</sup> The COS 1935 Review certainly argued that "the integrity of the Netherlands East Indies, Siam and Macao has been assured mainly by British seapower".

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind: The United States, Britain and the War Against Japan, 1937 – 1945*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978), p 36 - 37.



Japanese aggression in China, Britain would not necessarily be alone. Such action would threaten US assets as well and Britain and the US shared a wider interest in containing Japanese ambition. Britain invariably found US policy in the Far East both unpredictable and unreliable but US naval support in executing an aggressive trade blockade was at least possible.

### **The rise of the Axis: Contemplating war on three fronts**

The previous chapter has described how, at the end of 1935, the DRC argued that naval rearmament must be based on the needs of a two hemisphere war but failed to win formal Cabinet endorsement for this concept. During 1936, while the Admiralty developed proposals for a New Standard navy, the combination of perceived Japanese ambition, accelerating German rearmament, and the disruptive behaviour of Italy with its potential threat to Britain's position in the Mediterranean, raised concerns about Britain's ability to manage the global risks to Empire security. Chatfield, writing privately to Hankey at the beginning of 1937, felt Imperial security policy was "drifting" while Britain's continued commitment to collective security under the League exposed her to unlimited liability.<sup>44</sup> He was doubtful it was possible to safeguard the Empire if Britain became involved in simultaneous war East and West. This was "something we have never done before" and "should not contemplate". Rearmament would provide deterrence and, after 1942, enable Britain to negotiate from a position of strength but, for the next five years, it was important to reduce the risk of conflict through judicious concessions. Because of its Empire responsibilities, Britain could not take risks in Europe.<sup>45</sup>

At formal COS level, the growing security risks to the Empire were addressed in two important papers prepared in the first half of 1937 for the Imperial Conference in June.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Chatfield's view of "collective security" was well summarised in his memoirs. "Collective security inflicted on the COS impossible responsibilities. No-one could tell us who to fight against." Lord Chatfield, *The Navy and Defence, Vol II, It Might Happen Again*, (London: William Heinemann, 1947), p 87.

<sup>45</sup> Notes by Chatfield, on Sir Robert Vansittart's Memo on the World Situation and Hankey's subsequent comments, dated 5 January 1937, CHT/3/1, NMM. These notes were shared with Hankey.

<sup>46</sup> Imperial Conferences were gatherings of Government leaders of the Dominions and self-governing territories of the Empire. They took place approximately every five years. The previous full conference was in London in 1930 but there was an Imperial Economic Conference in Ottawa in 1932.

These were an overall Review of Imperial Defence<sup>47</sup> and a more specific paper focused on the Far East<sup>48</sup>. The former paper doubled as the COS Annual Review and comprised a major stock-taking of the Empire's military liabilities and assets shared with Dominion Governments.<sup>49</sup> The Far East Appreciation was an equally wide-ranging review of the specific risks in the Far East and present strategy for countering them. It was essentially therefore a stock-take of the "Singapore Strategy" as of mid-1937.

At the Imperial Conference itself, the First Lord, Sir Samuel Hoare, in a statement clearly designed to confront scepticism from Australia and New Zealand, insisted that the security of the Empire continued to depend on RN ability to control sea communications anywhere in the world, and gave an unambiguous assurance to send a fleet to the Far East if necessary.<sup>50</sup> Chatfield, as COS Chairman, subsequently summarised Britain's strategy for a "Pacific War", drawing on the COS papers above, at a briefing for Dominion representatives on 1 June.<sup>51</sup> In contemplating such a war, Britain faced two problems: two enemies separated by 10,000 miles with Italy lying between them, resentful, ambitious and able to do damage; and the prospect the UK could be drawn into a European conflict not of its choosing.<sup>52</sup> Chatfield saw two compensating advantages: the Anglo-German Naval Agreement which capped German naval strength; and the cooperation and resources of the

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<sup>47</sup> "Imperial Conference, 1937, Review of Imperial Defence", COS 560 of 22 February 1937, CAB 53/30, TNA. Key paragraphs relevant to the Far East are: 25-28, 37-39, and 55-64.

<sup>48</sup> "Appreciation of the Situation in the Far East, 1937", COS 596 of 14 June 1937, CAB 53/32, TNA.

<sup>49</sup> The Admiralty insisted on adding a Naval Appendix to the main Review. This was essentially an overview of Empire naval capability, both current and planned, available to secure the sea communications of the Empire against seaborne attack. It was intended to help the Dominions plan their individual naval contributions within a common framework. The document is striking for the emphasis it places on trade defence and the scale of RN investment in AA and A/S capability. COS 570 of 24 March 1937, Naval Appendix to the Chiefs of Staff Review of Imperial Defence, CAB 53/30, TNA. The CIGS and CAS were clearly reluctant to see a separate Naval Appendix but Chatfield appears to have outmanoeuvred them, insisting that a similar Naval paper had been presented at previous Conferences and that the RN had a special responsibility for securing Imperial communications and guiding the contributions of the individual Dominions. COS 576 of late April 1937, Letter from FSL to Secretary of the CID, CAB 53/31, TNA.

<sup>50</sup> Minutes of Imperial Conference 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 26 May 1937, AIR 8/220, TNA. Hoare's statement, delivered in the presence of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, was arguably the most authoritative commitment made at the Imperial Conference though it was subsequently confirmed and amplified by Chatfield and drew on the COS Review already shared. Speaking at the CID some twenty months later, in February 1939, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain would describe this assurance given at the Imperial Conference as "categorical and unqualified". Minutes of 348<sup>th</sup> CID Meeting, CAB 2/8, TNA.

<sup>51</sup> COS 209<sup>th</sup> meeting dated 1 June 1937, CAB 53/7, TNA.

<sup>52</sup> The phrase "not of its choosing" referred to a scenario where Britain felt obliged to support France in a war with Germany which had been triggered by events in Eastern Europe where no direct British interests were involved. Para 84 of Review.

Dominions and India. Against this background, imperial defence had four tasks: Defence of the UK homeland without which the Empire would disintegrate; Security of the Mediterranean; Protection of Dominions and Colonies; and, Security of Imperial communications. Chatfield underlined, however, the conclusion of the Review that no risks associated with the Mediterranean could interfere with the despatch of a fleet to the Far East.<sup>53</sup> Britain might conceivably have to give up naval control in the Mediterranean and lose Malta and Cyprus but that need not imply loss of Britain's whole position in the Middle East since forces could be deployed and supported there via the Indian Ocean. The Mediterranean could always be recovered but the Far East, once lost, could not.<sup>54 55</sup> Chatfield then emphasised the differences between a European war and Pacific war. The former required a major contribution from all three services while the latter would be predominantly a naval war. It did not require an Army or Air commitment on a national scale. In Europe, economic pressure contributed to the strategic outcome but in the Pacific it was the only means to victory since invasion of Japan was inconceivable. This would be war fought at long distance with only part of the Empire affected. Chatfield accepted that exerting economic pressure against Japan would take time and decisive results were unlikely inside two years but the expansion of Japan's overseas trade had rendered her vulnerable and the more she invested in her military the more dependent she became on imports.

Chatfield then addressed the problems posed by a two hemisphere war. If Britain was already involved in a war with Germany, there would be two consequences for Far East

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<sup>53</sup> There was clearly an odd juxtaposition here. On the one hand, Chatfield was highlighting the importance of the Mediterranean, and, on the other, stating it would effectively be sacrificed if necessary for the Far East.

<sup>54</sup> The Imperial Review formally ranked British security interests as follows:

- (i). Security of Imperial communications throughout the world;
- (ii). Security of the UK homeland against German aggression;
- (iii). Security of Empire interests in the Far East against Japanese aggression;
- (iv). Security of interests in the Mediterranean and Middle East;
- (v). Security of India against Soviet aggression.

The COS would continue to rank the Far East above the Middle East in theory, if not in practice, until 1942.

<sup>55</sup> Overall, these statements were intended to convey, and were certainly interpreted by Australian and New Zealand representatives, as an unambiguous commitment to despatch a full competitive fleet in the event of any Japanese attack. The First Lord Sir Samuel Hoare had already given his even more direct pledge at the start of the Conference. "We believe that the very existence of the British Commonwealth of Nations as now constituted rests on our ability to send our fleet to the Far East should the need arise." E (PD) 37 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Principal Delegates, 26 May 1937, AIR 8/220, TNA.

strategy. First, the deployment of a fleet adequate to match Japan might be considerably delayed. It would be essential therefore to reinforce Singapore with extra troops and supplies as soon as war broke out with Germany to ensure the base could hold out in the face of delay. Second, the scale of fleet would only be sufficient for a defensive strategy.<sup>56</sup> Economic pressure would remain the key lever but its effect was bound to be much slower. Chatfield drew attention to the capital ship modernisation programme which would remove three ships from RN strength over the period 1937 – 39. It followed that, if the RN was to retain adequate strength against Germany, it would have little margin over the IJN capital ship force and at times would be inferior.<sup>57</sup> The RN believed it was more efficient than the IJN and could still win with inferior forces but it was prudent to base calculations on numerical strength and numbers also influenced deterrence. If the RN did have inferior forces, “we must feel our way carefully at first and judge the efficiency of the Japanese by their conduct in cruiser and destroyer operations in the early stages of a war. The RN could then better gauge what risk was acceptable.”<sup>58</sup>

A COS memo issued shortly before Chatfield’s briefing amplifies how the RN saw the risk posed by Japan in the first phase of a simultaneous war at this time.<sup>59</sup> The memo emphasised that the security of the eastern half of the Empire depended on the early establishment of a fleet at Singapore. At a minimum this fleet must be adequate to act on

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<sup>56</sup> These were of course important caveats which Chatfield appeared to have forgotten, or at least chose to play down, in the subsequent debates over Far East reinforcement with his successor, Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse, in early 1939.

<sup>57</sup> Hoare had also underlined this point on 26 May.

<sup>58</sup> Chatfield’s belief expressed here that the RN was more “efficient” than the IJN can be used to support the argument that the RN consistently underestimated the IJN. This issue is dealt with very effectively by Christopher Bell in *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy*, p 63 – 65. Bell argues that the RN always preferred to have numerical superiority over the IJN and always calculated the numerical balance through simple bean counting where one Japanese warship equated to one RN warship. However, he recognises that, in parallel to this view, many RN decision-makers (including Chatfield) thought the IJN threat would be more manageable than bean-counting would suggest. Bell argues this was not necessarily unreasonable. Navies are not equally effective, the RN did enjoy ingrained self-belief that it was superior to all other navies (a belief consistently justified in regard to the German and Italian navies in WWII), and in the Far East it was generally contemplating a defensive war with the support of a fortified base and shore air support while the IJN until 1940 would have very long and vulnerable lines of communication.

<sup>59</sup> COS 587 of 28 May 1937, “Protection of Sea Routes in Waters Adjacent to India”, CAB 53/31, TNA. This memo was a response to a Government of India request for guidance on the level of RN protection available in the Indian Ocean in the case of a “world war”. It reflected concern over the protection of Indian Army troops earmarked to reinforce Singapore.

the defensive and serve as a strong deterrent.<sup>60</sup> The time needed to deploy the fleet depended on the nature of the war. In a single-handed war, or if war with Japan came first, the fleet would be deployed within a timescale of 28 – 70 days. If war broke out simultaneously with Germany and Japan, deployment might need to await mobilisation of reserves and full force generation which could take three to six months. If war with Germany came first, force generation would be complete but redistribution of forces might be complex, extending the 70 day target. The intervention of Italy would impose further complications but it was a cardinal principle that the Far East took priority over the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, Japanese action would depend on their perceived priorities and commitments. IJN deployment of two capital units in the Indian Ocean, together with cruisers, light forces and submarines was a reasonable assumption. Their role would be to attack British reinforcements, raid bases and destroy fuel stocks. In the worst case, this force might be deployed prior to formal hostilities. Pending arrival of the main RN Eastern Fleet, the only RN force available to counter an incursion into the Indian Ocean was the small East Indies squadron possibly reinforced by units from the China station squadron. Protection of trade and troop convoys would therefore depend heavily on evasive routing. This underlined the need to reinforce Singapore with planned extra troops and supplies as soon as war broke out with Germany and in advance of Japanese intervention.

Three fundamental conclusions can be drawn from this collection of papers and Chatfield's presentation. The first is the extent to which British strategy at this time was shaped by the need to protect the Empire as a whole rather than a narrow focus on the security of the UK homeland.<sup>61</sup> This is an obvious point but is not always sufficiently emphasised by historians. The second is formal recognition by the COS that Britain and its Allies might now face a global war against three enemies, Germany, Japan and Italy

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<sup>60</sup> The language "act on the defensive" and "serve as a strong deterrent" is lifted direct from the definition of "New Standard" in the DRC Third Report. It was regularly used from 1937 onward as the prospect of producing a fleet to match that of Japan became more difficult. The phrases clearly implied, and were certainly used to suggest, something less than a competitive fleet but neither the size nor goals of such a defensive force were ever adequately defined. As will be discussed later, Backhouse, Chatfield's successor as First Sea Lord, would focus on exactly this point in March 1939. SAC First Meeting, 1 March 1939, CAB 16/209, TNA.

<sup>61</sup> Chatfield was of course especially committed to the wider Empire perspective.

which meant Britain would have to address risks in three different theatres. The third is the COS view that, in such a global war, the priorities would be security of Imperial communications, the security of the UK homeland against Germany, and the security of Far East interests against Japan. For the COS, the security of the UK and security of Singapore were the two “keystones” on which survival of the “British Commonwealth of Nations” rested. The defeat of the UK homeland “would destroy the whole structure of the Commonwealth” while “the security of Australia, New Zealand and India hinges on the retention of Singapore as a base for the British Fleet”.<sup>62</sup> No losses in the Mediterranean would be as serious as the surrender of British seapower in the Far East which would leave the whole Eastern Empire exposed. The COS were clear that the primary and most immediate threat to the UK homeland was German air attack, while in the Far East, as Chatfield emphasised, the threat was essentially naval. They also, however, recognised that, “strategically”, the future of the UK homeland and the Empire were linked with France. If Germany crushed France, it would dominate all Western Europe generating power that would render the situation very difficult for Britain.<sup>63</sup> Against this background, the COS took some comfort from the fact that none of the three potential enemies intended direct action against the British Empire in the immediate future while Japan and Italy were only likely to move if Britain was already at war with Germany.<sup>64</sup> In the meantime rearmament had been initiated on a large scale primarily as insurance against Germany but also to enable the RN to provide an adequate fleet to meet liabilities in the East while leaving sufficient forces in home waters to neutralise Germany.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the growing global risks Britain faced, the Imperial Conference papers have a coherence and confidence that belies the conventional historical narrative that portrays Far East defence as now increasingly hopeless. Much of the supporting argument for the strength of fleet that could be deployed to the East in the period 1937 – 40, and the options for its use, were credible in the circumstances of the time. The COS were not willing, in

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<sup>62</sup> Paras 12, 14 and 79 of COS Review.

<sup>63</sup> Para 83 of COS Review.

<sup>64</sup> In regard to Japan, this was an accurate assessment of their thinking. JM 146, *ibid*.

<sup>65</sup> Paras 83 – 88 of COS Review.

part no doubt for political reasons, formally to admit the defence of Hong Kong was impossible but the Far East Appreciation left little doubt this was their true assessment and they certainly saw little chance of recovering the territory once lost. The Appreciation also effectively acknowledged that any operations north of Singapore with the forces available before 1940 would be limited at best, even in a single-handed war, and probably confined to protecting the coast of Malaya. The Appreciation not unreasonably judged that, in a strictly defensive war, the RN could still cut Japanese trade with South-East Asia and Europe and damage Trans – Pacific trade as well, while keeping British trade losses, other than China, to a minimum. It accepted, however, that in a full global war with Germany and Japan, the scope for achieving serious economic pressure on Japan would lapse from lack of resources.

There were nevertheless weaknesses in the COS assessment. The figures in the Far East Appreciation designed to demonstrate it was possible to provide a competitive fleet in the East, while maintaining a deterrent force against Germany, were optimistic as regards realistic force generation and political feasibility and this would be demonstrated when crises arose in the Far East at the end of 1937 and in mid-1939.<sup>66</sup> A related point, which was hardly addressed in any of the planning papers throughout the 1930s, let alone once the Triple Threat was a reality, was the difficulty of keeping some two thirds of the RN in

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<sup>66</sup> Para 330 of the The Far East Appreciation provided figures to demonstrate that capital ships could be made available for Far East deployment as follows over the period 1937 – 1940. Three RN ships, *Renown*, *Valiant* and *Queen Elizabeth*, were assumed to be in rebuild from mid-1937 to mid-1939 but available by autumn 1939. The new *KGVs* would then start to appear late 1940. The figures were therefore designed to demonstrate that the RN could still produce a credible capital ship force over this period of “maximum vulnerability” when for two years only 12 ships would be available.

- Summer 1937 – spring 1938: Ten ships leaving two battle-cruisers at home to counter the three German Pocket battleships.
- Spring 1938 – summer 1939: Eight ships leaving two battle-cruisers and two *Queen Elizabeth* class battleships at home to counter three Pocket battleships and two *Scharnhorsts*.
- Summer 1939 – late 1940: Ten ships leaving three battle-cruisers and two *Nelsons* at home to counter three Pocket battleships, two *Scharnhorsts* and two *Bismarcks*.

The figures were optimistic on three counts. First they suggested the rebuilds would be completed more quickly than experience with *Warspite* suggested was possible. Second, they took no account of ships absent in short refits of up to six months. And, most important, they understated the scale of force needed to contain the German fleet. Countering three Pocket battleships with two battle-cruisers was just about credible in military terms, if hard to sell politically, but Chatfield’s successor would judge in late 1938 that a minimum of six ships, including all three fast battle-cruisers, were needed to counter three Pocket battleships and two *Scharnhorsts*. As a result, with the rebuilds running late, as this chapter shows later, the Admiralty would struggle to project a force of even seven ships in the summer of 1939.

the Far East theatre for an indefinite period while economic coercion played out. There were also two more fundamental problems. The first was the failure adequately to address the scenario of Far East deployment when war was already underway with Germany. This was, after all, when the COS judged a Japanese move was most likely. In his briefing to Dominion representatives on 1 June, Chatfield had implied both a considerable delay in deployment under this scenario and that the scale of fleet would only be sufficient for a defensive strategy. These caveats were distinctly ambiguous. Did “considerable delay” compromise the assurance that Singapore could hold out until relieved? And since strategy was now assumed to be defensive even in a single-handed war, what did a reduced scale imply? Buried in Part I of the Far East Appreciation, under the heading “If war breaks out when we, allied with France, are already at war with Germany”, was rather more explicit, and for Australia and New Zealand, more alarming, language:

*“While the strength of the Fleet to be sent to the Far East can only be decided in the light of the conditions at the time, we cannot base our plans on any other assumption than that it will be unable to undertake operations forward of the Singapore area.”*

*“We cannot accurately forecast the delay which might occur before we could despatch a Fleet to the Far East since it must depend on the naval and political situation at the time.”*

This language was very close to that used by Vice Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham as DCNS in a submission to the CID almost exactly two years later and which is often regarded by historians as final recognition that the traditional Singapore Strategy was no longer feasible. The second problem was the failure to recognise that there were potential equities and risks in the Mediterranean and Middle East that might rival those in the Far East. This problem would loom ever larger over the coming year.

It is important to keep the emerging question-marks over the size of fleet that could be sent to the East in a simultaneous war, as it was perceived in 1937, in perspective. Historians who see confirmation here that the “Singapore Strategy” was an illusion and that the RN already faced impossible overstretch go too far. The COS and Admiralty



were not saying a fleet could not be sent but that it would take more time to build it up and that its ultimate strength in global war might be significantly inferior to the maximum IJN fleet. That would certainly rule out major RN operations north of Singapore but it would still be reasonable to anticipate reinforcing and holding Singapore and the Malay Barrier, even with a much reduced force, given that the IJN would face long lines of communication and would need to consider Russian and US intervention. It is also worth noting that the permanent RN forces based East of Suez in 1937 were rather larger than the entire German Navy of that time and, if employed boldly, could alone tie down significant IJN strength. Indeed the RN could not only harass, and perhaps severely degrade, any Japanese invasion convoy heading south, but also deploy the asymmetric “freak navy” tactics to harry the IJN which it so feared from the German navy in Europe.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Finally, it is clear from the 1937 papers that the Admiralty viewed 1937 – 39 as a window of vulnerability in managing the problem of simultaneous two hemisphere war. From 1940, it expected the fruits of the rearmament programme significantly to ease the pressures on the RN.

The caveats expressed in the Far East Appreciation on the scale and speed of deployment in a global war nevertheless exposed an unfortunate circularity in Britain’s Far East naval

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<sup>67</sup> In June 1937, the RN China Squadron comprised: One Carrier, four 8 inch heavy cruisers, two old 6 inch light cruisers, 11 destroyers, 15 submarines and one minelayer. The East Indies, Africa and Australasia squadrons could add a further three 8 inch cruisers, four modern 6 inch cruisers, three old 6 inch cruisers and three destroyers. Appendix A to Far East Appreciation, COS 596. The major units in the German Navy at this time comprised three Pocket Battleships and six 6 inch cruisers. The seven 8 inch cruisers available to the RN in the Far East were broadly equivalent to the three Pocket Battleships. Alastair Mars, who was a junior officer in the Far East based Fourth Submarine Flotilla from 1937 – 39, has provided a detailed picture of the capability of the China Squadron and the way it would have countered an IJN offensive at this time. This includes a detailed “war game” portrayal of what would have happened if Japan had immediately opened hostilities in September 1939. Mars makes a convincing case that the Fourth Submarine Flotilla could inflict decisive damage on any Japanese invasion convoy heading south. He subsequently became one of the most successful submarine commanders of WWII and was a Staff Operations Officer at Submarine HQ. His evidence and views therefore deserve respect. Alastair Mars, *Submarines at War 1939 – 1945*, (London: William Kimber, 1971), Chapter Three for “The Influence of British Submarine Power in the Far East”, and Appendix 1 for the war game. In a letter dated 11 October 1938 to CinC China, Vice Admiral Sir Percy Noble, Backhouse, who had just taken over as First Sea Lord, stated that he did not think the Japanese would relish running the gauntlet of the Fourth Submarine Flotilla in any putative attack on Singapore.

<sup>68</sup> In 1935, the then DCNS, Vice Admiral Sir Charles Little, stated that the primary object of the China Squadron in a war with Japan was “the security of the passage of the Main Fleet to the Far East”. Rather unhelpfully, he then compromised this simple aim by suggesting it also embraced a plethora of smaller objectives: defence of Hong Kong and Singapore; and inflicting damage on the Japanese in any operation they chose to undertake. Clearly the Squadron could not do all these things. DCNS Minute dated 19 March 1935, CHT/4/4, TNA.

strategy that it failed to address right up to the fall of Singapore in 1942. The modern definition of “strategy” comprises “ends, ways and means”.<sup>69</sup> There should be a desired overall goal, or end state, the route or ways to achieve this from the starting point, and the resources to enable the transition. This framework is helpful both in illuminating the attitude of decision-makers in 1937 and that of historians since. As already shown, the minimum end state sought by the COS was the prevention of any serious Japanese attack on Malaya, India, Australasia, and the trade and communications between them. The maximum end state was to convince Japan to renounce any action against any British interest anywhere in the Far East theatre. For the minimum end state, the importance of India and Australasia to the Empire, as Britain perceived it in the 1930s, was self-evident. Malaya mattered because it was a valuable economic asset and because it contained Singapore and the naval base on which Far East defence depended. Other goals falling under a maximum end state, such as holding Hong Kong, and protecting commercial interests in China might be desirable but, as argued above, were effectively discretionary. The chosen “way” to achieve the minimum end state was by establishing control of the southern part of the South China Sea and all sea areas to the south and west of this. The “way” towards the maximum end state was then to extend sea control steadily northwards. The primary “means” to achieve sea control was then a “fleet” which decision-makers judged must be broadly equal to the IJN in capital units and required a base at Singapore to operate effectively. The circularity lay in the fact that, in 1937, and for long afterwards, the Admiralty argued that the “means” (i.e. a “fleet”) depended on the availability of Singapore so the security of the base became an end in itself. The means therefore heavily influenced the inclusion of “protecting Malaya” as an essential goal in the minimum end state. This in turn required control of the southern part of the South China Sea which then dictated the size and composition of the desired fleet to be deployed.

In reality, while Singapore was certainly essential to an offensive posture aimed at the maximum end state, and executed over several years, that did not make it a pre-requisite

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<sup>69</sup> For this definition and a wider debate about the meaning of strategy, see: Cm 7953, *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy*, Introduction 0.14; and, HC 435, House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, *Who does UK National Strategy?*, (London: HMSO, 2010), 2 Defining Strategy, paras 9-16.

for achieving adequate sea control west and south of the Malay barrier. The RN would demonstrate that it could operate a substantial fleet from Ceylon with minimal heavy support facilities in the period 1942 – 44 just as it chose to move the Mediterranean Fleet from Malta to the minimally equipped but more secure Alexandria during the Abyssinian crisis of 1935 – 36 and again from 1939 – 43. The loss of Singapore did not therefore imply the loss of seapower in the East Indian Ocean and an imminent threat to India and Australasia if that is what Chatfield meant by “losing” the Far East. It might make the sustained operation of a major RN fleet temporarily more difficult but the potential resources and options that could be generated using the assets of India and Australasia would compensate. Chatfield’s argument that the Mediterranean was always recoverable so long as Britain held a strong position in the Middle East, serviced from the Indian Ocean, was a reasonable one to make in 1937, with Italy as the opponent here rather than Germany, though he perhaps still understated the scale of the military challenge in practice, and the strategic stakes would look much higher under the threat of German attack in 1941 – 42. His related argument that the Far East, by which he presumably meant Malaya, was irrecoverable was less convincing. The military challenge involved in recovering Mediterranean interests and Malaya was similar.<sup>70</sup>

The purpose of this strategy digression is not to argue that the COS and Admiralty should now have begun contingency planning to dispense with Singapore. As argued above, the Japanese threat to South East Asia was still remote, Britain could hold the Barrier with a reduced fleet, and, as Chatfield emphasised, the RN could expect to get stronger not weaker in the coming years. It is rather to demonstrate that the COS and Admiralty were locking themselves into a rigid mind-set that linked the survival of the core Eastern Empire<sup>71</sup> to the fate of Singapore when in reality the one did not follow from the other. Critics of the “Singapore Strategy” are right to highlight this rigidity of thinking and to see it looming large over the eventual fall of Singapore. However, the same critics also too often fail adequately to distinguish “ends”, “ways” and “means”. They perceive presumed RN inability to send a fleet after 1938, loss of Singapore in 1942, and a belief that Britain

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<sup>70</sup> In a minute dated 24 March 1939, Backhouse, Chatfield’s successor, stated that the loss of Singapore would be “serious” but it did “not mean the loss of the Eastern Empire for all time”. ADM 1/9909, TNA.

<sup>71</sup> “Core Eastern Empire” here means India and Australasia.

was unable then to provide adequately for the security of India and Australasia, as inextricably linked. This thesis argues that not only is this linkage misconceived but that the starting point and end point are also plain wrong. The RN always had the capacity to send a competitive fleet at least to the Indian Ocean so long as it accepted opportunity costs elsewhere, usually in the Mediterranean. In early 1942, it did deploy such a fleet and the loss of Singapore did not prevent this. The RN was also still capable in 1942 of exercising sufficient seapower to protect the core Eastern Empire in a much bleaker context than that envisaged pre-war.

There is a further point regarding the investment in Singapore in the 1930s that receives insufficient attention from the critics. They portray Singapore as symbol without substance but fail to acknowledge that symbolism mattered. Chatfield demonstrated the value of symbolism in his 1934 letter to Fisher. Japanese ambition beyond China could best be countered by having “a sufficient fleet recognised as being able to go out to Singapore and secure Britain’s strategic position”.<sup>72</sup> This was the “fleet in being” concept much favoured by Churchill later. The fleet did not have to be in the Far East to deter Japan. Deterrence held so long as Japan believed it was credible it could deploy. Visible investment in Singapore symbolised British commitment to Far East naval defence and gave Britain options.<sup>73</sup> Greg Kennedy has also argued that Singapore as “symbol of British resolve and capability” in the Far East was essential to convincing the US that Britain remained committed to protecting its interests in the region and setting the two countries on the path to strategic cooperation. Japanese uncertainty over the nature of that cooperation then enhanced deterrence and was one reason that Japan made no move against Britain for more than two years after September 1939.<sup>74</sup> If this argument is even partly accepted, it fully justified the money invested in the base.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Chatfield letter to Fisher of 4 June 1934, CHT/3/1, NMM.

<sup>73</sup> As the First Lord, Sir Samuel Hoare, stated at the Imperial Conference: “By our action in building, developing and equipping the Naval Base at Singapore, we have advertised to the world in general, and Japan in particular, our intention to maintain Imperial interests in the Pacific”. Imperial Conference, Minutes of 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting, AIR 8/220, TNA.

<sup>74</sup> Japanese sources suggest there was no serious discussion of “southern expansion” in Japanese leadership circles until late summer 1940 following German victories in Europe and no serious planning for a potential attack on Malaya and Singapore until early summer 1941. The possibility of US intervention no doubt exerted some influence on evolving Japanese attitudes in late 1940 but it does not appear to have been a decisive factor. The positive “deterrence” effect posed by the US was also balanced by the negative effect

Immediately following the Imperial Conference papers, the JPC produced a draft Appreciation of the situation in the Mediterranean and Middle East in the event of an early unilateral war against Italy. This reflected Italy's new status as a possible enemy in the wake of the Abyssinian crisis and the implications posed by a Mediterranean war for Britain's Far East strategy.<sup>76</sup> The paper complemented the earlier Far East Appreciation and exposed issues that would ultimately bring a significant shift in how the risks to the Eastern Empire were perceived. It also foreshadowed key aspects of overall British strategy in the coming war. The paper emphasised that Britain was immensely stronger than Italy and through its control of both ends of the Mediterranean could cut Italy's access to its African Empire and eliminate much of its trade. However, Italy held two powerful cards: its central position enabling it to threaten or cut Britain's primary sea and air routes to the Middle East and Eastern Empire; and its ability to threaten Egypt and the Canal from Libya. These Italian advantages led to three enduring conclusions for future British strategy. First, the confirmation that Malta was too vulnerable as a base for more than light RN forces.<sup>77</sup> The main Fleet would have to base in Alexandria which imposed time and distance challenges in controlling the central Mediterranean. Second, the naval effort required to move British merchant and military traffic through the Mediterranean with reasonable security in the face of a hostile Italy would be disproportionate. In war the Mediterranean would be closed and all traffic diverted round the Cape. The paper also demonstrated, however, that the economic loss from diversion of merchant traffic was manageable. Third, the defence of Egypt was critical to the security of the Canal, Alexandria, and Britain's wider position in the Middle East.<sup>78</sup> Since Egypt could not be

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on Japanese attitudes of any evidence of active Anglo-US military cooperation in the region which was viewed as provocative. JM 146, *ibid*.

<sup>75</sup> Greg Kennedy, "Symbol of Imperial Defence: The Role of Singapore in British and American Far Eastern Strategic Relations, 1933 – 1941", in *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited*.

<sup>76</sup> COS 603 of 26 July 1937, "Mediterranean and Middle East Appreciation Interim Draft", CAB 53/32, TNA. Hankey subsequently confirmed that this was Part I of a wider Appreciation. It would be followed by a Part II covering the situation where Britain and France were opposed to Germany and Italy, and a Part III where Japan was also an enemy. The full paper would be updated to present the situation as it would be on 1 April 1938. COS 619 of 22 September 1937, CAB 53/33, TNA.

<sup>77</sup> Malta had the only dock capable of taking a capital ship between Gibraltar and Singapore (when the latter was complete).

<sup>78</sup> The importance and vulnerability of Egypt clearly preoccupied Chatfield. In a letter to CinC Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, dated 5 August, he enclosed a copy of the Mediterranean and

reinforced rapidly through the Mediterranean, sufficient forces must be “pre-positioned” to meet any Italian attack.<sup>79</sup> There was one striking omission in this draft. It noted that the closure of the Mediterranean would have no significant repercussions for oil supplies since all Empire requirements west of Suez could be met from the western hemisphere. It did not, however, highlight the continuing importance of Middle East supplies to the Eastern Empire.<sup>80</sup>

The issues exposed in the Mediterranean Appreciation complicated the defence of the Eastern Empire from Japan in several ways. Deploying, concentrating and sustaining a fleet in the East would be more difficult. Closure of the Mediterranean through war with Italy would not prevent transfer of the Mediterranean Fleet, always the core of the Far East Fleet<sup>81</sup>, through the Canal but reinforcements and supplies direct from the UK via the Cape route would take longer as would any redeployments back to Europe to deal with Germany.<sup>82</sup> Any losses suffered in a Mediterranean war would reduce forces available to counter Japan although much naval action in the Mediterranean theatre might be discretionary.<sup>83</sup> A bigger problem was the resource cost imposed by the need to secure

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Middle East Appreciation, and commented: “If we have trouble with Italy, the Navy can win the war slowly, but the Army and Air Force can lose it in Egypt, rapidly, and therefore it is the defence of Egypt that will be our main preoccupation. CHT/4/10, NMM.

<sup>79</sup> COS 646 of 24 November 1937, “Defence of Egypt”, CAB 53/34, TNA, examined this in detail.

<sup>80</sup> From late 1936 to late 1938, a series of detailed assessments were produced by the Oil Board (a strategic committee comprising representatives from key Government Departments and Industry) into the oil supplies available to the Empire in the event of war. The Board considered the scenario of a European war (OB 162, 1936), the effect on supplies of a closed Mediterranean (OB 189 of 22 February 1937), supplies in a Far Eastern war only (OB 233 of 8 February 1938), and finally supplies in a simultaneous war in both Europe and the Far East (OB 290 of 23 December 1938) with Mediterranean either closed or open. The studies looked not only at available supplies but also tanker availability and embraced both military and civil requirements. The scale of research and quality of presentation is impressive. See: CAB 50/5 – 8, TNA.

<sup>81</sup> Throughout the inter-war period, RN plans assumed the Mediterranean Fleet would deploy to Singapore in the event of a Far East crisis and that CinC Mediterranean would command the Far East Fleet. This was a key reason for basing such a large fleet in the Mediterranean. Chatfield’s letter to Pound of 30 December 1937 discusses the possibility that Pound may need to deploy to Singapore following the crisis provoked by Japanese attacks on the gunboats HMS *Ladybird* and USS *Panay*. CHT/4/10, NMM.

<sup>82</sup> Plymouth to Singapore via Suez at 8100 miles was just under a third shorter than the Cape route at 11,400 miles. For the Mediterranean Fleet based at Malta Singapore reduced to about 6000 miles via Suez. Steven Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt 1935 1940: Conflict and Crisis in the Mediterranean*, (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p 182.

<sup>83</sup> The prospect that the RN would suffer losses in a war with Italy that would then compromise its ability to deal with Japan was an abiding Admiralty concern, not least for Chatfield, from the Abyssinian crisis onward. In his memoirs, Chatfield admitted reluctance to see the RN drawn into war over Abyssinia. “Our naval responsibilities were worldwide but we still had a one power standard.” “If we lost, as we were bound to lose, some ships in a Mediterranean war, we should be in a serious position as regards Imperial Security

Egypt against potential Italian attack. The Appreciation demonstrated that the line taken by Chatfield at the Imperial Conference, that the Mediterranean could always be temporarily evacuated and sealed off to concentrate on the Far East, was over-simplified. A commitment to hold Egypt and the Canal would be significant and would require trade-offs with the Far East especially regarding scarce air power. There was another important strategic circularity here similar to that at Singapore. If the primary argument for defending Egypt was to protect the Canal, it could be argued that, with the Mediterranean closed, the main purpose of the Canal was reduced from “key artery of Empire” just to protecting Egypt.<sup>84</sup> How much did Egypt then really matter and what opportunity cost was justified to protect it?<sup>85</sup> British, and subsequently US, strategists would raise this question at regular intervals through to the autumn of 1942.<sup>86</sup> This thesis argues that there were ultimately two decisive arguments for holding the Canal though their expression remained distinctly opaque in late 1937 and they neither featured in the Appreciation nor other policy papers at this time. These were: to enable the RN to guarantee the western boundary of the Eastern Empire and the vital Middle East oil that sustained it; and to prevent Italian and German naval forces reaching the Indian Ocean.<sup>87</sup>

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for many years. Ships cannot be built in a day.” *The Navy and Defence, Vol II, It Might Happen Again*, p 89.

<sup>84</sup>“Artery of Empire” is a widely used term for the Mediterranean through route and Suez Canal. Michael Simpson has later coined a more modern phrase: “superhighway to the world-wide web”. ‘Superhighway to the World Wide Web: The Mediterranean in British Imperial Strategy, 1900 – 1945’, in *Naval Strategy and Policy in the Mediterranean*, edited by John B Hattendorf, (London: Frank Cass, 2000).

<sup>85</sup>The then D of P Captain Victor Danckwerts put the matter succinctly in a minute dated 23 March 1939. If Singapore was lost, the Eastern Empire was at Japan’s mercy. There was little use then to holding Egypt where the principle reason for Britain’s presence was to protect the Canal. The only use of the latter was as a highway to an Empire which Britain would be in the process of losing. And, in any case, the RN did not propose to use the Canal as a highway in a war with Italy. ADM 1/9909, TNA.

<sup>86</sup> The most powerful exponent of the British interest in Egypt specifically and the Near East generally, at this time, was the Ambassador, Sir Miles Lampson (later Lord Killearn). Lampson directed British interests in Egypt continuously from 1934 – 46. During the winter of 1937 – 38 he conducted a determined and substantially successful campaign, often to the visible annoyance of the COS, to get the defences of Egypt upgraded. Lampson’s view of the priority that should attach to Egypt is summarised in a telegram to the PUS Foreign Office, Sir Robert Vansittart, dated 30 November 1937, where he argues that “our state in Egypt and the Near East is as important as our interest in defending French frontiers and cannot be regarded as a secondary issue”. COS 651 of 13 December 1937, CAB 53/34, TNA.

<sup>87</sup> COS (and other Government) assessments during 1937 – 38 tend to refer to “wider Middle East interests” or “our wider position in the Middle East” without spelling out why this mattered. The final version of the Mediterranean Appreciation in February 1938 made some effort to assess the worst case consequences following Italian control of the Eastern Mediterranean or even the loss of Egypt on Palestine, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. It suggested most of these consequences were containable and, although the Appreciation did not say so, an obvious conclusion was that any losses here were less important than those that might follow a determined Japanese attack in the Far East. COS 691 of 21 February 1938, CAB 53/37, TNA.

The potential closure of the Mediterranean and the growing realisation that Egypt was a substantial and inescapable commitment was one of two factors that complicated Far East defence strategy at the end of 1937. The other was the deterioration in the Far East outlook caused by the outbreak of war between Japan and China in July. This had three consequences. It rendered any realistic hope of a diplomatic understanding with Japan void.<sup>88</sup> It raised the prospect of an early clash with Japan over British interests in China which might not be easily contained. It also meant Britain would be increasingly constrained in the Far East by the need to avoid alienating the US which would make the Japan problem more difficult to manage.

Against this background, many historians present the winter of 1937/38 as a watershed in Britain's approach to Imperial defence. They argue that it was the point at which the political and military leadership began to recognise that the Triple Threat, and the possibility of simultaneous war in three divergent theatres, was an insoluble strategic dilemma. They contend that this then put Britain on a path of messy, and often shabby, strategic compromises, diplomatic and military. One of these was the effective shelving of any serious commitment to send a fleet to the East while maintaining to the Dominions that the commitments given at the Imperial Conference remained firm. Haggie describes the Anglo-US discussions over a joint show of force in the Far East at the turn of 1937 following the Japanese attacks on US and British vessels in the Yangtse as "the moment of truth for the Main Fleet to Singapore strategy".<sup>89</sup> Actually all that this affair demonstrated was that neither the Cabinet nor the Admiralty were prepared to despatch two thirds of the active RN to protect, and perhaps risk a major war over, British commercial interests in China. It did not follow that no action would or could be taken to protect a British colony such as Hong Kong and, even less, did it suggest that the concept of Singapore as one of

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<sup>88</sup> Anthony Best argues that, during the first half of 1937, there was genuine hope that a revival of British naval strength, trade concessions, and a more enlightened Japanese attitude to China, could lead to agreement. This would alleviate Britain's "strategic nightmare" of conflict in three theatres. Such hopes were completely dashed by the Sino-Japanese war which, in Best's judgement, had a profoundly detrimental impact on Anglo-Japanese relations. *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbour*, p 36 – 37.

<sup>89</sup> "Preparations had been made, Anglo-American staff talks were in progress: all that remained was the political decision to despatch the fleet. In the event those critics of the main fleet notion who had always maintained that when it came to the point European considerations would prevent the despatch of the fleet were proved right." Haggie, *Britannia at Bay*, p 115 – 119.



two “keystones” of Empire defence, critical to the defence of India and Australasia, was now abandoned.

It is not difficult, however, to find evidence to demonstrate that COS attitudes were indeed noticeably bleaker by the end of 1937. A report to the CID that November concluded with a passage much quoted by historians:

*“Without overlooking the assistance we would hope to obtain from France, and possibly other allies, we cannot foresee the time when our defence forces will be strong enough to safeguard our territory, trade and vital interests against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously. We cannot, therefore, exaggerate the importance, from the point of view of Imperial Defence, of any political or international action that can be taken to reduce the number of our potential enemies and gain the support of potential allies.”*<sup>90</sup>

It is nevertheless important to put quotes of this kind in context. The COS did not judge war with any of the Triple Alliance group as imminent at this time nor did they assume war with one member would automatically translate into war with the other two though they recognised an “increasing probability”.<sup>91</sup> Nor did they see Britain engaged in a hopeless armament race it was bound to lose. On the contrary, they were still confident that, given time, Britain would get relatively stronger and ultimately strong enough to deter aggression against the Empire.<sup>92</sup> The reference to reducing the number of enemies was directed mainly at Italy though Chatfield at least still harboured hopes that an

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<sup>90</sup> COS 639 of 12 November 1937, “Comparison of the Strength of Great Britain with certain other Nations as at January 1938”, CAB 53/34, TNA, para 42.

<sup>91</sup> COS assessments during 1938 were clear, for example, that Italy and Japan would be keen to exploit any opportunities arising from British pre-occupation in a war with Germany. But they rightly also assessed that Italy would see much to lose and therefore incline to caution while Japan was increasingly bogged down in China.

<sup>92</sup> Two earlier sentences from the same document as that quoted above, but which receive less attention, read: “Even today we could face without apprehension an emergency either in the Far East or in the Mediterranean, provided that we were free to make preparations in time of peace and to concentrate sufficient strength in one or other of these areas.”; and, “So far as Germany is concerned, as our preparations develop, our defence forces will provide a considerable deterrent to aggression.”

Throughout 1938 – 39, the COS were clear Germany was better prepared for early war than Britain but they also judged that Britain and France were superior in general economic strength to Germany and Italy which would be decisive in a long war. See e.g. COS 755 of 5 August, “Appreciation of the Situation in the Event of War against Germany in April 1939”, CAB 53/40, TNA.

understanding could be reached with Germany. Many historians of this period have also not sufficiently emphasised that strategy involves managing risk and making choices. Britain had to find a credible way of defending its Empire with the resources currently available and those in the pipeline. It could not do everything but it could identify what mattered most at any given time and plan accordingly.<sup>93</sup> The strategic planning trail at CID and COS level throughout the period 1935 – 39 consistently demonstrates two things: a clear framework of overall Imperial security priorities; and good judgement of relative risk. Here it is worth remembering that, until December 1941, British Empire territorial losses were confined to the Channel Islands. Judged on that basis, given the forces ranged against her, British risk management was remarkably effective.

It is also essential to emphasise that, from autumn 1937 until early 1939, there was no significant change in the strategic principles and priorities laid down at the Imperial Conference, which had broadly echoed those established by the DRC, and nor, as Chapter One has shown, did any shift in the balance of rearmament investment at this time reduce RN prospects of achieving a credible two hemisphere navy. The evidence from COS papers throughout 1938 is clear that neither the potential hostility of Italy nor the risk of the Mediterranean being closed caused any significant tilt towards giving higher priority to Mediterranean defence, let alone a reversal of the Far East first strategy, at this stage. The one important adjustment was the limited build-up of land and air forces in Egypt for the reasons set out earlier.<sup>94</sup> Beyond that, the final version of the Mediterranean Appreciation, approved by the COS in February 1938, demonstrated a willingness to accept remarkable risks in the Mediterranean theatre in the event of a simultaneous “three power” war.<sup>95</sup> The Mediterranean Fleet would still deploy to the East leaving a few

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<sup>93</sup> The COS note setting out the arguments for reinforcing Egypt dated 14 February 1938 makes the “balance of risk” argument particularly well. In this case they were setting out the trade-offs between extra air and AA assets in Egypt where they could make a significant difference against the need to maximise air defence capability against Germany as quickly as possible. COS 686, Defence of Egypt, CAB 53/36, TNA.

<sup>94</sup> Lawrence Pratt puts it slightly differently. He sees the decision to reinforce Egypt (with self-sufficiency for 60 days) as the first real modification of the DRC strategy to concentrate defence effort on Germany and the Far East alone. He also sees it foreshadowing a “reversal of imperial priorities in the spring of 1939”. He acknowledges, however, that decision-makers at the time probably saw the Egypt investment as only a “slight deviation” from established policy. *East of Malta, West of Suez*, p 131 – 132.

<sup>95</sup> The Appreciation was approved by the CID at their 315<sup>th</sup> meeting, chaired by the PM, on 25 March. The implications posed by the closure of the Mediterranean provoked surprisingly little discussion and certainly

submarines and light surface forces. The COS not only accepted that Italy would control the Eastern Mediterranean but that even military supplies to Egypt through the Red Sea could not be guaranteed against Italian interdiction.<sup>96</sup> Acceptance that control of the Mediterranean, with the exception of Egypt, would have to be sacrificed if Japan intervened in a European war against Germany and Italy was repeated in COS assessments prepared before and after the Munich crisis and in a major European Appraisal completed in February 1939.<sup>97</sup> The August 1938 assessment acknowledged that, after despatch of a fleet to meet the intervention of Japan, Britain's Mediterranean possessions would be in a "state of siege" and it also noted that France would lose 50% of its oil if Italy blockaded the Iraq pipeline terminals at Haifa and Tripoli in Lebanon. The later European Appreciation recognised that Italy might be able to attempt seaborne landings in Egypt and Palestine and conduct a bombardment of Alexandria.

The conclusion of the Mediterranean Appreciation that, in any war with Italy, whether single-handed or part of a global conflict, the Mediterranean would be closed to through traffic both merchant and military, has received little attention from historians. Yet, as the British military leadership quickly recognised, this had strategic implications that went beyond the defence of Egypt and deployment of the Far East Fleet. By substantially increasing the transit time to all key territories in the East, it meant the Eastern Empire and British interests in the Middle East would be largely isolated from the UK homeland in wartime and would need therefore to be more militarily self-sufficient.<sup>98</sup> A major review

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no push to alter existing strategic priorities. The PM indeed emphasised that preparations against Italy must still take third place in the order of priorities. CAB 2/7, TNA.

<sup>96</sup> COS 691 of 21 February 1938, Mediterranean, Middle East and North East Africa Appreciation, CAB 53/37, TNA. The willingness to accept risks in the Mediterranean is all the more striking given the massive superiority the Italians would have in the theatre in land and air power quite apart from naval supremacy following withdrawal of the RN fleet. The Italian air advantage was put at 6:1 in numbers and most of their aircraft were judged as competitive to, if not superior, to the RAF in quality. During the rest of the year, COS assessments would reiterate that British forces in Egypt could not count on reinforcements after war broke out and must rely on forces and supply stocks already in theatre.

<sup>97</sup> COS 755 of 5 August 1938, Appreciation of the Situation in the Event of War Against Germany in April 1939, CAB 53/40, COS 765 of 4 October 1938, Appreciation of the Situation in the Event of War Against Germany, CAB 53/41, COS 843 of 20 February 1939, European Appreciation 1939 – 1940, CAB 53/45, all papers in TNA.

<sup>98</sup> Pound as CinC Mediterranean put this particularly well in a letter to the Admiralty dated 14 November 1938, ADM 116/3900, TNA. He stated:

- "With present communications and long range aircraft, the Mediterranean has become a very small place."

into the Defence of India in May 1938 accordingly highlighted the need for a strategic reserve based east of the Mediterranean to ensure Imperial security. This review arguably triggered a process that would ultimately see India and Australasia providing most of the manpower to defend the Eastern Empire in the coming war and also become significant producers of military material.<sup>99</sup> The closure of the Mediterranean also vastly raised the importance of the security of the Indian Ocean not only for the protection of trade but also military traffic, including the route to Egypt, and vital war materials including oil. By early 1939, this was influencing the role of the putative Eastern Fleet which should have “sufficient strength to protect the Dominions and India and give cover to our communications in the Indian Ocean”.<sup>100</sup> While the true importance of the Singapore base, and therefore the defence of Malaya, to Far East naval defence can certainly be debated, as noted earlier, the Indian Ocean was now an inescapable naval commitment as the coming war would demonstrate.

### **1939: A new balance between Far East and Eastern Mediterranean**

The European Appreciation<sup>101</sup> approved by the COS on 15 February 1939<sup>102</sup>, was the last formal strategic appreciation completed before the outbreak of war. As its name implied, the Appreciation concentrated primarily on the risks and consequences of a conflict in Europe where Britain and France were ranged against Germany and Italy. The Appreciation assumed that, because of her preoccupation with China, early Japanese intervention was now unlikely unless the Western Allies were facing defeat, thus offering

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- “Italy will not fail to make full use of her advantageous geographical position and of her strength in long range aircraft.”
  - “Movement of a single auxiliary from say Malta to Alexandria will become a major operation.”
  - “The Central and Eastern Mediterranean, though seemingly one of the nearest of foreign stations, becomes, when using the Cape route, the most distant of all save China.”

The war would demonstrate that these were prescient points.

<sup>99</sup> COS 737 of 2 July 1938, Defence of India, CAB 53/39, TNA. The Review dated 28 May was produced by Major General H R Pownall who served on the CID staff from 1933 – 38 and was later VCIGS in 1941.

<sup>100</sup> COS 846, European Appreciation, para 228, *ibid*. The Appreciation specifically noted that the intervention of Japan could threaten communications to Egypt and the Middle East.

<sup>101</sup> COS 843, *ibid*.

<sup>102</sup> COS 276<sup>th</sup> Meeting dated 15 February, CAB 53/10, TNA.

Japan easy pickings.<sup>103</sup> The paper therefore allocated core RN strength, including the entire capital ship force, between the Atlantic and Mediterranean on a ratio of two to one with the standard China and East Indies Squadrons deployed to watch Japan.<sup>104</sup> If, against current, expectation Japan did intervene, then the 1937 Imperial Conference priorities would stand. The despatch of a fleet to Singapore “would be imperative”; RN forces would be withdrawn from the Mediterranean with France left to restrain Italy from its bases in the west. The Empire would then be faced with “an immense aggregate of armed force which neither present nor projected defence was designed to meet” and the outcome of the war would depend on holding key positions until other potential allies, notably the US, intervened.<sup>105</sup>

Although, at face value, the European Appreciation suggested that strategy for defending the Eastern Empire in the event of a global war against three Axis powers was essentially unchanged from 1937, it introduced two qualifications to the prevailing policy that, in a three enemy war, Far East naval defence took absolute priority over the Mediterranean. The paper displayed ambitions for early offensive naval action against Italy which, whatever its merits in a war confined to Europe, would make it more difficult to extricate forces for the Far East should this prove necessary.<sup>106</sup> It also stated that, although a fleet would certainly be sent to the East if Japan intervened, “its strength must depend on our resources and the state of the war in the European theatre”. These apparent adjustments to existing strategy were sponsored by the new First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse, who had succeeded Chatfield in August 1938, but evidently also had strong support from the new First Lord, Lord Stanhope. The possibility that strategic interests in the Mediterranean might make it desirable to delay and/or reduce the size of fleet sent to the Far East through deliberate choice was raised for the first time when the CID considered the European Appreciation on 24 February. As the Prime Minister noted, such a choice would conflict with the guarantees given to the Dominions at the 1937 Imperial

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<sup>103</sup> This reflected Foreign Office guidance. European Appreciation Appendix I. “Political Review April 1939”. It also accurately reflected Japanese attitudes. JM 146, *ibid*.

<sup>104</sup> European Appreciation Appendix IV, “Probable British Naval Dispositions April 1939”. The China and East Indies strength was broadly the same as that listed in the 1937 Imperial Conference papers.

<sup>105</sup> European Appreciation para 269 – 270.

<sup>106</sup> European Appreciation paras 139 – 140 and 258. The paper also identified wider offensive options against Italy using land and air, as well as naval, power “as our strength develops”. Paras 265 – 266.

Conference which had been “categorical and unqualified”. Chatfield, now Minister for Defence Coordination, accordingly proposed a Strategic Appreciations Committee be formed to consider this issue further.<sup>107</sup>

The background to these “adjustments” has been much scrutinised by historians of both Mediterranean policy<sup>108</sup> in the run-up to war and of the “Singapore Strategy”<sup>109</sup>. Both groups have portrayed Backhouse as a revisionist who regarded deploying a substantial proportion of the RN to the Far East as impractical and who believed that, after securing home waters against Germany, the RN’s immediate priority should be to concentrate against Italy in the Mediterranean. They emphasise here the influence of the retired Admiral Sir Reginald Drax<sup>110</sup>, brought in by Backhouse to provide independent advice on strategy as well as other supposed Mediterranean advocates such as Pound and Cunningham who was now DCNS.<sup>111</sup> The Mediterranean historians, Lawrence Pratt<sup>112</sup> and Reynolds Salerno see the RN leadership as influential, during the winter of 1938/39, in promoting the growing awareness in British Government circles that Britain had fundamental security interests in the Eastern Mediterranean extending well beyond control of Egypt and the Canal.<sup>113</sup> In their view, the growing RN emphasis on the Mediterranean helped shape the “containment policy” that led to the guarantees to Greece and Turkey in

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<sup>107</sup> European Appreciation, para 237. The CID meeting was the 348<sup>th</sup> and the minutes are in CAB 2/8, TNA. Stanhope took the lead in questioning withdrawal from the Eastern Mediterranean while Chatfield, at this stage, argued forcefully for continuing to give absolute primacy to the Far East. The PM not only noted the conflict with previous assurances but wondered whether Dominion leaders should now be advised that policy might need adjustment. See also Pratt, *East of Malta West of Suez*, p 171.

<sup>108</sup> E.g. Pratt, Salerno and Michael Simpson.

<sup>109</sup> E.g. Haggie, Murfett, Farrell and Bell.

<sup>110</sup> Backhouse letter to Drax dated 15 October 1938, DRAX 2/10, CCA.

<sup>111</sup> Michael Simpson, “Superhighway to the World Wide Webb: The Mediterranean in British Imperial Strategy, 1900 – 1945”.

<sup>112</sup> Lawrence Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez*, and Reynolds Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War*. Both historians describe the wider developments in British foreign and security policy towards Italy and the Mediterranean from late 1938 through 1939. They are also an excellent guide to the conflicting calculations and ambiguities that marked British policy towards Italy from 1935 through to the outbreak of the European war and in Salerno’s case to June 1940. Pratt’s later chapter headings record a journey from “acquiescence and appeasement”, through “containment” to “England’s first battlefield”, and then back to partial acquiescence to preserve Italian neutrality, partly in response to renewed crisis in the Far East.

<sup>113</sup> The term “RN leadership” is carefully chosen here in preference to “Admiralty”. That reflects three points. First, it is debateable whether new thinking ever translated into a formal Admiralty policy. Second, one of the initiators was Pound as CinC Mediterranean and so outside the Admiralty. Third, at least one prominent member of the Naval Staff, D of P Captain Victor Danckwerts was resistant to changing established Far East strategy.

spring 1939 and to a brief flirtation with the concept of the Mediterranean as Britain's "first battlefield".<sup>114</sup>

Historians who portray Backhouse as a "revisionist" invariably overstate the case and also fail to explain satisfactorily what his "revisions" amounted to in practice. This partly reflects the brevity of his tenure and the difficulty of reaching a definitive view of his thinking from a limited evidence base but also the rapid pace of events during the final run-up towards war.<sup>115</sup> It is essential therefore to disentangle what new issues and ideas were raised within the RN leadership and why, whether they were in fact new at all or more a shading of existing strategy, whether the more ambitious proposals were remotely realistic, and how far matters had really changed by the outbreak of war in September. It is especially important to distinguish between two themes in RN thinking towards the Mediterranean in 1939: the idea of the knock-out blow against Italy which proved short-lived; and the growing awareness that a substantial RN presence in the Eastern Mediterranean was an essential guarantor of Britain's whole position in the Middle East.

Historians who argue that Backhouse arrived at the Admiralty already committed to a radical overhaul of Far East naval strategy do not adequately explain what his alternative was.<sup>116</sup> If it meant either dispensing with Singapore as "keystone" or the basic principle

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<sup>114</sup> Pratt argues that the first official proposal for a Mediterranean offensive came from Pound, as CinC Mediterranean, in a despatch dated 14 November 1938. It is important to note, however, that Pound's suggestion was for simultaneous British and French land/air offensives mounted against Libya from Egypt and Tunisia respectively. The RN would have a conventional supporting role primarily directed at cutting Italian supply lines. Pound was soon advised that British land and air forces in Egypt were quite inadequate for such a scheme. Pratt, *East of Malta West of Suez*, p 167 – 168. The main papers relevant to these exchanges are in ADM 116/3900, TNA.

<sup>115</sup> Backhouse succeeded Chatfield in late August 1938 and was effectively out of action with the brain tumour that would kill him from the end of March 1939. The last meeting of the COS he attended was the 281<sup>st</sup> meeting on 15 March. CAB 53/10 and CAB 53/11, TNA. His tenure was therefore little more than six months. Cunningham, as DCNS, was Acting First Sea Lord from end March until the beginning of June when Pound took over.

<sup>116</sup> Notably: Malcom Murfett in his chapter on Backhouse in *The First Sea Lords: From Fisher to Mountbatten*, (Westport CT USA: Praeger, 1995); Michael Simpson, "Superhighway to the World Wide Webb: The Mediterranean in British Imperial Strategy, 1900 – 1945"; and Reynolds Salerno. Salerno, for example, states "Backhouse argued that Britain had overextended itself in the East. "The RN could no longer provide adequate protection for all Britain's colonies and dominions, and the time had arrived to establish defence priorities." "Britain needed a new world-wide naval strategy that placed emphasis on offensive rather than defensive action and on the Mediterranean rather than the Far East..." Vital Crossroads, p 97 – 98. This is an exaggerated and distorted interpretation of Backhouse's position which

of despatching a fleet in the event of an Eastern war, the evidence is not convincing. He signed off on the European Appreciation, which, despite his qualifications recorded above, ultimately reaffirmed Far East priority over the Mediterranean, he provided formal reassurance on the despatch of a fleet to the Australians in November<sup>117</sup>, and, in one of his last statements before falling ill, told Stanhope that he had “always thought it necessary to send a fleet of a certain size to the East if Japan became threatening”.<sup>118</sup> However, he did bring critical scrutiny to the Far East problem, and differed from Chatfield, in a number of ways. He recognised that the projections for a Far East Fleet done in 1937 were always over-optimistic and that the maximum available capital ship strength was unlikely to exceed five until 1940.<sup>119</sup> He argued that would be enough to protect communications in the Indian Ocean but insufficient to take on the main IJN fleet which effectively ruled out

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appears to be based on selective reading of a few sources. As this thesis demonstrates, Backhouse did not question the fundamentals of Empire defence. He did, however, instinctively believe three things: that a sharper distinction could be drawn between the vital core of the Eastern Empire, India and Australasia, and more discretionary interests in China; he thought the “core” could be adequately protected in at least the first stages of a war with forces short of a full fleet: and he hoped this could release resources for a more activist strategy in the Mediterranean.

<sup>117</sup> This assurance was given at a meeting with the Australian High Commissioner Stanley Bruce on 1 November at which Lord Stanhope, the First Lord was also present. Backhouse re-affirmed that, in the event of war with Japan, the RN would send a fleet of at least seven capital ships to Singapore. In his chapter on Backhouse in *The First Sea Lords*, Malcom Murfett is deeply critical of this promise as is Salerno. Murfett argues that Backhouse was deliberately deceitful, confirming a policy that Backhouse himself no longer believed to be viable and was in the process of revising. Murfett claims there is no British record of the meeting. Murfett’s interpretation is wrong. Backhouse’s real view is recorded in two successive COS Memos, 813 of 22 December 1938, CAB 53/43, and COS 837 of 7 February 1939, CAB 53/44, and the COS meetings on 13 January and 15 February, both CAB 53/10, all CAB references in TNA. Backhouse remained fully committed to sending a fleet to counter a threat to Australia but he judged, quite reasonably, that the risk to Australia at this time was remote. His only significant caveat was that, if war in Europe was underway, force redistribution would take time and the existing 70 days period before relief at Singapore might not be met. This was no different from the line taken by Chatfield in 1937.

<sup>118</sup> Backhouse minute to First Lord dated 30 March 1939, ADM 1/9909, TNA.

<sup>119</sup> Backhouse set out the capital ship position in 1939 in a note for the Strategic Appreciation Committee dated 28 February. SAC 4, CAB 16/209, TNA. Three capital ships were still under major reconstruction in early 1939, *Renown*, *Valiant* and *Queen Elizabeth*, with the first expected to complete in September but not becoming fully operational until the end of the year. In the 1937 Far East Appreciation, these reconstructions were all assumed to complete by summer 1939 raising the theoretical maximum availability to 15 ships. COS 596 of 14 June 1937, para 330, CAB 53/32, TNA. Chatfield in his memoirs claims the Controller (Henderson) underestimated the time needed for these reconstructions. *The Navy and Defence Vol II*, p 122 – 123. In addition to the reconstructions, *Hood* and *Revenge* were undergoing short refits in 1939 until late summer though both could in theory be mobilised at 28 days’ notice. The European Appreciation allocated eight capital ships to the Atlantic following full mobilisation and three to the Eastern Mediterranean. Six was now viewed by Backhouse as the minimum safe force to contain Germany which left a theoretical maximum of five for the Far East, three withdrawn from the Mediterranean and two from the Atlantic. German strength in 1939 was the same as that projected in 1937 when Chatfield thought four ships would be sufficient to contain it. Backhouse’ figure was arguably a more realistic assessment of what was required to deal with the German raider threat whereas Chatfield had cut the force to an absolute minimum in order to produce numbers that were competitive against the IJN.



operations north of Singapore where he accepted Hong Kong might well be lost.<sup>120</sup>

Backhouse never specifically addressed the issue of whether a fleet significantly inferior to the IJN would be able to secure Singapore if the Japanese mounted an all-out attack. He judged such an attack most unlikely unless a war in Europe was going badly but thought that it would be possible to keep communications open through the Indian Ocean and bolster Singapore with more troops and aircraft.<sup>121</sup> He also placed new emphasis on the US Navy as a restraining factor on Japan.

In essence, Backhouse was merely addressing more honestly and formally issues relating to strength and timing of reinforcement that had been recognised as far back as 1937. These were: that force redistribution to create a Far East Fleet when war was already underway in Europe might take a considerable time; that rapid reinforcement of Singapore with land and air forces from India would therefore be essential and might involve some risk; and that the “period before relief” was likely to be exceeded. Implicit in all this was the likelihood that there might well be an advance guard, probably from the Mediterranean, including capital ships, before the full strength could deploy. The practical difference therefore between Backhouse’s views on Far East reinforcement and existing Admiralty planning, or indeed the caveats Chatfield had already expressed in 1937, was less than “revisionist” supporters imply.

Where Backhouse and Stanhope did break new ground, as already mentioned, was in arguing that, if Japan intervened when war was already underway in Europe, then delaying reinforcement and reducing its strength could be a deliberate strategic choice rather than a consequence of the inherent delays in force redistribution. If the loss of everything north

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<sup>120</sup>At the COS 263<sup>rd</sup> meeting on 23 November 1938, Backhouse noted that British interests in China were essentially commercial. If the China trade was lost to Japan, it would be difficult to justify any strategic interest in Hong Kong. The defence of Singapore was an entirely different case. It should be held “with all our might”. CAB 53/10, TNA. See also Admiralty paper at SAC 4, *ibid*.

<sup>121</sup>The best guides to Backhouse’s thinking on Far East reinforcement are his comments at the first meeting of the Strategic Appreciation Committee held on 1 March 1939, available in CAB 16/209 in TNA and his minute dated 24 March commenting on D of P’s minute reporting Foreign Office proposals for a stronger RN commitment to the Mediterranean. The FO note had been written by Victor Cavendish-Bentinck, recently returned from Egypt, but about to become Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, a post he retained throughout the war. He argued that abandoning the Eastern Mediterranean might be more disastrous for the British Empire than accepting a temporary loss of trade in the East or a small risk of attack on Australia. Given his future role this attitude was significant. ADM 1/9909, TNA.

of Singapore was discounted, then it was possible to carry risk. They promoted this argument further during the first two meetings of the Strategic Appreciations Committee convened by Chatfield at the beginning of March.<sup>122</sup> As Stanhope put it, he did not accept the view that “if we do not send a fleet immediately, we will lose Australasia and India”. For his part, Backhouse questioned what was meant by key terms in the 1935 DRC formula: “acting on the defensive” or “serving as a deterrent”. They were evidently open to interpretation. Interpretation in his view also applied to the 1937 commitments. The commitment was to send a fleet “but we did not specify when”, or, he might have added, in what precise strength. In sum, Backhouse and Stanhope favoured a more flexible and graduated response to any Far East threat rather than the automatic and early despatch of the maximum possible fleet.

If there was an element of choice over when to deploy forces to the East and in what strength, then the corollary was that the RN could maintain stronger forces in the Eastern Mediterranean and for longer, perhaps for six months, even after Japanese intervention. Backhouse and Stanhope here pressed two points. It would enable the RN to deliver some hard blows against Italy that would at a minimum reduce the naval threat she posed but might even knock her out of the war. In addition, they emphasised a more political point, the role of the Mediterranean Fleet as guarantor to Greece and Turkey and to Britain’s wider position in the Middle East, where Stanhope thought “things might go very wrong”.<sup>123</sup> Chatfield clearly felt this policy not only broke undertakings given to the Dominions in 1937 but put the Eastern Empire at risk. Both these claims were overstated. It was true that Britain had assured the Dominions that no risk in the Mediterranean would prevent the despatch of a fleet to the East. However, Chatfield had also emphasised that, if a European war was already underway, the arrival of a fleet would be “considerably delayed” and capable only of a “defensive role”. A “defensive role” surely suggested a

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<sup>122</sup> The SAC was effectively another Sub Committee of the CID and brought together the three COS, the three Service Ministers, and a selection of other Ministers with relevant expertise under Chatfield as Minister for Defence Coordination and Chairman. The first meeting was on 1 March and the second on 13 March. The minutes are in CAB 16/209, TNA.

<sup>123</sup> At the COS 266<sup>th</sup> meeting on 5 January 1939, Backhouse expressed his concern about growing hostility to Britain in the Arab world and the need for a JPC report on this. CAB 53/10, TNA.

need to distinguish between Far East interests which were critical and those that were discretionary as Backhouse and Stanhope were now attempting to do.<sup>124</sup>

Many historians give Drax a prominent role in developing this thinking and some even refer to a “Backhouse/Drax school”.<sup>125</sup> This emphasis on Drax’s contribution looks overdone.<sup>126</sup> He essentially produced two new ideas for tackling RN force distribution in a global war in 1939 against three enemies.<sup>127</sup> He argued first that Far East naval reinforcement could be reduced to a minimal “Flying Squadron”, comprising two *Queen Elizabeth* class battleships, a carrier, and a flotilla of Tribal class destroyers, which, added to the China and East Indies squadrons, would prevent Japan doing “serious damage” in the first six months of a Far East war.<sup>128</sup> This would allow the RN to concentrate a maximum force in the Mediterranean to “crumple” Italy within his “six month Far East

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<sup>124</sup> The minutes of the SAC meetings do not show Chatfield at his best. He comes across as pedantic, legalistic, and at times disingenuous.

<sup>125</sup> It is worth noting that Drax was a controversial figure within the RN. He had a major clash with Chatfield in late 1937 when he was in his last post as CinC Plymouth. He savaged a Naval Staff paper “Appreciation of War with Germany (1939)” for lacking offensive spirit. In a stinging rebuke, Chatfield accused him of not understanding the overall strategic context Britain faced with threats from Italy and Japan as well as Germany. He instructed Drax in future to make his proposals of a “definite and tangible nature and not in the form of generalisations”. For a more detailed account of this clash, including biographical background on Drax, see Joseph Maiolo, ‘Admiralty War Planning, Armaments, Diplomacy, and Intelligence Perceptions of German Sea Power and their influence on British Foreign and Defence Policy 1933 – 1939’, p 196 – 199. Chatfield’s letter to Drax is in CHT/3/1, NMM.

<sup>126</sup> Some portray the “Flying Squadron” as an original contribution to the problem of Far East naval defence which might have led to a more credible alternative to the “Singapore Strategy” though they have failed to explain precisely how and why. Notable examples here are: Haggie in *Britannia at Bay*, p 139 – 141; Murfett in his Backhouse chapter in *The First Sea Lords*; and Brian Farrell in *The Defence and Fall of Singapore*, (Tempus Publishing, 2005), p 46 – 47. Others portray his concentration on Italy as influential in tilting Britain towards a more Mediterranean orientated strategy though the linkage here is doubtful. See: Reynolds Salerno, *Vital Crossroads*, p 98 – 101 and 118 – 121; and Lawrence Pratt, *East of Malta West of Suez*, p 173. Christopher Bell uses the term “Backhouse/Drax Scheme”, *The Royal Navy and Seapower*, p 88. This surely implies they had fully discussed and agreed a common view on future strategy, which would seem to go beyond the available evidence. Drax did not produce his final paper until 16 March, by which time Backhouse was ill, and he may not have seen the paper until the end of the month when he minuted both Cunningham and Stanhope. His minutes suggest he saw it as an important input but he clearly did not regard it as the definitive answer to RN force distribution. It is also not clear if and when Drax’s papers were reviewed by the Naval Staff. Backhouse’s minutes dated 30 March and 2 April are in ADM 1/9897, TNA.

<sup>127</sup> Drax developed his strategy ideas in a series of papers over the winter concluding with a final summary dated 16 March 1939. Drax Memo OPC 11, ADM 1/9897, TNA. His earlier papers and associated correspondence are in the Drax Papers, Box 2, CCA.

<sup>128</sup> Drax did not define “serious damage”. If the goal was to secure the Indian Ocean against any serious IJN incursion, screen Australasia, and perhaps allow judicious raids against isolated IJN targets, such a force was certainly sufficient. But it was more doubtful whether it could necessarily guarantee the security of Singapore for a six month period. Drax ducked this question as have those historians who commend his originality.

window” while containing Germany.<sup>129</sup> The views expressed by Backhouse and Stanhope clearly reflect some of Drax’s ideas, they no doubt found his force distribution scheme reassuring, and Backhouse welcomed the offensive mind-set he displayed in comparison to D of P.<sup>130</sup> While there is no evidence that Backhouse personally ever endorsed the “Flying Squadron” concept in its entirety, and his proposals for offensive operations in the Mediterranean were more restrained than Drax’s ambitious ideas for bombarding military and economic targets on the Italian coast, the concept seems nevertheless to have helped encourage a more flexible approach to Far East reinforcement from this time on. The term “Flying Squadron” features in early drafts of the revised Far Eastern War Memorandum prepared in May<sup>131</sup> and, as later chapters show, the Naval Staff would adopt variants of the concept in their contingency plans from late 1940 to deploy *Force H* as immediate reinforcement to protect the Indian Ocean in the event of Japanese intervention. It can also be argued that Churchill was applying similar thinking in pushing for what amounted to a *Force H plus* in the Indian Ocean in the late summer of 1941.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Drax’s final force allocations in March assumed that 12 capital ships were available through the rest of 1939 which was probably optimistic even after mobilisation. If five were required in the Atlantic (one less than Backhouse stipulated was necessary) and two were earmarked for the “Flying Squadron”, that only guaranteed five for the Mediterranean. For practical purposes therefore, Drax’s Mediterranean reinforcement differed from the force distribution shown in the European Appreciation only by the addition of two *Nelsons*. The “crumpling” of Italy accordingly rested on the deployment of five battleships in the Eastern Mediterranean rather than three. Drax Memo OPC 11. It also assumed four things: that the RN battle-fleet could operate in the Central Mediterranean, and off the Italian coast, in the face of Italian airpower whereas Pound was pretty sure it could not; that coastal bombardment could achieve important economic and political effect, that the Italian battle-fleet would accept battle with a superior RN force on RN terms; and that an Italian defeat (of say Taranto proportions) would cause Italy to sue for peace.

<sup>130</sup> Backhouse used language clearly drawn from Drax in regard to Italy, e.g. “striking (her) a series of hard blows at the outset” and also suggested two *Queen Elizabeths* (i.e. the “Flying Squadron”) might be sufficient to control the Indian Ocean. SAC First and Second Meetings, CAB 16/209, *ibid*.

<sup>131</sup> See AT to CinC China dated 16 May 1939, ADM 116/3863, TNA.

<sup>132</sup> Christopher Bell provides one of the better balanced and more thoughtful summaries of the Backhouse and Drax inputs to Far East Naval strategy at p 86 – 90 of *The Royal Navy and Seapower*. He nevertheless sees the proposals for reduced Far East reinforcement as a necessity imposed by limited resources whereas this thesis argues they reflected strategic choice. He also argues that Drax’s main innovation was to suggest that speed and mobility could compensate for reduced size at least in the short term. While this is a reasonable interpretation, it is not clear that is how Drax actually viewed matters. There was also an inherent weakness in the “Flying Squadron” concept which neither Bell nor other historians mention. A true “Flying Squadron” would have combined battle-cruisers and carriers, units with similar speed, on the lines of the future *Force H*. The *Queen Elizabeths*, at 24 knots, were slower than the RN carriers, but, more important, slower than all IJN capital ships. The four *Kongo* battle-cruisers could do 30 knots after reconstruction while the six battleships were all capable of 25 knots. They also decisively outranged the two unmodernised *Queen Elizabeths* and the *R-class*. The Drax force therefore could neither fight a superior IJN force nor guarantee to avoid it. To be fair, Backhouse (and perhaps Drax too) would have preferred to deploy the RN battle-cruisers in the East but they were needed at home to counter the fast German ships.

The Australians quickly picked up on the discussions at the first SAC meeting and sought formal clarification on naval reinforcement policy at PM level. This provoked an important response from Chamberlain to Dominion PMs on 20 March.<sup>133</sup> He stated that it remained the intention to despatch a fleet to the Far East if Japan intervened but its size would depend on the state of any European war and losses sustained. Nevertheless Britain intended to achieve three objects: The prevention of major operations against Australasia or India; the protection of imperial communications; and preventing the fall of Singapore.<sup>134</sup> Backhouse transmitted a similar message on naval channels.<sup>135</sup> These messages reflected the discussion at the CID on 24 February but actually signalled a policy shift that not only went beyond the conclusions of that meeting but also pre-empted the SAC debate. They confirmed two things. First, Far East reinforcement would no longer be automatic but based on comparative risk assessment with European and Mediterranean interests. Second Far East defence would now focus on an inner core and interests north of Singapore were likely to be sacrificed.

The formal outcome of the SAC process for naval policy in the Far East is summarised in a much quoted passage in an Admiralty memorandum signed by Cunningham as DCNS on 4 April and approved by the CID on 2 May:

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<sup>133</sup> There is a copy of this telegram in SAC 13 of 13 April, CAB 16/209, TNA.

<sup>134</sup> James Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base*, p 150, describes this telegram as “a skilful formula” which re-affirmed the intention to defend the Dominions while declining to commit to precise forces or timing. The elaborate plans of 20 years were abandoned for “a vague promise”. This is misleading. The first sentence here was not actually new since it merely repeated Chatfield’s caveat at the Imperial Conference. The Australians nevertheless did take it as a significant weakening of British commitment. The focus on the “three objects” was a much more important change. It implied Britain would now focus only on the inner core of the Eastern Empire and would not contest Japanese aggression north of Singapore. That could be seen as either weakening of commitment or realistic concentration on what really mattered.

<sup>135</sup> Backhouse’s telegram was despatched on 17 March to the Australian First Naval Member, Vice Admiral Sir R Colvin. This admitted that the strength of the fleet that could be sent to the Far East was under review. However, Backhouse insisted it would be sufficient to protect communications in the Indian Ocean and to deter any Japanese expedition against Australia. This was closely aligned to the Chamberlain text. ADM 1/9831, TNA. Backhouse had earlier told Colvin that an expedition to Australia was currently beyond Japan’s power due to distance and lack of a forward base from which to mount it. Backhouse letter to Colvin of 9 January 1939, ADM 205/3, TNA.

*“...There are so many variable factors which cannot at present be assessed, that it is not possible to state definitely how soon after Japanese intervention a Fleet could be dispatched to the Far East. Neither is it possible to enumerate precisely the size of the Fleet we could afford to send.”*<sup>136</sup>

This conclusion is generally interpreted negatively by historians. It surely implied that, with limited RN resources, Britain's strategic dilemma was now insoluble and “variable factors” a convenient term to mask the reality that despatching a significant fleet to the East was now a remote prospect. However, the memorandum can also be read more positively. The variable factors were genuine.<sup>137</sup> It was difficult to predict whether Japanese intervention would pose an immediate threat to critical interests or take effect only slowly with losses Britain could bear. It was equally difficult to judge in advance the political and strategic costs of withdrawing the RN from the Eastern Mediterranean. These points were endorsed by the SAC on 17 April. In particular, the SAC stressed: “Offensive operations against Italy offered the best prospect of speedy results and should not be lightly broken off”; and, the “Importance of affording moral and material support to our allies in the Near East, Turkey, Greece and Egypt”.<sup>138</sup> Keeping deployment options

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<sup>136</sup>Cunningham's Memorandum “Despatch of a Fleet to the Far East”, dated 4 April 1939, was prepared in response to a request from the SAC Second Meeting on 13 March for clarification of the Admiralty view of Far East naval reinforcement. D of P prepared a series of papers labelled Enclosures A, B, C. and D to support the Memorandum. D of P's preferred draft response for the SAC appears to be reflected in Enclosure B which presents the established view that the only effective counter to Japan is the deployment of a competitive fleet. In a minute to Cunningham, dated 2 April, Backhouse, presumably writing from his hospital bed, criticises D of P's paper for being “purely defensive” offering no prospect of winning a war. Cunningham's final memorandum does draw on D of P but is much more flexible in its approach and clearly took some account of Backhouse's thinking. All these papers are in ADM 1/9897, TNA.

<sup>137</sup> The main “variable factors” which would appear in many subsequent documents through the summer were:

- The number of capital ships (and other forces) available when Japan intervened. This number might reflect war losses if war was already underway in Europe as well as the ships coming out of rebuild from autumn 1939 onward.
- The overall strategic situation. Was Britain already at war, with Germany alone, or with Italy too, and with what result? Was there a prospect of achieving an early decisive blow against Germany or Italy?
- The strategy adopted by Japan. Ambitious and aggressive or confined to minor commerce raiding.
- The attitude of the US and USSR as restraining factors on Japan.
- The adverse impact of RN withdrawal from the Eastern Mediterranean on the attitude of Greece, Turkey and the Muslim world.

<sup>138</sup>The Cunningham Memorandum was submitted to the SAC as SAC Paper No 16. It was considered at the SAC 6<sup>th</sup> Meeting on 17 April before going on to the CID. CAB 16/209, TNA. It is worth noting that

flexible until threats took effect surely made sense so long as the trade-offs were calculated and understood and did not cross over into self-deception. Overall therefore, while the Cunningham memorandum certainly confirmed Britain could not meet all naval threats simultaneously, it also argued there was still scope for strategic choice and that one choice, as Backhouse and Stanhope had argued at the SAC, was deliberate delay in Far East reinforcement while Japanese intent clarified. The enduring influence of the Cunningham memorandum is evident in the amendments to RN Far East War Plans produced in the summer and also the ever growing awareness in British leadership circles of why the Eastern Mediterranean mattered and how it could best be secured.<sup>139</sup>

On 2 May, the CID endorsed the SAC recommendations with little further debate. It agreed that, if a choice had to be made between temporarily abandoning the Eastern Mediterranean or the Far East, then this decision would need to be taken by the government of the day taking all relevant factors into account. The Prime Minister recognised that, in seeking to balance Mediterranean and Far East interests, there was an effective scaling down of previous assurances to the Dominions but he felt his 20 March telegram had adequately addressed this. If Britain was defeated, then the fate of the Dominions was sealed. Britain would do all it could to protect them but must concentrate on the “main enemy”.<sup>140</sup> The CID did agree it was desirable to brief the Americans on the new policy. They were informed through a special Admiralty emissary, Commander T C Hampton, who had two meetings with the US Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Leahy, at the beginning of June. This meeting and its consequences is discussed in Chapter

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Cunningham made no specific mention of offensive operations in the Mediterranean in his original memorandum.

<sup>139</sup> D of P produced a first draft of Section XVII of Naval War Memorandum (Eastern) in early May. His covering minute to this draft states that it is based on Cunningham’s Memorandum. However, he notes that it goes further than the Cunningham Memorandum in specifying the number of capital ships and other forces to be sent to the East under three different scenarios. If Japan intervened simultaneously with Germany and Italy with the USA neutral, then four ships would be sent. If the US was an ally, then only two ships would go (essentially therefore the “Flying Squadron”). If Italy was neutral, or knocked out, then a maximum capital ship force of seven ships would be deployed. D of P minute dated 5 May 1939, ADM 116/3863, TNA. The new Far East War Memorandum, clearly produced under Cunningham’s direction, adopts a much more flexible approach to Far East reinforcement than that displayed in D of P’s earlier “Enclosure B” produced at the end of March. The related reference to a “Flying Squadron” in the 16 May tel to CinC China suggests both that D of P had now seen the Drax papers and that Cunningham had expressed at least some approval for the content.

<sup>140</sup> Minutes of 355<sup>th</sup> CID Meeting, CAB 2/8, TNA.

Four.<sup>141</sup> The Dominions undoubtedly received a less detailed and perhaps less honest account of evolving naval strategy than the Americans received via Hampton and this would later rankle.<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, as Haggie argues, they should have been in no doubt that there was no longer any guarantee of the automatic despatch of a full fleet and the purpose of reinforcement now was “to secure communications in the Indian Ocean and deter a major expedition against the Dominions”.<sup>143</sup>

The prevailing historical interpretation of pre-war Far East naval policy views the outcome of the 2 May CID meeting as both flawed and dishonest. It was flawed because it effectively abandoned the policy of countering any hostile move by Japan with the immediate deployment of a competitive fleet without putting in place a credible alternative. The dishonesty lay in suggesting to the Dominions that nothing fundamental had changed. Brian Farrell puts it starkly. The Admiralty knew it could no longer promise the Fleet would be sent out at any given time, but would not drop the Singapore Strategy entirely and replace it with something else. What remained was the worst of both. The promise was not retracted but the commitment to implement it at a fixed time was.<sup>144</sup>

There are two problems with the Farrell interpretation which is representative of majority historical opinion. First, it implies a single rigid “Singapore Strategy” whereas, as this chapter demonstrates, and Christopher Bell emphasises, the term actually embraced a range of options. Adopting a more flexible approach to Far East naval reinforcement did not in itself render a strategy to counter Japan based primarily on naval force invalid. Nor was such flexibility new. Second, in criticising the lack of a credible alternative to the “Singapore Strategy”, Farrell and other historians seem unclear whether the problem they perceive is one of failure to set appropriate Imperial priorities in the face of a looming three enemy war or more one of failure to implement credible plans to meet those priorities. Thus, Farrell accuses Britain of failing to adapt grand strategy and “making the

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<sup>141</sup> Haggie, *Britannia at Bay*, p 143. Hampton’s records of his meetings are in ADM 116/3922, TNA.

<sup>142</sup> Neidpath, p 150 - 155.

<sup>143</sup> Haggie, p 145.

<sup>144</sup> B P Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940 – 1942*, 46 - 47.



situation fit the plan” (whereas in reality strategy was significantly adjusted), commends the Admiralty for adopting the Drax proposal for concentration against Italy (which it never did), but then accuses it of not following through by dropping the “Singapore Strategy” and adopting the “Flying Squadron” (which in some respects it did do). Murfett too commends Backhouse and Drax for strategic innovation with their focus on the Mediterranean but doubts the viability of the “Flying Squadron” seeing it as “not much improvement on the old Singapore Strategy”. This all begs the question of what they think could be done differently. If there is a lost opportunity in Drax’s thinking, it perhaps lies in the failure of the Naval Staff to reconsider whether Singapore really was essential to the naval defence of the Eastern Empire or whether Chamberlain’s 20 March inner core could be adequately guaranteed with smaller forces operating from Ceylon and Australia. For obvious reasons, by 1939, dispensing with Singapore as “keystone” would have been very difficult but it is conceivable that Backhouse and Cunningham, if they had remained together at the Admiralty, might have attempted this.<sup>145</sup>

This lack of clarity in the Far East historiography partly reflects the muddled way in which the perceived strategic imperatives in the Mediterranean evolved across 1939 and have then been presented by Mediterranean historians. Three arguments for giving greater naval priority to the Mediterranean must be distinguished here: the concept of the knock-out blow against Italy which was short-lived; the Balkans as buffer against the Axis and possibly as a base for an Anglo-French offensive; and the Eastern Mediterranean as barrier to protect Middle East oil and the access routes to the Eastern Empire from the west. On 2

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<sup>145</sup>The main evidence for this is in the attitudes they displayed in their minutes of 23 March 1939 (Cunningham) and 24 March (Backhouse) on D of P’s minute on FO proposals for a stronger naval commitment to the Mediterranean. As stated earlier, D of P, Captain Victor Danckwerts set out the standard Admiralty case for prioritising the Far East over the Mediterranean in trenchant terms. If Singapore was lost, the Eastern Empire was at Japan’s mercy. There was little use then to holding Egypt where the principle reason for Britain’s presence was to protect the Canal. The only use of the latter was as a highway to an Empire which Britain would be in the process of losing. And, in any case, the RN did not propose to use the Canal as a highway in a war with Italy. Cunningham as DCNS purported to agree with Danckwerts while managing to convey that he actually saw things rather differently. He thought D of P’s argument was overstated and, significantly, added that “denuding the Mediterranean might be disastrous”. Backhouse repeated his conviction that: Japan would not attack southwards unless a European war was going badly for Britain; three or four capital ships would suffice to protect core interests in the East; Japan would have to consider potential intervention by the US; and Singapore defence could be enhanced with land and air assets. He agreed with DCNS that D of P’s argument was overstated. Losing Singapore would be serious but the Far East position would be recoverable. ADM 1/9909, TNA.

May, the CID gained a much more optimistic impression of the possibilities against Italy than either the COS or the RN leadership felt was achievable.<sup>146</sup> It is not clear from the available records how this came about, nor why it took nearly three months for Chatfield to acknowledge, with some embarrassment, that an early knock out was not possible and that “Ministers might have been misled”.<sup>147</sup> The saga of the “knock-out blow” did not show British strategy making at its best but, in determining naval deployment, it did not ultimately matter. By late April, the more convincing argument for a strong naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Fleet here as ultimate guarantor of Britain’s commitment to Greece and Turkey, the security of Egypt and the Levant and, behind them all, the strategic interests of the Middle East, was already gaining traction.<sup>148</sup> These wider interests were emphasised by Stanhope at the 2 May CID meeting but took on ever sharper definition over the second half of 1939. By early December, the COS had identified three

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<sup>146</sup> The JPC had informed the COS that an early knock out was not realistic in a paper dated 27 March, so some five weeks before the CID meeting. This paper stressed, in line with what Pound had already been told at the end of 1938, that there were no land or air forces available for offensive operations and that the impact of naval power in isolation would be limited, possibly incurring more loss than benefit. It concluded that effort should remain focused on the defence of Egypt. COS 863 of 27 March 1939, “Allied Plans Against Italy”, CAB 53/46, TNA. Backhouse remained bullish about prospects against Italy up to his departure. He told Cunningham on 2 April that: “Seizing her colonies, bombarding oil storage and cutting her supply lines might bring results”. Minute to Cunningham dated 2 April 1939, ADM 1/9897, TNA. Cunningham did not, however, reflect this thinking in his Memorandum for the SAC of 4 April. At the COS 290<sup>th</sup> meeting on 19 April, Cunningham, now Acting FSL, stated that there were no plans for offensive operations in the Mediterranean yet in existence. The COS agreed guidance should be issued to the CinCs in anticipation of forthcoming Staff Talks with the French. This set out quite modest aims. The primary goal would be to make Italy’s position in Africa untenable. The RN would close the two ends of the Mediterranean, cut the routes to Libya and Ethiopia and exert general pressure where possible. There was no reference to action against the Italian mainland. CAB 53/11, TNA. Pound gave a more detailed appraisal of naval possibilities in early July soon after taking over as FSL which broadly endorsed the earlier JPC thinking. COS 946 of 10 July 1939, CAB 53/51, TNA.

<sup>147</sup> Chatfield’s comments on Ministers being misled were made at the COS 309<sup>th</sup> meeting dated 19 July 1939, CAB 53/11, TNA. Perhaps the best insight into this controversy is available in the correspondence between Pound and Cunningham in late July in the wake of these COS discussions. On 24 July Pound wrote: “I do not know who gave the politicians the idea that it (knocking out Italy) could be done but it seems they expect it and are now undergoing the rather painful process of being undeceived. Italy can only be knocked out either by her armies being defeated or by being laid waste by air. We cannot do either of these things at the beginning of the war and it is left to the navy to do the knocking out. I can only imagine they thought the fleet would steam slowly along the Italian coast and blow it to bits which, if it were possible, would not knock Italy out.” (Although Drax had come close to pushing this view!) Cunningham responded on 26 July: “I think the phrase “knocking Italy out of the war” was coined by the politicians themselves. They were never given to understand that Italy could be knocked out in a week or so. What they were told was that if Libya was completely cut off and the Italians kept fighting it was most likely that Libya followed by Abyssinia could be out of the war in about six months. Further that the surrender of the army in Libya coupled with attacks on the Italian coast where material damage can be done would have a great moral effect and might well cause the Italians to lose heart and think they had had enough.” Cunningham Papers, MS 52560, BL.

<sup>148</sup> Spurred by Cunningham’s Memorandum of 4 April.

fundamental British strategic interests in the Middle East: the security of the Canal on which control of the Eastern Mediterranean depended in the face of a hostile Italy; the Anglo-Iranian oil fields; and the routes to North-East India. The defence of these needed strategic depth<sup>149</sup> which required the support of Turkey and control of Iraq, Iran and Egypt. Turkey was “the first line of defence for the Suez Canal from the north.”<sup>150</sup>

Against this background, the COS and Admiralty records can be interpreted to reach a more positive view of evolving British strategy for defence of the Eastern Empire across 1939. Given the range of risks Britain now faced, and the different ways they might take effect, a degree of muddle and ambiguity was perhaps excusable. However, there is a convincing case that the British strategy process was still generally good at identifying what mattered most, capable of correcting errors such as the “knock-out blow”, and avoiding simplistic panaceas. It is reasonable to argue that by the summer Britain’s political and military leadership were reaching consensus on a new set of principles that would guide strategy for the defence of the Eastern Empire through the first half of the coming war.<sup>151</sup> First, that the core interests in the Far East were the protection of

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<sup>149</sup> This is the first reference to the concept of “strategic depth” in Middle East defence which would resonate through 1941 and 1942.

<sup>150</sup> COS 146 of 5 December 1939, “Middle East: Review of Military Policy”, CAB 80/6, TNA. This paper nevertheless emphasised that: “Our interests in the Middle East, important as they are, are not as important as the security of France or Britain, or of Singapore.”

<sup>151</sup> One other contribution to this consensus deserves mention. Churchill sent a “Memorandum on Seapower 1939” to Chamberlain with a copy to Chatfield on 27 March. He argued that Germany would be pre-occupied with securing the Baltic and thus pose little naval threat to Britain in the first phase of a war. If Italy was hostile, Britain should therefore concentrate on mastering the Mediterranean which the RN could do in two months. The Italian armies in Africa would then be “cut flowers in a vase” and easily wrapped up. Failure to take the initiative here would risk an Italian invasion of Egypt, under German leadership, with disastrous consequences. Meanwhile Britain must not be distracted by the threat from Japan. If Japan intervened, British interests in China, including Hong Kong, would be “temporarily effaced” and it was pointless wasting effort to protect these. “We must bear losses for the sake of the final result”. By contrast, he thought the likelihood of an attack on Singapore which would involve mounting a seaborne expedition across 3000 miles against a heavily armed fortress was remote. The Japanese were a cautious people, would recognise the risks, and wait until matters were decided in Europe. Singapore could anyway easily hold out for 6 - 12 months while Italy was liquidated. No invasion of Australia was possible while Singapore stood and anyway the concept was “ludicrous”. It was reasonable to provide Australia with a “guarantee” of protection but “in our own way” and “in proper sequence”. Chatfield commented to the PM on 30 March that he broadly agreed with this assessment, including concentration on Italy, although he thought wrapping up the Mediterranean would take at least six months. These papers are in PREM 1/345, TNA. Churchill’s paper is a fascinating preview of his personal strategic position in the coming war. The stance revealed here on Japan would be little modified through 1940 and 1941. Substantial sections of this paper would be lifted wholesale for the formal guarantee he gave to Australia as First Lord in November and described later. Chatfield’s apparent enthusiasm here for a Mediterranean offensive, while it reflected the emerging SAC

Australasia, India, Singapore and the communications between them, primarily in the Indian Ocean. Second, that a serious Japanese threat to this core would take time to develop giving Britain some discretion over the size and timing of naval reinforcements. Immediate deployment of a full fleet was not an automatic pre-requisite to defend this core. Third, that there were now interests in the Eastern Mediterranean that at least matched, and perhaps took precedence over, all Far East interests beyond the core. Fourth, there would therefore have to be a trade-off between Eastern Mediterranean and Far East dictated by the relative level of risk and benefit at any given time. There were too many variables here to fix the level of Far East naval reinforcement in advance. Finally, France in the Mediterranean, and the US in the Far East, could help reduce the risk inherent in the trade-offs between the two theatres.<sup>152</sup>

In the face of what was now seen as a probable three enemy war, these principles implied both an important change but also a logical evolution in the desired strategic end state for defence of the Eastern Empire defined in 1937. The maximum achievable end point in a war with Japan had reduced to securing the core Eastern territories and Indian Ocean while on the western boundary the minimum desired goal now encompassed control of the Eastern Mediterranean rather than solely Egypt and the Canal. To what extent did Britain also have the other elements of a strategy, the “ways” and “means”, to achieve these revised end points in mid-1939? The best evidence for an answer to this question lies in the Naval Staff planning papers<sup>153</sup> produced during May and June to give practical effect to Cunningham’s memorandum for the SAC and the series of COS papers dealing with the

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consensus, was clearly at odds with the personal position he had taken at those meetings. His six month assessment also clashed with the emerging JPC advice that such an offensive was completely unrealistic. Pratt, *East of Malta West of Suez*, p 174 – 5, argues that Churchill’s intervention here was important in helping tilting the SAC and CID in favour of an offensive against Italy. That is possible though, as demonstrated in this thesis, the idea did not last long. It may have been more influential in discouraging any inclination to risk war with Japan over China interests when the Tientsin crisis erupted in June.

<sup>152</sup> One of the earliest and clearest annunciations of these principles can be seen in COS 886 of 20 April 1939, CAB 52/48, TNA, which anticipates much of the discussion at the 2 May CID meeting. This JPC paper emphasised that it was impossible to be sure what form Japanese intervention in the Far East might take. Japanese action might be quite restrained, essentially focused on British interests in China, or highly aggressive where the worst case could include the loss of Hong Kong and Borneo and a determined attack on Singapore. The concept of “core”, as already noted, underpins the PM’s telegram to Dominion leaders of 20 March.

<sup>153</sup> D of P minutes dated 5 and 31 May 1939 with new Section XVII of Far East War Memorandum (Eastern). ADM 116/3863, TNA.

level of force that might be mobilised against Japan that summer to meet the Tientsin crisis<sup>154</sup>. The COS Tientsin papers are widely quoted by historians of the Far East School to demonstrate Britain's inability any longer to generate a competitive Far East Fleet and therefore the effective collapse of the "Singapore Strategy".<sup>155</sup> In fact, as with the earlier crisis in the winter of 1937 – 38, they do no such thing. What the papers and the subsequent deliberations at the CID actually convey is the deep reluctance of the COS and Admiralty to take risks with naval security in the Atlantic and Mediterranean in order to generate a maximum fleet to protect commercial interests in China at a time when the capital ship force was at its lowest ebb.<sup>156</sup> Difficulty in generating an adequate fleet for a confrontation over China, implying deployment well north of Singapore in waters advantageous to Japan, did not mean it was now impossible to meet Chamberlain's more bounded 20 March objectives. Here there are important insights in the papers that have been largely overlooked. They show the scale of RN force the Admiralty judged was required to meet different levels of Japanese attack, how far these forces could be generated, and the consequences for other theatres. The papers indeed established a basic framework for managing the naval risk posed by Japan in a three enemy war that would remain in force until the end of 1941.

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<sup>154</sup> COS 931 of 24 June 1939, "The Situation in the Far East", CAB 53/50, TNA.

<sup>155</sup> Much of the historical attention has focused on the mathematical contortions the Admiralty was forced to engage in by Chatfield to demonstrate that it might just be possible to produce seven capital ships for the Far East by early autumn and that such a force would be credible both in encouraging Japan to an acceptable settlement and adequate if it came to war. Historians are correct that, in reality, the RN would have struggled to produce more than five or six ships before late autumn. They are also correct that judgements on IJN efficiency, assessed at 80% of the RN, were arbitrary and convenient rather than based on any hard intelligence. However, this focus on the mathematics rather misses the point. The COS and Admiralty were clear it made no sense to get into a war over China at this time. The papers were drafted in a way to bring this home to the CID and Cabinet which they did.

<sup>156</sup> The CID considered COS advice on the use of naval force to back up potential economic sanctions against Japan on 26 June. David McIntyre provides a good summary of the debate in *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base*, p 157, drawing on the records of the 362<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of the CID in CAB 2/9, TNA. Chamberlain declared that, sooner or later, if war broke out, Britain would have Germany, Italy and Japan ranged against her. The attitude of the US was uncertain and France the only ally. He accepted the advice of the COS that the maximum fleet which could be generated, based around seven capital ships, would be insufficient to operate safely north of Singapore. In consequence, Britain could not stop Japan freezing her out of China. He assumed his colleagues would agree there was therefore no point in Britain initiating retaliatory action which risked a more general war. If Japan initiated such a war, that would be a different matter. He agreed he would inform Australian and New Zealand representatives which he did on 28 June. Here he re-affirmed the points in his 20 March telegram. If a fleet went now to the East, the temptation for Germany and Italy to take advantage would be irresistible. Sending a less than adequate fleet would be pointless. In short, Britain was understandably not going to risk war for its China trade. The records of this meeting and a follow up meeting at the Dominions Office on 11 July are also in CAB 2/9, TNA.

The Tientsin papers identified first a maximum level of reinforcement for the Far East theatre which could be achieved without incurring significant additional risk in other theatres. This comprised: two capital ships, one carrier, two cruisers and one destroyer flotilla.<sup>157</sup> This was the Drax “Flying Squadron” in all but name.<sup>158</sup> The COS judged that the most this force, when added to the China Squadron, could achieve was to secure communications in the Indian Ocean against raids and deter major operations against Australasia. It would not be able to hold, or even remain in, Singapore if the Japanese moved south in strength. As already mentioned and discussed in future chapters, a small “Immediate Response Force” composed on these lines to secure the Indian Ocean, would be central to Britain’s contingency planning against Japanese intervention from mid-1940 until late 1941. The papers also established a maximum force that could be deployed to the Far East in autumn 1939 following full mobilisation and withdrawal from the Eastern Mediterranean. This would be seven capital ships with appropriate supporting forces.<sup>159</sup>

The final position on Far East naval reinforcement before the outbreak of war with Germany was issued by the Admiralty on 4 August in amendments to Naval War

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<sup>157</sup> Cos 927 of 16 June 1939, CAB 53/50, TNA

<sup>158</sup> The composition of the force was indeed not only virtually identical to the Drax “Flying Squadron” but also to the limited reinforcement package notified to CinC China in the AT of 16 May which was actually described as a “Flying Squadron”. There is an entrenched historical view that Pound, incoming FSL in early June, and Rear Admiral T S V Phillips, the former D of P, as his new DCNS, rejected any concept of Far East reinforcement other than a full fleet and, in particular, banned any reference to the term “Flying Squadron” or the work of Drax. This view largely rests on a minute written by Phillips on 5 July instructing D of P to delete the term “Flying Squadron” from his proposed draft on the Far East to be included in the new War Memorandum (European). See e.g. Christopher Bell, *Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy*, p 90. The relevant minutes are in ADM 1/9767, TNA. Phillips’ comment needs, however, to be placed in the context of the difficult discussions with the Australian High Commissioner who pressed the PM at their meeting on 28 June for assurance that Britain could still send a full fleet to the Far East and would do so again with the Dominion Secretary on 11 July. Records of these meetings are in CAB 2/9, TNA. Since the Australians would receive copies of the War Memoranda, references to “Flying Squadrons” would play to their suspicion that Britain was not being honest about its real intent. It seems likely therefore that Phillips’ instruction reflected political presentation rather than opposition to the concept itself. Phillips had after all signed off the initial Tientsin paper (COS 927) in which the “Flying Squadron” concept, though not the actual term, appeared. Furthermore, on 18 August, by which time the Tientsin crisis was dying down, Pound told Cunningham there remained an option of “sending a weaker force of two battleships to the Far East” in which case Vice Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, Cunningham’s Deputy would go with *Barham* and *Malaya*. Cunningham Papers, MS 52560, BL. This seems conclusive evidence that Pound was not opposed to a flexible reinforcement policy. He and Phillips would continue to promote such a policy through 1940 – 41.

<sup>159</sup> This figure depended on the re-commissioning of *Renown* following her rebuild due in September and completion of short refits to *Hood* and *Revenge*.

Memorandum (European). This addressed the RN response to Japanese intervention when Britain was already at war with Germany and Italy drawing on the new strategic principles which Britain had been evolving since the start of the year.<sup>160</sup> The minimum objectives for the Far East were now those established by Chamberlain on 20 March. Providing the resources to achieve them would require a trade-off between Far East and East Mediterranean risks on the basis of the Cunningham “variable factors”. The Memorandum then defined the precise composition of a “maximum force”, after allocating sufficient forces to deal with Germany as primary enemy, and where the elements for this would be found.<sup>161</sup> This force, centred on seven capital ships and two carriers, would involve full withdrawal from the Eastern Mediterranean although significant forces would be allocated to secure the Red Sea and Persian Gulf from Italian attack.<sup>162</sup>

Such a force would be just adequate to secure the Eastern Empire “core” as defined above and to have a good prospect of cutting the communications of any IJN invasion fleet directed at Singapore.<sup>163</sup> It would not, as the Admiralty acknowledged, be strong enough

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<sup>160</sup> Admiralty Circular Telegram dated 4 August 1939, Amendments to Naval War Memorandum (European), ADM 1/9767, TNA. The background to these amendments, new Sections XVI and XVII, is explained in minutes by D of P and VCNS on 4 and 5 July respectively also in ADM 1/9767. D of P felt that plans to deal with Japanese intervention when war was already underway in Europe were better covered in War Memorandum (European) than War Memorandum (Eastern) which had been under revision since May to reflect the Cunningham Paper recommendations. Phillips as VCNS approved this subject to certain changes:

- The Memorandum should emphasize the RN could not resource three fleets.
- Security of Home waters must have priority.
- A Far East Fleet must have sufficient strength to face Japan in line with COS Tientsin recommendations.
- Providing a Far East Fleet would therefore require HMG to choose between Far East and Eastern Mediterranean. The exercise of this choice would depend on circumstances.
- References to “Flying Squadron” should be deleted.

<sup>161</sup> The allocations here took account of the availability of the battle-cruiser *Renown* due to complete rebuild in September and the battle-cruiser *Hood* and battleship *Revenge* due out of short refit by the end of August. The minimum Home Fleet to deal with Germany would then comprise: the three battle-cruisers, *Hood*, *Renown* and *Repulse*, needed to deal with Germany’s fast ships, three *R-class* battleships, and three carriers. Other forces would include: two 8 inch cruisers, 14 6 inch cruisers, 26 destroyers and 18 submarines. Set against German strength at this time, this was a substantial force.

<sup>162</sup> The “maximum” Far East fleet, including the existing China and Australia Squadrons, would comprise: seven capital ships (two *Nelsons*, three *Queen Elizabeths*, two *R-class*), two carriers, seven 8 inch cruisers, ten modern 6 inch cruisers, 55 destroyers and 15 submarines.

<sup>163</sup> D of P’s “Enclosure B” prepared in support of the Cunningham Memorandum of 4 April estimated that the maximum IJN fleet supporting an attack on Singapore might be: seven or eight capital ships, four carriers, eight 8 inch cruisers, and a proportionate number of ancillary forces. This was based on 75%

to conduct offensive operations north of Singapore.<sup>164</sup> It would also leave no safety margin at home against Germany in the event of war losses and would open Britain to considerable political and strategic risk in the Mediterranean although the COS were reasonably confident Egypt could be held. This concept of a “maximum force”, collected primarily at the expense of the Eastern Mediterranean, would continue to feature in “worst case” contingency planning even after the strategic shock of the fall of France, and certainly through 1941, to meet an imminent Japanese full-scale threat to Australia or the Indian Ocean although by then it was more likely to base in Ceylon than Singapore.

In terms of Britain’s overall naval strategy, this “maximum” Far East fleet identified above can also be viewed as the maximum “means” available from late 1939 to achieve the new strategic end state balancing Eastern Mediterranean and Far East. However, it is clear from all the papers from the Cunningham Memorandum onward that the “way” to achieve this balance was now through a minimum and flexible reinforcement policy for the Far East. RN forces, including all capital units, would be concentrated in the Atlantic and East Mediterranean, as in the European Appreciation, for as long as possible. No reinforcements were now likely to be sent to the East unless the Japanese began serious raids on Empire communications or moved in strength against Singapore.<sup>165</sup> The scale and pace of reinforcement would then depend on the perceived level of risk in accordance with Cunningham’s April paper and would fall between the minimum and maximum force levels described above. Contrary to mainstream historical opinion, this was a clear overall strategy which included the concept of the “Flying Squadron” although with much more realistic expectations of what such a force could achieve than Drax provided in his paper. It was also, in the circumstances of late 1939, still a credible one. Britain could and would

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availability. This was certainly a reasonable maximum threat set against the overall strength of the IJN at this time, the problems of supporting an IJN force of this size at long distance, and the need to guard against US intervention. The RN “maximum” would therefore be competitive in all categories except carriers but would have some land-based air support too.

<sup>164</sup> This 1939 RN “maximum” fleet had one less carrier and about 30% less cruisers and destroyers than the maximum RN fleet that might have been generated in early 1936 as discussed earlier in the chapter. However, the goals of the 1939 fleet were more limited and strictly focused on defence.

<sup>165</sup> There was one exception here. China squadron forces on detachment in the Red Sea and Aden would return east immediately on the opening of hostilities with Japan. The detached forces comprised a division of destroyers and four submarines. Australian and New Zealand cruisers would also return east. ADM 116/3863, TNA.



send a major fleet if the core Eastern Empire was seriously threatened but it hoped, quite reasonably, that this would not be necessary. There is inevitably a tendency here to view Japanese potential against Britain in 1939 through the optic of what they achieved in late 1941. The IJN was a powerful opponent but much less powerful than it would be two years later and the RN forces based permanently in the Far East were, as noted earlier, much stronger.<sup>166 167</sup> They alone, if well-handled, could inflict significant damage on any force attacking Malaya as previously noted. Most important, the Japanese at this time still had no embarkation points from which to mount a seaborne attack or airfields to support it within 2000 miles of Singapore.<sup>168</sup> The RN “maximum force” available if it came to a full fleet confrontation would be smaller than advisable but, whatever the continuing limitations of Singapore as a support base, the challenge to the RN in supporting a fleet would be less than that confronting the Japanese.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> To mount a credible attack on Singapore, the IJN would have needed sustained air superiority which depended on its carrier force. The IJN only had three fleet carriers available at the time of the Tientsin crisis although a fourth *Hiryu* would commission in July. With two light carriers added, a maximum effort by this IJN carrier force would certainly have enjoyed an initial numerical advantage over the combined British carrier and land-based air forces of at least 2:1. However, the IJN carriers would have been very vulnerable to attrition not least from submarine attack. With air superiority eroded, the risk of British forces successfully interdicting IJN communications would be high. Troop transports would be especially vulnerable. IJN aircraft had no significant quality lead over British aircraft at this time. The British were well aware of the threat posed by carrier attack and undertook a major exercise in early 1938 with the carrier *Eagle* posing as an IJN carrier supporting a landing force. *Eagle's* mock attacks were very successful raising uncomfortable implications which the British attempted to address over the next year or so. D W McIntyre, *Rise and Fall*, p 136.

<sup>167</sup> The revised 1939 Far East War Plan provided a breakdown of the forces assumed to be available in the Far East on 1 August in the event of Japanese intervention while war was already underway in Europe. The figures comprised the combined total for the China and Australia Squadrons following the return of detached units in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. The overall strength would then be: one aircraft carrier, four 8 inch cruisers, six modern 6 inch cruisers, 19 destroyers, 15 submarines, seven escort vessels and various light forces. ADM 1/9767, TNA.

<sup>168</sup> In November, Churchill as First Lord would point out that the distance from Japan to Singapore was “as great as that from Southampton to New York” (in reality about 2400 miles) and that transporting and maintaining an army sufficient to besiege Singapore over that distance would be a “forlorn undertaking” given the risk of RN interdiction. WP (39) 135 of 21 November 1939, “Australian and New Zealand Naval Defence”, CAB 66/3/35, TNA. Churchill overstated the distance here since the Japanese could have gathered an attack force at a base like Hainan in Southern China which was only 1100 miles but the basic argument is valid. Providing the fuel to sustain an IJN force at this distance, which would require a substantial tanker fleet and a safe anchorage from which to refuel, would be a formidable undertaking. The RN by contrast could rely on significant facilities and large fuel reserves at Ceylon.

<sup>169</sup> According to Major Terato Kunitake, who was in charge of planning both the Malaya and Singapore operations executed in late 1941, the Japanese did not undertake any planning for an attack on Singapore or Malaya until August 1940 when studies began in the Operations Section of the Army General Staff. Even then, planning moved slowly and was not complete until October 1941. In 1940, the Japanese Army did not even possess one detailed map of the Singapore area. While visiting Germany in 1940, General Tomoyuki Yamashita, future commander of the 25<sup>th</sup> Army and conqueror of Singapore, discussed an attack on

The policy of minimum and flexible reinforcement sufficient to guarantee security of the Eastern Empire core was reaffirmed by the War Cabinet and conveyed to the Dominions in November after the outbreak of war. Churchill, now First Lord, produced a paper designed to reassure visiting Dominion Ministers that Britain could and would protect Australasia against any “serious” Japanese attack. This included an unambiguous commitment that, if Britain were forced to choose between its Middle East interests and the defence of Australia, the latter would take precedence. Such assurance was judged important in winning consent for the deployment of Dominion forces overseas.<sup>170</sup> Haggie provides a good summary of the paper itself, the War Cabinet concern that it went beyond Chamberlain’s guarantee of 20 March, and subsequent discussion with Australian representatives.<sup>171</sup> Two points in the paper, not mentioned by Haggie, deserve emphasis because they reflect Churchill’s personal perspective on Far East naval reinforcement which he would regularly underline over the next two years. The first was the concept of “the Fleet in being”. “The power of a predominant fleet is exercised simultaneously in all quarters of the world in which it has bases. This is irrespective of the position it occupies at any given moment provided that it is not permanently tied to that station.” Deterrence, in other words, rests as much on the possibility of deployment as its actuality. The second and related point was that ships “could not be left idle” in wartime waiting for an attack that might never come.<sup>172</sup> These points neatly underlined the policy reached over the summer – prepare to protect the “core” but do not send reinforcements until we have to.

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Singapore with senior German officers. They all argued that capture of the base would take up to 18 months and require a minimum of five divisions. Professor Tomoyuki Ishizu and Professor Raymond Callahan, Chapter 3, *The Rising Sun Strikes: The Japanese Invasions*, in *The Pacific War Companion* edited by Daniel Marston, (Osprey Publishing, 2011). This chapter draws on the Japanese Official War History, *The Malayan Campaign*, Tokyo, 1966.

<sup>170</sup> WP (39) 135 of 21 November 1939, *ibid.* While the paper aimed to provide robust reassurance, it was careful to distinguish between the scale of fleet needed to combat Japan in its home waters and the more limited requirement now which was to deploy a force sufficient to deter attack on Singapore or Australia. It emphasised the difficulty Japan would have undertaking a long range siege. It also included, with typical Churchillian rhetoric, the famous and emotive phrase that “duty to kith and kin” would take precedence over the Mediterranean.

<sup>171</sup> Haggie, *Britannia at Bay*, p 164 – 166. The War Cabinet debate is in WM 39, 89th Conclusions dated 20 November 1939, item 7, CAB 65/2/23.

<sup>172</sup> As Churchill told Richard Casey, Australian Minister of Supply and leader of their Delegation, and High Commissioner Stanley Bruce on 20 November, “He wished to make it quite clear there would be no question of moving powerful forces to the East on the mere threat of a Japanese attack. We should have to wait until such a threat had developed.” Haggie, p 165, *ibid.*

Neither policy nor plans changed during the first months of 1940 until the collapse of France and intervention of Italy sharply reduced Britain's options in the Far East.

## Conclusion

The main conclusion from this chapter is that Britain's strategy (using the modern definition of ends, ways and means) for defending its Eastern Empire through naval power was more credible in the late 1930s than most historians have allowed. It is not true that the basic concept of deploying a substantial fleet to the East if and when Japan attacked British territory and interests there was always an illusion. The goals set were generally limited and within British resources given that, until the very end of the decade, a major conflict was inherently unlikely and allowed considerable political discretion. The strategy was neither "eviscerated"<sup>173</sup> nor reduced to "a hollow gamble"<sup>174</sup> by the rise of the Triple Threat nor fatally compromised by the need to protect interests in the Mediterranean. Above all, the strategy did not fail to adapt to new circumstances. On the contrary, from late 1938, Britain's leadership moved towards a new consensus on balancing the needs of the Eastern Mediterranean and Far East by focusing on a critical "inner core" of Eastern Empire interests and making naval reinforcement plans more flexible. This flexibility was neither an empty gesture nor deception. It was backed by clear priorities and detailed force allocations. Those forces remained strong enough at this point to retain command of the Indian Ocean and severely disrupt a full-scale Japanese attack on Singapore for which, unknown to the British, the Japanese had yet to do any planning.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Callahan, *The Worst Disaster*, p 26.

<sup>174</sup> Farrell, *Defence and Fall*, p 47.

<sup>175</sup> Marder indeed stated : "All the thinking (by the RN) about the IJN's strategy (through the 1930s) was a grand exercise in futility – and a waste of countless man hours – since IJN operational planning paid scant attention to Great Britain before 1940 – 41, and even then its plans bore little relation to the cogitations of Whitehall planners". While he acknowledged this outcome was in the nature of contingency planning, his judgement is still unfair. Military risk assessment must address possibilities as well as certainties and the future as well as the present. This chapter contends that British assessments of the Japanese threat, as it evolved through the 1930s, were both realistic and balanced. *Old Friends, New Enemies*, Vol 1, p 65.

## Chapter Three

### **Britain's Eastern strategy after the fall of France and its impact on naval planning**

This chapter and the next one address the evolution of British strategy for defence of the Eastern Empire from the fall of France in June 1940 until the summer of 1941 when the implications raised by the German attack on Russia and the Japanese move into southern Indo-China create a natural break point in the evolution of the risk posed by Japan. Chapter Four examines the influence of the US relationship on Far East defence in this period. This chapter considers how the British war leadership, comprising the War Cabinet and COS, tried to balance the growing risk posed by Japan in the Far East from mid-1940 with the existential threat to the UK homeland from Germany and the prospect of a combined German and Italian assault on the western boundary of the Eastern Empire in the Mediterranean and Middle East. It argues that during this period Britain laid the ground for future strategic failure in the Far East territories. However, this was not simply because, with limited resources, it chose to prioritise the defence of the Middle East as most historians have argued.<sup>1</sup> It was rather because it committed to holding a forward position in two theatres simultaneously which in the Far East meant controlling a far larger area than anything contemplated pre-war.

The first part of the chapter explores why Britain adopted its forward position in the Middle East which absorbed a steadily increasing share of military resources between autumn 1940 and the Japanese attack twelve months later. This included the major part of the RN's best carrier power and almost all the modern land-based airpower that could be spared from the UK for deployment overseas. This severely limited the quantity and quality of resources available to counter Japanese aggression at the eastern end of the Empire. Although the trade-off between these two boundaries of the Eastern Empire, in both of which naval and air power were decisive elements, has long been recognised by

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<sup>1</sup> Included here are Roskill and Barnett but also all the main historians of the "Singapore Strategy".

historians, this thesis argues that they have been surprisingly poor at representing the issues which were judged most important by decision-makers at the time. This chapter shows that by spring 1941, Britain's war leadership had identified three critical reasons for holding a forward position in the Middle East which have been neglected in the historiography. These were: the influence this exerted on German access to the Iberian peninsula and North-West Africa with consequent implications for the security of the Atlantic lifeline; the denial of Iraq oil to the Axis; and the security of the western boundary of the Eastern Empire and the Persian oil without which it could neither survive economically nor generate its full war potential. It also shows how investment in the Middle East highlighted the importance of the Indian Ocean supply routes and their potential vulnerability to Japanese attack and therefore the growing awareness of interdependence between these theatres by summer 1941.

The second part of the chapter explores the implications raised by the new COS Far East Appreciation of July 1940 which would shape defence policy in this theatre over the next 18 months. The thesis argues that although its approach appeared defensive with outwardly sensible recommendations focused on minimum reinforcements to hold Malaya and thus Singapore, the underlying strategy it embraced was regressive rather than progressive. It was regressive in two senses. First, instead of building on the more flexible defensive thinking of 1939, focused on the security of the Indian Ocean and inner core of the Eastern Empire, it reverted to a wider strategic goal of holding Japan north and east of the entire Malay barrier in order to secure Singapore. This resurrected the more ambitious 1937 strategy to control at least the southern sector of the South China Sea which was beyond Britain's resources in 1940 - 41. Second, it insisted the optimum way to achieve this wider goal was through the traditional deployment of a battle-fleet rather than a modern integrated "all arms" approach. The chapter argues therefore that the problem identified in Chapter Two when reviewing the 1937 FEA took effect. Deploying a fleet to Singapore was no longer just one way to achieve a strategic end; holding the base had become the end itself. It was the failure adequately to distinguish between ways and ends more than lack of means that would bring disaster. The Admiralty, who

continued to exert the dominant influence on Far East strategy, were primarily responsible for this.

### **The case for holding a forward position in the Middle East**

The fall of France made it much harder for Britain to control the sea areas and communications essential both to protect the Empire and successfully prosecute the war. The loss of French naval support here was less serious than the size of the French Navy suggested. The French Navy had contributed little to operations against German surface forces to date in either the Atlantic or Norway and brought little value to the defence of Atlantic convoys against the submarine threat.<sup>2</sup> The loss of French forces as a counterweight to Italy in the Western Mediterranean was more serious but even this gap proved manageable. The prospect that Germany would acquire French capital ships, including those nearing completion, was a bigger risk but the likelihood of this was minimised by mid-July.<sup>3</sup> The real damage to British naval strategy lay in German access to bases on the French Atlantic coast, which vastly complicated RN defence of the critical Atlantic trade routes, and the change in status of French territories overseas to a position somewhere between unfriendly neutral and outright hostile.<sup>4</sup> For the next two and a half years, Britain faced a constant risk that Germany or the other Axis powers would be able

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<sup>2</sup> David Brown, *The Road to Oran: Anglo-French Naval Relations September 1939 – July 1940*, (London: Frank Cass, 2004), Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> The complex negotiations, and subsequent French and British actions, to prevent French naval units falling into German hands, are outside the scope of this thesis. They are well covered by David Brown in *The Road to Oran*. His book also provides an excellent overview of Anglo-French naval relations over the first nine months of the war. Four modern French capital units were of particular concern. One of the two battle-cruisers, *Dunkerque* was immobilised for at least a year by the British action at Oran, while the *Strasbourg* escaped to Toulon. Of the two new battleships, the virtually complete *Richelieu* was disabled by FAA torpedo attack at Dakar on 8 July while *Jean Bart*, still some way off completion, was out of German reach at Casablanca. The attack on *Richelieu* was noteworthy for the first use of Mark XII aerial torpedoes with advanced Duplex warheads employing a magnetic proximity fuse. See: Angelo N Caravaggio, 'The Attack at Taranto: Tactical Success, Operational Failure', (*US Naval War College Review*, Summer 2006, Vol 59, No 3).

<sup>4</sup> The primary value of French bases was in U-boat deployment. U-boats could deploy far more quickly and safely from bases on the west coast of France than from Germany where they faced a long and exposed transit to patrol areas. In some cases effective Atlantic patrol time virtually doubled. Admiral Doenitz provides a detailed account of the many advantages gained by deploying U-boats from France in his memoirs, *Ten Years and Twenty Days*, (Frontline Books edition, 2012), chapter 8. For the same reasons, the French bases also greatly helped with surface raider deployment both by warship and converted merchant vessel. Finally, French airbases greatly extended the opportunities for air attack on Atlantic and coastal shipping.

to exploit French territory against her whether on the Atlantic coast of Africa, in the Mediterranean, or the Far East where indeed Japan moved rapidly to take bases in northern Indo-China making an attack southwards a much more feasible proposition.<sup>5</sup> Countering these new risks in the Atlantic and Mediterranean tied up significant extra RN and RAF resources, in a way never anticipated pre-war, making it much more difficult to release forces to counter Japanese intervention even with the more flexible reinforcement policy which had emerged in 1939. Several historians indeed insist that it was the fall of France that finally rendered the Singapore strategy impossible.<sup>6</sup> However, that is true only if the strategy is defined within very narrow limits. Britain certainly lost Singapore in 1942 but it held India and the Dominions and maintained adequate control over Indian Ocean communications. It also despatched a larger fleet to the Indian Ocean that year than it deployed in any other theatre during World War II.

The most authoritative assessment of how the British leadership saw Britain's overall strategic position following the fall of France is the COS "Future Strategy" paper of 4 September.<sup>7</sup> At the level of grand strategy, this paper established a blueprint for how victory might still be achieved by wearing down Germany as primary enemy through economic attrition using naval blockade, bombing and subversion.<sup>8</sup> As Brian Farrell argues, this was more an expression of faith than a realistic war plan. Britain was potentially strong enough to cope with a wider war embracing Italy and the Mediterranean, but only within a defensive framework. Anything more ambitious

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<sup>5</sup> Japanese sources suggest the main reason for their intervention in northern Indo-China, which was negotiated with the French Colonial Authorities over the period June – September, was to cut aid to China and provide a new launching point for military operations against her. JM 146, "Political Strategy Prior to the Outbreak of War, Part II", p 7 – 12. The possibility of wider southern expansion to gain at a minimum economic control over South-East Asia and the NEI was discussed for the first time as the Japanese assessed the consequences of the German victories in Europe. However, there was no concerted strategy to achieve this yet and the IJN was resistant to risking a military confrontation with the Western powers. JM 146, p 13 – 18. Vice Admiral Nobutake Kondo, Vice Chief of Naval Staff, told the Emperor on 26 September that the IJN had no operations plan for a war with Britain. JM 146, p 30.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Farrell claims the fall of France, more than any other single event, compromised Singapore. *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940 -1942*, p 56. Christopher Bell states that it was the event that finally precluded the despatch of a substantial fleet to the Far East. *The Royal Navy, Strategy and Seapower*, p 94.

<sup>7</sup> 'Future Strategy', W.P. 362 of 4 September, CAB 66/11/42, TNA.

<sup>8</sup> Naturally the "Future Strategy" paper did not emerge out of the blue. Its genesis can be seen in a series of earlier papers prepared by the JPC from mid-July onwards and especially those developed to brief the visiting US Delegation led by Rear Admiral Robert Ghormley at the end of August. See e.g. COS 629 (JP) of 14 August, "Anglo-American Standardisation of Arms Committee, CAB 80/16, TNA, and, COS 675 of 28 August, "Anglo-American Standardisation of Arms Committee, CAB 80/17, TNA.

depended on US support.<sup>9</sup> However, the paper is also important for its analysis of comparative force levels and its assessment of the immediate strategic vulnerabilities and potential opportunities confronting both Britain and the Axis. Here, while the basic concept of “wearing down” Germany certainly influenced immediate British priorities and choices, the security of the UK homeland and the defence of the other interests and territory perceived as critical to the future war effort was for the moment the primary concern.

The paper believed that the RN could maintain adequate naval superiority over Germany and Italy until August 1942.<sup>10</sup> The active hostility of France would be a significant additional commitment but would still not dangerously weaken British control of essential sea areas. The projections for German and Italian naval strength, including German U-boat production<sup>11</sup>, were broadly accurate although they slightly overstated commissioning of German heavy surface units.<sup>12</sup> The paper was noticeably more confident that Britain could retain naval supremacy in the Atlantic and Mediterranean than when the implications of French defeat were first addressed at the end of May.<sup>13</sup> This probably reflected three factors: better understanding of German naval losses in Norway; the neutralisation of the French fleet; and the naval supremacy established in initial engagements with Italy<sup>14</sup>. The first point was especially important. Not only was the remaining German surface force quite incapable of supporting an invasion operation but only two heavy units would be available for Atlantic raider operations for the rest of

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Farrell, *The Basis and Making of Grand Strategy – Was there a Plan?*, (UK: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), p 21 - 23.

<sup>10</sup> There was no special significance attached to this date. The paper was merely projecting comparative force levels, using estimates of current strength and anticipated production, out to 1942. There was no implication that the balance would fundamentally change at that point.

<sup>11</sup> The paper estimated 70 U-boats on 1 August, whereas the true figure was 59, and 157 (or 130 allowing for wastage) by 1 August 1941 when the true figure would be 153 on 1 July that year. True figures taken from Horst Boog and others, *Germany and the Second World War Vol VI*, Table III.iii.i, p 348.

<sup>12</sup> The paper correctly anticipated that only two new battleships, *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz*, would be available before 1942, but assumed incorrectly that there would be two aircraft carriers and a fourth *Hipper* class heavy cruiser by end 1941. In the event, none of these three were ever completed.

<sup>13</sup> COS (40) 390 of 25 May 1940, “British Strategy in a Certain Eventuality”, CAB 80/11, TNA.

<sup>14</sup> These included the hit by *Warspite* on the Italian battleship *Giulio Cesare* at the battle of Punto Stilo off Calabria on 9 July 1940, the sinking of the cruiser *Bartolomeo Colleoni* by the Australian cruiser *Sydney* on 18 July, and early attrition of Italian submarines.



1940.<sup>15</sup> Indeed the scale of German loss in Norway arguably equated to the best outcome from the six month offensive against Germany postulated by Drax in early 1939. In addition, the operational U-boat force would not increase at all in the first year of the war.<sup>16</sup>

The paper assessed that the forces required to retain adequate superiority over Germany and Italy in the new strategic circumstances left no margin for the foreseeable future to deal with any Japanese intervention. The most that could be deployed to the Eastern theatre was a small “hunting group” to deter IJN raider action in the Indian Ocean.<sup>17</sup> The paper nevertheless stressed the continuing importance of holding Singapore as a potential base for a fleet in being and, along with Malaya, as a foothold for recovering any losses

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<sup>15</sup> The German Navy lost three cruisers, including the brand new *Blucher*, one of its only two heavy cruisers, ten destroyers and six U-boats. In addition, the two battle-cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* and Pocket battleship *Lutzow* were all badly damaged. The first two would not be operational again until the end of the year and *Lutzow* not until well into 1941. This left only the Pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer* and heavy cruiser *Hipper* potentially available for Atlantic raider operations or indeed to support an invasion of UK. The Norwegian historian Geirr Haarr, who has provided the most detailed account of the Norwegian naval campaign to date, argues that the German surface navy, small before the campaign, “was crippled virtually beyond recovery”. This seems an overstatement but underlines the scale of loss. Geirr Haarr, *The German Invasion of Norway April 1940*, (UK: Seaforth Publishing, 2011). Churchill was certainly aware of the full state of German naval weakness by early August. On 11 August, he told the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand that “the German Navy is weaker than it has ever been” and is reduced to “only one pocket battleship, a couple of 8 inch *Hippers*, two light cruisers, and perhaps a score of destroyers”. Apart from the addition of an extra *Hipper*, this assessment was essentially correct. *Second World War, Vol II*, p 385 – 387.

<sup>16</sup> There is an authoritative table setting out monthly U-boat strength in *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol. VI, *The Global War*, (OUP, 2001) by Horst Boog, Werner Rahn and Bernd Wegner. Strength at key dates, taken from Table III.iii.i, was as follows:

Month	Total Available	Frontline Strength
September 1939	57	39
September 1940	59	27
January 1941	81	22
July 1941	153	53
January 1942	249	91 (North Atlantic: 65, Mediterranean: 21)

Not only therefore did the U-boat force not grow during the first year of the war but deployable strength on the frontline actually dropped significantly and, as confirmed by Doenitz in his memoirs, continued to fall until it reached its lowest point in January 1941. *Ten Years and Twenty Days*, chapter 5. Even by January 1942, when overall strength was growing very fast, deployable numbers in the North Atlantic had still not yet doubled from September 1939. Actual numbers deployed, when allowance is made for rest and maintenance were of course much less, at between 50 – 70 % at best of frontline strength. John Ellis gives broadly similar figures, drawn from earlier sources in Table 37 of his *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1990). Britain meanwhile had increased its deployable Atlantic escort capability between September 1939 and January 1942 with around 40 new destroyer escorts, some 200 new corvettes and about 40 old destroyers from the US. Allowing for losses etc, escort strength had at least tripled therefore by January 1942. See Chapter One, Table 4.

<sup>17</sup> This would probably comprise a battle-cruiser and a carrier.

when stronger forces became available.<sup>18</sup> Here, perhaps optimistically, it emphasised the intent of finishing the European war with a fleet sufficiently strong to secure and, if necessary re-establish, Britain's position in the East against the strongest anticipated Japanese fleet.

Apart from a direct attack on the British homeland, and a continuing assault on the Atlantic shipping routes, the papers saw two immediate areas of risk. First, an Axis drive south-west through Spain to seize Gibraltar, secure the Western Mediterranean, and acquire bases on the West African coast both to break the British blockade and support the Atlantic offensive. Second, an attack on Egypt to secure the Eastern Mediterranean, force the withdrawal of the British fleet there and open up access to the Middle East and its oil and to the Indian Ocean. The first risk followed directly from the fall of France and was certainly a real one. Throughout the autumn, the Germans did indeed try hard to draw Spain into the war and their strategic aspirations in South-West Europe, embracing the capture of Gibraltar and the acquisition of bases in the Atlantic Islands and North-West Africa, were closely aligned to British fears.<sup>19</sup> However, the Spanish leadership, under General Franco, was unwilling to commit unless Germany could guarantee benefits that would outweigh the economic damage from subsequent British blockade. Here Spanish aspirations in North Africa were in competition with French and Italian interests which Germany was reluctant to confront and Spain was sceptical British naval power would be easily dislodged from the Mediterranean.<sup>20</sup> As the British had already calculated, the retention of a powerful fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean, in addition to the newly

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<sup>18</sup> The concept of Singapore and Malaya as "foothold for recovery" clearly reflected Chatfield's line at the 1937 Imperial Conference.

<sup>19</sup> German goals here were summarised in Fuhrer Directive No 18 of 12 November 1940 which defined plans for the capture of Gibraltar and subsequent acquisition of bases in the Atlantic islands and ideally North West Africa. The text of this Directive is available at: [www.ww2db.com](http://www.ww2db.com). According to the diary of Colonel General Franz Halder, Chief of the German General Staff, the idea of attacking Gibraltar was under discussion as early as 30 July. Other options for bringing pressure against Britain at this time were: to support the Italians in an attack on Egypt; to attack Haifa; to attack the Suez Canal; and to encourage Russia to move on the Persian Gulf. Halder Diaries, Vol IV Part 2, US Army Archives, Fort Leavenworth.

<sup>20</sup> *Germany and the Second World War: Volume 3: The Mediterranean, South-East Europe and North Africa 1939 – 1941*, (UK English edition: Clarendon Press, 1998), by Gerhard Schreiber and Bernd Stegemann, esp p 145 – 152 and 187 – 193, provides an excellent analysis of German aspirations in the south-west as well as the competing German and British pressures acting on Spain. They stress how dependant Spain was on British goodwill for its oil and most of its food. Britain calibrated supplies to Spain with great skill to ensure she had no chance to build up a cushion of stocks.

established *Force H* at Gibraltar, encouraged Spanish caution.<sup>21</sup> Substantial British bribes to the Spanish military leadership were also influential.<sup>22</sup> The second risk was an elaboration, in the new circumstances, of the risk to the Middle East identified during the SAC discussions of early 1939. The Future Strategy paper's analysis of the Middle East position is especially important because it identified the strategic goals here, and the strategic rationale underpinning those goals, which determined the huge British investment in this area over the next three years.

The importance the Future Strategy paper, drafted at the end of August, placed on Britain holding Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean, with a strong fleet here as guarantor, contrasts with the evaluation done two months earlier by the JPC.<sup>23</sup> In June, the JPC acknowledged there were strong arguments, already advanced by the Naval Staff, for withdrawing the bulk of the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet to meet the heightened risks in the Atlantic, and to seal the western entrance of the Mediterranean, in the event of French collapse.<sup>24</sup> However, they also saw powerful political and strategic arguments which currently outweighed the naval case for withdrawal. Holding Egypt without the fleet might be difficult, Turkey might then tilt towards the Axis and a wholesale collapse in Britain's position across the theatre could follow. The effectiveness of the blockade strategy would be seriously compromised.<sup>25</sup> These factors were again identified in the Future Strategy paper but the arguments for holding the Eastern Mediterranean were now tightened. The most important new arguments related to oil. The paper rightly identified

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<sup>21</sup> For a good assessment of the strategic influence exerted by *Force H* during the period 1940 – 1942 both in discouraging Spanish intervention and pro-Axis action by French naval forces, see: Michael Simpson, "Force H and British Strategy in the Western Mediterranean 1939 – 42", (*The Mariner's Mirror*, 83:1, 1997, p 62 – 75).

<sup>22</sup> David Stafford, *Churchill and Secret Service*, (UK: Overlook Press, 1997), p 236 - 238.

<sup>23</sup> COS (40) 469 of 17 June, "Military Implications of the Withdrawal of the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet", CAB 80/13, TNA.

<sup>24</sup> D of P's paper setting out the naval arguments for withdrawal is attached to the minutes of the 183<sup>rd</sup> COS Meeting on 17 June 1940, CAB 79/5, TNA. This paper correctly highlighted the heightened risks to Britain's Atlantic trade through German access to French ports and possibly Spanish bases too. However, it largely ignored the benefits Germany and Italy might gain from easy access to the Black Sea and overstated the limitations of Alexandria as a base.

<sup>25</sup> These arguments were developed and tightened by the JPC at the beginning of July and brought together in a COS telegram to the Dominions and relevant overseas officials and commanders dated 3 July. This set out the rationale for holding the Middle East and stressed the significance of Persian oil. It also expressed confidence that Britain could cope with Italy so long as the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet remained in place. COS (40) 521 of 3 July, "Military Policy in Egypt and the Middle East", CAB 80/14, TNA.

shortage of oil as a major Axis vulnerability.<sup>26</sup> If Germany could enjoy “tranquil trade” from the Black Sea through the Eastern Mediterranean to Italy and France, she could increase oil imports by three million tons per year.<sup>27</sup> The obstacle to such tranquil trade was the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet.<sup>28</sup> The Fleet also denied Germany the prospect of reaching the Iraq oil fields through Turkey or Syria while preserving their use for Britain. The paper emphasised that Germany would not be able to exploit Iraq oil in the short term since Britain would destroy the infrastructure but she could deny it to Britain and ultimately threaten the Iranian fields and the refinery at Abadan.<sup>29</sup>

The British assessment of the Axis threat to the Middle East was entirely logical and the option of an attack here, both to weaken Britain’s position and reap economic benefits by breaking the blockade, was regularly aired within the German leadership through the second half of 1940.<sup>30</sup> However, German aspirations here were much less coherent and focused than the British assumed. There were two reasons for this. Dislodging Britain from the Middle East would be a far more complex operation than an attack on Gibraltar

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<sup>26</sup> The Future Strategy paper assessed total German oil receipts (production and imports) for the period 1 June 1940 to 31 May 1941 at 7.6 million tons. Capacity was actually about 1 million tons greater because synthetic production was by this time about 1.0 million tons higher than the British estimate of 3.3 Million tons. British figures, including stocks available across occupied Europe, were otherwise very accurate.

<sup>27</sup> This would be about 35% of Germany’s projected 1940 supply. The figure assumed about 1 million tons additional supply from Rumania above the 2 million tons from that source already provided by land and river routes. It is worth noting here that the Germans did experience serious transport difficulties with Rumanian oil over the winter of 1940-41. The remaining 2 million tons would come from Russia.

<sup>28</sup> Stalin attached particular importance to Britain’s ability to control the Eastern Mediterranean through naval power and saw this as a key factor both in weighing Russia’s options in the Balkans and in judging Britain’s war prospects against Germany. See: Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia*, (Yale University Press, 1999), esp p 13 and 58 – 59.

<sup>29</sup> General Sir Archibald Wavell as CinC Middle East was fully alert to the importance of oil in the successful prosecution of the war, highlighting Britain’s enormous comparative advantage here over Germany and the importance of maintaining it, in a paper sent to Field Marshall Sir John Dill as CIGS at the end of May. See: Harold E Raugh, *Wavell in the Middle East 1939 – 1941*, (London: Brassey’s, 1993), p 61 -63, for the full text of relevant papers. Michael Howard also quotes Wavell’s biographer John Connell recording Wavell’s view that “the prime task of Middle East Command should be to prevent Rumanian oil reaching Germany”. Michael Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War*, (London: Greenhill Books, 1993), p 10. Setting such a goal meant not only denying transport of Rumanian oil by sea but acquiring airbases in the Balkans to interdict Rumanian oil infrastructure and land transport routes.

<sup>30</sup> See: Gerhard Schreiber and others, *Germany and the Second World War: Volume III: The Mediterranean, South-East Europe and North Africa 1939 – 1941*. Section III, “The Strategic Dilemma of the Summer and Autumn of 1940: An Alternative or Interim Strategy?”, contains an authoritative account, drawing on primary German sources, of the various discussions relating to a Mediterranean initiative. The first proposals for an attack on the British position in the Mediterranean, as an alternative or complement to invasion of the UK, were set out in a memorandum by Major General Alfred Jodl, Chief of OKW Operations Staff, on 30 June 1940. The authors describe this as the “precursor of all subsequent ideas”.

through Spain and would therefore compete for resources with a 1941 attack on Russia to which Hitler was broadly committed from end July.<sup>31</sup> And any major German intervention in North Africa or the Eastern Mediterranean would cause tensions with Italy who saw this as her sphere. For these reasons, the German leadership never conducted a serious analysis of the strategic benefits, risks, and feasibility, in terms of military resources and logistic support, of a drive into the Middle East at this time. A partial exception here is the German Naval Staff who produced detailed arguments in favour of a Mediterranean strategy which were put to Hitler by Grand Admiral Raeder in September and again in November. However, Hitler evidently saw the Mediterranean as a distraction from the Russia campaign to which he was now committed and Raeder lacked the power base and the naval capability from which to make the case convincing.<sup>32</sup> Oddly, the possibility of gaining control of Middle East oil reserves for German use appears to have played little or no part throughout the Mediterranean debates that autumn.<sup>33</sup> Given this inability to articulate decisive benefits for a Mediterranean offensive, the subsequent German intervention in the theatre from early 1941 was essentially motivated by defensive factors, protecting the Rumanian oil fields and facilities from potential attack<sup>34</sup>, securing

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<sup>31</sup> *Germany and the Second World War: Volume III*, p133, states Hitler announced his decision on 31 July 1940.

<sup>32</sup> *Germany and the Second World War: Volume III*. Raeder's proposals and various meetings with Hitler on 6 and 26 September and 14 November are described at p 212 – 235. Raeder suggested that the Middle East could provide a base from which to seize the Caucasus oilfields making an attack on Russia in the North unnecessary. See also: German Naval History Series, "Axis Naval Policy and Operations in the Mediterranean 1939 – 1943", by Vice Admiral Eberhard Weichold, German Admiral in Rome 1940 – 1943, para 62, ADM 199/2518, TNA. However, Raeder was also forced to admit that some of the objectives he suggested, notably the seizure of the Atlantic Islands, such as the Canaries and Azores, were impractical in the face of British seapower.

<sup>33</sup> The summary of German deliberations in *Germany and the Second World War: Volume III* gives no indication that there was any serious analysis of the prospects of acquiring and exploiting Iraqi oil. That may reflect the fact that, at this time, largely because of the lull in major military activity following the fall of France through to the Balkan operations in the spring of 1941, the German oil position was better than at any time in the war. Attitudes changed in early 1941 as serious planning for Barbarossa accelerated. A memorandum produced by General Thomas, Chief of the War Economy and Armaments Department, stressed that capturing the Caucasus oil fields would be essential to preserve Wehrmacht operational capability. By May, Wehrmacht Operations Staff were anticipating a monthly shortfall of 300,000 tons by September. *Germany and the Second World War: Volume III*, p 853 – 854.

<sup>34</sup> This was a significant factor behind the German intervention in Greece and the subsequent decision to take Crete which Hitler feared could be used to conduct air raids against the Rumanian oilfields. *Germany and the Second World War: Volume III*, p 764. In reality, an effective air attack against Ploesti, mounted from East Mediterranean bases, was well beyond RAF bombing capability at this time. The first major attack would not be mounted until August 1943 by the USAAF from Benghazi. This was a disaster with 40% losses and little impact on oil output. Only in mid-1944 were the Allies able to mount a serious and

the Balkans as a southern flank prior to the attack on Russia in June, keeping Italy in the war, and occasional opportunism such as the intervention in Iraq in May.<sup>35</sup>

While the denial of oil and other economic resources to the Axis were alone viewed as compelling British arguments for holding the Eastern Mediterranean, the Future Strategy paper also resurrected many of the arguments from early 1939 in favour of early action to drive Italy out of the war. The immediate opportunities, as identified then, were to sever access to her African Empire and then eliminate it, tighten the blockade of her trade and harry her fleet. Having identified the dual benefits, offensive and defensive, of holding a forward position in the Eastern Mediterranean, the paper nevertheless identified a fall-back position if Axis forces proved too strong or demands elsewhere, including a Japanese threat to the Eastern Empire core, required withdrawal of the fleet. Here a more extreme version of the Chatfield 1937 policy would take effect. Forces would be withdrawn from the Mediterranean, the Canal would be blocked and Britain would retire to a line from East Africa to Iraq, in the last resort holding the Persian Gulf, Aden and Kenya. While the paper did not spell out the circumstances in which the “last resort” might take effect, it stated that, in the face of a direct and immediate threat to Australasia, Britain would abandon its position in the Middle East and Mediterranean to come to its aid.

The decision to hold and exploit a position in the Eastern Mediterranean did not therefore make it impossible to place a substantial fleet in the East, or at least in the Indian Ocean. Not only could the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet be withdrawn in extremis but, in theory, the Indian Ocean could be given greater priority at any time. However the decision meant forces available to meet potential Japanese intervention were nevertheless reduced in

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ultimately very effective campaign out of Italy. Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939 – 1945*, (London: Allen Lane, 2013), Part Two, chapter 9.

<sup>35</sup> This is illustrated in successive Fuhrer Directives: No 18 of 12 November 1940 which focuses primarily on Gibraltar but mentions limited support to the Italians against Egypt and the need to secure the Balkans; No 20 of 3 December 1940, which defines operations to secure the Balkans in more detail; No 30 of 23 May 1941, exploitation of the anti-British rising in Iraq; No 32 of 11 June 1941 which defines plans for a series of offensives to take control of the Mediterranean and Near East after the collapse of Russia. Only the last displays real ambition with concerted drives on Gibraltar, the Suez Canal via Egypt, and into Palestine and Iraq/Iran from Bulgaria through Turkey. However, it represented a wildly optimistic vision for what might become possible in 1942 following victory in Russia and comprised vague aspirations rather than any coherent strategy for undermining British Imperial power.

crucial ways. The build-up of adequate RN forces in the Mediterranean required reductions in the China Squadron which by autumn 1940 was a pale shadow of its 1939 strength.<sup>36</sup> Committing to the Mediterranean would inevitably entail significant losses, limiting options for any future Far East naval reinforcement.<sup>37</sup> But the most critical penalty paid in the Far East, as will be demonstrated later, was in land-based airpower where, through 1941, the Middle East absorbed almost all the modern air resources available for deployment from the UK to overseas theatres. If the consequence of the commitment to the Eastern Mediterranean was to leave the Far East increasingly exposed to Japan, then the obvious question is whether this commitment was justified. Were the risks and benefits perceived by Britain's leadership in autumn 1940, especially in regard to oil, valid? Or, as the many critics of Britain's Mediterranean campaign argue, was the Mediterranean actually a strategic dead end, offering no decisive advantage to either side, with investment therefore discretionary, with the net result that Britain in particular expended huge resources for negligible gain?<sup>38</sup>

There are several problems with the standard critique. Any charge that the Mediterranean was an irrelevant sideshow rests heavily on viewing the theatre and its prospects through the hindsight of the specific German-Russian war that began in mid-1941. In mid-1940, British decision-makers clearly faced other possible futures. Critics, and indeed most supporters, of British Mediterranean strategy devote little attention to the issue of Middle East oil supplies although this is a central theme throughout British strategy papers in the period 1940 – 42. They also largely ignore the southern supply route to Russia which became an increasingly important factor in British and US minds from late 1941. Critics

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<sup>36</sup> By mid-1940, the carrier *Eagle*, all but one of the 8 inch heavy cruisers, most of the modern destroyers, and the 15 submarines of the Fourth Submarine Squadron had been withdrawn. Almost all these forces went to the Mediterranean. Most of the submarines went to Malta which proved to be an unwise deployment. These large boats of the "O", "P" and "R" classes were ill suited to the clear waters of the Mediterranean where they were very vulnerable to aerial spotting and many were quickly lost. John Winton, *Cunningham: The Greatest Admiral since Nelson*, (London: John Murray, 1998). In late July, the remaining forces east of Suez comprised: one 8 inch cruiser, two modern 6 inch cruisers, four old 6 inch cruisers, six Armed Merchant Cruisers, five old destroyers, and three A/S escorts. COS (40) 592 of 31 July, "The Situation in the Far East in the Event of Japanese Intervention Against Us", p 23, CAB 66/10/33, TNA.

<sup>37</sup> Indeed by the end of 1941, the RN had lost, in vessels either sunk or damaged, virtually all the frontline with which it started the year in the Mediterranean.

<sup>38</sup> There is a good summary of the main critics and their case provided by Douglas Porch in the preface and introduction of *The Path to Victory; The Mediterranean Theatre in World War II*, (New York; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).

and supporters also show little awareness of the critical linkage between the Mediterranean and Atlantic campaigns though this loomed large in German and US, as well as British, thinking. Finally, while there are legitimate arguments over the extent to which the offensive phase of the Mediterranean campaign from mid-1943 displaced effort that could have been better applied in North-West Europe, these should not be confused with the rather different risk-benefit balance which applied in 1940 – 42.

The British official historian J M A Gwyer accepts that withdrawal or defeat in the Middle East would have given the Axis valuable prizes, notably a sea route to access Rumanian oil, safe access to raw materials in Egypt and Turkey, and denial of Iraqi oil to Britain even if Germany could not exploit this itself.<sup>39</sup> However, he also suggests the economic losses in the Middle East would not be critical so long as the Iranian fields and Abadan were protected and naval control was retained in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Falling back here would therefore have enabled valuable resources to be redeployed elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> Gwyer judges that the case against withdrawal lay in damage to British morale and her standing with the US and key neutrals, the compromise of the blockade, still a key element of British strategy, and belief that this was the only fighting theatre which could contribute to “wear down”.<sup>41</sup> These factors certainly carried weight with the British leadership as did the argument that effective defence of the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean required strategic depth. However, it is important to ask whether Gwyer’s justification for forward defence here is adequate or whether the strategic stakes in the Middle East were higher than he suggests.

The German historian Klaus Schmider has examined the factors that could have made the Mediterranean and Middle East a decisive war theatre in the period 1940 – 42 and is

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<sup>39</sup> In fact, while Iraqi oil was useful to Britain, it was not critical. For practical purposes, with the closure of the Mediterranean, it could only be used to supply British forces and territories from the pipeline terminal at Haifa in the immediate East Mediterranean area. If Britain withdrew from the Eastern Mediterranean, then clearly the oil could not be accessed but nor would it be needed. In addition, the loss of Iraq could easily be made up from the Persian fields.

<sup>40</sup> This was of course the “Future Strategy” “last resort” line.

<sup>41</sup> J M A Gwyer, *Grand Strategy Volume III: June 1941 – August 1942, Part I*, (London: HMSO, 1964), p 5 - 7.



perhaps the only historian to have explored the oil issue in detail.<sup>42</sup> A search through the index of most histories dealing with the Mediterranean and Middle East campaigns in World War II, and indeed prominent general histories of the war, produces hardly any reference to Middle East oil. Even Michael Howard makes only brief mention.<sup>43</sup> Yet it is a dominant theme through COS and JPC papers in 1940 – 1942. Schmider argues that only Britain had the brief prospect of lasting strategic advantage in this period through exploiting the victory over the Italians in early 1941 to seize all of Libya before the Germans could intervene.<sup>44</sup> This lost opportunity has been well explored by other historians but Schmider convincingly demonstrates its military feasibility. Expelling the Axis from North Africa would have enabled Britain to control the Central Mediterranean, secure Malta, and release significant air and ground forces for the Far East, rendering the painful strategic trade-offs of 1941 unnecessary. British sea and airpower would have made an Axis reinvasion of North Africa virtually impossible.<sup>45</sup>

For Schmider, failure to seize this opportunity rendered Britain's Mediterranean strategy essentially negative. It sought to deny the Axis assets, the use of the Suez Canal and access to the Indian Ocean, the oil fields of Iraq and Iran, which, while not intrinsically valuable to Britain, could in British eyes provide war winning potential for the Axis. However, Schmider contends that the Axis could never achieve decisive effect with these assets. Gaining the Suez Canal or Iraqi oilfields would not themselves influence the war's outcome. The British could still control the exit from the Red Sea while getting useful yields from the Iraq fields would take Germany a year<sup>46</sup> and make only a modest

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<sup>42</sup>Klaus Schmider, The Mediterranean in 1940-1941: Crossroads of Lost Opportunities, (*War and Society*, Vol 15, No 2, October 1997).

<sup>43</sup> Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War*, p 7 – 10.

<sup>44</sup> This was Operation Compass led by Lieutenant General Sir Richard O'Connor. Originally conceived as a raiding operation, it led to the capture of Cyrenaica and virtual destruction of the Italian Army in North Africa comprising ten divisions. 130,000 prisoners were taken, along with 380 tanks and 845 guns for less than 2000 British Empire casualties. Major General I S O Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Volume 1, The Early Successes against Italy*, (HMSO, 1954), Review of the Desert Campaign, p 362.

<sup>45</sup> This is an endorsement therefore of the "Future Strategy" case for early action against Italy and indeed some of the pre-war "knock-out blow" thinking.

<sup>46</sup> The suggestion that it would take a year to recover at least 50% of production following British destruction of wells and pipeline infrastructure reflects the difficulty Germany had in recovering any yield from the Caucasus wells it captured in late 1942 in the Grozny area. See: Horst Boog and others, *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol VI, p 1038 – 1048.

contribution to her overall oil needs.<sup>47</sup> The geographical location of the much richer Iranian oil fields and Abadan meant they could only be effectively exploited through the Indian Ocean where the Axis had no prospect of secure access.<sup>48</sup> The Axis could of course deny Middle East oil, including Abadan, to Britain but he argues that lack of Allied shipping resources made this oil usable only in the Eastern Mediterranean and areas immediately bordering the Indian Ocean. Although its loss would drastically reduce the military potential of these theatres, the sheer scale of US economic and energy resources would compensate for this loss elsewhere. Schmider does acknowledge the possibility of Germany establishing a position in northern Iraq and Iran in 1941, facilitating a drive north to seize the Caucasus oil fields the following year, a move that might have caused the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Despite some compelling arguments, Schmider understates the strategic benefits for the Axis in the Middle East and their potential to damage the British and Allied cause in important ways. He is right to highlight the difficulties Germany would face in exploiting the oil fields but, if Iran oil was beyond reach, he appears to accept that two million tons a year from Iraq in mid-1942, rising to perhaps four million tons from 1943, was a credible outcome. This would have added somewhere between 20 – 40% to Germany's oil supply in that period, making a substantial difference to her war potential given that her successes in 1941 – 42 rested on consumption that was barely a third of that enjoyed by the British Empire.<sup>49</sup> Obtaining Iraq oil would certainly have enabled his projected drive northward

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<sup>47</sup> The pre-war yield of the Iraq Kirkuk fields was about 4.5 million tons per annum. The oil was delivered to the Mediterranean coast by a pipeline which forked at the Syrian border with a northerly arm going to the port of Tripoli in Lebanon and a southerly arm to Haifa in Palestine. Schmider assumes that, in the face of any imminent threat to Iraqi oil, Britain would have done everything possible to destroy wells, pumping stations and sections of pipeline. Assessing how long it would take the Germans to restore a useful output is a difficult task but achieving an output of 2 million tons via the Tripoli line, part of which was clearly on Vichy territory and difficult for Britain to access, within 12 months seems reasonable.

<sup>48</sup> The pre-war output of the Iranian fields was around 11 million tons per annum but their productive potential was much higher.

<sup>49</sup> Bernhard R Kroener, Rolf Dieter Muller, and Hans Umbreit, provide the basic figures for German oil consumption and output during the first half of the war at p 472 - 475 of *Germany and the Second World War: Vol V: Organisation and Mobilisation in the German Sphere of Power: Part 2: Wartime Administration, Economy and Manpower Resources 1942 – 1944/45*, (UK English edition: Clarendon Press, 2006). These were (figures in thousands of tons):

Year	Total Consumption	Synthetic	Imports	Production Occupied Territories
1939	8200	2200	5165	0
1940	7600	3348	2075	0

into the Caucasus. The key factor preventing Germany realising this substantial strategic benefit in Iraq was the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet. Schmider is therefore wrong to suggest that Axis control of the Canal would bring little value since the Canal was essential to the RN's hold over the Eastern Mediterranean. Without it, even if the fleet retired temporarily to Haifa following loss of Alexandria, it would be a fast wasting asset. Meanwhile his claim that the loss of Abadan would have had no decisive impact on the overall Allied war effort, is also too sweeping. In 1941, it supplied about 22% of British Empire consumption, including most of that in the Eastern Empire, and its contribution was growing. Its loss would therefore have had serious consequences for the British war effort, perhaps reducing it as much as 25% by 1942, on the economies of the Eastern Empire and security of India, and certainly would have made the Allied task much harder after US intervention.<sup>50</sup>

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1941	10000	4116	2807	332
1942	9500	4920	2359	370

The gap between total consumption (35,300,000 tons) and total output (production plus imports) (27,674,000 tons) across these four years i.e. 7,629,000 tons, was made up by running down stocks and through captured supplies, notably from France. Stocks of aviation fuel declined by a half between 1940 and 1942 (from 613,000 to 333,000 tons) and naval fuel declined by two thirds (from 521,000 to 136,000 tons). Kroener et al emphasise (p 472) that the oil supplies required to support the blitzkrieg campaigns of 1940-41 were indeed fragile from the very beginning and depended heavily on booty, dwindling stocks, and holding back the motorisation of the Wehrmacht. For another good summary of the dire consequences that shortage of oil had for the German and Italian war effort, see Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy*, (UK: Allen Lane, 2006), esp p 411 – 413. He notes that, in May 1941, there were serious proposals for a partial “demotorisation” of the Wehrmacht, while in February the same year, the Italian Navy was threatening to suspend all operations in the Mediterranean unless supplied with 250,000 tons of fuel. German stocks of naval fuel were just 280,000 tons at that time. Tooze confirms German oil supply from all sources in 1941 was around 10 million tons with stocks of about 2 million available at the start of the year. This not only had to feed Germany's own needs and war effort but much of occupied Europe as well. The US Strategic Bombing Survey confirms the figures in *Germany and the Second World War* and shows that output peaked at an annual total of just over 11 million tons in 1943. It follows that even 2 million tons of Iraq oil would have made a big difference. By contrast, Britain anticipated supplies for 1941 comprising: Home: 11, 036,000 tons; Admiralty: 3,700,000 (home) and 2,900,000 (overseas); Overseas (Dominions, Colonies and Friendly Neutrals): 14,951,400. Total planned use for the British Empire across 1941 was therefore: 32,587,400 tons, more than three times German consumption. In addition Britain had stocks (home and overseas) of some 9 million tons equating to a whole year of German output with 6 million tons belonging to the Admiralty alone. OCB (41) 27 of 20 March 1941, “Oil and Tanker Position 1941”, CAB 77/4, TNA.

<sup>50</sup> This argument is explored further in Chapter Eight. It rests heavily on the assessments prepared for the COS and War Cabinet in the first half of 1942 on the implications of losing Iranian oil and Abadan. They concluded that the British war effort might be reduced as much as 25%. About 7 million tons of the the 14, 951,400 tons of oil allocated to the British Empire Dominions and Colonies for 1941 came from Iran with additional quantities earmarked for RN use in the Eastern theatre. OCB (40) 95 of 22 November 1940, CAB 77/3; and OCB (41) 27 of 20 March 1941, CAB 77/4, both TNA.

Schmider also dismisses the significance of the Persian supply route to Russia, yet, as Chapter Eight will show, this may have been critical to Russian survival in the second half of 1942. Finally, Schmider does not address the significance of the Balkans to the Mediterranean theatre. Control of the Balkans was perceived by Germany as essential to secure their southern flank in the war with Russia. Above all, it was critical to protect Rumanian oil without which their war effort would risk collapse. While Britain dominated the Eastern Mediterranean and held a substantial position in the Middle East and North Africa, she presented at least a potential threat to Germany's most important external source of oil. This alone surely justified investment to undermine Britain's position.<sup>51</sup>

Contrary to the main thread of his argument, Schmider's work actually underlines therefore how important the Middle East was to Britain's overall position, both in containing German power and maintaining the economic viability and war potential of the Eastern Empire. And, most important, Britain could not know when her initial calculations were made, following the fall of France, that Germany would attack Russia the following year, nor, as she continued to pour resources into the Middle East in mid-1941, could she know Russia would survive, or of course how and when the US might enter the war. In short, Schmider's analysis demonstrates that Britain's war leadership was right to calculate through late 1940 and 1941 that, while loss of the Middle East did not immediately lead to defeat, it would, at a minimum, threaten the survival of the Eastern Empire, and make the task of defeating Germany virtually impossible.

Schmider does not consider the specific influence of British naval power on Axis prospects in the Middle East and assessing the consequences of the withdrawal of the Mediterranean Fleet in June 1940, as the Naval Staff originally favoured, is not easy. The Axis would certainly have been able to dominate the northern half of the Eastern Mediterranean and British intervention in Greece would have been impossible. However,

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<sup>51</sup> Michael Howard draws the parallel between the importance of Rumanian oil to Germany and Iranian oil to Britain. Denial of either would be a critical blow. *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War*, p 10. Both sides almost certainly, however, exaggerated the potential of air power to achieve serious effect against oil infrastructure with the capabilities available in the first half of the war.

that might then have given O'Connor the resources to clear Italy from North Africa providing Schmider's decisive win for Britain there. That in turn could have encouraged Britain to redeploy a fleet to the Eastern Mediterranean to bolster Turkish neutrality and prevent any Axis seaborne initiative against Syria. If exploration of such counterfactuals rapidly becomes fruitless, it nevertheless underlines key points. There were significant strategic benefits for Germany in the Middle East as Raeder at least recognised. However, realising those gains would have required the application of substantial forces with implications therefore for the timing and conduct of the attack on Russia.<sup>52</sup> The logistic challenges of such an offensive were formidable but not insuperable. Success did, however, require the neutralisation of the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet. So long as it was in situ or could be rapidly redeployed from the Indian Ocean after withdrawal, Axis options in the theatre were always constrained at least until air power could be positioned to deal with it. Here, in so far as Germany contemplated a serious Mediterranean option at all at the turn of 1940/41, it is likely that British naval power had a discouraging effect rather greater than its real strength justified given the damage the RN was to suffer at Crete. In that sense the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet did indeed prove the ultimate guarantor of Britain's position in the Middle East.

There is other compelling evidence which confirms the value of British investment in the Mediterranean during 1941. This is a German strategic appreciation of August 1941, summarised in the diary of the Chief of the General Staff, Colonel General Franz Halder, reviewing the strategic outlook if Russia was not defeated in 1941.<sup>53</sup> It assessed that Britain supported by the US knew it was impossible to beat Germany on the continent. Their basic strategy therefore would be to increase Germany's supply problems and use air power further to weaken the Axis position. They knew invasion of the UK could be discounted at present. Their immediate objectives would therefore be to clear the Axis

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<sup>52</sup> Essentially, Germany would have needed to execute the all-out Mediterranean offensive outlined in Fuhrer Directive 32 of 11 June from late 1940 as the British of course expected them to do. This would have meant delaying an attack on Russia until 1942.

<sup>53</sup> The Halder diary entry for 13 September records an "extract from an OKW Memorandum on the strategic situation as of late summer 1941 approved by the Fuhrer". This is one of very few genuinely "strategic" papers included in the diary. The entry appears in Vol VII, *The Campaign in Russia*, Part 2, and is available from the US Army Historical Division at Fort Leavenworth. *Germany and the Second World War: Volume III*, p 639, confirms that this OKW Memo had the title "The Strategic Situation in the late summer 1941 as a basis for further Political and Military Plans". It was dated 27 August and approved by Hitler.

from North Africa, with direct US intervention in West Africa a possibility, use naval and airpower to dominate the Mediterranean, tighten the blockade and collapse Italy. Britain would establish direct contact with Russia through Iran to sustain her will to resist and deny Germany access to Caucasus oil. She would also strive to keep Spain and Turkey neutral. Germany had to defeat Britain but could only achieve this through direct invasion or siege warfare. The former would involve a massive re-allocation of military resources not possible until late 1942. The latter meant sinking one million tons of shipping per month and also required a large shift in resources. However, effective operations in the Atlantic required bases in Spain and West Africa. Ideally this would be achieved by drawing France, Spain, and hopefully Turkey, into a collaborative alliance with the Axis but the political and military challenges in achieving this were formidable and depended on defeat of Russia first. The collapse of Russia was therefore the primary goal to which everything else must be subjected. Only then would it be possible to mobilise an all-out effort against Britain in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. In the meantime, pressure should be applied to France to reduce the risk of British/US intervention in her African colonies. Operations in the Eastern Mediterranean would be impracticable before Trans-Caucasia was achieved.

This assessment was in some respects an extension of Fuhrer Directive 32 but it ranged far wider and is remarkable for the degree to which it recognised the dangers in British strategy in the Mediterranean.<sup>54</sup> There is no sense here that Germany viewed the Mediterranean as an unimportant sideshow. On the contrary it saw the Mediterranean as fundamentally linked to the prosecution of a successful Atlantic trade war which was the preferred means of defeating Britain. It is also striking that within two months of the opening of the Russian campaign the German leadership should have focused on the potential importance of the Iran supply route to keeping Russia in the war. There is clear

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<sup>54</sup>*Germany and the Second World War: Volume III*, p 639, states that the assessment was the last representation of the operational sequence that Hitler had envisaged from late autumn 1940 onward: deal with Russia first, drive from the Caucasus into the Middle East, then complete the conquest of North Africa. In a conference of the Assistant Chief of Staff Operations on 24 October 1941, it was noted that "Because of the course of the campaign in the east, the development of the supply situation in Africa, and the still unclear attitude of Turkey, of the three possible operational directions for attack on the Middle East (Egypt, Anatolia, Caucasus), at the present time the Caucasus is the obvious choice". Thereafter, the authors judge that "the dogma that a decisive success against the USSR would solve all Germany's problems came to dominate the thinking of the German military".

recognition in this memorandum that British mastery of North Africa would deny Germany the French and Spanish support without which defeat of Britain might well prove impossible. There is thus a neat parallel with Britain's assessment of its own position in the Mediterranean and Middle East theatre. Neither side can lose the war here but, without holding it, it may be difficult to win. This perception is crucial. It is not only fundamentally different to the view taken by Schmider but the linkage in German minds of the Mediterranean and Atlantic has been largely ignored by historians.<sup>55</sup>

It is worth reflecting what impact this OKW Memorandum would have had on attitudes within the British war leadership if a copy had reached them in early autumn. It would surely have demonstrated that Churchill's belief that Britain's position in the Middle East came second only to the defence of UK, a belief on which the COS were initially more ambivalent, was absolutely correct. It would also have argued for a maximum effort to dislodge the Axis from North Africa by the spring of 1942 with the consequence that risk must be carried in the Far East. Finally, it would have underpinned Churchill's view that, if America entered the war, they should mount an early attack on North-West Africa. In short, the memorandum was the best possible support for the strategy Churchill would successfully promote in his "WW1" paper at the Arcadia Conference with the Americans after their entry into the war in late December. If, as Andrew Roberts argues, WW1 amounted to one of the great state papers of the war, the August OKW Memorandum deserves recognition as a worthy Axis counterpart even if it was not in the end a strategy the Germans felt able to execute.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> That includes the authors of *Germany and the Second World War: Volume III* who accept the OKW memo is an important insight into German thinking but do not underline, or indeed mention, the Mediterranean/Atlantic connection.

<sup>56</sup> Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: The Military Geniuses who led the West to Victory in World War II*, (London: Allen Lane, 2008), p69. There is a copy of WWI in three parts included with the First Sea Lord's Personal Papers 1939 – 1941, ADM 178/322, TNA.

## **A new Far East strategy and its weaknesses**

The September 1940 Future Strategy paper did not address the defence of the Far East in detail but its references to the continuing importance of Singapore, the contingency of deploying a task force to protect the Indian Ocean, and the “last resort” commitment to Australasia reflected a detailed Far East Appreciation (FEA) considered by the COS a month earlier on 31 July 1940 and issued, following War Cabinet discussion, on 15 August.<sup>57</sup> The new FEA was a comprehensive review of British military policy in the theatre designed to address the drastic shift in priorities necessitated by the fall of France and the risk that Japan would now exploit British preoccupation in Europe to move against British interests in the East. It established a new baseline for assessing defence needs in the theatre over the remaining sixteen months of uneasy peace, most subsequent planning papers linked back to it, and its recommendations on force levels acquired almost holy writ.

The urgency in completing the FEA, despite obvious pressures elsewhere, reflected growing evidence of Japanese aggression towards British interests in China, especially tension over the Burma Road.<sup>58</sup> The COS saw this hostility as consistent with an overall Japanese aim of excluding Western interests from the Far East and acquiring control of the strategic economic resources of the area. To realise this ambition, the COS judged that Japan must ultimately capture Singapore since otherwise the existence of an RN fleet in being anywhere in the world would remain a threat.<sup>59</sup> However, they also judged that, while an early attack on Malaya or Singapore was possible, Japan was more likely to

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<sup>57</sup> ‘The Situation in the Far East in the event of Japanese Intervention against us’, COS (40) 592 of 31 July 1940, CAB 66/10/33, TNA. The covering note for the War Cabinet described this as a “Far East Appreciation”. The Far East Commanders abbreviated the “Far East Appreciation” to “FEA” and this has been adopted in this thesis.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Immediate Measures Required in the Far East’, COS (40) 488 (JP) of 24 June 1940, CAB 80/13, TNA. The Joint Planning Staff (JPS) first addressed these developments on 24 June. They argued that “the strategic importance of our position in the Far East remains as great as ever”, that land and air reinforcements would have to compensate for inability to deploy a fleet, and that these must come primarily from Australia and India.

<sup>59</sup> The FEA estimated the Japanese could make the following forces available for “new adventures” i.e. beyond existing commitments in the China war and watching Russia:

Naval: Ten battleships, seven carriers and substantial supporting forces;

Land: Six to ten divisions along with the necessary shipping to project at long range.

Air: Up to 423 land-based aircraft and 281 carrier borne aircraft.



pursue expansion step by step through Indo-China and Thailand, and avoid direct confrontation with the British Empire or US until the position in Europe was clearer. This was not only a sensible judgement but broadly reflected the reality of Japanese thinking at this time.<sup>60 61</sup>

The FEA explained that the two key assumptions underpinning the last major review of Far East defence in 1937<sup>62</sup>, summarised in Chapter Two, were no longer valid. These were: that any threat to Far East interests would be seaborne; and, that Britain could send to the Far East within three months a fleet sufficient to protect the Dominions, India, and Indian Ocean communications. Instead Japanese advance into southern China, the development of communications and airfields in Thailand, the vulnerability of Indo-China following French collapse and the increased range of modern aircraft, had created an overland threat to Malaya against which the arrival of a fleet could now only partially guard.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, the collapse of France, the development of a direct threat to UK, and the need to retain naval forces in European waters sufficient to match both the German and Italian fleets made it temporarily impossible to despatch an adequate fleet to the Far East should need arise. Without a fleet, it was impossible to prevent damage to British interests but the FEA argued the damage could still be contained providing a foothold for recovery when resources allowed. The COS saw three ways of achieving this aim: buying time through concessions to Japan; compensating for the lack of a fleet by relying on airpower and reinforcing the land defences of Malaya; and building a common front

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<sup>60</sup> See JM 146, "Political Strategy Prior to the Outbreak of War, Part II", p 13 – 18 for a good summary of Japanese leadership discussions on southern expansion from June to September. There was no concerted strategy at this time and there were major differences of view between Army and Navy.

<sup>61</sup> A copy of the FEA was sent to Far East Commanders on board the merchant vessel *SS Automedon*. *Automedon* was intercepted and sunk by the German raider *Atlantis* on 11 November 1940, north-west of Sumatra, and the secret documents she was carrying were captured. The Germans passed the FEA to the Japanese. It was clearly a valuable insight into British thinking but it is more doubtful it had any long term impact on Japanese planning. There is a detailed account in Eiji Seki, *Mrs Ferguson's Tea Set: Japan and the Second World War: The Global Consequences Following Germany's Sinking of the SS Automedon in 1940*, (Global Oriental, 2006). *Atlantis* was subsequently sunk in the South Atlantic in early 1941 en route home by the cruiser *Devonshire*.

<sup>62</sup> 'Far East Appreciation 1937', COS 579 (JP) of 7 May 1937, CAB 53/31, TNA.

<sup>63</sup> The scale of Japanese attack defined in the FEA, drawing on advice from the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), proved an accurate reflection of what Britain would face sixteen months later. The assumption that Japan would probably attack through Thailand and a seaborne assault on northern Malaya, supported by aircraft based in Thailand and Indo-China, was also correct.

against Japanese aggression with the Americans and Dutch, the latter as the colonial power holding the Netherlands East Indies (NEI).<sup>64</sup>

The 1940 FEA and its implications have inevitably attracted considerable coverage in the historiography of Britain's Far East strategy. Most historians have portrayed it as a reasonably honest assessment of Britain's predicament in the Far East. Many have inevitably also presented its bleak conclusions as marking the final death of a naval strategy for defending the Eastern Empire which by 1939 they see as barely credible. Others have focused on the inherent flaws in the new air based strategy, not least, the subsequent refusal of the PM to authorise the recommended resources.<sup>65</sup> However, despite this attention, there remain issues which have either not been addressed or merit more scrutiny.

Although the FEA acknowledged the changing strategic context for Far East defence, it insisted that defence here remained essentially a naval problem. The "security of India, Malaya, and Australasia depends on our ability to control the sea communications leading to them" and the "foundation of our strategy remains basing an adequate fleet in Singapore". The Naval Staff defined "adequate" here as sufficient to engage successfully the maximum fleet the Japanese might send south.<sup>66</sup> However, the present "temporary impossibility" of sending an "adequate" fleet did not mean there would be no naval reinforcement. A task force, broadly similar to Drax's 1939 "Flying Squadron", although this term was not used, would be sent to Ceylon if Japan intervened to cover the Indian

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<sup>64</sup> The FEA stated that the attitude and capability of the US was likely to be a significant constraining factor on Japan but did not itself include any recommendations for developing cooperation with the US. The parallel paper, COS (40) 308 of 7 August, "Assistance to the Dutch in Event of Japanese Aggression in the Netherlands East Indies", CAB 66/10/39, TNA, did explore the scope for US naval intervention and highlighted the value of a US fleet basing in Singapore.

<sup>65</sup> Haggie, p 179 - 181.

<sup>66</sup> The Admiralty's view of what now constituted an "adequate" fleet was defined in WP (40) 308, "Assistance to the Dutch in Event of Japanese Aggression in the Netherlands East Indies". To oppose successfully the maximum fleet the Japanese might send south (ten battleships, seven carriers and supporting forces), the Admiralty argued that a fleet comprising nine capital ships (one less than Japan), "together with a comparable strength of carriers, cruisers and destroyers" was required. This was a larger force than anticipated during the 1939 Tientsin crisis and was clearly impossible if current commitments in the Atlantic and Mediterranean were to be met. The paper stated that the desired capital ship force could only be achieved by withdrawing capital ships from the Mediterranean and Atlantic escort and reducing the Home fleet below an acceptable level. Even if this were done, leaving the Italians free to raid the Atlantic, there were insufficient cruisers and destroyers to make the fleet viable.

Ocean including the vital communications to the Middle East by the Cape route. This required speed to avoid a superior IJN force and might comprise the modernised battle-cruiser *Renown* and modern aircraft carrier *Ark Royal* from the Gibraltar force.<sup>67</sup> It would give “a measure of security” if the IJN was “un-enterprising”.<sup>68</sup> When it considered the FEA on 8 August, the War Cabinet also agreed to reassure the Dominions that the commitment to redeploy the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet to meet a direct and immediate threat to the Dominions stood.<sup>69</sup> <sup>70</sup> While this promise was politically expedient the records suggest it reflected Churchill’s ultimate priorities.<sup>71</sup> War Memorandum (Eastern)

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<sup>67</sup> The Gibraltar Force, by now known as *Force H*, at this time comprised two capital ships and an aircraft carrier. By the autumn, the established contingency plan was to deploy *Force H* from Gibraltar in the event of war. For most of the period from the FEA until the outbreak of war with Japan, *Force H* comprised the modernised battle-cruiser *Renown*, the modern carrier *Ark Royal*, and the modern cruiser *Sheffield*. *Force H* would have been replaced by two *R Class* battleships or, once the first two *KGVs* became available to the Home Fleet by spring 1941, the two *Nelsons*.

<sup>68</sup> WP (40) 308, *ibid*.

<sup>69</sup> The conclusions of this meeting contain Churchill’s draft telegram subsequently despatched to Dominion Premiers on 11 August. Churchill used language here almost identical to that of November 1939. WM (40) 222<sup>nd</sup> War Cabinet Conclusions, Minute 4, CAB 65/14/20, TNA. The telegram is also given at p 385 – 387 of Churchill’s *Second World War, Vol II*. Haggie states that the official Australian Army historian judges this commitment was decisive in persuading Australia to deploy troops to Malaya. Haggie, p 179-180. Major General Hastings Ismay, Military Secretary to the PM and War Cabinet, provided earlier reassurance in a letter to the Australian High Commissioner S M Bruce on 3 July 1940 in response to Australian anxiety that despatch of a fleet to the Far East was now impossible. This letter is attached to the record of COS (40) 209<sup>th</sup> Meeting on 5 July 1940. Item 3 covered ‘Defence of Singapore’. CAB 79/5, TNA.

<sup>70</sup> From August 1940 until December 1941, the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet always had at least three *Queen Elizabeth* class battleships (with two modernised) and until late May 1941 at least one modern fleet carrier. The movement of both *Force H* and the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet to the Indian Ocean would therefore generate a maximum force against Japan of four capital ships (with three modernised) and for most of the period two modern fleet carriers. In the Atlantic, for the rest of 1940, the Home Fleet countered the reduced German threat with two fast battle-cruisers, the two *Nelsons* as heavy support and a fleet carrier. This left around five battleships (usually four *R-Class* and one unmodernised *Queen Elizabeth*) and one fleet carrier available for Atlantic convoy escort against German surface raiders and as a general reserve. About half the available RN strength in modern cruisers and fleet destroyers, over this period, was divided, in broadly equal numbers, between the Home and East Mediterranean Fleets. The other half was deployed on trade protection, primarily in the Atlantic. The distribution of major units was very close to that envisaged in the European Appreciation of early 1939. Maintaining this deployment pattern between Atlantic and Mediterranean was tight as war losses and damage took effect but, during the period, three new battleships, one rebuilt battleship, and four fleet carriers were commissioned. This allowed sufficient resilience to cope with the evolving naval threat from Germany and Italy and, by mid-1941, a growing margin from which to find a defensive force for the Indian Ocean had it proved necessary.

<sup>71</sup> James Neidpath notes that Churchill never failed to reaffirm this promise at key moments through 1939 – 42. However, he argues that while the emotional “kith and kin” aspiration was undoubtedly genuine, Churchill always felt it was up to him and not the Australians to judge at what point the promise should take effect. This attitude could be, and was, stigmatised as “dishonest” by the Australians but Neidpath suggests it is better characterised as “cavalier”. Churchill was prepared to take great risks with Australian security because he trusted to optimistic forecasts of Japanese intentions and never really put himself in their position. For most of 1941, the COS would regularly reaffirm in policy and planning papers that the Far East ranked above the Middle East in order of strategic priority but would almost always find reasons,

meanwhile remained extant in the background and within six months was being brushed off and updated even if its actual execution remained a remote contingency.<sup>72</sup> It can be argued therefore that, at one level, the FEA was merely a reiteration, or at least a logical extension, of Chamberlain's March 1939 strategy, rather than the fundamental break with the past that most historians imply.<sup>73</sup> Substantial naval forces would still be deployed to meet a critical threat to the Eastern Empire "inner core".<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile the idea that Singapore might need to depend on land and airpower for an extended period was again hardly new as Chapter Two has demonstrated. The period before relief" was now effectively open-ended but even Chatfield had raised the possibility of it lasting up to a year in 1937.

However, in insisting that "the foundation of our strategy" remains "the basing of a fleet on Singapore", the FEA embedded the view within Britain's war leadership that, while aspects of the Japanese threat had altered, the traditional components of a strategy to address it, the ends, ways and means, remained valid. In reality, the nature of the Far East defence problem had now changed fundamentally and required a complete re-think. Without this, Britain faced strategic failure. There were three new aspects to the problem

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usually under pressure from the Prime Minister, for arguing that this was not "an immediate choice". *The Singapore Naval Base*, p 179. Nevertheless, the strategic decisions of early 1942, to put reinforcement of the Eastern Fleet above the needs of the Mediterranean, when the risks to both Indian Ocean and Mediterranean were at their height, show that "in extremis" the promise was indeed kept. See Chapters Seven and Eight.

<sup>72</sup> Roskill, *Churchill and the Admirals*, p 209, quotes Vice Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, CinC China, briefing his staff in Singapore in September 1941 on Admiralty intent to deploy a powerful fleet to the Far East. While he accepts Layton was faithfully repeating an Admiralty signal, Roskill treats this possibility with incredulity while noting how long-lived the concept of a "main fleet to Singapore" was. It is rather Roskill's dismissive tone as official naval historian that surprises here. As Chapter Four demonstrates, contingency planning for an Eastern Fleet never entirely lapsed and resumed in earnest following decisions taken at the ABC-1 staff talks with the Americans in February and March 1941. The September signal was just one of a regular stream of preparatory signals and papers on planning for an Eastern Fleet which followed these talks.

<sup>73</sup> Two powerful recent reiterations of the view that the FEA marked a fundamental shift in the prospects for Far East defence are: Malcom Murfett, 'Reflections on an Enduring Theme', in *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited*, p 21 – 22; and Brian Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940-1942*, p 63 – 64.

<sup>74</sup> The trade-offs between the Eastern Mediterranean and the Far East, and the "Cunningham factors" underpinning them, rehearsed at such length in 1939, all still applied even if the stakes in withdrawal from the Mediterranean were now somewhat higher. So therefore did the concept of minimum and maximum reinforcement. However, as regards the maximum, the Admiralty appeared now to favour a rigid "all or nothing approach". If the requirement was to prevent a Japanese expedition reaching Malaya in current circumstances, that was perhaps a defensible proposition but it was not true for the more limited objective of holding the Indian Ocean and protecting Australasia.

here. First, the increasing likelihood that Japan could attack Malaya overland from Thailand exploiting the improvements made to land communications in western Malaya in the late 1930s. The FEA acknowledged a fleet could only “partially” guard against this but even that was optimistic. Second, modern airpower meant the Singapore base could potentially be rendered unusable, and naval operations gravely hampered, if the Japanese acquired airbases anywhere within 300 miles of Singapore.<sup>75</sup> This implied that Britain must now defend all of Malaya. The third factor was the NEI which offered an attacker both airbases and multiple launching points for a land attack on Malaya. The security of Singapore thus depended on at least the adjacent areas of this territory, notably Sumatra, remaining in friendly hands. However, the NEI, easily accessible and poorly defended, were now highly vulnerable to a Japanese attack at their chosen place and moment which an RN fleet would have difficulty contesting. The traditional scenario therefore, where an RN fleet arrived to sever the communications of a Japanese expeditionary force projected at long range to besiege Singapore Island itself, no longer applied.<sup>76</sup> Nor was it sufficient to deploy airpower which could temporarily substitute for a fleet in this standard scenario. In practice, the effective defence of Singapore now required Britain or its allies to hold the land, sea and air space within a radius of 300 miles of Singapore and to be able to contest a significant area beyond that.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> The figure 300 miles here is based on a JPC paper examining the German air threat to Alexandria from bases in eastern Libya and western Egypt. JP (41) 338 of 29 April 1941, “Air Threat to the Mediterranean Fleet”, CAB 79/11, TNA. This is an excellent guide to assessing the Japanese air threat because the scale of attack it anticipated against Alexandria, 200 long range bombers, 200 dive-bombers, and 250 fighters, was very close to that projected for Singapore by the JIC at this time and indeed available to the Japanese in December 1941. There was also little practical difference between German and Japanese capability against this type of target. The JPC judged that, for a force of this size to achieve serious effect against the fleet in Alexandria, through sustained daylight bombing against a fighter defence of three squadrons, it would be necessary to reduce the attack range to 300 miles or less both to generate adequate sorties and allow fighter escort. Below 300 miles, the threat might be too great to allow the fleet to remain.

<sup>76</sup> This was of course the scenario painted by Churchill with the Australians in November 1939 and one he would maintain until well into 1941. WP (39) 135 of 21 November 1939.

<sup>77</sup> The likelihood that Japan would choose to execute an attack on Singapore via an invasion mounted through Northern Malaya had received increasing recognition in British military circles since late 1937. See Ong Chit Chung, *Operation Matador: World War II: Britain's attempt to foil the Japanese invasion of Malaya and Singapore*, (London: Times Academic Press, 1997), chapter 3 “The Defence of Malaya”, for a detailed account. However, although Japan had acquired a closer launching point for an expedition at Hainan in Southern China in 1939, it could still be argued that, until mid-1940, a seaborne attack on Malaya remained a risky undertaking vulnerable to RN interdiction. The key change following the fall of France and the Netherlands was clearly the potential ease with which the Japanese might now seize airbases throughout Indo-China and in Borneo and Thailand. This would make British interdiction in the Gulf of Siam vastly more difficult.

The FEA implicitly recognised this by stating that, in the event of war, Malaya<sup>78</sup>, Burma<sup>79</sup> and the NEI<sup>80</sup> must all now be defended to protect Britain's position in the East.<sup>81</sup> Over the next year, this aspiration would translate into a more defined military objective of holding a defensive line from Lashio in eastern Burma, and then a crescent just north of the Malay barrier to Tonga east of Fiji.<sup>82</sup> This was a huge additional commitment beyond Chamberlain's March 1939 core. A realistic assessment of the resources required to protect Malaya alone against the anticipated scale of Japanese attack would surely suggest figures analogous to those currently being projected to hold Egypt. And even if Britain provided adequate forces to secure Malaya, it must rely on the Dutch to protect the NEI and deny the Japanese bases that could compromise the defence of Singapore and provide access to the Indian Ocean and Australasia. The COS recognised Britain could do little to support the Dutch but the Dutch were unlikely to hold off a Japanese attack themselves.<sup>83</sup> This was a conundrum much discussed but never adequately addressed in the new defence plans. It made sense to develop a joint defence plan with the Dutch and some progress was made through 1941 but Britain could never solve the harsh reality that the limited defences of the NEI left Singapore fatally exposed to attack from multiple adjacent locations. Even if reinforced defences of Malaya were strong enough to halt an initial Japanese attack, by occupying key points of the NEI, the Japanese could impose a sea and air blockade and even the strongest RAF force would then become a wasting asset.<sup>84 85</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> The FEA argued that it was necessary to hold all Malaya partly to deny Japan airbases for close attack on Singapore but also because the food supplies necessary for Singapore to withstand a long siege, i.e. more than three months, were in the North.

<sup>79</sup> Burma was important to the defence of Singapore because it was a crucial staging point for air reinforcements.

<sup>80</sup> The FEA stated that the establishment of Japanese bases in the NEI would "directly threaten our vital interests", endangering sea and air communications and Singapore. It did not, however, distinguish between different parts of the NEI. The most vital territory to the defence of Singapore was clearly Sumatra and to a lesser extent Java.

<sup>81</sup> COS (41) 152 (O) of 28 July 1941, "Far East Defence Arrangements", CAB 80/59, TNA.

<sup>82</sup> The significance of Lashio was that it was the starting point of the "Burma Road" into China.

<sup>83</sup> WP (40) 308, 'Assistance to the Dutch in Event of Japanese Aggression in the Netherlands East Indies'.

<sup>84</sup> Edward Miller argues that the same problem applied to the much more ambitious US plans in late 1941 to use airpower to defend the Philippines, *War Plan Orange*, (Annapolis, USA: Naval Institute Press, 1991), p 63.

<sup>85</sup> Most of the issues in this paragraph and the preceding one were recognised by the JPC in February 1941 in a report which addressed the consequences of an imminent Japanese attack southward suggested in some intelligence and diplomatic reports. This is known as the "February Crisis". The report offered a prescient analysis of how Japan would exploit its access in southern Indo-China, Thailand, including the Kra Isthmus,

In arguing that the Far East defence problem remained essentially a naval one, the Naval Staff also demonstrated a surprising rigidity of thinking in the FEA and successor papers. The primary rigidity lay in the belief that, if only an “adequate” battle-fleet could be based at Singapore, this would still be sufficient to deter and counter a damaging attack by Japan.<sup>86</sup> However, from August 1940 through to the outbreak of the Far East war, neither the Naval Staff nor the RN leadership in theatre gave enough thought to the practicalities of contesting the South China Sea with a battle-fleet given emerging war experience in the Mediterranean and elsewhere. The new realities were that any Japanese expeditionary force bound for Northern Malaya would now have to be engaged at a considerable distance from Singapore either off the Indo-China coast, or in the Gulf of Siam, or well to the east if en route to targets in the NEI. Here an RN or USN force would now not only have to cope with an IJN battle-fleet and substantial carrier fleet but almost certainly also land-based airpower in Indo-China, and possibly Thailand. An RN or USN force would therefore be at high risk unless transit and interdiction took place under its own defensive air umbrella. However, while the concept of an “adequate” fleet, as the preferred and primary way of countering Japan, remained a constant theme from the FEA onward, there is little sign that the Naval Staff saw “adequate” air cover as an essential pre-requisite for successful operations north or east of Singapore. In August 1940, the RN had yet to experience the full force of the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean but Norway, Dunkirk, and even the Italians at Calabria in July<sup>87</sup>, had demonstrated how vulnerable ships were to air attack in range of land bases.<sup>88</sup>

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and the NEI, in December. It correctly anticipated that Singapore could be bombed from bases in southern Indo-China. JP (41) 103 of 7 February, “Implications of a Japanese Southward Move”, attached to COS 46<sup>th</sup> Meeting Minutes of 8 February, CAB 79/9, TNA. There remained, however, a surprising disconnect between recognition of the issues and facing up to the implications for theatre strategy.

<sup>86</sup> Almost every document from 1940 to 1942 measured RN effectiveness against Japan in terms of comparative battleship strength. For example: WP (40) 95: War Cabinet Memorandum from First Lord, ‘Comparison of British and Japanese Fleets’, 12 March, 1940, CAB 66/6/25, TNA; WP (40) 308 of 7 August 1940, ‘Assistance to the Dutch in Event of Japanese Aggression in the Netherlands East Indies’, Annex 1, p 5-6; ‘Allied Strategy in the Far East’, COS (40) 893 of 2 November 1940, CAB 80/21, TNA; and, Minuting between PM and Naval Staff on comparative strength of Allied and Axis capital ships in early 1942 in PREM 3/324/14, TNA.

<sup>87</sup> Vice Admiral Sir Algernon Willis, Mediterranean Fleet COS in 1940, identified Calabria (also known as Punto Stilo) as a defining moment in his memoirs. “It was apparent from our experiences with the Italian Air Force that, without a carrier with modern fighters, sorties into the central Mediterranean would sooner or later lead to damage or loss of important fleet units.” Memoirs, p 28-29, IWM. Cunningham’s reaction was

Leaving aside the new risks posed by airpower, the continued insistence that Far East defence rested on naval power, the whole panoply of pre-war strategy and planning that underpinned this perception, and the persistence of a mind-set, at least in this theatre, that “fleet” and “battle-fleet” were synonymous, discouraged a fresh approach to the defence problem. It should have been evident to the COS, the wider military leadership, and even the Admiralty, that, assuming a battle-fleet could be established at Singapore, this could not alone secure the base any more than a battle-fleet on its own could protect Alexandria from land and air attack launched from Libya. Nor could it guarantee protection of the much extended critical defence space defined in the FEA. It could not therefore be the “foundation of our strategy”. If the desired strategic “end-point” really was to hold Malaya, Burma and the NEI, a mix of naval, air and land components broadly comparable to those the FEA expected Japan to deploy was required. If Britain and her allies could not find the necessary resources then the end-point should be adjusted. In the event, Britain persisted with a strategic end for which ways and means were quite inadequate.

The failure to bring fresh thought to the problem posed by the FEA had three important consequences for the RN’s position in the Far East when the Japanese attacked in December 1941. First, it meant that the FEA recommendations for enhanced land and air defence were viewed more as temporary “stop gap” or “holding operation” than either essential complement, let alone permanent substitute, for the traditional fleet. This perception encouraged London planners and the COS both to limit the scale of land and, above all air forces, allocated to the Far East and to accept delay in their build-up. Second, it encouraged Britain’s war leadership, but especially the Admiralty, to see the US Navy as the primary answer to Far East defence but within a traditional 1937 style British “main fleet to Singapore” framework that showed little regard for either US needs or the new strategic context following the Japanese advance into northern Indo-China. If the RN could not provide a “main fleet to Singapore”, then the US should be persuaded to

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similar and reflected in a note to Pound on return to Alexandria. John Winton, *Cunningham, The Greatest Admiral since Nelson*, p 96 – 98.

<sup>88</sup> The rapid German seizure of airbases in Norway and their subsequent operations against the Home Fleet were an obvious analogy for what Japan might achieve in southern Indo-China.



substitute. This in turn would enable Britain to keep its land and air investment in the Far East to a minimum.<sup>89 90</sup> As Chapter Four shows, Britain's unwillingness either to make a serious contribution to defence of the Malay Barrier, or bring flexibility to how it could best be achieved, severely compromised efforts to achieve a practical joint US/British/Dutch defence plan. As a result, when it did become possible to provide significant RN reinforcements for the Far East in autumn 1941, Admiralty planners defaulted to a variant of War Memorandum (Eastern) that might have made some sense against a 1937 type IJN threat but was quite inappropriate for the current circumstances.

The FEA stated that, until a fleet again became available, defence of Britain's interests must depend primarily on airpower. Here, military commanders on the spot when the Japanese attacked in December 1941, and many historians since, regard the failure to achieve the FEA recommended air strengths as both a prime cause of overall British defeat and a contribution to the loss of *Force Z*.<sup>91</sup> They stress the deficit in aircraft numbers and quality – around 180 frontline effectives (many obsolete) on 7 December 1941<sup>92</sup> compared to the 336 modern aircraft originally promised. This glaring overall deficit means that the original force levels defined in the FEA have not been adequately scrutinised. A substantial part of the famous “336” comprised reconnaissance aircraft and the allocation covered the Indian Ocean and Borneo as well as Malaya. The recommended fighter and bomber strength for Malaya was only 64 and 96 respectively

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<sup>89</sup>Here, the COS, and even more the PM, failed to see the negative linkage between a minimalist approach to air reinforcement of Malaya and the prospects of achieving the desired US naval deployment. From September 1940 onward, the COS and PM used the hope of US intervention as a justification for going slow on air reinforcement. Not surprisingly, the US saw this as at best demonstrating a lack of seriousness and at worst a plot to trap them in a British war. Comments made at COS (40) 374<sup>th</sup> meeting of 5 November, Item 4, CAB 79/7, TNA. Ironically, going slow on air reinforcement also meant that when the US did make a serious commitment to the theatre in the final months of 1941, but through airpower rather than naval power, the British air contribution remained too weak and ineffective for the combined allied air strength to give Japan enough cause to pull back.

<sup>90</sup>The fact that RAF strength in Malaya in December 1941 was weaker than it might have been without the comfort of the US factor had serious implications for the RN too. It rendered the Admiralty plans for a new Eastern Fleet which emerged in the autumn of 1941 deeply flawed and had serious consequences for the protection of *Force Z*. The fundamental truth was that, by late 1940, airpower and naval power were becoming interdependent and complementary. It was an illusion to think one could substitute for the other.

<sup>91</sup> See: Report by Vice Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, CinC China 1940-41 and Acting CinC Eastern Fleet from 10 December 1941, 'Remarks on the Operations in Malaya and the Defence of Singapore', p 2 and 3, in ADM 199/1472A, TNA; and, 'Despatch on the Far East' by Air Chief Marshall Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, W.P. (42) 403 of 8 September 1942, CAB 66/28/33, TNA.

<sup>92</sup> Christopher Shores, *Bloody Shambles*, Vol 1., (London: Grub Street, 1992), p 57-58.

(the latter including 32 torpedo bombers). This proposed fighter/bomber force was supposed to counter a Japanese combined fighter/bomber scale of attack on Malaya of about 600<sup>93</sup> i.e. a Japanese advantage of nearly 4:1 as well as interdict any invasion fleet at sea and hopefully significantly degrade a Japanese landing.<sup>94</sup> These odds were daunting even assuming the RAF enjoyed a quality edge in aircraft,<sup>95</sup> organisation, training and experience.<sup>96</sup> In the event, the British fighter/bomber total when the Japanese attacked in December 1941 was not far below the recommended 160 and, in the case of fighters, there were substantial reserves.<sup>97</sup> While the subsequent disastrous RAF performance partly reflected poor deployment and training, limited operational experience, and an element of obsolete aircraft within the total, it also suggested that the problem was less the slow pace of reinforcement during 1941 than that the FEA target strength was completely inadequate for the task.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> This predicted scale of attack would prove highly accurate though in the event it would be entirely land-based as opposed to including an expected 40% carrier borne element. Shores, p 52-53.

<sup>94</sup> In the run-up to war in autumn 1941, RAF Far East Command formally saw its role as follows: Find the enemy at sea as far away from Malaya as possible; strike hard and often at invasion convoys; disrupt any subsequent landings; and, finally, support the Army by delaying any onward enemy advance from the landing grounds. Despatch of Air Vice Marshall Sir Paul Maltby on Air Operations in Malaya and NEI 1941 – 1942, para 135, Supplement to the London Gazette 26 February 1948, CAB 106/86, TNA.

<sup>95</sup> When the FEA issued, it was reasonable to assume the quality of many Japanese aircraft, especially fighters, lagged behind their RAF counterparts. The standard Japanese naval fighter in mid-1940 was the Type 96 or “Claude”, a fixed undercarriage aircraft far inferior to the Hurricane let alone the Spitfire. The famous A6M Zero did not become operational until autumn 1940 and the first intelligence on its performance did not appear until early 1941. The standard carrier dive bomber until late 1940 was the Type 96 “Susie” equivalent to the Swordfish. The G3M “Betty” was an excellent state of the art long range naval bomber but it was to prove highly vulnerable to modern fighters. Peattie, “Sunburst”, Chapter 4 and Appendix 6.

<sup>96</sup> The RAF believed, from observation of Japanese air performance in China, that the efficiency and effectiveness of both the Imperial Japanese Army Air Force (IJAAF) and Imperial Japanese Naval Air Force (IJNAF) was low by Western standards although it also judged the IJNAF the better of the two. John Ferris, *Student and Master: The United Kingdom, Japan, Airpower, and the Fall of Singapore, 1920-1941*, p 109-113, in *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited*. Also, Henry Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force: The Royal Air Force in the War Against Japan 1941-45*, (London: Brassey’s, 1995), pp 25-27. This includes reference to various Air Ministry Weekly Intelligence Summaries from 1940.

<sup>97</sup> Shores, *Bloody Shambles*, Vol 1, p 57 – 58, has 64 Buffalo fighters, 55 Blenheim I and IV, and 26 Vildebeest torpedo bombers, deployed in operational squadrons in December. A further Buffalo squadron had started forming but this still left about 100% reserves from a total delivery during 1941 of 170. There were, however, few Blenheim or Vildebeest reserves. The Buffaloes and Blenheims could be cast as “modern” if inferior to their Japanese equivalents. The Vildebeests were certainly completely obsolete. There were in addition 24 Hudson aircraft, also modern, formally tasked on reconnaissance but capable of a bombing role.

<sup>98</sup> In reaching their recommended Far East strength, it may be assumed the starting point for the JPC was the scale of Japanese attack but, besides the assumed RAF quality advantage, they were no doubt also influenced by the 346 aircraft the Dutch were expected to have in the NEI by late 1941. A final factor was of course what could reasonably be allocated from overall British production. The COS “Future Strategy”

The FEA was therefore an odd mixture. It demonstrated good understanding of potential Japanese objectives<sup>99</sup>, and how Japan might achieve them, and reasonable awareness of the changed strategic environment and its implications. There was inexorable logic behind its conclusion that Japan's growing ability to deploy land and air power much closer to Singapore meant that its defence now required more strategic depth. However, as stated earlier, the underlying strategy was regressive rather than progressive. Instead of adopting the more flexible defensive thinking of 1939, focused on the security of the Indian Ocean and inner core of the Eastern Empire, it effectively committed Britain to controlling a vast area north and east of the Malay Barrier which it argued was still best achieved through deployment of a traditional battle-fleet. Underlying the FEA was a circular argument. Singapore had been created to project a battle-fleet to coerce Japan but it now required a battle-fleet to protect the base itself so that it could maintain a battle-fleet. In reality, as events would show, the Eastern Empire did depend on the security of the Indian Ocean but this did not require Singapore and nor was a battle-fleet the sole arbiter of maritime dominance as Mediterranean experience was already showing. Deploying a fleet to Singapore was still a reasonable way to secure the strategic end of protecting the inner core of the Empire in the context of the late 1930s; but protecting the base had now become the end itself. Historians who argue that Britain's Far East strategy failed in 1941 because it could no longer deploy a fleet and refused to address the consequences are wrong. Britain could, if it had to, still find a fleet sufficient to meet the limited 1939 objective of securing the Indian Ocean, even in the dire situation of late 1940, and would certainly demonstrate it could do so in early 1942. The RN failure in late 1941 was less inability to provide an adequate fleet and more failure to recognise the limitations of a fleet in the new strategic circumstances and insistence nevertheless on deploying an inappropriate force against unrealistic strategic goals.

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paper, para 271, is a valuable guide to how overall air production and deployment priorities were seen in August 1940. The proposed strength for Malaya represented ten per cent of projected 1942 overseas fighter strength and sixteen per cent of 1942 overseas bomber strength. The JPS no doubt judged this an achievable target and a reasonable maximum for a theatre where hostilities were not yet underway. The projected 1942 strengths assumed 160 fighters and 80 light bombers obtained from overseas orders, many of which would indeed go to Malaya. The projections seriously underestimated wastage in protracted combat of which there was only limited experience in mid-1940.

<sup>99</sup>JM 146, *ibid*.

Two questions now arise. The first is why, during the debates around the FEA, and later as it became clear that reinforcements for Malaya would remain well below agreed requirements, the role of Singapore as “keystone” of Eastern Empire defence was never challenged by the COS. As Chapter Four shows, the Americans did not believe Singapore could be defended with the resources the British were prepared to commit<sup>100</sup> and US planners also saw the base as expendable believing (correctly as it turned out) that British imperial communications could be adequately defended without it.<sup>101</sup> Certainly it was the only base in the Eastern Hemisphere with all the facilities required for long term support of a fleet and it had the only dock east of Durban capable of taking capital ships or carriers.<sup>102</sup> However, Malta represented in almost all respects an equivalent strategic asset which the RN had judged too vulnerable to use as a fleet base in wartime and possibly also indefensible. There were alternative potential bases that could support naval cover for Australasia and the Indian Ocean, notably Colombo and Trincomalee in Ceylon, and Darwin or Perth in Australia. Again the Mediterranean offered a precedent. If Alexandria was an effective operational base for the Eastern Mediterranean, then Ceylon could surely fulfil the same role for the Indian Ocean. The level of military investment in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean already underway in the autumn of 1940 was also a marker for the potential commitment required to keep Singapore viable.

There are perhaps several reasons the Mediterranean parallels did not trigger a rethink at least at this time. Haggie points to the long history behind the “main fleet to Singapore” idea and the vast amount of political, military, economic and emotional capital Singapore therefore represented.<sup>103</sup> As the FEA demonstrated, and as discussed above, naval power

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<sup>100</sup> Miller, *War Plan Orange*, p 265, and Ian Cowman, *Dominion or Decline*, p 190. See also the paper prepared for the COS by Rear Admiral Roger Bellairs, “Allied Strategy in the Far East”, COS (40) 893 of 2 November, CAB 80/21, TNA. Bellairs pointed out that, at the end of October, the deficit between current aircraft strength in Malaya and the target strength in the August Appreciation was 166 aircraft with no fighters yet available.

<sup>101</sup> Miller, *War Plan Orange*, p 265.

<sup>102</sup> Minute by Director of Dockyards, ADM 1/11855, TNA. H.P. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1982), p 218, claims the value of Singapore as a naval base was undermined by its inability to repair RN warships damaged off Crete in May 1941 though he does not quote sources for this claim.

<sup>103</sup> Haggie, p 188.

as the “foundation” of Far East defence and Singapore as its base persisted and were inextricably linked in a way that was not entirely logical.<sup>104</sup> Governments always find it difficult to overturn long established policy and to admit that the investment in the base and its defences since 1935 was effectively wasted would be even harder.<sup>105</sup> Personalities were important too. Pound and Phillips, now driving the Admiralty, had largely created the “Singapore Strategy”.<sup>106</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, symbolism played a role not least in underpinning the “fleet in being” concept.<sup>107</sup> The FEA also embedded the idea that, so long as Singapore held out, Britain had a foothold from which it could eventually recover its position in the Far East, a variant of Chatfield’s argument in 1937.<sup>108</sup> Finally, in August 1940, there were still compelling arguments of “time and distance”. Even with their new base at Hainan, the Japanese were still over a 1000 miles from northern Malaya, they were not yet in southern Indo-China and an air threat there would take time to develop. Britain therefore had a window in which to improve its defences and, above all,

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<sup>104</sup> The British representative at the Anglo-American Staff Conference (ABC-1) in early 1941, Rear Admiral Roger Bellairs, admitted to the Americans that the importance of Singapore went beyond the strictly military. “The maintenance of a fleet base at Singapore is a cardinal point in British strategy. The conception is based not only on purely strategic but political, economic, and sentimental considerations, which even if not vital on a strictly academic view, are of such fundamental importance to the Empire that they must be taken into account. We are a maritime power, various Dominions and Colonies held together by trade routes across oceans. The home population is dependent on imported food and overseas trade. The security and population of India is our trust and responsibility. Defence of all their interests is vital to our war effort and depends on the capacity to hold Singapore and in the last resort to base a battle-fleet there.” Quoted by Cowman, p 194-195.

<sup>105</sup> Historians have quoted various figures for the overall cost of the Singapore base. Many estimates are poorly sourced and some are clearly exaggerated and designed to highlight the resources wasted on a flawed strategy. Raymond Callahan quoted £60M at p 80 of his 1974 article “The Illusion of Security: Singapore 1919 – 1942”, (*Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol 9, No 2, April 1974, pp 69 – 92). This was then quoted by James Morris in *Farewell the Trumpets* (Penguin Books, 1979) and widely replayed. Malcom Murfett offers £25M in the introductory chapter of *Sixty Years On* (edited by Brian Farrell). An official figure of £15M (of which £4M was provided by the Dominions, the Malay States, and the Sultan of Johore) was given by Ismay in a minute to the PM dated 9 January 1942, PREM 3/156/6, TNA. The Ismay figure seems consistent with a statement by the First Lord recorded in Hansard for 15 February 1933 that expenditure to date at that time (covering initial excavations and preparation etc and some armament) was £3.5M. If the 1942 figure of £15M was correct, and it looks the most authoritative, then the cost to the UK Exchequer equated to two *KGV* battleships.

<sup>106</sup> Pound as D of P 1923 – 1925 had supervised much of the early planning to create the “Singapore Strategy” while Phillips as D of P from 1935 – 1938 had, as described in Chapter Two, sought to keep the strategy viable in the new circumstances posed by the rising “Triple Threat”.

<sup>107</sup> Ismay’s letter to Bruce, *ibid*, is revealing to this argument. Ismay summarised the COS view as follows: Japan cannot undertake a serious invasion of Australia so long as: a) The British fleet (wherever it may be) is in being; and b) Singapore is secure.

<sup>108</sup> As Chapter Four demonstrates, the concept of Singapore as essential foothold from which eventual recovery could be mounted even if there were heavy initial losses in the Far East was a major theme running through the British position at the ABC-1 talks.

fashion a deterrent alliance with the US and the Dutch to make holding Singapore and the Malay Barrier a more credible proposition.

The second question is whether, if Singapore had to be held, it could be done with a smaller security perimeter around it. Several historians have explored more effective and economical options for securing adequate defensive depth in Malaya than the plans actually implemented in 1941.<sup>109</sup> It was clearly not necessary to hold all of the NEI to cover Singapore. Holding Sumatra and its offshore islands would be sufficient. Given the very limited British forces available, deploying bomber squadrons to Borneo, as the FEA suggested, made little sense. An agreement to support the Dutch in holding Sumatra would have enabled preparatory investment in air and sea reinforcement routes and more effective cooperation with air reconnaissance, submarine operations, defensive mining and light naval forces.<sup>110</sup>

While the FEA had critical weaknesses if assessed as a long term strategy, it is important not to judge it too harshly. Given the overall problems facing Britain in August 1940, the uncertainties over whether and how Japan might intervene in the war, and the reasonable possibility of significant US support in keeping the consequences of intervention manageable, its immediate recommendations were sensible enough. Providing the proposed reinforcements did not irrevocably commit Britain to a particular defence strategy. They were needed in the theatre under any likely scenario. They could provide a necessary core on which to construct a more credible Allied defence of the Malay Barrier,

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<sup>109</sup> For example, H P Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, chapter 8. Ong Chit Chung, *Operation Matador*, gives an exhaustive account of the “Matador” strategy and its problems. It failed because Britain would not authorise invasion of a neutral country until it was too late.

<sup>110</sup> Interestingly, this was broadly the solution offered by Major General I S O Playfair, Chief of Staff to the American-British-Dutch-Australian ABDA joint Far East Command formed in January 1942, in a personal record written a year later. He stated that Malaya fell when France fell. It was impossible to build up its defences to meet the changed scale of Japanese attack resulting from their access to airfields in Indo-China. Had it been politically possible, the right tactical answer to the threat from Indo-China was to incorporate Malaya and Sumatra into a fully integrated defensive zone under a single command. This zone could then exploit “defence in depth” e.g. basing aircraft in Sumatra out of Japanese reach and then deploying them temporarily to forward airbases in Malaya. He too emphasised the importance of submarines, mining and light naval forces in securing this zone. Playfair’s views merit attention not just because of his ABDA role but because he was Director of Military Plans and therefore the Army representative on the JPC through much of 1940 – 41. Some Personal Reflections on the Malaya Campaign July 1941 – January 1942, CAB 106/193, TNA.

and to reinforce this when war broke out. But, if the concept of holding Singapore were ever abandoned, they were equally necessary to support defence of the Indian Ocean core.

In the event, the FEA proposals for reinforcement met immediate resistance from the Prime Minister. In a minute to Ismay, on 10 September, and subsequent comments to the COS, Churchill challenged much of the FEA case.<sup>111</sup> Using arguments almost identical to those of November 1939, he insisted the threat to Singapore over long exposed lines of communication from Japan was overstated and that its prime defence remained a fleet whose protection applied whether on the spot or at a distance. The recently reinforced Mediterranean fleet could easily be redeployed east if required. He still saw Singapore as a “fortress” which could hold out until relieved, ignoring the hard geographical realities imposed by the NEI problem. He rejected the idea of trying to hold all of Malaya “a country as large as England” with current resources and dismissed the Japanese air threat to Singapore itself. The COS tried to educate the PM ten days later but the arguments they deployed were not compelling and had little effect.<sup>112</sup> Churchill accepted it might not be feasible to send a fleet for the present but the Japanese “would never be certain what we might do” so the concept of deterrence remained valid. The presence of a substantial US fleet on their flank would encourage the Japanese to be cautious.<sup>113</sup> Meanwhile the Middle East must have priority for overseas resources.

Both sides had a point here. The COS were correct in emphasising that Singapore would only be viable as a base if the Japanese could be kept at a distance. The PM was right to question whether it was credible to find forces to hold Malaya given the demands of the Middle East. The COS failed to confront the PM with the NEI problem, they did not explain the new limitations on what a fleet alone could achieve, nor did they argue that operation of a fleet depended on establishing adequate air support in the theatre. The present distance of the nearest Japanese bases gave the discussions a hypothetical quality

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<sup>111</sup> Prime Minister to Major General Ismay, 10 September 1940, Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol 2, 591-2.

<sup>112</sup> COS (40) 317<sup>th</sup> meeting of 19 September 1940, CAB 79/6, TNA.

<sup>113</sup> This was an accurate reading of the attitude of the IJN at this time. The Japanese Army was more inclined to take risks in pursuing an expansionist policy to the south but there was still a broad consensus that war with the US would be unwise. JM 146, *ibid*.

but the COS had acquiesced in PM arguments they should have challenged and had begun a pattern of deferring awkward problems. Meanwhile, the PM's attitude here would remain remarkably consistent for the next 15 months. Entrenched scepticism that the Japanese would mount a long range attack against Singapore and an erroneous belief that Singapore was a Verdun type fortress played a part. More important was his view that, with the notable exception of Australasia and India, nothing in the Far East matched the importance of the Middle East, and that the US would act as a brake on Japanese ambition. These factors made him willing to carry risk in the Far East but successive personal interventions across 1941 also demonstrate that he never accepted the COS concept of Singapore as a "keystone" of Empire defence ranking alongside UK. Kirby's argument that, if he had better understood the vulnerability of Singapore, he would have sanctioned more resources is wrong. All the evidence suggests he would have accepted the loss of Singapore rather than compromise on support for the Middle East or Russia.<sup>114</sup>

The proposed reinforcements were revisited four months later when the JPS reviewed the recommendations of Far East Commanders. Their assessment, which took the FEA as a baseline, comprised a Tactical Appreciation and the conclusions of a Defence Conference held at Singapore in October.<sup>115</sup> These papers were comprehensive and, judged with the benefit of hindsight, make an impressive read. The assessments of Japanese intent, likely operational execution, and scale of forces, were both prescient and realistic about Japanese capability.<sup>116</sup> Inevitably, given the gap, already evident in the FEA, between potential Japanese strength and resources currently allocated to defence of Malaya, the Commanders argued for significant additions to the reinforcements proposed in August if the military objectives of the COS were to be met. The most obvious increase was to air

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<sup>114</sup> Kirby argues that Churchill's view of Singapore as a "fortress", capable of surviving an all-round siege for a significant period, was genuine. He also emphasises the PM's consistent belief that US naval power would shield Singapore and contain the consequences of a Japanese attack. Kirby therefore argues that, had the COS disabused the PM of this picture, he would have given the Far East theatre more priority in the second half of 1941. *Singapore: The Chain of Disaster*, Epilogue, p 254-55.

<sup>115</sup> 'Far East Tactical Appreciation', COS (40) 1053 of 19 December, and 'Far East Singapore Defence Conference', COS (40) 1054 of 19 December, both in CAB 80/24, TNA. For planning purposes, the papers assumed the Japanese had established bases in both Indo-China and southern Thailand but had not invaded the NEI.

<sup>116</sup> Neither the Japanese air order of battle nor the intelligence available changed much between the August Appreciation and November Commanders' assessment.



strength to a total of 580 frontline effectives including 144 fighters (up more than 100%)<sup>117</sup> and a strike force of 192 (up 100%<sup>118</sup>) actually based in Malaya.<sup>119</sup>

The Commanders' force levels assumed the Japanese had acquired bases in Indo-China and southern Thailand (as indeed they would do between July and November 1941) but had not established themselves in the NEI and would not do so during an attack on Malaya. They questioned whether the NEI assumption was valid. If it proved incorrect (as proved the case in December 1941<sup>120</sup>), the scale of air attack on Malaya would significantly increase, landings would become possible on the west coast and Singapore risked blockade. To deal with this, their proposed scale of forces would need to increase further. These assumptions largely explain the force additions to those in the FEA. They also reflect the Commanders' recognition that providing replacement aircraft from the UK or Middle East in the face of a Japanese attack might prove difficult and initial numbers and reserves must reflect this.<sup>121</sup> Here, it is not clear how far they considered the vulnerability of the air route from Burma to rapid Japanese interdiction.

The COS broadly accepted the JPS view that local Commanders had "overstressed" the inadequacies of the proposed August reinforcement programmes and that the original scales should stand apart from small enhancements to land forces.<sup>122</sup> The JPS rejected any increase in air strength beyond the August target of 336. They noted the Japanese had

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<sup>117</sup> John Ferris, p 114-115, quotes figures for proposed RAF fighter strength in these assessments which are not correct. He states that Singapore Commanders were arguing 72 fighters could defeat 175/195 Japanese at odds of 2.4 to 2.7. In fact Commanders were asking for twice that strength and not far from fighter parity.

<sup>118</sup> The 100% increase is valid if comparison is made with the FEA strike allocation based in Malaya. However, the FEA also allocated 32 bombers to Borneo which the FE Commanders now argued would be better covered from Malaya. The increase within the overall Far East theatre was therefore closer to 50% for strike aircraft.

<sup>119</sup> At the time this assessment was prepared, the only modern aircraft in Malaya were a combined total of 48 Blenheim I and Hudson bombers with just 13 in reserve. There were no fighters. Letter from CinC Far East designate, Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham to the COS dated 27 October contained in COS (40) 873 of 27 October, 'Defence of Singapore', CAB 80/21, TNA.

<sup>120</sup> The Japanese attacked Borneo in late December, the Celebes in early January, and commenced operations against Sumatra on 14 February. See: H P Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, map p 288.

<sup>121</sup> This of course was a similar argument to the "pre-positioning" debate relating to Egypt in 1937 – 38. See Chapter Two.

<sup>122</sup> Item 6, COS (41) 13<sup>th</sup> meeting of 8 January 1941 and attached papers, CAB 79/8, TNA.

never fought a first class power and doubted they were more effective than the Italians.<sup>123</sup> Recent British performance in North Africa and the Battle of Britain showed that superior numbers could be countered by mobility and power of concentration. Much of the JPS treatment here was superficial or misleading and it did not reflect poor intelligence which at JIC level remained an accurate guide.<sup>124</sup> The careful arguments of the local Commanders were countered with flat assertion. There is no evidence the PM exerted influence before the COS endorsed the JPS recommendation but both knew how reluctant the PM had been to sanction investment in the Far East the previous September. The PM had not changed his view. When he saw the COS papers on the Commanders' assessment, he re-iterated his opposition to any significant "diversion" of forces to the Far East.<sup>125</sup>

Reviewing the case made by the local Commanders and the intelligence picture, it is hard to see how the JPS felt an August scale of defence could cope. However, the JPS and COS could argue that the threat picture had not fundamentally changed, that commanders always ask for more resources than they need<sup>126</sup>, and, most important, that the Japanese were not yet in southern Indo-China, let alone Thailand, so there was time in hand.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> This is one of the first occasions the analogue of the "Italians" was used as a measure of Japanese effectiveness in strategic papers. In so far as this related to air fighting capability, and certainly capability at sea, it was potentially misleading. Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, as CinC Mediterranean, described Italian high level bombing of the Mediterranean Fleet at Calabria in 1940 as "most frightening" and was "seriously alarmed" for his older ships. John Winton, *Cunningham*, p 95 - 96. The JPS must have known this.

<sup>124</sup> The JIC provided an update on the threat to Malaya which was available to the COS when they considered the JPS review. The JIC confirmed that Japan could deploy ten divisions at short notice though shipping might only be available for four. These would be supported by 336-432 land-based aircraft from southern Thailand and a further 290 carrier based. Naval forces could include the entire IJN battle-fleet of ten capital ships and seven carriers. 'Scale of Attack on Malaya', JIC (41) 11 of 6 January, CAB 81/99, TNA. The Director of Military Intelligence (DMI), reviewing this JIC assessment in the wake of the Japanese attack exactly a year later noted that the naval and army scale "was excessive" while the air scale was "remarkably accurate". DDMI (I) minute of 2 January 1942 covering MI2 paper 'Note on JIC Papers on Japan', WO 208/871, TNA.

<sup>125</sup> PM minute to Ismay dated 13 January. The JPS felt obliged to confirm that not only was 336 a ceiling but it was a target to be reached only by the end of 1941, if then. See papers associated with: 'Allocation of PBV Output and Reinforcements for the Far Eastern Air Forces', JP (41) 56 of 22 January, CAB 79/8, TNA.

<sup>126</sup> A further factor here was the known poor relationship between the Army and Air Commanders in Singapore which no doubt made it easier to criticise their recommendations. Brian Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore*, Chapter 3, provides a good account of this.

<sup>127</sup> However, they had previously suggested to the Vice Chiefs that the minimum warning time of an attack on Singapore (then five days) should be reduced. This reflected the inability of SIS to provide any "war warning" and the likelihood the Japanese might now mount an invasion from Camranh Bay just three days

They could also argue that, despite the relentless resource pressures Britain faced at this time, the reinforcements earmarked for Malaya over the next six months were not only significant compared to the present baseline but comparable to what was currently reaching the Middle East where there was an active war underway.<sup>128 129</sup> That said, the decision to retain the 336 target would be more defensible if there had been a definite date for completion of the programme<sup>130</sup> and more awareness that what was required was investment in overall capability, experienced pilots and maintenance personnel, radar and command and control, as well as up to date aircraft. John Ferris has argued that the RAF could have beaten a Japanese air force twice its size or more through a “system” which linked these capability elements together as in UK. He states that instead Britain under-rated the IJNAF and IJAAF, concluded these could not beat the RAF at its best, and so sent their worst and in small numbers.<sup>131</sup>

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steaming from northern Malaya. Warning would then be completely reliant on air reconnaissance. ‘Period of Warning of an Attack on Singapore’, COS (40) 899 (JP) of 4 November, CAB 80/21, TNA. Phillips as VCNS rejected this view as unconvincing. Item 2. COS (40) 377<sup>th</sup> meeting of 6 November, CAB 79/7, TNA.

<sup>128</sup> 170 Brewster Buffalo fighters were on order from the US, to be delivered between January and July, with three squadrons to form by mid-year and the possibility of a further two by end 1941. 24 US Glenn Martin Baltimore bombers were expected by July with eight per month thereafter, and the first of two Beaufort torpedo squadrons, drawing on aircraft built in Australia, was to form by June with 50 aircraft available by the end of the year. G2 Minute dated 20 February 1941, Brooke-Popham Papers 6/1/8, and tel to Air Ministry of 1 March 1941, Brooke-Popham Papers 6/1/11, both in LHC. To ease the shipping burden, the US aircraft were to be shipped direct from the US. Had these deliveries from the US and Australia proceeded to schedule, there would have been seven strike squadrons of modern aircraft by December, together with substantial reserves though not all would have been properly worked up. With 112 frontline aircraft, this total would have been very close to the FEA target strike force of 128 including the Borneo element. In the event, there were severe production delays in both the US and Australia. JP (41) 565 of 20 July, CAB 79/13, TNA. The Baltimores never arrived and had to be covered by less capable Hudsons whose primary role was reconnaissance. Only six Beauforts were delivered by December and none were operational. The five planned Buffalo squadrons were in place by then but only two were properly worked up.

<sup>129</sup> At the beginning of 1941, there were still only three Hurricane squadrons in the Middle East and only 87 aircraft had arrived since the beginning of September. The bomber position was better with a first line strength of 15 squadrons. Major General I S O Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Volume 1, The Early Successes against Italy*, 254. However, attrition over the next four months, including the losses in Greece, would mean there were only three fighter squadrons and seven bomber squadrons available in Egypt at the end of April. “Draft Interim Reply to Mr Menzies”, dated 28 April 1941, attached to Minutes of COS 152<sup>nd</sup> Meeting, CAB 79/11, TNA.

<sup>130</sup> The FEA had originally set a target date for completing its proposed “336” programme of “end 1941”. This date had now been made conditional on available resources and commitments elsewhere.

<sup>131</sup> Ferris, “Student and Master”, p115. Ferris acknowledges, however, that, even with the 336 strength, the disparity would have been more than 2:1 and that anyway, while airpower was important, it was only one of several factors causing defeat. A D Harvey argues convincingly that Japanese aircraft did not enjoy any significant advantage over the modern Allied aircraft deployed in theatre in late 1941 and their latest fighters, the Zero and Ki43, lagged well behind the latest aircraft in the European theatre such as the Spitfire

At the beginning of 1941, therefore, the position was as follows. Britain had accurately assessed the risks posed by Japan and had devised a holding strategy to limit those risks and protect its vital interests, pending an improvement in its overall strategic position and the benefits of growing war production. The strategy relied on holding Singapore to give credence to the deterrent value of a fleet in being, using enhanced airpower to keep the Japanese at an acceptable distance from Singapore, and, above all, drawing the US into an alliance, along with the Dutch, sufficient to dissuade Japan from southern adventures. But there were three fundamental flaws in the strategy at this time. First, if the US was unwilling or unable to provide a credible military deterrent against Japan, the resources Britain was notionally willing to provide itself by end 1941, even if an alliance could be negotiated with the Dutch, were quite inadequate to meet the desired goal of holding the NEI and Malaya or even a lesser goal of Malaya, Sumatra and Java. Second, Britain's increasing commitment to the Mediterranean and Middle East, designed to meet the opportunities and risks posed by that theatre, were likely further to reduce resources for the Far East. Third, the PM did not believe in important elements of the FEA strategy and this was also likely to compromise the build-up of adequate airpower, leaving Malaya wide open to attack in the north, and making any naval operation north of Singapore a high risk enterprise. In the new circumstances, a fleet unable to operate north of Singapore could not guarantee its protection. Unknown to the British, there was a further problem. Japan's primary goal in South-East Asia at this time was to secure strategic resources, above all oil. It hoped to achieve this peacefully and avoid military confrontation with either the US or Britain.<sup>132</sup> So the British were correct in seeing the US as a brake on Japanese ambition. But Japan also viewed military cooperation between Britain and the US as a direct threat to her national security, especially if it threatened her

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VB. He states, however, that they did have an enormous advantage in the quality and experience of their pilots and their ability to achieve concentration of force at decisive points. These factors, which broadly agree with Ferris, were decisive. See: 'Army Air Force and Navy Air Force: Japanese Aviation and the opening phase of the war in the Far East', (*War in History*, 6:2, pages 174 – 204, 1999).

<sup>132</sup> In the spring of 1941, the IJN General Staff had only completed a rough study of war strategy against the US or Britain on a total war scale. Indeed the only planning against Britain to date had focused on Hong Kong. Up to the spring there was no expectation of all-out war against either the US or Britain in the near future. JM 150, "Political Strategy Prior to the Outbreak of War, Part IV", p 6 – 7.

oil. The more therefore that Britain drew the US into her Far East defence arrangements, the greater the risk of provoking the very attack she feared.<sup>133</sup>

The British lobbying operation to encourage forward deployment of the US fleet, preferably at Singapore, but otherwise at Manila, and US rejection of such deployment at the ABC-1 Staff Talks which ended in March, is described in the next chapter. Most historians covering the Far East theatre in 1941 have argued that, without US willingness to make a clear-cut commitment to contain Japan, Britain's Far East dilemma was not soluble without diverting substantial resources from the Middle East.<sup>134</sup> However, as the next chapter also shows, US intransigence over forward basing did not end the prospect of constructing a naval deterrent. US intervention in the Atlantic could release sufficient RN forces to resurrect an Eastern Fleet and the US Pacific Fleet could still exert influence on Japan from Pearl Harbour. Throughout 1941 therefore, the desirability of enhancing Far East air and land reinforcements to FEA standard would continue to be qualified by the possibility of reverting to the traditional naval strategy or at least creating a sufficient British/US naval deterrent to discourage a Japanese move south. Later in the year, the US would fundamentally alter its position on forward basing with the commitment to establish a large strategic air force as a regional deterrent in the Philippines. This further encouraged Britain to think it could maintain a minimum reinforcement policy.

### **The strategic trade-off between Middle East and Far East in 1941**

There were two constraints on overseas supply that made diversion from the Middle East the only option to reinforce the Far East: the need to maintain strength in the UK homeland against the perceived continuing risk of invasion;<sup>135</sup> and the limitations of

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<sup>133</sup> This was especially true of the IJN in the Japanese debates of autumn 1940. JM 146, p 17 – 18.

<sup>134</sup> This applied especially to airpower but also specialist land material, notably tanks and artillery. Kirby, as official Far East historian, was one of the first to emphasise this. *Singapore: The Chain of Disaster*, Epilogue p 254-5.

<sup>135</sup> It is evident from the whole trail of COS papers through early 1941 that the threat of UK invasion was still taken seriously, that force levels within UK, including air, were judged barely acceptable to counter this risk, and that any supplies sent overseas could not be retrieved in time to meet an attack. Richard Overy in Chapter 2 of his latest book, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939 – 1945*, explains why Fighter Command continued to expand through 1941 (75 daytime squadrons in January and 99 by September compared with 58 in July 1940) and how this limited the transfer of the most advanced aircraft overseas. In Chapter 5 he

shipping which, with occasional exceptions, had to take the Cape route. Several historians have looked in detail at whether such diversion was possible, whether the need was recognised and discussed, who ruled against it and why, and, finally, whether it would have made any practical difference to the subsequent campaign in Malaya.<sup>136</sup> There is a broad consensus that Churchill played a critical role in giving absolute priority to the Middle East and therefore minimising Far East force levels.<sup>137</sup> Most historians have accepted the need for this strategic trade-off, in the circumstances of 1941, recognising a brutal reality that Britain could win where it mattered against Germany in Europe or lose everywhere<sup>138</sup>, though many also see the choice here as the inevitable consequence of longstanding imperial overstretch.<sup>139</sup> Much of the 1941 historiography has therefore focused on whether the resulting risks in the Far East were adequately recognised, or reflected an ignorant and reckless disregard for what the Japanese might achieve, and on poor tactical deployment and decisions in theatre.<sup>140</sup> However, the dominant historical view that Britain now faced an impossible strategic dilemma in the Far East misses a crucial distinction. In the absence of effective US support, and given Britain's other commitments, the specific problem of securing Singapore as a viable base almost certainly was insoluble in 1941. However, despite the claims of the COS, inability to hold Singapore did not then mean defence of the Eastern Empire core was also insoluble. As Chapter Eight demonstrates, despite its commitments to the Atlantic and Middle East,

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describes the problems with bomber production during 1940 – 1942 and the problems this posed in balancing overseas needs with the build-up of Bomber Command as a credible strike force at home.

<sup>136</sup> Two good studies here are: James Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire*; and, Raymond Callahan, *The Worst Disaster: The Fall of Singapore*, (Second Edition - Singapore: Cultured Lotus, 2001).

<sup>137</sup> Kirby and Roskill played a key role in establishing this view. Kirby accepted Churchill may well have been right to prioritise the Middle East but argued that his decisions and choices nevertheless reflected a deeply flawed view of Singapore defences. Roskill is less sympathetic and argued that the substantial reinforcements rushed out after the Japanese attack in December 1941 surely "gave the lie" to Churchill's claim that it was impossible to spare more resources for the Far East given the overall demands facing Britain in 1941. He also accuses Churchill of consistently under-rating Japanese prowess and efficiency. *Churchill and the Admirals*, p 196 – 197.

<sup>138</sup> This was how Churchill put it to Australian Prime Minister John Curtin on 19 January 1942. "To try to be safe everywhere is to be strong nowhere". *The Second World War*, Vol IV, p 14.

<sup>139</sup> Brian Farrell and Raymond Callahan are representative of this position. They are deeply critical of both the "Singapore Strategy" and the conduct of many aspects of the Malayan Campaign, but nevertheless accept the need for hard strategic choices in the circumstances of 1941. See especially Brian Farrell's essay "1941: An Overview", in *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited*.

<sup>140</sup> Although it is rather dated, David McIntyre provides a good and balanced summary of all these factors in the "post mortem" section of *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base*, p 211 – 222. Later work has added detail but without altering the broad thrust of his summary.

Britain could still generate sufficient power in the first half of 1942 to secure key communications in the Indian Ocean and protect access to India and the Dominions without Singapore. It could have adopted such a strategy earlier.

Despite valuable work on the strategic trade-offs between Middle East and Far East, there remain key issues here not adequately addressed and important in understanding how Britain made its choices.<sup>141</sup> The first is Britain's vulnerability in the Middle East by the end of April 1941, following German intervention in the Balkans and North Africa. This is illustrated in the JPC Note prepared for the Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies on 28 April which reviewed the immediate threats to the Mediterranean and Middle East and the implications Axis moves here might have on Japan's actions in the Far East.<sup>142</sup> It painted a bleak picture of a potential two pronged offensive in the Eastern Mediterranean directed at Iraq via Turkey in the north and against the Suez Canal and Alexandria in the south. It emphasised the current superiority of German airpower here and the threat it posed to British naval bases and operations. The JPC judged Germany's ultimate goal was to destroy Britain's position in the region and capture Middle East oil supplies. They also anticipated a simultaneous operation through Spain to seize Gibraltar. Essentially, the JPC argued the Germans would attempt to execute now the very strategy that they would shortly embrace in Fuhrer Directive 32 and the August OKW Memorandum highlighted earlier as their ambition for 1942. To meet the most immediate threat to Egypt, the JPC noted there were only four British divisions facing six Italian and up to four German. There were only three RAF fighter squadrons in Egypt and seven bomber squadrons though it was hoped to increase these to six and ten by the end of May. The JPC assessed it was still possible to hold Egypt and the Levant but reserves were limited and British reinforcement lines around the Cape were far longer than those of the Axis. The worst case scenario was therefore a retreat to Sudan and the Persian Gulf, blocking the canal, destroying the oil fields and denying the Axis access to the Indian Ocean. If Japan intervened in current circumstances, the only certain reinforcements were to

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<sup>141</sup> Raymond Callahan, *The Worst Disaster*, and James Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base*, in particular have explored the trade-offs.

<sup>142</sup> JP (41) 335, "Draft Interim Reply to Mr Menzies", dated 28 April 1941. The note was approved by the COS at their 152<sup>nd</sup> Meeting on 29 April, and is attached to the minutes. CAB 79/11, TNA.

despatch a task force to the Indian Ocean. Additional naval reinforcements would depend on circumstances and here the JPC listed a variant of the 1939 Cunningham factors.<sup>143</sup>

The suggestion of strategic retreat provoked a sharp intervention from the PM in the form of a “Directive” to the COS.<sup>144</sup> This stated categorically that Japan was unlikely to enter the war unless there was a successful invasion of UK. Fear of US intervention was a powerful restraint and Japan would recognise that even defeat for Britain in the Middle East would not help her much since British forces there could be transferred to the Far East theatre. Loss of the Middle East would, however, be a disaster “of the first magnitude” for Britain second only to “invasion and final conquest”. Every effort was therefore to be made to hold the forward line and there was to be no thought of strategic withdrawal. No reinforcements were to go to the Far East beyond the modest upgrade in progress. This “political” guidance was certainly eminently clear but the COS felt it overstated the importance of Egypt compared to the continuing risk of invasion at home and the loss of Malaya which they thought a bigger disaster than the loss of Egypt.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Also at the 152<sup>nd</sup> meeting, the COS approved a telegraphic sitrep on the Middle East primarily for HMA Washington to draw on with the US President. Halifax had informed the COS in Washington tel 1764 of 23 April that the President wanted to discuss the Middle East following reports from his own advisers that Britain would have difficulty holding Egypt. CAB 79/11, TNA. The final text is in COS (41) 271 of 29 April, “Situation in the Middle East: Memorandum by the COS”, CAB 80/27, TNA. The sitrep covered much the same ground as the Menzies Note but did not address the Japan angle. It was also shared with the Dominions. Interestingly, the first draft, considered by the COS at their 150<sup>th</sup> meeting the previous day concluded with the passage: “Malaya has always been regarded as second only in importance to the UK as a base for the security of the Empire. Important though the Middle East is politically and from the point of view of exercising economic pressure, it must be realised that neither in the UK nor in Malaya have full defence requirements been met”. This passage was removed probably because the COS had now received the PM’s 28 April Directive.

<sup>144</sup> “Directive by the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence”, dated 28 April 1941, AIR 8/919, TNA. The catalyst for this Directive was not the JPC Note but comments by the Director of Military Operations, Major General John Kennedy, at dinner at Chequers on 27 April when he revealed contingency plans had been prepared to evacuate Egypt. Kennedy’s own account is in his memoir, *The Business of War: The War Narrative of Major General Sir John Kennedy*, (London: Hutchinson, 1957), p 104 – 108. There is a full account in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S Churchill, Vol. VI, Finest Hour 1939-1941, Vol. VII, Road to Victory 1941-1945*, (London: William Heinemann, 1983 and 1986), p 1071. It also features in the Brooke diaries, Field Marshall Lord Alanbrooke, edited by Danchev, Alex and Todman, Daniel., *War Diaries 1939-1945*, (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), p 154.

<sup>145</sup> These views are illustrated in the initial COS draft response to the PM dated 5 May, AIR 8/919, TNA. This was proposed by Dill but Kennedy claims to be the original drafter, *Business of War*, p 110 – 112. It argued that Britain could survive the loss of the Middle East and continue the war so long as the UK homeland, Malaya, the Cape and essential sea routes remained secure. It is striking that they referred here to “Malaya” not “Singapore”. This clearly reflected their view that holding Malaya was now necessary to protect Singapore but it also underlined the point that defending Singapore and Malaya had become an end



Ismay persuaded them to make these points with care and avoid any direct challenge to the PM's order of priority.<sup>146</sup> The CIGS, Field Marshall Sir John Dill, separately reminded the PM that Malaya formally still ranked second in the UK's strategic priorities.<sup>147</sup> The PM responded that the US remained a decisive deterrent to Japan, that an attack on Singapore was unlikely and less dangerous than a Japanese attack on shipping, that its defence required "only a fraction of the forces" needed in Egypt, and that he could not agree even the loss of Singapore outweighed the loss of Egypt.<sup>148</sup>

Several points arise from these papers. The PM's Directive, read as a set piece, was stronger on exhortation than logic. However, the underlying rationale for his commitment to the Middle East was set out in his parallel letter to Roosevelt who had also suggested strategic withdrawal.<sup>149</sup> Here Churchill stressed the influence holding a forward Middle East position had on Spain, Vichy, Turkey and Japan. Loss of the Middle East would trigger a cascade of wider losses which would threaten the security of Atlantic and Pacific communications and make a war in which the US and the British Empire were ranged against the Axis a "hard, long and bleak proposition". Speaking privately afterwards, he noted that the issue was not "whether we shall win or lose" but whether the war is "long or short". "With Hitler in control of Ukrainian wheat and Iraq oil, British staunchness will not "shorten the ordeal".<sup>150</sup> Churchill's picture here of the stakes in the Mediterranean and Middle East, and not least the Atlantic connection, shows an uncanny similarity to the view OKW would take in August and reveals a depth of strategic insight beyond the present COS.

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in itself rather than a means to an end. As Ismay evidently recognised, had the PM received this minute, it would have triggered an "explosion" given his antipathy to holding all Malaya.

<sup>146</sup> Ismay produced a redraft on 5 May which the COS adopted for their final response on 7 May, Air 8/919. Here the line was altered to: "Life would continue after the loss of the Middle East so long as we do not lose the UK or the Battle of the Atlantic". Reference to Malaya as a pre-requisite of survival was dropped.

<sup>147</sup> CIGS Minute to PM dated 6 May, WO 216/5, TNA.

<sup>148</sup> PM response to CIGS dated 13 May, WO 216/5.

<sup>149</sup> This letter dated 4 May is quoted in *The Second World War, Volume III, The Grand Alliance*, p 208 – 209. The full correspondence is in PREM 3/469, TNA. The incoming Roosevelt message clearly reflected the advice he had received, as relayed to the COS by Halifax on 23 April, that Egypt might well fall.

<sup>150</sup> This was a conversation with Ismay, Jock Colville, his Private Secretary, and US Presidential Envoy Averell Harriman, and is recounted by Martin Gilbert in *Finest Hour*, p 1079.

Given the stakes as Churchill saw them, the JPC Note underlines how limited the immediate air strength in Egypt was to deal with the most pressing Axis threat. Not only was the anticipated strength by end May a bare minimum defensive force but, as the PM was undoubtedly aware, it compared favourably with aircraft already in Malaya and anticipated in the next few months from US sources.<sup>151</sup> The PM's refusal to countenance any diversion to Malaya is therefore understandable. And, given the imminent risks to Crete, and in Syria and Iraq, it is equally understandable that he pressed for maximum additional air reinforcement to the Middle East. On 15 May, the Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, responded with plans for an approximate doubling of frontline strength in the theatre by mid-July although this was still only 80% of the anticipated German fighting strength in the Mediterranean.<sup>152</sup> This strength was broadly achieved on schedule but, by early July, the need to improve defences in the Levant, Iraq and Iran had raised the target further.<sup>153</sup> These figures demonstrate that the need to match the German threat in an active war theatre meant diversion to the Far East was not feasible before mid-July, nor did the direct deliveries to the Far East planned from the US appear to make it necessary. After July, there was in theory sufficient strength to make diversion possible and that coincided with the Japanese move into southern Indo-China and awareness of growing delays to deliveries from the US and Australia. The reason diversion did not now happen is explored below.

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<sup>151</sup> Aircraft supply for Malaya had been discussed at the Defence Committee Meeting of 9 April, just three weeks previously. It had been agreed that supply direct from the US was the best means of meeting Malaya's needs and it did not make sense to add Hurricanes from UK. CAB 69/2, TNA. The PM could reasonably expect at this time that Malaya would have sufficient Buffaloes for five fighter squadrons and sufficient Baltimores and Beauforts for four new bomber squadrons by late summer.

<sup>152</sup> Frontline strength would rise to 40.5 squadrons and 692 aircraft. Portal's total included 17 squadrons of Hurricane fighters and seven of the US equivalent P40 Tomahawks. 862 aircraft were to be shipped between 1 May and 15 July with 300 aircraft per month to meet wastage thereafter. 'Air Reinforcements for the Middle East', COS (41) 79 (O) of 15 May, CAB 80/57, TNA. The CAS plan was approved by the Defence Committee the same evening. Minutes of 30<sup>th</sup> Meeting, CAB 69/2, TNA.

<sup>153</sup> It was now 62.5 squadrons. A note for the PM from Ismay dated 3 July confirmed that fighter deliveries to the Middle East were exceeding those planned with 402 delivered in May/June against a target of 341. This represented just under half of combined monthly production for Hurricane II, Spitfire II, and Spitfire V, which was 420 in those months. Meeting the bomber target also involved significant penalties to Bomber Command. 'Air Reinforcements for the Middle East', COS (41) 125 (O) of 3 July, CAB 80/58, TNA. There would be 48.5 squadrons in the Middle East by late August, including 23 fighter and 17 bomber. By that time, the long term target strength had risen dramatically to a total of 90 squadrons in the theatre by spring 1942. COS (41) 154 (O) of 31 July 1941, "Strategic Situation in the Middle East", TNA.

As stated above, it is clear from various papers circulating at the beginning of May that the COS believed the defence of Malaya was ultimately more important than Britain's position in the Middle East.<sup>154</sup> It is equally clear from the PM's exchanges with Dill that he did not agree with this order of priority and nor did Ismay.<sup>155 156</sup> The COS' belief that Malaya should rank above the Middle East was underlined during the preparation of two major strategic assessments in May and June. These were a Mediterranean and Middle East Appreciation<sup>157</sup> and a wider review of "Future Strategy"<sup>158</sup>. They demonstrate how the COS viewed the comparative claims of the Middle and Far East during the second quarter of 1941 before the German attack on Russia and Japan's move into southern Indo-China substantially altered the strategic picture. The first draft of the Middle East Appreciation not only insisted that the security of Singapore<sup>159</sup> ranked immediately after the UK homeland, reflecting Dill's earlier arguments to the PM, but went further, claiming that "the loss of Singapore would vitally affect Britain's ability to continue the war" whereas the loss of the Middle East, while a disaster of the first magnitude, was not vital in the same way. It justified this priority for the Far East by emphasising that the loss of Singapore would cut sea communications with Australasia and threaten those in the wider

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<sup>154</sup> This was not only evident in the COS' initial draft response to the PM's Directive, prepared by Dill, but in a record of the discussion held at the 161<sup>st</sup> Meeting on 5 May which is available in AIR 8/919, TNA. This states: that the relative importance of Egypt has to be weighed against other theatres when considering reinforcements; the JPC will demonstrate this in their forthcoming Strategic Appreciation and show that the loss of Malaya would be a bigger disaster than the loss of Egypt; and that there must be no risk of denuding UK of essential forces.

<sup>155</sup> Raymond Callahan quotes Ismay stating after the war: "If you will read the minute Dill sent to Winston in May 1941, you will see what I regard as the most extraordinary document that has ever seen the light of day. Put yourself in the PM's place and ask yourself whether you would have much confidence in the strategic advice of a man who put his signature to that document". Ismay suggests the exchange was a decisive factor in convincing Churchill that Dill had to be replaced as CIGS. *The Worst Disaster*, p 92 – 93.

<sup>156</sup> Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownall, at this time VCIGS, stated in his diary for 20 December 1941, that Dill, who remained CIGS throughout 1941, had always placed the Far East second in importance to home defence and therefore above the Middle East. Pownall, however, felt the Prime Minister placed the Middle East above the Far East. *Chief of Staff: The Diaries of Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownall*, Vol 2 1940 – 44, edited by Brian Bond, (London: Leo Cooper, 1974), p 66.

<sup>157</sup> The COS commissioned this Appreciation at their 150<sup>th</sup> Meeting on 28 April. It was designed to take a more comprehensive look at the Middle East situation expanding on the sitrep prepared for HMA Washington. The first draft of this was JP (41) 364 of 10 May, 'Situation in the Mediterranean and Middle East', CAB 79/11, TNA. The final version was a telegram to Dominion Prime Ministers and is in COS (41) 92 (O) of 31 May, CAB 80/57, TNA.

<sup>158</sup> JP (41) 444 of 13 June, 'Future Strategy', attached to COS (41) 213<sup>th</sup> of 16 June, CAB 79/12, TNA.

<sup>159</sup> With this paper, the JPC tended to refer to "Singapore" as the key interest in the Far East in place of "Malaya" which they had been using for the past month or so.

Indian Ocean, put the stability of India at risk, and impose economic losses for both Britain and the US in oil, tin and rubber.

Drawing on a recent JIC assessment<sup>160</sup>, it also argued that, although war had not yet broken out in the Far East, Japan's ambitions were clear and Britain's difficulties in the Middle East could encourage an early strike. Land and air forces in Malaya were still far below the minimum necessary for security and three months were required to ship supplies to Singapore. Resources needed for the Far East were exactly those needed in the Middle East but quantities required for the Far East were small and could make all the difference to securing a vital British interest. Equivalent resources in Egypt would have limited impact. As the JPC subsequently expressed it: "We should not spoil the ship for a h'ap'orth of tar".<sup>161</sup> When the final much abbreviated version issued, the Far East section had been substantially revised. Singapore now "remained a vital interest" since it was required to secure sea communications in the Indian Ocean, but a Japanese attack was unlikely and the US posed a powerful deterrent. "Menace remained" and some reinforcement was required but no target was set for this.<sup>162</sup> In conclusion, this final version emphasised that it was not possible to be strong everywhere and risks must be accepted including in the Far East. This was a radically different Far East section from the first draft and the language clearly reflected input from the PM.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> This paper was JIC (41) 175 of 1 May, 'Japan's Future Strategy'. The actual scale of attack the Japanese could bring to bear was considered broadly the same as in the January JIC paper but this one was more detailed. It confirmed that eight divisions could be made available at short notice, there was adequate ship lift for six at one time, and the Japanese had considerable experience of combined operations. The air threat had risen slightly with a maximum of 450 land-based aircraft and 340 carrier borne though the limitations to airfields in Indo-China and Thailand would reduce the scale of air attack that could be generated at one time. Air capability was assessed to be similar to the Italians.

<sup>161</sup> 'The General Situation with particular reference to the Mediterranean and Middle East', COS (41) 82 (O) of 21 May 1941, CAB 80/57, TNA.

<sup>162</sup> COS (41) 92 (O) of 31 May, *ibid*. The final telegram, sent under the PM's signature, opened by stating that invasion of UK "probably remains Germany's 1941 objective" and went on to say that, apart from the battle of the Atlantic, the enemy main effort was now directed to the capture of Egypt. The word "probably" may have indicated growing signs of an early attack on Russia from Enigma intercepts.

<sup>163</sup> Churchill's scepticism over attempts to portray Singapore as a "keystone" was evident during the ABC-1 talks in February. He castigated the Admiralty negotiating team for using "extreme arguments" such as Singapore having priority in Empire considerations and in a subsequent minute to the First Lord and First Sea Lord, argued that, if Singapore were captured, a fleet could be based in Australia to protect it from invasion. PM Minute to FSL and First Lord of 17 February 1941, ADM 116/4877, TNA.

It is extraordinary therefore that, when the “Future Strategy” paper issued three weeks later on 24 June, the language on the Far East had reverted back to the Middle East Appreciation first draft.<sup>164</sup> These two expressions of Far East policy were miles apart and there should surely have been effort to reconcile them.<sup>165</sup> The primary responsibility here lay with the COS. The PM had given clear political direction on Britain’s strategic priorities. If the COS did not agree, as they evidently did not, it was up to them, through the JPC, to test the arguments and present an alternative case. The various papers from late April through to late June had raised important questions. First, what was the basis for the COS argument that the defence of Malaya ranked second only to UK? That was certainly the position at the 1937 Imperial Conference but that priority had been heavily qualified in 1939. There was no mention of second priority for Malaya in the 1939 European Appreciation, nor in the 1940 FEA, nor in the 1940 Future Strategy paper.<sup>166</sup> It was inappropriate to resurrect a pre-war priority in the utterly changed circumstances of 1941.<sup>167</sup> Dill had referred the PM to his oft repeated guarantee to the Dominions but, as Dill should have acknowledged, that guarantee applied only to a “direct and immediate threat” to the Dominions themselves and did not automatically imply over-riding priority for Malaya. Second, were the arguments put forward by the JPC, and apparently endorsed by the COS, in support of second priority for Malaya valid? Was it really true that “the loss of Singapore will vitally affect our ability to win the war”? Was it right that the loss

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<sup>164</sup> The Secretary to the COS provided a “commentary” collating individual COS comments on the original JPC “Future Strategy” draft on 22 June. This slightly tempered the language on the Far East but it insisted “Singapore is vital to us”, “by its loss we should lose control of sea communications with Australia and New Zealand”, and “it is of the utmost importance to take, as soon as possible, the necessary measures for its defence”. COS (41) 115 (O) of 22 June, CAB 80/58, TNA. There is no evidence the COS disagreed with the original Far East sections drafted by the JPC. The original paper, JP 444, was forwarded with the JPC commentary to the PM on 24 June and Pound, as COS Chairman, subsequently congratulated the JPC on the quality of their work. COS 225<sup>th</sup> Meeting of 26 June, item 4, CAB 79/12.

<sup>165</sup> The paper was considered at the 44<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Defence Committee on 25 June. Pound commended it as a valuable overview and, without being specific, suggested there were areas of disagreement that merited more discussion. The PM evidently regarded the paper as too hypothetical for his taste and effectively side-lined it. CAB 69/2, TNA.

<sup>166</sup> It is also noteworthy that in the first major strategic briefing given to the Americans, when a team led by Rear Admiral R Ghormley visited London in August 1940, the COS stated that the UK and Egypt were the “vital theatres” and gave no indication that the Far East was viewed as second priority. COS (40) 285<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 29 August 1940, CAB 79/6, TNA.

<sup>167</sup> Kennedy states in *The Business of War*, p 190, from the perspective of late December 1941: “The British Chiefs of Staff, since before the war, had always accorded to the defence of Singapore a higher priority even than the defence of the Middle East; but this had been lost sight of by the British Government during the last year and a half”. This seems disingenuous. The COS do not appear formally to have reaffirmed the priority at any point between spring 1939 and spring 1941 and they certainly had no political endorsement for it.

of Singapore would cut communication with Australasia? Third, even if Malaya was to have second priority, what did this mean in practice? What were the defence goals? The COS had insisted in the FEA that all Malaya must be defended to protect Singapore. The PM disagreed and the conflict here also ought to be reconciled. The COS knew Singapore and Malaya depended on the security of the NEI but the implications here had never been tackled. The PM had told Dill the defence of Singapore required just a “fraction” of the resources required in the Middle East and Dill had acquiesced.<sup>168</sup> Logic surely suggested that the whole Malay barrier could not possibly be defended against the Japanese scale of attack recently confirmed by the JIC with a “fraction” of Britain’s current Middle East forces.<sup>169</sup> Was Dill merely suggesting the rather arbitrary FEA reinforcements would be enough?

At the end of June, the midpoint of the year, these fundamental questions therefore lay unresolved. The COS supported Middle East reinforcement but not beyond the point where it posed a risk to the UK homeland or Malaya. They remained committed to early completion of the FEA reinforcement package and it appeared there would be sufficient surplus from the Middle East air build-up by August to cover a looming shortfall in Far East re-equipment due to delay in US deliveries. However, over the next six weeks, there was a remarkable shift towards the PM’s position that the Middle East should have overriding priority. The key influence here was the German attack on Russia on 22 June. This created the new risk, in the event of early Russian collapse, of a German drive into the

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<sup>168</sup> PM minute to CIGS dated 13 May 1941 and CIGS response, WO 216/5, TNA.

<sup>169</sup> Richard Aldrich judges that the performance of the JIC in 1941 was broadly excellent. He states that, throughout the year, the JIC achieved a strikingly accurate forecast of Japanese strategy in South East Asia at the outbreak of war and that the landward attack on Malaya ranks as one of the most widely predicted operations of the Second World War. Headline estimates of Japanese capabilities and scales of attack were also generally accurate. Aldrich adds that the JIC forecasts were especially impressive given the complex nature of Japanese decision-taking and the fact that final decisions on southern operations were only made in the autumn. *Intelligence and the War Against Japan*, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p 52-67. Michael Goodman in his newly published official history is more nuanced. He agrees JIC performance was “rarely wide of the mark” and that “strategically its assessments were accurate” but sees one notable failure in its inability to recognise that Japan would attack the UK and US simultaneously. He also argues that awareness of Japanese capability at the tactical level was poor although he fails to support this judgement with hard evidence. *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee, Volume 1, From the Approach of the Second World War to the Suez Crisis*, (London: Routledge, 2014), p 102 - 107.

Middle East either through Turkey or from the north through the Caucasus.<sup>170</sup> But it also offered a window of opportunity to drive the Axis from North Africa before Germany could redeploy forces from Russia.<sup>171</sup> Risk and the prospective offensive, which would ultimately go ahead as Operation Crusader in November, meant the effort to build maximum possible strength in the Middle East, especially in armour and air power, received further momentum.<sup>172</sup> By 20 July, the JPC, contemplating an imminent Japanese move into southern Indo-China, and in a complete reversal of their position a month previously, stated that they could not now recommend diverting any additional air resources from the Middle East to reinforce Malaya although they did propose small enhancements to land forces.<sup>173</sup> They were, however, reflecting the PM's attitude. On 16 July, he re-iterated to the COS his conviction that Japan would not attack Britain in present circumstances but, if she did, the US would intervene. He accepted the likelihood of an imminent Japanese move into southern Indo-China merited further precautions but without risk to other theatres.<sup>174</sup>

The seeming relentless priority now being given to the Middle East was criticised by the Americans, who were a key contributor of reinforcements, and now suggested the investment was disproportionate to either benefit or risk.<sup>175</sup> This caused the COS to

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<sup>170</sup> The intelligence assessments which formed perception of this risk, and the likelihood of it being realised, are described in detail by F H Hinsley, with others, in *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations*, Vol 2, (London: HMSO, 1977-1984), p 277 – 279. Hinsley also provides a good summary of how the northern risk influenced the timing of an offensive into Libya and the differences of view between London and CinC Middle East, now General Sir Claude Auchinleck.

<sup>171</sup> Kennedy, in *The Business of War*, p 152 – 153, records a note he wrote on 21 July stating that there was still time for the Germans to finish the Russian campaign and turn on either the UK or the Middle East before the winter. If they chose the latter, they would have the whole winter as a suitable season for operations.

<sup>172</sup> Hinsley shows that, until October, the Middle East commanders tended to overestimate German air strength in North Africa and also feared, with some justification, that additional air forces could be transferred from Russia if fighting died down there during the winter. These factors, and the desire to achieve air superiority for a Libya offensive, maintained the pressure to maximise air reinforcement to the Middle East and avoid diversion. *British Intelligence*, p 290 – 291.

<sup>173</sup> JP (41) 565 of 20 July 1941, "Far East: Action in view of Japanese Intentions", CAB 79/13, TNA. There was an obvious irony here. The JPS were highlighting the same Indian Ocean risks as they had in May with their "h'ap'orth of tar" argument for Malaya reinforcement, but now from Germany rather than Japan, and using them to bolster the Middle East at the expense of the Far East.

<sup>174</sup> 'Prime Minister's Personal Minute, Serial No M 745/1' Annex I to JPS (41) 565 of 20 July, 'Far East – Action in view of Japanese Intentions', Attachment to COS (41) 254<sup>th</sup> meeting of 21 July, CAB 79/13, TNA.

<sup>175</sup> Note to the PM from US Presidential Adviser Harry Hopkins, considered at COS 254<sup>th</sup> Meeting on 21 July, CAB 79/13. Kennedy adds a lot of background and colour to US criticism in chapters 16 and 17 of

commission the JPC to produce one of the most important, but under-recognised, papers of the war.<sup>176</sup> It brought together in a comprehensive form, for the first time since the start of the war, all the various arguments used to justify Britain's investment in the Middle East to date. It identified two critical interests Britain had to defend: access to the Indian Ocean, control of which came close second to the Atlantic in generating the maximum Empire war effort<sup>177</sup>; and Iranian oil and the Abadan refinery which were essential to sustain Eastern Empire lifelines and production<sup>178</sup>. Their security required defence in depth. Withdrawal to East Africa and the Gulf would not only mean huge economic and material loss but would tilt Spain and Turkey into the Axis camp with serious consequences for the Atlantic battle in the case of the former. The paper also defined "offensive" opportunities: tightening the blockade; knocking out Italy; wearing down German air strength<sup>179</sup>; and joining up with Russia through Iran and the Caucasus. Overall, this was a compelling rationale. It brought new strategic coherence to the vision the PM had been expressing for months not least in his May exchange with Roosevelt.<sup>180</sup> It set the strategic goals Britain would pursue in the Middle East and Mediterranean

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*The Business of War.* He quotes Hopkins saying the US military view the British position in the Middle East as "quite hopeless" and further reinforcement would be akin to "throwing snowballs into hell". Kennedy thought the US criticism was helpful in promoting a sense of balance in the allocation of resources. He also noted at this time that Japanese action might prove a determining factor on Middle East policy. If they entered the war, effort might have to be reduced in the Middle East to hold Malaya.

<sup>176</sup> JP (41) 580 of 23 July, "The Strategic Necessity of Holding our Present Middle East Position", CAB 79/13, TNA.

<sup>177</sup> The emphasis given in this and subsequent papers to preventing Axis access to the Indian Ocean is puzzling. If the British had been forced out of Egypt, they would have blocked the Suez Canal and it would have taken the Axis months, perhaps even a year, to clear it. But, under the most optimistic scenario, this would only have provided access to the Red Sea which Britain could easily dominate at its southern end. Although Germany and Italy did discuss joint operations in the Indian Ocean at the Friedrichshafen naval summit in June 1939, there is no evidence either contemplated serious fleet operations, or incursions by heavy units, as opposed to raiding operations by light forces and submarines from Italian bases in East Africa. By mid-1941 all these bases had been lost. Robert Mallett, *The Italian Navy and Fascist Expansionism 1935-1940*, (London: Frank Cass, 1998), chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>178</sup> The COS were still unclear precisely why Persian oil was so important when the matter was raised on 31 July and decided to ask the Oil Board to clarify. COS 270<sup>th</sup> Meeting, CAB 79/13, TNA.

<sup>179</sup> When the COS discussed JP 580 on 24 July, Portal suggested it would be possible to engage up to 30% of Germany's air strength in the Mediterranean and Middle East theatre. Minutes of 260<sup>th</sup> meeting, CAB 79/13, TNA. It appears that Germany had about 16.5% of its frontline air strength in the Mediterranean and North Africa in late autumn 1941 rising to an average of 20% from May 1942 through to June 1943. The 1941 estimate draws on figures in Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, Vol 2, p 291, and John Ellis, *Brute Force*, Table 42 drawing on Webster and Frankland. 1942/43 estimate is from Ellis, Preface, p xx.

<sup>180</sup> It also brought much needed coherence and intellectual weight to COS understanding. When the response to the Hopkins criticisms was initially discussed at the COS 256<sup>th</sup> Meeting on 22 July, the arguments aired in favour of the Middle East strategy were somewhat banal. CAB 79/13, TNA.



theatres through to 1943. The immediate resources required to achieve this comprehensive new strategic vision were set out in a parallel paper circulated a week later.<sup>181</sup> The importance of holding the Middle East was further underlined in a COS “General Strategy” paper prepared for the Placentia Bay conference with the Americans in early August. This confirmed that the COS now agreed the Middle East must have first call on overseas resources.<sup>182</sup>

The COS endorsement of the Middle East as Britain’s main overseas priority, and the new stress placed on protecting the Indian Ocean and Persian oil if Britain was to maximise its war effort, ought logically to have spurred the COS to commission a parallel review from the JPC into “the strategic necessity of holding our present Far East position”<sup>183</sup>. The Japanese move into southern Indo-China at the end of July further emphasised the need for this. Such a review would surely have identified that the defensive goals established in the 1940 FEA were not achievable with available resources and that the deterrent effect of the US was currently insufficient to fill the gap. It would therefore have exposed just how much risk Britain was now carrying in this theatre. A COS update on Far East Defence produced for the War Cabinet at the end of July fell far short of the searching reappraisal required. It merely confirmed the existing strategic aspiration, to hold, in collaboration with the Dutch, a defensive “crescent” from Lashio in Burma to Tonga in the South Pacific, with Singapore as the keystone, and then summarised the forces currently available to execute it.<sup>184</sup> The COS emphasised that, in line with the FEA, defence would continue to depend initially on the flexible deployment of airpower, but they acknowledged air strength for Malaya was still barely fifty per cent that recommended in the FEA with now little prospect of improvement before the end of the year.<sup>185</sup> US

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<sup>181</sup> ‘Strategic Situation in the Middle East’, COS (41) 154 (O) of 31 July, CAB 80/59, TNA.

<sup>182</sup> COS (41) 155 (O) of 31 July, “General Strategy”, CAB 80/59, TNA. This paper emphasised the need for strategic depth to deny access to the Indian Ocean and protect Persian oil. “Loss of our position in the Middle East would have disastrous effects”. Singapore meanwhile was essential to maintaining sea communications with India and Australasia but its defence needs would now have to be balanced against requirements in other theatres.

<sup>183</sup> An equivalent title to JP (41) 580 substituting “Far East” for “Middle East”.

<sup>184</sup> ‘Far East Defence Arrangements’, COS (41) 152 (O) of 28 July, CAB 80/59, TNA.

<sup>185</sup> Within six weeks, the COS formally confirmed there would be no further air reinforcements for the Far East until 1942. COS (41) 324<sup>th</sup> of 16 September, CAB 79/14, TNA. This reflected the continuing demands of the Middle East but also the new requirement to provide urgent aid to Russia. The impact of aircraft shipments to Russia can be seen at COS (41) 301<sup>st</sup> of 28 August which discussed the consequences of

intervention was therefore the critical factor. At best this would deter the Japanese but, failing that, it would enable the despatch of an RN fleet (by releasing resources in the Atlantic), provide an advance base in the Philippines<sup>186</sup>, and discourage the Japanese moving all their forces south.

This update lacked credibility. It did not address the likely scale of Japanese attack and therefore the complete inadequacy of available forces to hold the proposed defensive line. The COS did ask the JPC to clarify what early reinforcements were possible but were unwilling to sanction diversions from the Middle East.<sup>187</sup> The COS no doubt deferred to the PM's political judgement that Japan would not attack and that, if she did, the US would intervene but they had a responsibility to spell out the risk being carried and its full consequences.<sup>188</sup> They did not satisfactorily address the time lag before RN or other reinforcements could reach the theatre in the event of war, the dependence of any new RN deployment on airpower, or the current limits on US fighting effectiveness, all issues within their remit. Nor did they insist on a clear programme for filling the obvious force

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supplying 200 Hurricanes, CAB 79/14, TNA, and "Allocations of Aircraft to Russia from American Production and the effect on RAF Expansion", COS (41) 207 (O) of 17 September, CAB 50/89, TNA. The latter paper estimated that, over the nine months October 1941 – June 1942, the RAF would lose 1800 fighters from UK production and 1800 assorted aircraft from US production. UK fighter squadrons would need to be capped and upgrades to the Middle and Far East put on hold. Roskill was particularly critical of what he saw as a diversion of 200 Hurricane Mk IIs to Russia which could have been better employed in the Far East. There are two points here. First the allocation to Russia was a political choice easier to criticise with hindsight (as Roskill did) than in the autumn of 1941 when any contribution that might keep Russia fighting seemed critical. Second, the real limiting factor for Hurricanes in autumn 1941 was shipping space and the capacity of the Takoradi air reinforcement route. Whatever went to the Far East on these routes detracted from what went to the Middle East. Roskill letter to Admiral Sir William Davis, dated 11 April 1975, ROSK 4/79, CCA.

<sup>186</sup> This may be the first ever reference to the prospect of an RN fleet based in the Philippines which would take on increasing significance in the coming months. The inclusion of this reference in a JPC paper must have been sponsored by D of P on behalf of the Naval Staff. It reveals therefore how easily the Admiralty defaulted to the thinking of War Memorandum (Eastern). The release of RN forces for an Eastern Fleet through US substitution in the Atlantic is described in Chapter Four.

<sup>187</sup> JP (41) 664 of 12 August, "Improvement of our position in the Far East", CAB 79/13, TNA. This set out existing force levels for each service, identified reinforcements that could be provided in 30 days, and additional forces "later". The RN reinforcements identified broadly coincided with the forces Pound would propose to the PM for Indian Ocean reinforcement in their exchange of minutes two weeks later and which is discussed in Chapter Six.

<sup>188</sup> Kennedy claims that he and Dill discussed the Far East situation on several occasions immediately following the Japanese attack on 7 December. They felt there was little hope for Singapore, as naval and air forces were lacking and the army units were short of tanks and other specialist weapons. They agreed, however, that reinforcements had not been feasible given the needs of other theatres. This, however, begs the question as to why defence goals in the Far East were not made more realistic and why they had both been arguing in May that Malaya was essential to Empire defence. *Business of War*, p 183.

deficiencies which had now been reaffirmed within a reasonable timescale. A more honest appraisal drafted in early August, given the decision to prioritise the Middle East, would have endorsed the American view that Singapore was not defensible with existing resources.<sup>189</sup> The War Cabinet would then have had a choice, either to set a more limited goal of an “outer ring” defence aimed at protecting Australasia and critical Indian Ocean communications from Ceylon<sup>190</sup>, acknowledging that the role of the forces in Malaya and Singapore was now essentially to buy time, or to accept more forces must be diverted from the Middle East, transferring risk there and potentially compromising the Crusader offensive.

This failure adequately to address the risk posed by the Japanese move into southern Indo-China was a key turning point. Given the time lag in moving forces to the East, it was arguably the last moment when Britain had the option of injecting sufficient air forces to buy enough time when Japan struck in December to enable more substantial reinforcements to arrive. It is worth considering therefore what level of diversion from the Middle East at this time was logistically achievable and what the consequences in the two theatres would have been. A minimum diversion would have re-allocated four bomber squadrons to Malaya to replace the delayed Baltimores and Beauforts due from the US and Australia. A maximum diversion might perhaps have added four squadrons of modern fighters.<sup>191</sup> Moving these, along with 100% reserves, spares and support, in time

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<sup>189</sup> Ironically, that is not quite how the Japanese saw matters at this time. At the end of September, as they finalised preparations for the Malaya operation, they anticipated that, owing to the air and naval strength of the Allies at Singapore, progress along the Malayan peninsular would be extremely slow. Dr Stephen Bullard, *Japanese Army Operations in the South Pacific Area: New Britain and Papua Campaigns 1942 – 1943*, Translation from Japanese Official History of World War II, Senshi Soshō, Introduction p 4, quoting Japanese planning documents, (Australian War Memorial, 2007).

<sup>190</sup> It is possible to see how such an alternative more limited goal would have looked because the JPS had to address precisely this challenge six months later in February 1942. Their plan then is in ‘Far East Policy’, JP (42) 147 of 16 February attached to COS (42) 54<sup>th</sup> meeting of 17 February, CAB 79/18, TNA. This established the concept of an “outer ring” defence set back from the Malay barrier. It is worth noting that Kennedy produced a note for Brooke on 14 December, just one week into the Far East war, which suggested Malaya might be beyond saving and that effort should focus on holding Burma, Ceylon and the Indian Ocean. *The Business of War*, “Note on the Situation 14.12.41, p 185 – 189. Such an “outer ring” defence was of course analogous with the contingency “outer ring” for the Middle East based on the line from Kenya to the Persian Gulf.

<sup>191</sup> Following the Japanese attack in December, the JPS recommended the transfer of a slightly larger air group to Malaya and Burma than the “maximum” diversion suggested here, comprising six light bomber and seven fighter squadrons, which it judged would not unduly compromise Middle East security. Admittedly, by this time, the Crusader battle was largely over so the immediate risks in diversion were reduced. JP (41)

to be operationally capable by December would have been just possible.<sup>192</sup> The consequence in the Middle East would have been a reduction in RAF strike capability for the Crusader battle in November of about 20%. Given how closely fought Crusader was, this might have tipped a narrow victory into defeat. Assessing the impact of even the maximum force in Malaya is more difficult. It would have virtually doubled RAF fighting power, might well have saved *Force Z*, at least initially, and probably delayed and complicated the Japanese advance.<sup>193</sup> <sup>194</sup> Thereafter, the continuing survival of Singapore would have rested on which side could reinforce most quickly. Here the Japanese held the advantage as well as the opportunity to increase their initial scale of attack.<sup>195</sup> However, the argument is academic. Given the priority placed on Crusader, and the comparatively small air advantage Britain was perceived to enjoy in North Africa, there was no prospect

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1093 of 25 December, 'Far East and Middle East', CAB 79/16, TNA. It is worth noting that, on 3 September, Pound advocated sending two of the 20 fighter squadrons earmarked for the Middle East to Malaya instead. This was categorically rejected by the PM. COS (41) 310<sup>th</sup> Meeting of 3 September, CAB 79/14, TNA.

<sup>192</sup> In the five months March – August 1942, 1000 aircraft (of broadly similar type to those projected here) were shipped, mainly via the Middle East, to India to achieve an effective strength of 500. The suggested maximum reinforcement for Malaya would involve moving just over 250 aircraft, including 100% reserves, in three months. For the strike squadrons most of the support structure was already in place. 'Proposed Air Reinforcements for India, Burma and Ceylon', COS (42) 107 (O) of 19 April, CAB 80/62, TNA.

<sup>193</sup> General Sir Archibald Wavell, who took over the "ABDA" South-East Asia Command in January 1942, argued that holding out an extra month in Malaya would have been sufficient to inject sufficient forces to ensure stabilisation in the theatre. See Wavell note dated 17 February to COS quoted in Kennedy, *Business of War*, p 197 – 198.

<sup>194</sup> It is also hard to gauge whether such reinforcements would have had any deterrent effect on the Japanese. Taken in isolation, it seems unlikely although the Japanese did fear the cumulative impact of Western reinforcements through the winter. They had also overestimated RAF numbers in Malaya by nearly 100% and NEI air strength by 50% without being dissuaded. JM 152, Political Strategy Prior to the Outbreak of War, Part V, p 10.

<sup>195</sup> James Neidpath is one of the few historians to have examined the trade-off between reinforcement of Malaya in autumn 1941 and the impact on Crusader. His starting point is to calculate the maximum force the Japanese could devote to Malaya if they reinforced their initial attack with air and ground forces moved from the Philippines after the initial campaign there (about three weeks in) and made some adjustment to NEI attack plans. He suggests the Japanese Malaya attack force could then be raised to as much as 1200 (as opposed to 600) aircraft and ten (Compared to four) divisions. He argues that to combat this Britain would need 1000 aircraft and eight divisions, force levels never realistic with even a minimal holding operation in the Middle East through 1941, and only partly achievable if Crusader and aid to Russia had both been abandoned. He does not address whether a limited diversion in the autumn could buy enough time for later reinforcement. While the detail of his figures can be questioned, his basic point that Japan had enough capacity to counter even a significant British diversion from the Middle East prior to their attack seems valid. *The Singapore Naval Base*, p 199.

the PM or COS would have countenanced a diversion during the August and September window when it could make a difference.<sup>196</sup>

The Admiralty appears to have been oddly passive in the debate over strategic trade-offs between the Middle East and Malaya in the spring and summer of 1941. Given that they were the historic architects of a Far East naval strategy, in which both the CNS and VCNS had played a personal role, and which remained Britain's preferred option, there is little sign of Naval Staff pressure to make the defence of Singapore more credible. As the next chapter shows, the Admiralty knew by February that there was no chance of a US fleet basing at Singapore and only limited deployment forward of Hawaii. Unless the US entered the war and replaced RN forces in the western Atlantic, there was also no prospect of the RN deploying more than a small Indian Ocean task force. The Admiralty assumed therefore that, in the event of war, Japan was likely to achieve a foothold in Malaya and, while Singapore might not fall, the naval base might be unusable.<sup>197</sup> From February through August, the evidence suggests both Pound and Phillips judged that the main threat to Britain in a war with Japan, fought without American support, was not the loss of Far East possessions but attack on the vital communications in the Indian Ocean including those that sustained the Middle East.<sup>198</sup> This was a reasonable view of priorities in the circumstances and indeed a logical evolution of the Chamberlain principles of March 1939. However, the Admiralty can still be criticised on three grounds. First, if they really did judge that Singapore was now effectively dispensable to the naval priorities that most

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<sup>196</sup> The need for maximum air power to support the Crusader offensive was emphasised when Middle East Commanders met the Defence Committee on 1 August and a start date was set for 1 November (subsequently delayed to 18 November). Defence Committee 53<sup>rd</sup> Meeting, CAB 69/2, TNA. The margin of air advantage enjoyed by the RAF for Crusader was the subject of argument between Middle East Command and London during October and is well summarised by Hinsley, *British Intelligence*, Vol II, p 290 – 291.

<sup>197</sup> AT 666 to CinC China of 4 April 1941, ADM 116/4877, TNA. The assumption was that the Japanese could conduct air attacks from Thailand and northern Malaya and also prevent sea access if they seized Sumatra and Java.

<sup>198</sup> See: Minute from FSL to PM of 16 February dealing with the implications of a guarantee to the NEI, ADM 205/10, TNA; FSL views at Defence Committee 12<sup>th</sup> Meeting on 9 April, CAB 69/2, TNA; and, VCNS views at Defence Committee 56<sup>th</sup> Meeting on 8 August, CAB 69/2, TNA. Phillips stated here that the Admiralty had revised their view of what was vital. Trade in the Indian Ocean and Pacific was while defence of the Kra Isthmus was not. The Admiralty had insufficient resources to deal with Japanese raiders and expected minimal help from the US who were mainly focused on the Atlantic. The longstanding promise to the Dominions to withdraw the East Mediterranean Fleet to protect them predated the scale of Britain's commitment to the Middle East.

mattered, then they should have taken a lead in calling for a major rethink on Far East strategy and resources. Second, as part of such a rethink, they should have emphasised that the concept of retaining Singapore as a naval base or “as a foothold for recovery” now only made sense if sufficient airpower could be provided to protect the base and cover fleet operations. By mid-1941, Mediterranean experience demonstrated that one was not possible without the other.<sup>199</sup> Finally, they should have done much more in this period to prepare Ceylon as an alternative operating base drawing on the experience of Alexandria. As Chapter Six will demonstrate, in August, the Admiralty was poised between a judicious defensive strategy focused on the Indian Ocean and a tendency to default to the traditional framework of War Memorandum (Eastern).

## Conclusion

This chapter therefore draws four main conclusions. First, it argues that Britain’s continuing commitment to the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, following the fall of France, was influenced by two important factors that have received insufficient attention. These were: the need to secure the western boundary of the Eastern Empire and protect access to the Indian Ocean and Iranian oil, to enable Britain to generate the full war potential of that Empire, deny vital resources to the Axis, and later establish direct contact with Russia; and the influence that Britain’s position in Egypt exerted on attitudes in Spain, Vichy and Turkey, and the prospect of Germany extending its control of the Atlantic coast. These wider strategic factors ultimately dictated the need to hold a forward position in the Middle East and the military resources generated by the Eastern Empire made it possible.<sup>200</sup> Second, Britain’s leadership failed adequately to recognise how

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<sup>199</sup> Cunningham’s signal to the Admiralty of 25 April 1941 sums this point up well. He said: “The key to the situation here and the one which will decide the issue of our success or otherwise in holding the Mediterranean lies in air power. We can probably manage on land and on sea with forces reasonably inferior to the enemy but we cannot do so if also inferior in the air. I consider that no half measures will do. If HMG want to hold the Mediterranean, adequate air forces must be sent”. ADD MS 52567, Cunningham Papers, British Library.

<sup>200</sup> The “war potential” of the Eastern Empire requires clarification. In December 1941, total British Empire land forces in the combined Middle East and Far East theatres comprised the equivalent of 16 divisions, with the Indian Army providing six, Australia four, New Zealand one, and South Africa two. These thirteen non UK divisions represented about 23% of total British Empire fighting manpower available for ground force deployment at this time although India and Australia had additional land forces for domestic defence and security. This percentage ground force contribution from these four territories remained broadly

fundamentally the defence problem at the other end of the Empire in the Far East had changed. Britain could no longer protect and use Singapore as a base without denying Japan access to a substantial area around it. Britain could only generate the air and land forces to achieve this by diverting them from the Middle East. Sufficient diversion was never possible in 1941 without putting the Eastern Empire and the oil to sustain it at serious risk from Axis attack in the west and undermining Britain's wider ability to prosecute the war. Britain could pursue a forward defence policy in one theatre but not both. Third, Britain's war leadership allowed the protection of Singapore to become an end in itself rather than seeing it as just one means to secure the critical core of the Eastern Empire rightly identified in 1939. The COS were primarily responsible for failing to conduct a searching reappraisal of Far East strategy in mid-1941 as they had in the Middle East. Finally, the Admiralty remained too attached to a narrow interpretation of pre-war strategy that was inappropriate to the opportunities and capabilities now available to the Japanese and failed to draw obvious lessons from the Mediterranean war.

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constant for the rest of the war as Empire forces steadily expanded. The percentage manpower contribution of the same four territories to British Empire air and naval strength was much less although often of high quality. Many air personnel were incorporated directly within British units. The percentage contribution of fighting manpower from these four territories is also reflected in their casualty rate which was about 19% of all British Empire casualties over the whole war. As the war progressed, the core Eastern Empire territories were increasingly able to equip and support the land forces they generated from their own productive resources with the important exception of heavy weapons. Production of major weapons, i.e. aircraft, tanks and ships, within Eastern Empire territories was negligible before 1942 and remained limited after that reaching at most 5% of overall Empire effort over the whole war with shipping the most important component. Beyond this direct fighting contribution, the Eastern Empire made a wider and critical contribution of raw materials and food and, as this chapter has demonstrated, oil from Persia and Iraq serviced the entire British Empire war effort east of Malta and the Cape. Figures taken from: Brian Farrell, *The Basis and Making of Grand Strategy – Was there a Plan?*, Book 2, Appendix B; and I C B Dear and M R D Foot, *The Oxford Companion to World War II*, (Oxford University Press, paperback edition, 2001). These various Eastern Empire contributions to the total British war effort explain the advice to the War Cabinet in mid-1942 that the loss of Abadan might reduce that effort by 25%. See footnote 50. This 25% figure certainly appears a reasonable estimate for the Eastern Empire war effort although what proportion of this would have been eliminated in practice by the loss of Abadan is impossible to calculate. Inevitably, historians of the declinist school, notably Corelli Barnett, have argued that the Eastern Empire brought Britain no net military benefit, and could only contribute to defending their own territories. The main counter-argument here is the overall strategic case for holding the Middle East set out in this chapter. The Eastern Empire, together with South Africa, provided about two thirds of the fighting manpower for the Crusader offensive in November 1941 and it would have been impossible to hold a forward position in the Middle East during the period covered by this thesis without Eastern Empire manpower.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The US relationship, ABC-1 and the resurrection of a Royal Navy Eastern Fleet**

This chapter examines the evolution of the naval relationship with the US from the first formal exchanges on naval cooperation in the Far East in early 1938 to the first UK/US Summit at Placentia Bay in August 1941 which initiated active US escort operations in the Atlantic, thereby releasing RN forces for deployment in the East. The chapter concentrates primarily on the period following the fall of France and how US attitudes influenced British naval strategy for protecting the Eastern Empire over the next twelve months. It explains how the collapse of France, and the US perception that without substantial assistance British defeat might quickly follow, led the US to prioritise the Atlantic over the Pacific; a decision enshrined in their “Plan Dog” memorandum of November 1940, and confirmed in the first formal American/British staff talks in early 1941 known as ABC-1. Plan Dog, however, effectively eliminated the British hope that the US would take responsibility for guarding their naval flank in the Far East. It obliged the RN leadership to adopt a compromise US proposal whereby the US would relieve sufficient RN forces in the Atlantic to enable the RN to create an Eastern Fleet to secure the Eastern Empire against Japanese intervention in the war. The chapter explains why it then proved difficult to translate the ABC-1 strategic principles into practical plans for cooperation in the Far East and how failure here would ultimately encourage the Admiralty to embrace an unwise forward deployment strategy with inadequate forces in the autumn of 1941.

#### **The initial contacts**

As stated in the Introduction, the development of the British-US naval relationship from the mid-1930s to the outbreak of the European war in September 1939 has been



comparatively well covered by historians.<sup>1</sup> There is a consensus that, from the 1930 London Conference, the relationship between the two navies moved steadily from one marked by rivalry and suspicion<sup>2</sup> towards cautious friendship based on growing awareness of common interests especially in dealing with the naval threat posed by Japan in the Far East.<sup>3</sup> There is also agreement that the visit of Captain Royal Ingersoll, the USN Director of Plans, to London in January 1938 marked a further step change. In the words of two historians, the visit established agreement for the Far East theatre on “strategic cooperation, respective spheres of action, reciprocal use of facilities, and common codes” while mutual war plans were also shared.<sup>4</sup> Views on the real significance of this visit, and subsequent exchanges over the next eighteen months, notably the visit by Commander Hampton to Washington in June 1939<sup>5</sup>, however differ. Cowman argues that the Ingersoll exchange was of limited value unless there was a clear political agreement by the British and US Governments on specific joint objectives to restrain Japan and the use of joint naval power to achieve them. There were too many political constraints and doubts on both sides to make this feasible. Cowman indeed doubts whether any firm foundation for future cooperation had been established by September 1939.<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, by contrast, sees

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<sup>1</sup> Key works here are: James R Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy: Anglo-American Naval Collaboration, 1937 – 1941*; Greg Kennedy, *Anglo-American Strategic Relations in the Far East 1933 – 1939*; Malcom Murfett, *Fool Proof Relations: The Search for Anglo-American Naval Cooperation during the Chamberlain Years 1937 – 1940*; Ian Cowman, *Dominion or Decline: Anglo-American Naval Relations in the Pacific 1937-41*; and, Arthur Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies*, Chapter Two, Part 6. There is also a useful collection of primary documents in the Navy Records Society, Volume 155, *Anglo-American Naval Relations, 1919-1939*, edited by Michael Simpson, especially Part VI, Edging towards an Alliance, 1937 – 1939.

<sup>2</sup> It is revealing that Roskill gave the first volume of his *Naval Policy between the Wars* the title “*The Period of Anglo-American Antagonism, 1919 – 1929*”.

<sup>3</sup> Both John Maurer and Christopher Bell argue convincingly that the 1930 London Conference marked a key turning point in Anglo-US naval relations in the new collection of essays which they have jointly edited: *At the Crossroads between Peace and War: The London Naval Conference of 1930*, (USA, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014). Maurer, in his opening essay at p 35, argues that historians have “missed the critical accomplishment of a de facto British-American political-military front”. He believes that, “to a degree”, “the foundation for the grand alliance of World War II can be found in the fine print of the correspondence leading up to and the language of the London Naval Treaty”.

<sup>4</sup> Haggie, *Britannia at Bay*, p 119; and Cowman, *Dominion or Decline*, p 137. Cowman repeats Haggie’s language here although he does not acknowledge this.

<sup>5</sup> As recorded in Chapter Two, Commander T C Hampton was despatched to brief the USN leadership on the implications for RN Far East reinforcement of the “Cunningham Strategy” endorsed by the CID on 2 May 1939. Hampton met the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral William Leahy, and Director of Plans, Rear Admiral Robert Ghormley.

<sup>6</sup> Cowman, p 153 – 154, and also chapter three. Lawrence Pratt is more positive than Cowman about the long term impact of the Ingersoll talks. He judges that the talks convinced the two navies that they had common interests and also established a degree of trust that set them on the road to strategic cooperation in

the evolving naval relationship as but one strand, albeit the most important, in a wider network of relationships focused on the Far East “problem”. He argues that, in the second half of the 1930s, joint exploration of this “problem” created a “special relationship” based on parallel goals, similar strategic evaluations, and common approaches. For him, these were the first steps in creating the “Grand Alliance” initiated at Placentia Bay.<sup>7</sup>

There is no value in this thesis repeating previous accounts of the Ingersoll and Hampton meetings<sup>8</sup> but there are four points arising from them that deserve more emphasis because they had enduring influence on subsequent development of the relationship in 1940 – 41.<sup>9</sup> The first is the concept of “spheres of interest” and division of labour. Ingersoll and his RN opposite number, Captain T S V Phillips, agreed that, in containing Japan, the RN would assume responsibility for the Indian Ocean, Australasia and the South China Sea as far as the Philippines. The USN meanwhile would cover the West and North Pacific including Fiji and Samoa, again up to the Philippines.<sup>10</sup> In 1938, this division had logic and offered the RN significant benefit, the possibility of securing the area as far as Hong Kong with a rather smaller force than if operating unilaterally. But it also established a division that the Americans would continue to promote through 1941 when Britain had scant prospect of resourcing her defined sphere.<sup>11</sup> Second, the British took some encouragement from both the Ingersoll and Hampton meetings, especially the latter, that, in the event of aggressive moves by Japan against the Western Powers, the Americans would be willing to base significant forces at Singapore, reducing the scale of force they

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1940. The Anglo-American Naval Conversations on the Far East of January 1938, (*International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944- ), Vol 47, No 4, p 745 – 763, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> Kennedy, *Anglo-American Strategic Relations*, p 3. Kennedy emphasises that the development of a closer relationship in the late 1930s reflected personal contacts, and a growing willingness to share information and views, across multiple geographic locations (Tokyo and China as well as London and Washington), and institutions (Foreign Office and State Department as much as Admiralty and US Navy Department).

<sup>8</sup> Haggie, Leutze, Cowman and Murfett all provide useful accounts with varying levels of detail.

<sup>9</sup> The Admiralty records of both the Ingersoll and Hampton meetings are in ADM 116/3922, TNA.

<sup>10</sup> The division of geographic responsibility at this 1938 meeting was geared primarily to the enforcement of economic sanctions and the conduct of a trade war against Japan. As this chapter shows later, this division would be followed closely in the ABC-1 agreement of March 1941.

<sup>11</sup> At the Hampton meeting, Leahy went rather further than the Ingersoll spheres of interest which focused on the Far East. Leahy suggested that, in the event of the US joining Britain and France in a war against the three Axis powers, the US Fleet should control the Pacific while the “Allied Fleets” (i.e. Britain and France) covered European waters, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. The Indian Ocean was not mentioned. Since Pound and Phillips had been the recipients for Hampton’s report in 1939, it was only reasonable for them to promote a similar division in mid-1940. Hampton record of 14 June meeting, ADM 116/3922, TNA.

might need to send.<sup>12</sup> Given such encouragement, the British would pursue this idea determinedly in late 1940. Third, the Ingersoll meeting encouraged the Admiralty to look favourably on the Philippines as a forward operating base that would get over many of the problems inherent in Hong Kong.<sup>13</sup> This too would influence Admiralty thinking both in late 1940 and again in the final run-up to war in late 1941. Finally, the Ingersoll meeting established a principle of sharing sensitive information that would extend into limited technical exchanges in 1938 - 39 and then much more substantial intelligence sharing after the outbreak of war.<sup>14 15</sup> It broke a barrier in establishing trust and confidence.

### **From the Bailey Committee to ABC-1**

The definitive history of the British-US naval relationship from the outbreak of the European war through to the conclusion of the ABC-1 staff talks on 29 March 1941 is undoubtedly James Leutze's *Bargaining for Supremacy*.<sup>16</sup> This identifies respective British and US goals in developing their relationship in this period, provides a detailed account of negotiations and tactics employed, and the key personalities involved. The test for any new historical contribution in the period up to March 1941 is therefore to add value to his account and conclusions. The key gap in Leutze's coverage, which applies to Cowman and Marder also, is an understanding of precisely how British aspirations for a

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<sup>12</sup> Leahy volunteered his "personal view" to Hampton that, in the event of joint war against the Axis, the US Fleet should move to Singapore in sufficient force to engage the Japanese Fleet on passage and therefore also on arrival. He was opposed to sending a weaker force and also stressed the importance of a British contribution, including by implication capital ships, to underline that this was a joint force. Hampton record of 14 June meeting, ADM 116/3922, *ibid*. See also Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, p 38 – 40.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Cowman provides a detailed account of Admiralty consideration of the Philippines as a base in "Defence of the Malay Barrier? The Place of the Philippines in Admiralty Naval War Planning 1925 – 1941", (*War in History*, Vol 3, No 4, pp 398 – 417, November 1996). He demonstrates that interest preceded the Ingersoll meeting and explores how and why it was then resurrected in late 1941.

<sup>14</sup> The Admiralty Board authorised a framework under which technical information would be shared with the USN on 12 May 1938. It agreed the US would be treated "exceptionally". ADM 116/4302, TNA. The evolution of naval technology and intelligence sharing in the first nine months after the outbreak of the European war is well described by Leutze at chapter 5 of *Bargaining for Supremacy*.

<sup>15</sup> Cowman states that the RN answered no less than 395 information requests from the USN in the second half of 1940 through the Bailey Committee whose status is explained later in the chapter. *Dominion or Decline*, p 171.

<sup>16</sup> Some 80% of Leutze's book covers this period compared with just 30 pages by Cowman in *Dominion or Decline* who deliberately focuses more on the period after ABC-1. Marder also covers this period only briefly in *Old Friends, New Enemies*, Vol 1, Chapter V, Part 2, although he does include some material not available elsewhere.

US naval contribution linked to the evolving British strategy for defence of the Eastern Empire in the run-up to the August 1940 FEA and then through the next twelve months. Establishing this linkage is important because, as stated in the Introduction, much of the prevailing historiography on British strategy here until the end of 1941 implies that Britain was acting in isolation. There are three central issues. First, did the role Britain wanted the USN to take on in the Far East theatre offer a credible strategic solution to her defence problem? Second, if Britain did have the basis for a viable strategy, could it have been presented to the US more effectively? Finally, once US opposition to Britain's preferred strategy was evident, was there an alternative strategy that would have achieved the goal of containing Japan and a better alignment of respective national interests?

The previous chapter described the FEA starting point that, with the collapse of France, the development of a direct threat to UK, and the need to retain naval forces in European waters sufficient to match both the German and Italian fleets, it was temporarily impossible to despatch an adequate fleet to the Far East should need arise. The COS had already anticipated this when on 25 May they assessed Britain's prospects if France fell. Their conclusion that Britain should rely primarily on the US to "safeguard our interests in the Far East" dated from that point.<sup>17</sup> Given the argument over the ranking of Singapore in Empire priorities the following spring, it is noteworthy, that at this time, maintenance of Britain's position in the Eastern Mediterranean took precedence over Singapore. By the end of June, the JPC had established the aspiration that "it would be convenient for the USA to assume operational control over the whole Pacific Ocean, including the entire British China Station".<sup>18</sup>

This JPC aspiration reflected the view of the Committee set up by the First Sea Lord under the retired Admiral Sir Sidney Bailey to determine what naval assistance Britain should seek from the US and which met for the first time on 20 June. Under its initial terms of

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<sup>17</sup> COS 390 of 25 May 1940, "British Strategy In A Certain Eventuality", CAB 80/11, TNA.

<sup>18</sup> COS 496 of 27 June, "Staff Conversations with the United States", CAB 80/13, TNA.

reference, the “Bailey Committee”<sup>19</sup> was not asked to consider Japan as a possible belligerent.<sup>20</sup> However its first report to the FSL, which established the basic parameters for operational assistance from the US, anticipated that, in present circumstances, the US “will continue to maintain a strong fleet to safeguard our joint interests in the Pacific and Far East at least until Japan makes her attitude clear”.<sup>21</sup> It also assumed that, if a capital ship force was required at Singapore, the Americans might be willing to provide this.<sup>22</sup> Several points regarding the Bailey Committee and its work have been insufficiently explained by Leutze and others. The Committee was exclusively concerned with the naval relationship with the US where it addressed three distinct requirements: it provided advice on where US operational assistance was most needed; it advised on how an operational partnership could best be managed drawing on World War I experience; and it conducted an audit of RN capability and war experience to date to provide a pool of knowledge that could be shared with the US to support a future operational relationship.<sup>23</sup> The initial recommendations on operational assistance, completed on 9 July<sup>24</sup>, naturally addressed the RN’s global needs where two points must be understood. First, the RN’s over-riding priorities until the autumn were to secure home waters, the Atlantic supply

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<sup>19</sup> The “Bailey Committee” was the term used in contemporary papers. The key members alongside Bailey himself were Rear Admiral W S Chalmers and Captain L Curzon-Howe. The latter was the recently returned Naval Attaché in Washington and had attended the Hampton talks in that role in June 1939.

<sup>20</sup> Bailey Committee Note dated 20 September 1940, ADM 199/1159, TNA.

<sup>21</sup> Report of first meeting dated 24 June, ADM 199/691, TNA.

<sup>22</sup> The expectation that the US might be willing to base a capital ship force at Singapore reflected the British view that Singapore was the only logical option in the Far East theatre given the lack of significant facilities in the Philippines. However, it also inevitably reflected the comments made by Leahy to Hampton in June 1939. In addition, more recently, on 16 April, the US Naval Attaché, Captain Alan Kirk, had asked DCNS (Phillips) whether the USN would be able to use Singapore in the event of a Japanese attack on the NEI. Phillips’ minute of 16 April 1940, FO 371/24716, TNA. Churchill, who was no doubt aware of the Hampton background from his time as First Lord, and certainly aware of Kirk’s enquiry, had also raised the possibility of the US using Singapore in his first letter, as PM, to Roosevelt on 15 May. Roosevelt pointedly did not offer any encouragement on the Singapore suggestion in his reply dated 18 May. *The Second World War, Vol II, Finest Hour*, p 22 – 24. Roosevelt and the new US CNO, Admiral Harold Stark, did, however, decide that the US Pacific Fleet should remain at Pearl Harbour after manoeuvres held there in May rather than returning to its normal base at San Diego.

<sup>23</sup> Neither Leutze (p 134 – 135) nor Cowman (p 170 – 171) adequately brings out these three roles. Neither gives the original terms of reference, nor do they explain why only one section (out of twelve) and five pages (out of 115) dealt with “Operational Assistance” in the final report dated 11 September. Apart from sections on “Liaison” (i.e. management of the relationship) and “Communications” (i.e. between the two parties), there were nine devoted to the third role i.e. the “knowledge pool”. ADM 199/1159, TNA.

<sup>24</sup> ADM 199/691, TNA.

route and the Mediterranean.<sup>25</sup> The Naval Staff certainly wanted the US to protect British interests in the Far East but, in assessing the potential USN contribution, this was not a primary interest at this stage. They hoped a strong US presence would restrain Japan but were not yet asking the US to do anything beyond what it was expected to do anyway to meet its own interests in the area. If the US kept the theatre peaceful, then it could provide much needed support in the more important Atlantic theatre. Second, there was an obvious difference between the US role in the Pacific and the Atlantic. Deterrence in the former could apply in peacetime. Support in the Atlantic depended on US entry into the war.<sup>26</sup>

The comparative low priority placed on the Far East element of the US relationship in Bailey's work at this point explains why the US role did not feature in the August FEA and why this did not include any specific recommendations for exploring the scope for US cooperation. British ideas for a US contribution to Far East naval defence had not therefore moved beyond the aspirational when the COS briefed the US fact finding mission led by Rear Admiral Robert Ghormley at the end of August.<sup>27</sup> The COS drew here on the newly completed "Future Strategy" paper for their briefing along with the

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<sup>25</sup> These naval priorities reflected the main risks and opportunities which would be defined in the "Future Strategy" paper at the end of August and which has been discussed in Chapter Three. They were also set out in a note prepared by the FSL for the PM on 2 August which considered the redistribution of the RN in the event of war with Japan with the US neutral. It stated that RN force allocation must reflect four principles: security of home waters was the first essential; if Britain was to hold the Middle East, a fleet was required in the Eastern Mediterranean; a force was required at Gibraltar to prevent any Italian breakout into the Atlantic; and, finally, defence of trade in the Indian Ocean was less important than the Atlantic. The intention therefore was to establish an Indian Ocean defence force comprising: the battle-cruiser *Renown*, the carrier *Ark Royal*, two 8 inch cruisers, some modern 6 inch cruisers if available, and six destroyers. It was assumed all Australian and New Zealand forces would have returned to home waters. Significantly, the paper stated that Trincomalee was a better base from which to protect Indian Ocean trade than Singapore. "Redistribution of the fleet in the event of war with Japan", dated 2 August 1940, ADM 205/6, TNA.

<sup>26</sup> Bailey's initial report on "Form of Operational Assistance desired from the US" was submitted to the FSL on 24 June along with comments from D of P. A revised version was produced on 9 July and approved by the FSL as a good baseline for discussion with the US on 18 July. The 9 July redraft shows greater emphasis on the need for a maximum US contribution in the Atlantic. The papers are in ADM 199/691, TNA. The final "Bailey report" addressing all three requirements mentioned in this paragraph is in ADM 199/1159, TNA.

<sup>27</sup> Ghormley, as already noted, as USN Director of Plans, had accompanied Leahy for the meeting with Hampton in June 1939. Later in 1939, he became Assistant CNO. His background therefore in theory equipped him well to comment on Far East cooperation.

FEA for the Far East element.<sup>28</sup> They neither emphasised the Far East as a current priority, ranking it behind the UK homeland, the Middle East, and even West Africa, nor sought any specific assistance in the theatre.<sup>29</sup> Reflecting the Bailey line, they merely made the general observation that, given Britain's present inability to provide a fleet for the Far East, it was "unnecessary to stress the immense value of active US cooperation" in the theatre and that support of a US battle-fleet would be "transformational". Ghormley did press Pound on British reaction to a hypothetical US transfer of part of their Pacific Fleet to the Atlantic. Would Britain then reinforce Singapore or give priority to the Mediterranean? Pound responded that "it would be strategically unsound" to send a force of insufficient strength to meet the Japanese fleet unless it could be sure of getting there first. In present circumstances, with inadequate forces under any likely scenario, it was better to concentrate on controlling the Indian Ocean rather than try to reach Singapore with insufficient forces.<sup>30</sup> Pound's response here, whatever its merits, was a revealing insight into his thinking on Far East reinforcement which would remain consistent up to September 1941.

Following the discussion with the COS, Pound arranged for Ghormley to receive a version of the full Bailey report and this provided a basis for a series of meetings between the Bailey Committee and Ghormley through September and October. Only the first of these, on 17 and 18 September, addressed strategic issues and operational assistance in any detail. The other meetings were mainly technical briefings. On 17 September, Bailey again stressed the value of US naval support in the Far East and stated that moving the US Pacific Fleet to Singapore, Australia or the Philippines "might keep Japan quiet". Ghormley made no response other than to stress the difficulty in maintaining and protecting lines of communication when the fleet deployed forward given the bases available to the Japanese in the Western Pacific. Bailey neither pressed the issue of Far East support in general, nor the use of Singapore in particular, and he laid at least equal

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<sup>28</sup> The COS briefing for Ghormley took place over two COS meetings, the 285<sup>th</sup> on 29 August and 289<sup>th</sup> on 31 August. The Far East briefing and discussion took place on the 31<sup>st</sup>. CAB 79/6, TNA.

<sup>29</sup> As already noted in Chapter Three, there was no suggestion at this meeting that the defence of Singapore ranked second in Empire priorities as Dill would suggest the following spring.

<sup>30</sup> Pound confirmed that, for him, a "sufficient" RN fleet meant a strength one battleship less than the IJN total i.e. nine ships along with appropriate supporting forces. That implied "six or seven destroyer flotillas" which could not possibly be provided at present.

emphasis on the value of US support in the Atlantic. Ghormley was left clear that US cover in the East was an important British aspiration but there were no specific proposals at this stage.<sup>31</sup>

There were two catalysts that encouraged Britain to try to translate the general aspiration of US naval cover in the Far East into a more specific commitment. The first was the need for a credible policy towards the NEI in the event of Japanese attack there. As the JPC stated on 2 October, war with Japan would seriously prejudice success against Germany. However, Japanese occupation of the NEI would soon neutralise the Singapore base and render it unusable. Britain could not therefore allow undisputed occupation but any support for the Dutch would be ineffective without prior staff discussions. The COS concluded that these should proceed but without any binding British commitment to intervene. Inviting US participation would clarify their attitude towards defence of the NEI and hopefully minimise British liability.<sup>32</sup> The second was the signing of the Tri-Partite Pact by the three Axis powers on 27 September which raised the potential risk of Japanese intervention and resulted in a specific proposal from the US Secretary of State Cordell Hull for private staff discussions to explore common defence possibilities.<sup>33</sup> The War Cabinet tasked the COS to develop proposals for such talks but it was soon apparent from HMA Washington that Hull had over-reached himself and there was no prospect of full staff talks at least until after the US Presidential election in November.

The COS therefore agreed that more informal exploratory talks on the Far East should be held with Ghormley in London while the US would also be invited to send a representative to attend the staff talks with the Dutch at Singapore.<sup>34</sup> In preparing draft instructions for the British delegation meeting Ghormley, the JPC stated that, during earlier Ghormley meetings, the Far East problem had only been addressed within a wider global context and not as a specific issue. They suggested the British objective now

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<sup>31</sup> Bailey Committee First Meeting, 17 September, ADM 199/1159, TNA.

<sup>32</sup> COS (40) 796 of 2 October 1940, "The Far East: Policy with regard to the NEI", CAB 80/19, TNA.

<sup>33</sup> COS (40) 798 of 3 October, "British-American-Dutch Technical Conversations", CAB 80/19, TNA. HMA Washington's account of his conversation with Hull in Washington tel 2146 of 30 September is attached to this memo as is an assessment of Japanese intent from HMA Tokyo. Hull suggested the talks should embrace Britain, the US, Australia and the Dutch.

<sup>34</sup> COS (40) 831 of 14 October, "Anglo-Dutch-American Technical Conversations", CAB 80/20, TNA.



should be to establish the employment of US, British and Dutch forces in the Far East theatre in the event all three were involved in a joint war with the three Axis powers. The JPC argued that US intervention would prevent a Japanese attack on Australasia and the presence of a US battle-fleet in the theatre would much reduce the risk of seaborne attack on Malaya although the possibility of land or air attack would remain. The US should be invited to take “Naval War Memorandum Eastern” as the basis for discussion with the US Fleet taking the place of the RN Eastern Fleet. The key question for discussion therefore was how far the US could make up the British deficit and from what base(s).<sup>35</sup> The JPC emphasised that the Memorandum would need modification because the Far East “defence problem” now embraced the NEI and Philippines as well as Malaya. It suggested Manila would be a good advanced base while Hong Kong would probably be unusable.<sup>36</sup> In line with long established Admiralty strategy, the JPC saw “economic pressure” as the primary means of bringing Japan to heel. Given that the US was likely to provide the bulk of forces, the JPC recommended that all British naval forces in the China Fleet area should come under US command with the Indian Ocean remaining a British responsibility. US ability to provide shore-based bombers and fighters for Malaya and the NEI should also be investigated.<sup>37</sup>

The Americans were unhappy even with more limited exploratory talks and insisted that, for the present, discussion with Ghormley on the Far East be limited to an exchange of information only and on a bilateral basis.<sup>38</sup> Ghormley accordingly produced a list of

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<sup>35</sup> The JPC did not suggest Singapore was the only option for the US to base their fleet. Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila, Guam and Honolulu were all listed as possibilities. COS (40) 833 (JP) of 15 October 1940, CAB 80/20, TNA.

<sup>36</sup> A précis of Naval War Memorandum Eastern was now produced and circulated on 20 October under the signature of Colonel E I C Jacob as Secretary to the UK Delegation to the deferred Staff Talks but now focused on the Ghormley meeting. The introduction confirmed that this was indeed the 1937 version of the War Memorandum “drawn up to give effect to the 1937 Far East Appreciation”. The plan was based on “the situation then existing” and “in many respects” was “not applicable to the present situation”. ADA (J) (40) 2, “British United States Netherlands Technical Conversations, Précis of Naval Eastern War Memorandum”, ADM 199/1232, TNA.

<sup>37</sup> COS (40) 833 of 15 October 1940, “Anglo-Dutch-American Technical Military Conversations”, CAB 80/20, TNA. The draft instructions for the British delegation were approved with minor modifications by the COS the following day, 16 October. A summary of the instructions was despatched to CinC China to use as the basis for staff talks with the Dutch at Singapore. AT 562 to CinC China of 15 October 1940, ADM 199/1232, TNA.

<sup>38</sup> COS (40) 856 of 22 October, “British-United States-Dutch Technical Conversations: Strategic Basis for Conversations”, CAB 80/21, TNA.

written questions: the composition of current British and Dutch forces; their planned reinforcements, strategic disposition and command arrangements; what exactly was required from the US and what level of US forces could be supported. He also issued a warning. While the US wanted to help keep the Japanese out of Malaya and the NEI, before contemplating any military assistance, they would need evidence that the British and Dutch were making a maximum commitment themselves to defending their territories.<sup>39</sup>

The British answer to Ghormley's key question - what exactly was required from the US in the Far East - was set out in an internal appreciation produced for the COS by Rear Admiral Roger Bellairs, who had been nominated to lead the British delegation to the deferred staff talks and would subsequently represent Britain at the ABC-1 talks in January.<sup>40</sup> This was a significant evolution of the JPC mid-October draft instructions and effectively replaced them. It re-emphasised the traditional view that Far East defence was essentially a naval problem and drew on the principles, and even language, of the 1937 Naval War Memorandum Eastern.<sup>41</sup> The British proposal now was that the US should counter any Japanese southward move directed ultimately at Malaya and/or the NEI by basing a substantial fleet at Singapore. This fleet, with a suggested minimum strength of eight capital ships and three carriers, should be strong enough to engage any IJN fleet, to disrupt Japanese communications, thus rendering any expedition against Allied territory impossible, and prevent Japanese interference with Allied trade.<sup>42</sup> Bellairs' appreciation

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<sup>39</sup> The British gave Ghormley an immediate written response on force levels based on those defined in the August FEA. This response, along with Ghormley's original letter of 25 October, is in ADM 199/1232, TNA.

<sup>40</sup> The COS tasked Bellairs with producing this at their 359<sup>th</sup> meeting on 23 October, Item 6, CAB 79/7, TNA.

<sup>41</sup> At the COS 23 October meeting, the VCNS, Vice Admiral Sir Tom Phillips, reflecting the suggestion already made in the JPC draft instructions of mid-October, argued against using the August FEA as the starting point for discussion with the US (and potentially the Dutch too). It assumed no fleet was available since Britain could not send one. If the US could now provide the necessary fleet, the strategy for dealing with Japan outlined in the 1937 Far East Appreciation was more useful.

<sup>42</sup> It is not entirely clear how these figures for desired US strength in the Bellairs paper originated. Several related Naval Staff papers at this time state this was the minimum strength the RN had judged necessary for its Eastern Fleet. Yet there is a consistent Admiralty view through the autumn of 1940, reflecting the Tientsin calculations of 1939, that the minimum capital ship strength in the Far East should be one unit less than the maximum IJN strength. That meant nine ships not eight and indeed this figure did often feature in subsequent British papers put to the US. The figure of three carriers did not link to any previous British formula or plan. In 1937, the RN hoped to deploy four carriers in a Far Eastern war while in 1939 the

argued that Singapore was geographically a much better base than Hawaii but it also emphasised the importance of Manila as an advanced operating base, arguing that Japan would want to neutralise the Philippines before moving south. Bellairs also proposed that the RN establish a task force in Ceylon<sup>43</sup>, and the US one at Hawaii, to secure communications and protect trade in rear areas.<sup>44</sup>

These Bellairs proposals of 8 November must be placed in a wider context. The Bailey report, the engagement with Ghormley, the need to respond to the on-off staff talks, which had spurred Bellairs' work, and, not least, the progress of the war since the fall of France, had all helped Britain to re-assess its naval priorities, to decide where its resources should best be concentrated, and to clarify what it wanted from the US. By early November, it had a coherent view of the global naval strategy it wanted to pursue and where it wanted US help. The RN leadership was clear that Europe was the decisive war theatre and Germany the main opponent to be beaten. If Japan intervened, strategy should be defensive and focus only on holding Singapore and the NEI and denying access to the Indian Ocean.<sup>45</sup> The Naval Staff judged that RN forces were insufficient to meet current commitments in the Atlantic and Mediterranean and on the wider trade routes.<sup>46</sup> RN forces to meet a threat from Japan could only be provided at the expense of European

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maximum it thought feasible was two. The figure three perhaps merely represented the minimum carrier strength the IJN were expected to deploy (para 17 of 1940 FEA) or the US carrier strength the Admiralty believed was presently located in Pearl Harbour (Annex III of WP (40) 308 of 7 August).

<sup>43</sup> This was the battle-cruiser and carrier combination identified at the time of the August FEA. If no Japanese attack on trade developed in the Indian Ocean, Bellairs proposed that this force should move to Singapore and support operations in the South China Sea.

<sup>44</sup> The final version of the Bellairs Appreciation is COS (40) 921 of 8 November, "Allied Strategy in the Far East", CAB 80/22, TNA. It was approved by the COS at their 380<sup>th</sup> Meeting on 8 November, CAB 79/7, TNA.

<sup>45</sup> Perhaps the clearest exposition of this view, at this time, is Pound's redraft of a brief prepared for the US President and dated 30 October, where he stated: "The outcome of the war would depend on the defeat of the Axis powers in Europe. When this is achieved the Japanese problem will be simple and even if we had made no progress in defeating that country in the meantime it is most probable she would give in after the Axis powers in Europe had been defeated. The defeat of Japan on the other hand by our combined forces would do little if anything to hasten the defeat of the Axis in Europe". "Allied Naval Dispositions in the event of Japan joining the Axis and the United States entering the war on our side", paper dated 30 October 1940, ADM 205/6, TNA.

<sup>46</sup> See: D of P minute for VCNS, "Commitment of our Naval Forces", dated 11 November 1940, ADM 199/1159, and Naval Staff briefing prepared for the FSL's meeting with Ghormley on 19 November, "Memorandum A – Our inability to provide forces for the W Atlantic", ADM 199/691, both in TNA.

commitments, compromising success in that theatre.<sup>47</sup> It was desirable therefore that US/British cooperation should focus first on the containment of Japan and the minimum USN forces required for this. Once Far East defence needs had been met, the balance of US forces could be deployed to assist the RN in the Atlantic.<sup>48</sup> This is the argument the British began putting to the US political and naval leadership, primarily through two meetings with Ghormley in the second half of November<sup>49</sup>, in which they drew on the Bellairs paper to make the more specific case for basing a US Fleet at Singapore.<sup>50</sup> What were its weaknesses and should the British have better anticipated US resistance?

Leutze and Miller have both savaged the British thinking encapsulated in the Bellairs paper which they argue was both unrealistic and showed an arrogant disregard for American interests.<sup>51</sup> Reynolds, Haggie and Cowman are more measured but still see serious failure in reading US intentions.<sup>52</sup> While some of the criticism here is certainly

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<sup>47</sup> The Naval Staff nevertheless insisted that, “failing other sources” (i.e. US), the necessary forces would be found to protect the Far East, especially Australia, if necessary by withdrawal from the Mediterranean. “Memorandum B – Reasons for our present policy”, ADM 199/691, TNA.

<sup>48</sup> This overall line of argument is presented in the Naval Staff briefing prepared for the FSL for his meeting with Ghormley on 19 November, “Memorandum B – Reasons for our present policy”, *ibid*.

<sup>49</sup> But also through Lord Lothian, the British Ambassador, who arrived back in Washington, after a visit to London where he was briefed by Pound, at the same time as the Ghormley meetings took place.

<sup>50</sup> These arguments, including the case for a US fleet at Singapore, were first put to Ghormley by Pound on 19 November. See “Notes on Conversation with the First Sea Lord”, on 19 November 1940, drafted by the US Naval Attaché, Captain Alan Kirk, ADM 199/691, TNA. Bailey and Bellairs followed up with a more detailed presentation, drawing on the COS approved Bellairs paper, on 22 November. Bailey’s agenda for this meeting, drawn up the previous day, is revealing:

- Seek a decision in Europe;
- Remain on the strategic defensive in the Pacific;
- Singapore the key position;
- Minimum force at Singapore to contain Japanese naval activities;
- Possible scale of attack on US West coast and counter-measures;
- Our estimated requirements and available forces;
- US forces that can be made available.

Bailey’s agenda and record of the 22 November meeting are in ADM 199/1159, TNA.

<sup>51</sup> Leutze states: “The British, strong in procedures and preparation, were weak in understanding American sensitivities and prejudices. To suppose that America would agree to send its fleet to a colonial outpost or meekly submit to the principle that initiatives for American involvement would emanate from London was to engage in day dreams bordering on the hallucinogenic”. *Bargaining for Supremacy*, Chapter 9, footnote 38, p 290. Miller is equally disparaging in *War Plan Orange*, p 264 – 265.

<sup>52</sup> David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance 1937-41: A Study in Competitive Cooperation*, (Europe Publications, 1981), p 224, states that, from Washington’s perspective, Britain’s view seemed “incredibly selfish and parochial”. He notes that most US policymakers were not confident of Britain’s survival. In these circumstances, to leave the US Fleet at Hawaii rather than withdraw it to the US, seemed controversial, while to move it 6000 miles further away to Singapore looked “treasonably irresponsible”. Sending a detachment to the Asiatic Fleet was almost as dangerous. Keeping it at Hawaii

justified, all three historians tend to merge the misreading of US thinking, the substantive issues, and weaknesses in how they were then presented, in a way that confuses rather than illuminates. The first point to stress is that the Bellairs paper had some logic and credibility, if it is judged solely as a strategy to defend Allied<sup>53</sup> interests in the Far Eastern theatre, comprising Malaya, the NEI, the Philippines and China, as opposed to wider US security needs across the Pacific. The fact that US “means” were to be applied to give effect to a long standing British strategy for countering Japan did not in itself imply the strategy was inappropriate to important US priorities in the Pacific theatre. Deployment of a US fleet to Singapore certainly solved a specific British problem but the British could reasonably argue that this was the best way to achieve a common desired strategic end, sufficient control of the South China Sea to secure essential Allied, not just British, territories and interests and apply enough economic pressure to discourage a Japanese advance. They were not promoting Singapore over Manila for selfish strategic or geographic reasons but on the practical basis that Manila lacked facilities as the Americans acknowledged. They could also argue that their proposals were a reasonable evolution of the ideas aired in 1938-39 in the discussions with Ingersoll and Hampton. Indeed, although the British did not know it, the proposals aligned closely with a USN plan, developed in autumn 1939, to deploy their Pacific Fleet to Singapore and then drive northwards to secure the Malay Barrier and the Philippines which was known as Rainbow 2. The plan was designed to address the type of strategic scenario that now prevailed.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, a much reduced version of Rainbow 2, known as “Asiatic Reinforcement” was still being actively developed until early January 1941.<sup>55</sup>

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was therefore “a tolerable compromise”. Haggie, *Britannia at Bay*, p 188, states that the British attitude “ignored not only the totally changed strategic situation in the area but also the unlikelihood of the Americans being willing to substitute their fleet for that of Britain in a British plan conceived originally to defend British Imperial interests. For Cowman, see *Dominion or Decline*, p 185 – 192.

<sup>53</sup> “Allied” here means British Empire, US and Dutch interests.

<sup>54</sup> Rainbow 2 is described in detail by Edward Miller in *War Plan Orange*, p 255 – 259, including a detailed map of the proposed USN deployment at p 258. Miller stresses that the plan was never formally approved and would never have gained the support of CinC Pacific Fleet. Leutze provides a briefer description in *Bargaining for Supremacy*, p 40 – 41 as does Cowman in *Dominion or Decline*, p 178 – 9. None of the three, however, notes the remarkable similarity between Bellairs’ November 1940 strategy and Rainbow 2 dating from exactly a year earlier.

<sup>55</sup> Miller, *War Plan Orange*, p 262 – 263, and Leutze, *A Different Kind of Victory: A Biography of Admiral Thomas C Hart*, (Annapolis, USA: Naval Institute Press, 1981), p 186 - 187. Leutze states that Commander John McCrea visited the CinC Asiatic Fleet, Admiral Thomas Hart, on 10 January 1941, bringing a copy of Rainbow 3 War Plan WPL 44 and a message from Stark. The message was: “Tell Admiral Hart that,

The Bellairs paper, however, had four major weaknesses which became increasingly evident once it was subjected to US scrutiny. The first problem lay in the force distribution it proposed between the Pacific and Atlantic theatres. The British claimed to be advocating a defensive strategy in the Far East, deploying, in Pound's words, "the minimum forces necessary to hold the Japanese" so that all other forces could be concentrated in the European and Atlantic theatres "to hasten defeat of Axis powers that alone can end the war".<sup>56</sup> However, as Ghormley was quick to point out, the distribution of US capital units, proposed by Britain, between Singapore, Manila and Pearl Harbour would in practice leave little effective surplus of major US units for deployment in the Atlantic.<sup>57</sup> Yet it is clear that the British also wanted a substantial US contribution in the Atlantic.<sup>58</sup> The British figures did not really add up and the strength of the US fleet proposed for Singapore seemed larger than a limited defensive strategy against Japan implied.

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consistent with a strong policy, there will be no backing down (with Japan). The President, Secretary of State, Welles (Under Secretary of State), and Navy Secretary Frank Knox, do not desire war with Orange (Japan). However, there will be no weakening or appeasing." McCrea briefed that Rainbow 3 envisaged reinforcing the Asiatic Fleet with a carrier, cruiser division, and destroyer squadron, tripling Hart's force. The US also anticipated cooperation with the British and Dutch with Hart's force playing a major role in defence of the Malay Barrier. Two days after McCrea's departure on 20 January, and just a week before the ABC-1 talks commenced, Hart was informed that Rainbow 3 was to be superceded. There would be no Asiatic reinforcement. The ships would go to the Atlantic instead.

<sup>56</sup> Paragraph 9 of Pound redraft for US President of 30 October, "Allied Naval Dispositions in the event of Japan joining the Axis and the United States joining the war on our side", ADM 205/6. Paragraph 5 of COS 921 used similar language: "It follows therefore that the main military effort must be made in the West and there should only be diverted to the East the minimum force which will be sufficient to neutralise the Japanese armed forces and thereby safeguard our general strategic position in the Pacific".

<sup>57</sup> The British consistently argued that the minimum US fleet required in Singapore was nine capital ships (one less than the overall IJN strength in 1940) and three carriers. They also argued that a further carrier would be needed in Hawaii absorbing therefore all but one of the USN's 1940 carriers. These figures, however, took little account of the problems involved in supporting and maintaining a US fleet at huge distance from its normal bases or the political difficulty of selling a policy where there were no US capital ships deployed outside the South China Sea. As Ghormley constantly pointed out, if the US did deploy nine capital ships to Singapore, it was inconceivable the remaining three ships presently in the Pacific Fleet would be released to the Atlantic. See Ghormley comments in 22 November meeting with Bellairs and Bailey, ADM 199/1159, TNA. In addition, while British figures credited the USN with 15 capital ships, one of these, *Arkansas* armed with 12 inch guns, was effectively a training ship while six others were of limited military value, comparable to the RN *R-Class*.

<sup>58</sup> The scale of US commitment desired in the Atlantic theatre was set out when the British Ambassador to the US, Lord Lothian, met the Naval Staff (comprising VCNS, Bailey, Bellairs, and D of P) on 9 November. It was suggested that to meet the Atlantic requirements, the US would need to withdraw two battleships, two carriers, and seven modern cruisers from the Pacific. This transfer was not consistent with the requirements set out in the Bellairs paper approved by the COS only the previous day. "Meeting between Lord Lothian, the First Lord and Naval Staff", 9 November 1940, ADM 199/1159, TNA.

The second problem, identified by Bellairs himself, was the inadequate state of the Singapore and Malaya defences. It would be difficult to induce the Americans to send a fleet to Singapore when they lacked confidence the base would still be there when they arrived. COS insistence that Bellairs' concerns were overstated and Singapore could withstand a long siege were unconvincing.<sup>59</sup> Worse, the failure to acknowledge the present weakness of defending forces and to demonstrate commitment to providing substantial reinforcements showed a disregard of Ghormley's warning that the British and Dutch must make a serious contribution to Far East defence.<sup>60</sup> The third problem, linked to this inadequacy of British and Dutch forces, was the lack of air power in the theatre. The proposed US fleet would have its own air component but it would still be significantly outmatched by the air forces the Japanese could bring to bear. The Bellairs paper did not address the limitations this would impose on naval operations in the South China Sea as already discussed in Chapter Three. Pound apparently believed it was not necessary for the proposed fleet to operate at any distance from Singapore but that hardly squared with the need to counter a Japanese expeditionary force to northern Malaya or the aspiration to cover the Philippines.<sup>61</sup> Finally, the British argument that a US fleet based at Singapore could provide adequate deterrence against an IJN attack on Hawaii or raids on the US West Coast was also unconvincing.<sup>62</sup> It was probably true that the material

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<sup>59</sup> COS 374<sup>th</sup> Meeting of 5 November, CAB 79/7, TNA. The Americans were well informed on the state of Singapore and Malaya defences through their observer at the Anglo-Dutch staff talks. They also had justifiable doubts that Singapore had the facilities capable of supporting a substantial fleet at this stage.

<sup>60</sup> This warning was repeated by Stanley Hornbeck, Special Adviser to the US Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, in two conversations with the Washington Embassy in late November. Hornbeck was well known to the British as the US Government's foremost expert on Far Eastern Affairs, having headed the Far Eastern Division in State Department from 1928 – 37. He was broadly sympathetic to British needs in the Far Eastern theatre and understood the importance they placed on Singapore. He stressed that not only did the US need to see evidence that Britain was making a serious effort to upgrade Far East defences but that no US naval officer he had spoken to favoured sending US ships to Singapore. Washington tels 2762 of 22 November and 2778 of 23 November, ADM 199/1232, TNA. Marshall of the Royal Air Force, Sir John Slessor, who was in Washington as an Air Commodore and Director of Air Plans at this time, was one of Hornbeck's interlocutors and he adds some additional colour on these conversations in his autobiography *The Central Blue : Recollections and Reflections by Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir John Slessor*, (London: Cassell & Co, 1956), p 346 – 347.

<sup>61</sup> In his redraft for the US President of 30 October, Pound stated: "Singapore is a natural base from which the (US) fleet should operate, but for the purpose of holding the Japanese it is not considered necessary it should operate far north of that place". "Allied Naval Dispositions in the event of Japan joining the Axis and the United States entering the war on our side", *ibid*.

<sup>62</sup> The Naval Staff argued that any raid would be executed by cruisers and carriers and would be constrained by logistics and the threat of US land-based airpower. They conceded that interception of a raiding force

damage the Japanese could inflict here was limited. However, they could, as the British Ambassador to the US, Lord Lothian, pointed out when he met Pound on 8 November, interrupt the communications across the Pacific on which the support of the US fleet depended.<sup>63</sup> Lothian was also inevitably much more aware of the political impact which any Japanese raids on the US Pacific coast would achieve than the Admiralty appeared to be.<sup>64</sup>

The completion of Bellairs' paper, and the wider conclusions reached by the RN leadership on how the US could best support Britain's global naval strategy, coincided almost exactly with a fundamental review of US global naval strategy by the Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Harold Stark. Stark's review is known to historians as the "Plan Dog" Memorandum<sup>65</sup> and its genesis and content are well described by Leutze.<sup>66</sup> Leutze rightly emphasises that Plan Dog was much more than a review of naval strategy. It was in effect a "National Security Review" which outlined not only the overall strategic risks and choices the US faced in October 1940 but anticipated the strategy the US would adopt over the next five years. Stark's core conclusion mirrored that of the British, that it was the war in Europe that was decisive and that victory here was essential to America's future. If Britain lost, then in a much quoted phrase, America might not "lose everywhere" but was in danger of not "winning anywhere". Stark did not think Britain could win in Europe without substantial US support which would limit what the US could do in the Pacific. In essence, the US must pursue an Atlantic first policy, try to avoid war

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would be easier if the US Pacific Fleet was based at Hawaii but the area of sea to be swept was still very large. If, by contrast, the US Fleet operated with "energy and initiative" from Singapore and Manila, it might pose sufficient threat to deter Japan from releasing a raiding force in the first place. "Memorandum B: Reasons for our Present Policy", briefing paper prepared for FSL meeting with Ghormley on 19 November 1940, ADM 199/691, TNA.

<sup>63</sup> The USN had identified Japanese interdiction of communications as a major problem with Rainbow 2. They anticipated that reinforcements and supplies for a Rainbow 2 fleet deployed at Singapore would need to be routed via the South Atlantic and Indian Ocean with RN assistance. Cowman, *Dominion or Decline*, p 179.

<sup>64</sup> COS 383<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of 8 November 1940, CAB 79/7, TNA. Lothian asked for more detailed advice on the Japanese scale of attack that might be generated against the US West Coast. D of P's subsequent arguments here were not entirely convincing and certainly did not address the threat to Pacific communications. D of P Minute PD 09239/40 for VCNS dated 11 November 1940, ADM 199/1159, TNA.

<sup>65</sup> The Memorandum is known as "Plan Dog" because Stark set out four strategic options for the US labelled A to D and recommended that the last, Option "D" for "Dog", should be the one pursued. This was the "Atlantic First" strategy as discussed below.

<sup>66</sup> *Bargaining for Supremacy*, Chapter 12.



with Japan, but, if conflict did arise, ensure operations in the Pacific did not compromise the primary effort in the Atlantic.<sup>67</sup>

While Stark's paper was immensely important in pushing the US towards a coherent national security strategy, it is important to emphasise that, in advocating a defensive strategy in the Pacific, it confirmed a shift in policy that was already well underway. The fall of France and the prospect that Britain might also suffer rapid defeat had inevitably focused US attention on defence of the Western Hemisphere since the early summer.<sup>68</sup> But, in addition, the financial stringency imposed on defence budgets in the aftermath of the depression meant that, by 1939, the US lacked the capability to conduct a full offensive war against Japan in the Pacific let alone a war against multiple opponents in two hemispheres. By 1940, a substantial naval rearmament programme was underway but the results would not begin to appear until well into 1942. Miller and Cowman note a steady reduction in the scope of US war plans for the Pacific towards the concept of a limited war fought with limited means to secure modest objectives.<sup>69</sup> The latter emphasises that, financial constraints apart, these more limited goals reflected the distaste felt by Congress and the US public for offensive war and recognition that US interests in the Far East were less valuable than those of Britain and other colonial powers.<sup>70</sup> British ambitions for a major US fleet at Singapore showed insufficient awareness of these limitations on US intent and capability as well as US warnings, repeated by Ghormley,

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<sup>67</sup> Stark forwarded the final version of his Memorandum to the Secretary for the Navy, Frank Knox, on 12 November 1940. The memo is also interesting for its emphasis on the Mediterranean. It judges that the defence of Egypt and then Gibraltar should be Britain's current priorities after the UK homeland, as indeed they were, and should take preference over the Far East. A copy of the memo is available online from the Franklin D Roosevelt Library.

<sup>68</sup> See John Lukacs, *The Legacy of the Second World War*, (New Haven, USA and London: Yale University Press, 2010), Chapter 6, "Rainbow Five", for a useful summary of the evolution of US strategic thinking across 1940.

<sup>69</sup> Edward Miller's, *War Plan Orange*, is the definitive history of US planning for a Pacific war from 1918 – 1941 though he provides some coverage of the periods before and after as well. The book is important both for the range of its coverage and its sheer command of detail and sources. It is, however, spoilt by two failings. The structure lacks logic and coherence. It is neither chronological nor built around consistent themes. This often makes his core arguments hard to follow and less powerful than they deserve. He also has a tendency to adopt a dismissive, even frivolous, style which sometimes becomes a substitute for proper historical analysis. This applies especially to aspects of the British/US engagement through 1940 – 41, so is particularly irritating to British readers.

<sup>70</sup> *Dominion or Decline*, p 178 – 179.

that US support in the Far East could only be contemplated if the British and Dutch were seen to be helping themselves.

The British were first alerted to the existence of Plan Dog on 31 October by the Bailey Committee representative in Washington, Captain Arthur Clarke<sup>71</sup> who was shown a first draft by the Head of USN War Plans, Captain Richmond (Kelly) Turner.<sup>72</sup> His telegram stated that Stark's appreciation contended that a full offensive war against Japan would absorb all US naval and industrial resources leaving the USN unable to provide the minimum assistance in the Atlantic and Europe necessary to avoid a British defeat. If Japan forced war upon the US, it would therefore adopt a defensive posture. This appeared to imply maintaining a reasonable fleet in the central Pacific and some small reinforcement to cooperate with British and Dutch forces in the Far East but ultimately the US was prepared to accept the loss of the Philippines, the NEI and Singapore.<sup>73</sup>

Given the authority of Clarke's insight, it might appear odd that neither the RN leadership nor the COS now questioned whether the emerging Bellairs strategy, which was not approved until 8 November, was still feasible. There were two reasons for the lack of an immediate rethink. In the first place, the Naval Staff saw pleasing agreement on the basic principle that there should be "a defensive strategy in the Pacific while a decision is reached in the vital European area". The difference therefore was over the implementation of a defensive strategy and here they hoped the US could yet be convinced of the key role of Singapore. The purpose in basing a fleet there was not initially to take the offensive but to contain Japan. In what would prove a prophetic insight, D of P added that, if the US could not be persuaded, "we might, under certain circumstances, have to send a powerful squadron ourselves to Singapore to the detriment of our offensive in Europe". An "uneconomical procession" of British and US forces to

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<sup>71</sup> Clarke was appointed as a Special Naval Liaison Officer to Washington in July 1940 at the suggestion of the Bailey Committee. Leutze provides a good summary of his background and the genesis of the appointment at p 135 – 139 of *Bargaining for Supremacy*.

<sup>72</sup> As described by Leutze, Clarke had been shown the complete Rainbow 3 Plan, the current US war plan for the Pacific, a week earlier on 23 October. Rainbow 3, which replaced Rainbow 2, envisaged a limited offensive in the Central Pacific. *Bargaining for Supremacy*, p 186 – 187.

<sup>73</sup> Washington tel 2400 of 31 October 1940, ADM 199/691, TNA.

the eastward would then be set in motion.<sup>74</sup> Second, Pound received a letter from Ghormley on 13 November seeking a meeting to discuss an assumption being made in the Navy Department that Britain “can and will” prevent any aggression against the Western Atlantic and Western Hemisphere by the Axis powers.<sup>75</sup> This conflicted with Clarke’s report and suggested US policy was still under development and thus susceptible to influence. As D of P put it, if Clarke’s reading was right, the US was adopting a more defensive posture in the Pacific, and more help in the Atlantic, “than we want”.<sup>76</sup>

On 21 November, Clarke reported that Stark’s paper, with a firm recommendation for Option D, and the support of the US Army, had been sent to the President. Clarke stated that, although the final paper had more detail, the core arguments were the same. Nevertheless, his telegram conveyed several crucial points. The status given to the paper suggested it was now likely to become official policy. It gave details of the other three policy options (A – C) which underlined the significance of the “Atlantic First” recommendation at D. Clarke also noted that substantial US intervention in the Atlantic was not only judged essential to secure victory but now also to avoid British defeat.<sup>77</sup> It is not clear Bailey and Bellairs saw this telegram before they met Ghormley the following day and it is unlikely it would have caused them to alter their planned briefing of Bellairs’ 8 November paper.<sup>78</sup> Despite this apparent commitment to Plan Dog, the British continued to get conflicting signals. On 30 November, Turner informed Clarke that he was preparing contingency plans based on Option C of Stark’s paper rather than D.<sup>79</sup> These involved strengthening the Asiatic Fleet to ensure the Malaya area could be held

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<sup>74</sup> D of P minute on Clarke telegram of 31 October dated 12 November 1940, ADM 199/691, TNA.

<sup>75</sup> Ghormley letter to Pound of 13 November 1940, ADM 199/691, TNA.

<sup>76</sup> D of P Minute of 14 November 1940, commenting on Ghormley letter to FSL dated the previous day, ADM 199/691, TNA.

<sup>77</sup> Washington tel 2750 of 20 November, FO 371/24243, TNA.

<sup>78</sup> Ghormley was also unsighted on evolving US policy. Turner told Clarke he had not been briefed on Stark’s Plan Dog paper and the British were not to display knowledge of this. Washington tel 2750 of 20 November.

<sup>79</sup> Option C here meant the version as summarised by Clarke in his tel of 20 November. Option C here read: “Abandonment of full offensive against Japan and adoption of a policy of rendering maximum aid to Britain in European and Far Eastern areas. This might prevent Japan achieving large successes in Malaysian area but would not permit despatch of sufficient weight to European area to ensure Germany’s defeat”.

while maintaining the main body of the US Fleet at Hawaii.<sup>80</sup> The corollary was that there would only be limited Atlantic reinforcement.<sup>81</sup> Turner suggested that, while the USN remained committed to D as the best option, they thought they might yet be over-ruled.<sup>82</sup> Turner was not yet aware of the British proposals for US deployment to Singapore put to Ghormley on 19 and 22 November.<sup>83</sup>

The beginning of December now brought two crucial and linked developments. The first was the US decision to proceed with staff talks in Washington in which a joint naval strategy would be a dominant theme.<sup>84</sup> The second was a firm US message, delivered in both Washington and London, that the British proposal to base a major US fleet at Singapore was unacceptable. Turner spoke to Clarke with typical bluntness. The British proposal reflected selfish interests and took no account of US needs. It was “equivalent to America proposing to despatch the British Mediterranean Fleet to Singapore to safeguard the Philippines”. Staff talks would be pointless if the British persisted. Turner did, however confirm that the significant Asiatic Fleet reinforcement of 30 November remained extant.<sup>85</sup> Ghormley reinforced this US position with Bailey.<sup>86</sup>

Churchill naturally observed these exchanges closely. He responded enthusiastically to the initial reports on Plan D seeing it as “strategically sound” and “highly adapted to our

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<sup>80</sup> Clarke would subsequently clarify that this “Asiatic reinforcement” would comprise: one carrier, five heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, 22 destroyers, 17 submarines and 36 flying boats. Washington tel 2952 of 6 December 1940, FO 371/24243, TNA.

<sup>81</sup> Although from the British viewpoint it would be very significant, comprising: three battleships, two carriers, five heavy cruisers, four light cruisers, 29 destroyers, and 56 submarines. Washington tel 2952 of 6 December, FO 371/24243, TNA.

<sup>82</sup> Washington tel 2869 of 30 November, FO 371/24243, TNA.

<sup>83</sup> Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, Chapter 13, footnote 26, p 297. Incredibly, Ghormley’s report, covering his discussions with Pound on 19 November and Bailey on 22 November, did not reach the Navy Department until 5 December.

<sup>84</sup> The British learnt that the President had authorised staff talks from Lord Lothian on 29 November. Washington tel 2851 of 29 November 1940, copy attached to COS 940) 1014 of 5 December 1940, CAB 80/24, TNA. Ghormley was not informed until 2 December when the Navy Department instructed him to prepare to return to Washington to participate. The story behind the US decision to proceed with staff talks is summarised by Leutze in *Bargaining for Supremacy*, p 202 – 205.

<sup>85</sup> Washington tel 2952 of 6 December 1940, ADM 199/1232, TNA.

<sup>86</sup> He explained that deploying the US fleet to Singapore would be widely perceived as “pulling British chestnuts out of the fire”. He added that, while he personally recognised the vital importance of Singapore to the British Empire, and therefore indirectly to the US, this was not grasped by US public opinion or indeed the Navy Department. Ghormley letter to Bailey dated 9 December 1940, ADM 199/1232, TNA.

interests". Britain should strengthen Stark's argument and do nothing inconsistent with it. Importantly, he saw little difference in deterrence effect between a US fleet based at Singapore or Honolulu.<sup>87</sup> He therefore instructed the Admiralty not to contest Stark's strong opposition to Singapore basing.<sup>88</sup> Pound accordingly sent temporising replies to both Stark and Ghormley stressing that the British delegation to the coming staff talks would approach matters with an open mind.<sup>89</sup> Leutze rightly sees Churchill focused here on the big prize, consolidating US support for Britain where it most mattered, and ideally bringing her into the war. He questions, however, whether Churchill fully understood that, in committing to an "Atlantic first" policy, the US would no longer have a superior fleet on Japan's flank, and that Far East requirements would have to assume higher priority for Britain if they were to take lower priority for the US.<sup>90</sup>

Leutze does not mention here a significant meeting at the Admiralty on 10 December.<sup>91</sup> With the exception of Pound, this brought together all the key members of the Naval Staff dealing with Far East policy and the potential US role.<sup>92</sup> The meeting is important for three reasons: it encapsulated Naval Staff thinking on the Far East at this time; it established Britain's opening naval position here for the forthcoming staff talks; and it also suggested scope for a better naval outcome for the Eastern theatre at ABC-1 than was in fact achieved. The meeting agreed that Singapore remained the best and preferred option to base a fleet with the aim of deterring a Japanese move south but recognised it would be hard to get the US to accept this. A key issue therefore was whether a fleet based at Honolulu could meet British needs. Threatening the Japanese homeland, including Tokyo and other cities, with attack by carrier based aircraft might achieve the desired deterrence but it was not clear whether the USN would countenance this or

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<sup>87</sup>PM minute to FSL, dated 22 November 1940, CAB 84/24, TNA.

<sup>88</sup>PM minute on Washington tel 2952, CAB 84/24, TNA.

<sup>89</sup>FSL letter to Ghormley of 10 December and his tel to Washington of 12 December, ADM 199/1232, TNA.

<sup>90</sup>*Bargaining for Supremacy*, p 200.

<sup>91</sup>Marder does describe this meeting in *Old Friends, New Enemies*, Vol 1, p 150, and Cowman refers to it in *Dominion or Decline*, p 191. Neither historian, however, brings out its full significance.

<sup>92</sup>Those present were VCNS (Phillips), ACNS (F) (Harwood), D of P (Daniel), Bailey, Bellairs, and Danckwerts. The latter was an ex D of P and about to head the British naval delegation in Washington.

whether it was logistically possible over a range of 3350 miles.<sup>93</sup> If the US would not contemplate carrier strikes, Britain would argue that a limited offensive role from Honolulu would be insufficient and hopefully bring the US to accept the need for more forward basing. If carrier attack was feasible, Britain should accept Honolulu as the primary US base but push for strengthening the Asiatic Fleet with two capital ships and the maximum possible air and submarine force at Manila. The RN would probably also bolster Far East defences by early deployment of *Force H* to the Indian Ocean.<sup>94</sup>

In their accounts of British – US naval negotiations at the end of 1940, Leutze, Cowman and Marder all move directly from the US decision to open staff talks, and their parallel message that deployment to Singapore was unacceptable, to the opening of ABC-1 on 29 January 1941. All three also imply that the British delegation effectively ignored Churchill's direction to defer to US views on Singapore by resuming their lobbying almost as soon as the conference opened.<sup>95</sup> None of them discuss the instructions for the UK Delegation which issued on 19 December, following approval by the Defence Committee on 17 December.<sup>96</sup> Yet these instructions reveal important shifts in British naval policy towards the Americans from the position taken with Ghormley in late November. The "General Instructions" stated that, in a war against all three Axis powers, it was British policy to give priority to the European theatre and defeat Germany and Italy first. However, the security of the Far Eastern position, including Australia and New Zealand, was also essential to British strategy and the retention of Singapore as key to

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<sup>93</sup> It is intriguing that the British should have raised this idea. The group no doubt had in mind the recent operation at Taranto, exactly a month earlier, as an example of how even a single carrier could achieve strategic success. However, the reference to "Tokyo and other cities" suggests they had civilian rather than military targets in view. They clearly wanted to achieve the maximum political effect, persuading the Japanese leadership that deploying the bulk of its naval forces southward was too risky. This appears to be the first time that the RN contemplated using naval aircraft against civilian targets although it was a logical evolution of what the RAF was doing and of plans to bombard Italian coastal targets with battleship gunfire. The idea anticipated the US "Doolittle" raid of April 1942 which did achieve a marked political effect even if it did negligible damage and was immensely complex to mount.

<sup>94</sup> "Staff Discussions with the USA", "Minutes of Meeting held in D of P's Room on 10 December", ADM 199/1232, TNA.

<sup>95</sup> Leutze, for example, describes "an unresolved difference" between the COS and PM over Far East policy. He adds: "For a time the British delegation at the conference seemed more intent on forwarding the strategy of the COS and in the process almost broke up the Washington meetings". *Bargaining for Supremacy*, p 217.

<sup>96</sup> COS (40) 1052 of 19 December 1940, "British – United States Technical Conversations", CAB 80/24, TNA. The evolution of these instructions can be tracked through successive JPC drafts over the previous week.

defence of those interests must be assured. The separate “Instructions for the Naval Delegates” confirmed the British view that an “adequate force” should be provided in the Pacific while meeting requirements in Europe. It recognised, however, that the basing of a potential Eastern Fleet was “unsettled”. The British view remained that Singapore was the right strategic option but it seemed the US might not accept this. They apparently favoured an Eastern Fleet at Hawaii with a “limited offensive role”. The naval delegates were accordingly instructed to explore how adequate deterrence could be achieved from Hawaii using precisely the arguments identified at the 10 December Admiralty meeting described above.<sup>97</sup> This was consistent with Churchill’s directive at the Defence Committee that the British delegates could explore US thinking but must ultimately defer to their position on all matters concerning the Pacific.<sup>98</sup>

The instructions then set out how the British would like to see US naval forces distributed between the European and Pacific theatres. Here they underline the sheer scale of commitment the British were now seeking from the US in the Atlantic and Western Mediterranean. This was already evident in the figures proposed by Bailey to Ghormley on 22 November. However, the new figures prepared for the staff talks contained important changes. The British now wanted the US to take over responsibility for the Gibraltar Force controlling the Straits and Western Mediterranean as well as providing the Atlantic support identified by Bailey. They now required four US carriers for the European theatres leaving just two available to cover the Pacific and Far East.<sup>99</sup> The British were therefore proposing a much larger naval commitment to the European theatres than the US had yet contemplated with inevitable consequences for defensive

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<sup>97</sup> The “naval instructions” here drew on the 10 December record almost verbatim.

<sup>98</sup> Pound stated that the COS fully agreed with the PM’s view. In regard to Singapore, Churchill stated that Britain should not be asking the US “to come and protect” it but rather offering its facilities for their use. DO (40) 51<sup>st</sup> Meeting of 17 December 1940, TNA.

<sup>99</sup> There is more detail on the rationale for these changes in the JPC draft response to US questions relating to the forthcoming ABC-1 talks sent by Ghormley on 4 December 1940. The response and original questions are in COS (40) 1038 of 13 December 1940, CAB 80/24, TNA. The response was approved with minor changes by the Defence Committee on 17 December. It is striking that Ghormley’s questions related only to Atlantic reinforcement and made the assumption that the US was either not at war with Japan or, if it was, would restrict its operations to the Central Pacific. This assumption dated 4 December preceded Turner’s rejection of Singapore basing on 7 December.

cover in the East leaving aside the argument over Singapore basing.<sup>100</sup> This British emphasis on Atlantic reinforcement has been under-recognised by the historians of the British-US naval relationship who, in describing both the run-up to ABC-1 and the conference itself, have tended to focus on the arguments over Far East strategy. They have also suggested that it was US concern over Atlantic security which effectively ruled out basing any substantial US force forward of Hawaii. These US fears were real but the British did much to encourage them in the last two months of 1940 when US policy was still evolving.

There were three problems with this British negotiating position for ABC-1. In the first place, the total Allied force, primarily American, recommended for the Pacific theatre was much weaker than the potential IJN opposition in the crucial categories of carriers, cruisers, modern destroyers and submarines.<sup>101</sup> Even if the bulk of this force was concentrated at Singapore, as the British wanted, and tasked with a defensive holding operation confined to the Malay Barrier, the disparity in airpower would now place it at a decisive disadvantage. If, on the other hand, it was based primarily at Hawaii, as the US insisted, a force of two carriers would be far too weak to conduct more than a symbolic and high risk, operation against the Japanese homeland. In short, the British aspiration for US deterrence cover could not be met with the forces the British were recommending. There was a fundamental inconsistency between what they wanted the US to do in the East to constrain Japan and what they claimed they needed in the European theatres. A charitable explanation for this is that the British overestimated US naval power. A fairer, if harsher judgement, is that RN planning here displayed a tendency to indulge in wish

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<sup>100</sup> The total British proposals for US forces in the combined Atlantic and Western Mediterranean theatres were now: five battleships, four carriers, 18 cruisers, 72 destroyers, 40 submarines, and significant light A/S forces in addition. By comparison, the Pacific Fleet would have: ten battleships, two carriers, 17 cruisers, 93 destroyers, and 80 submarines. Under these proposals, the Pacific Fleet would maintain superiority over the new Atlantic Fleet in battleships but would have less carriers, and would have its light forces much reduced also. It would therefore retain battleship equality with the IJN but would be far weaker in the crucial categories of carriers and cruisers.

<sup>101</sup> The combined US Pacific and Asiatic Fleets on 1 December 1941 would have a strength which was quite close to these British proposals: nine battleships, three carriers, 24 cruisers, 80 destroyers and 55 submarines. By comparison IJN strength at that time was: ten battleships, ten carriers, 35 cruisers, 111 destroyers and 64 submarines. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two Ocean War*, (USA: Little, Brown & Co, 1963), p 39.



lists that showed insufficient regard for strategic, operational, and not least logistic, realities.

The second problem was that, in pressing for such substantial support in European theatres, the British were confirming US fears that they were facing potential defeat here, thus encouraging the US to over-insure.<sup>102</sup> The British emphasis on Atlantic support, potentially at the expense of the Far East, requires more explanation. As shown in Chapter Three, the September Future Strategy paper had expressed confidence that Britain could retain control of all vital sea areas in the European theatre and there was no mention then of any critical dependence on USN resources. A strategic survey prepared for the forthcoming staff talks in mid-December shows why the September confidence was now being qualified.<sup>103</sup> It repeated that Britain faced three existential threats: invasion; crippling air attack; and seaborne attack on trade. The danger of the first two had receded but Germany was now making an intense effort to defeat Britain at sea, using a combination of submarine, surface raider, minelaying and air attack, and exploiting the strategic advantage of the long continental seaboard.<sup>104</sup> In the five weeks to 3 November, shipping losses were 420,300 tons, a level comparable to the worst period of the last war.

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<sup>102</sup> Under the Rainbow Five war plan that implemented “Plan Dog”, by July 1941, the USN had exceeded the British December target strengths for the Atlantic in all categories of warship except carriers (three in the Atlantic rather than four) and cruisers (13 rather than 18). Forces in the Pacific (Pacific and Asiatic Fleets combined) dropped significantly from the British targets (destroyers down to 58 by July, compared to 93, and submarines down to 50 from 80). See Miller, *War Plan Orange*, Table 24.1, Principal US Naval Forces, Disposition, 1940 – 1941, p 278. By December 1941, with the commissioning of the *Hornet* as a seventh carrier, the USN had four carriers in the Atlantic and three in the Pacific.

<sup>103</sup> COS (40) 48 (O) of 13 December 1940, “British – United States Technical Conversations”, CAB 80/106, TNA. This survey was commissioned to meet a request from the US Military Attaché Brigadier General Raymond Lee. The COS agreed the terms of the response at their 423<sup>rd</sup> Meeting on 11 December. They agreed to be as frank as possible omitting only details of future operations. CAB 79/8, TNA. The survey included as Annex 1, a current orbat for the RN, “State of His Majesty’s Fleet – Mid December 1940”, broken down into “Effective” and “Repairs/Refit” columns. Two points are worth noting here. First, the “Western Approaches Command” escort force covering the Atlantic convoys now had an effective escort strength of 126 vessels with 48 more in repair/refit. This faced a frontline U-boat force at this time of 22 boats. *Germany and the Second World War, Vol VI*, Table III.iii.i. Second, total RN and Dominion forces East of Suez at this time were: 7 heavy cruisers, 7 light cruisers, 8 destroyers and 12 escort vessels. Because of the sensitivity of the information in the survey, it was only released to the Americans on board *King George V* which transported both ABC-1 delegations to the USA, leaving Scapa Flow on 15 January 1941. See COS (41) 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting of 2 January 1941, CAB 79/8, TNA.

<sup>104</sup> The survey also noted the additional threat posed by a German move into Spain and against Gibraltar.

If losses continued at this rate, they could be fatal.<sup>105</sup> The survey concluded that holding out against Germany therefore, for the moment, depended on maintaining seaborne supplies. To ensure this, Britain required all the help the US could offer especially in light escort forces, flying boats and shipping resources.<sup>106</sup>

This December survey was clearly drafted to make the case for US naval support but there is no evidence to suggest it was not a genuine assessment of how Britain viewed the naval risks in the Atlantic at this time.<sup>107</sup> Monthly shipping losses from submarine attack were now three times the average monthly level over the first nine months of the war and the October figure was a warning of what the Germans could achieve with steadily growing U-boat output, the potential acquisition of bases in Spain and West Africa, and the diversion of RN destroyers to meet a new invasion risk in the spring.<sup>108</sup> The threat posed by German surface warship raiders was also now greater than it would be at any point during the rest of the war. With repairs after the Norwegian campaign complete, and two new battleships and a heavy cruiser nearing completion, the British faced a potential force of eight major units available for Atlantic raiding duty compared with just two in September. Germany now had scope for several simultaneous operations and the large

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<sup>105</sup> This was apparently the USN view as well. Admiral Stark stated in December that British ship losses had now reached 4.6MT per year and he forecast that at this rate Britain would not last another six months. Mark Skinner Watson, *US Army in World War II, Chief of Staff: Pre-war Plans and Preparations*, (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1950), Chapter XII, p 368. According to Roskill, total Allied shipping losses for 1940 (all types of vessel from all causes) were 3,991,641 tons. Losses of British controlled shipping were somewhat less but it was clearly the current rate of loss that mattered and Stark's figure was about right for the end of the year. Roskill figures from *War at Sea*, Vol 3, Part II, Appendix ZZ.

<sup>106</sup> The survey calculated that Britain's maximum merchant shipbuilding capacity was 1.5MT per year but it would require 3MT above that to make good losses.

<sup>107</sup> The survey was formally approved by the Defence Committee on 17 December and its content was not questioned. DO (40) 51<sup>st</sup> Meeting of 17 December 1940, CAB 69/1, TNA. W K Hancock and Margaret M Gowing quote the PM writing separately in the same month at p 254 of *The British War Economy* (British Official History Civil Series), (London: HMSO, 1949): "The decision for 1941 lies upon the seas. Unless we establish our ability to feed this Island, to import the munitions of all kinds we need ....we may fall by the way. It is in shipping and in the power to transport across the oceans, particularly the Atlantic Ocean, that in 1941 the crunch of the whole war will be found".

<sup>108</sup> Overall merchant ship losses in the second half of 1940 were 1.85MT for vessels over 1600grt of which at least 1,50MT were lost to U-boats. The U-boat loss was especially severe in October at 363,267 tons, a figure which would not be exceeded until February 1942. Merchant ship losses from W K Hancock and Margaret M Gowing, *The British War Economy*, Part III Statistical Summary, item d, Shipping Gains and Losses. U-boat inflicted losses from Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War, The Hunters 1939-1942*, Appendix 18.

raiders could only be dealt with by capital units.<sup>109 110</sup> The important shipping figure was the net loss after gains from new build and acquisition were taken into account. This was not yet critical in December 1940 but the British could see it was rising rapidly and they were aware that many of the shipping gains in the second half of 1940 were one off acquisitions and seizures that could not be repeated.<sup>111</sup> Although British raider countermeasures would prove sufficiently effective in the first half of 1941 to prevent their worst case raider scenarios, the British could not know this in December.<sup>112 113</sup> Overall therefore, from the British perspective, active US naval support in the Atlantic, as well as supplies and long term shipping output, looked essential to long term survival. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to argue that, in making their case, both internally and to the Americans, the British did not adequately distinguish between the essential and “nice to

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<sup>109</sup> The Pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer* commenced a five month sortie in October during which she ranged as far as the Indian Ocean. The heavy cruiser *Hipper* made sorties in December and February. The battlecruisers, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, returned to operations in mid-December and made a successful two month Atlantic sortie in January 1941 during which they destroyed more than 100,000 tons of shipping, the only raider operation which Roskill judges had any strategic effect. The battleship *Bismarck* and heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen* became operational in May and the battleship *Tirpitz* a little later.

<sup>110</sup> British plans and dispositions to deal with large German surface raiders are explored in two papers drafted by D of P. The first, in two parts A and B, was prepared in response to minute PD 09225/40 from the FSL on 6 November 1940. The second, “Heavy Ship Enemy Raids on Trade”, is dated 2 March 1941. Both are in ADM 116/4324, TNA. They are excellent background for understanding the composition of the forces, including carrier “hunting groups” sought for the Atlantic from the US during ABC-1.

<sup>111</sup> The net loss for vessels over 1600grt (which were clearly those responsible for ocean transport) in the second half of 1940 was just 664,000 tons. In the first half of 1941, it would rise to 1,212,000 tons, a rate that could not be sustained indefinitely. Remarkably, however, the second half of the year would bring a net gain of 229,000 tons reducing the net loss over all of 1941 to 983,000 tons. This reflected the impact of Ultra intelligence and evasive convoy routing, increased British escort strength, but also the impact of US naval escort in the Western Atlantic. Net loss comprised losses from all causes (war and marine losses and capture) general) set against gains (new vessels, captures and acquisition of foreign tonnage). Hancock and Gowing, *The British War Economy*, Part III Statistical Summary. They also provide details of the main sources of the tonnage windfall through one off captures and acquisitions in 1940 – 41 at p 255 -6 of the main text. The impact of the one-off shipping windfall through requisitions and captures over the first year of the war is shown in figures provided by Clair Blair which draw on Hancock and Gowing. British controlled shipping comprising vessels over 1600 grt was 17,784 thousand tons at the start of the war in September 1939 but had grown to 21,373 thousand tons by 30 September 1940. The limited net loss over 1941 meant the total stock was still at 20,693 thousand tons on 31 December 1941. *Hitler's U-Boat War*, Vol 1, Plate 6, p 99.

<sup>112</sup> Roskill has a good summary of German raider operations over the first 28 months of the war at the end of Chapter XXV of *The War at Sea*, Part I. He notes how little was achieved by the eight raiders (one battleship, two battle-cruisers, three Pocket battleships, and two heavy cruisers) deployed in this whole period. Together they sank just 59 ships, and a total of 297,909 tons, for the loss of *Bismarck* and *Graf Spee*. By the end of 1941, the remaining force was corralled in French ports or Norwegian waters and the prospects for Atlantic breakout were slim. Raiding operations by major surface warship were essentially over. Figures from Roskill, *War at Sea*, Vol 3, Part II, Appendix ZZ.

<sup>113</sup> From 1940, the Germans also used Armed Merchant raiders. A total of seven deployed during 1940 – 41 sinking 98 ships, and a total of 593,171 tons, against three raiders destroyed by the RN. Figures from Roskill, *War at Sea*, Vol 3, Part II, Appendix ZZ.

have”. Convoy escorts, flying boats, and shipbuilding resources were “essential” as the 13 December JPC survey stated. Three carriers and six cruisers to form “raider hunting groups” were “nice to have” in the Atlantic but would also make a substantial difference to the Pacific strength most needed.<sup>114 115</sup> The result was that, with British encouragement, the US had more forces, especially major units, in the Atlantic in 1941 than were justified by the real underlying strategic realities. This not only reduced deterrence cover against Japan but ensured overall Allied dispositions in the East would be less efficient than they might otherwise have been.

The impact of Atlantic lobbying on the Americans is evident in Table 6 below.

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<sup>114</sup> The same applied to battleships beyond those required to replace the Halifax escort force.

<sup>115</sup> It is possible that, by January, Pound at least recognised that Britain had overstated its needs in the Atlantic and that this would pose problems for the Far East. Leutze quotes a letter from Ghormley to Stark recording a meeting with Pound on 7 January. Pound thought three US battleships, along with modest supporting forces, and the current USN escort forces, would be sufficient to prevent any aggressive Axis moves against the Western hemisphere and assist convoy work. Carriers were not mentioned. There was a huge difference between the Pound line here and the ABC-1 instructions approved three weeks earlier. Ghormley told Stark it would be “dangerous” to count on Britain holding the Atlantic without considerable US assistance. Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, Chapter 13, p 213 and footnote 41. There appears to be no British record of this meeting.

**Table 6**

**US Naval Forces in the Atlantic 1940 - 1941**

	RN Deficit D of P 9/11/40	Bailey 22/11/40	UK Del 19/12/40	Rainbow 3 7/12/40	Rainbow 5 31/7/41
Capital Ships	4	5	5	3	6
Aircraft Carriers	5	2	4	2	3
Cruisers	18	20	18	9	13
Destroyers	82	77	72	45	81
Submarines	N/A	60	40	56	63

Notes:

- (i). Column 1 is extracted from the figures in D of P's note for VCNS dated 9 November, "Commitment of our Naval Forces", ADM 199/1159, TNA. This included a table setting out overall force requirements for various theatres along with ships actually available on 11 November 1940. It therefore identifies the deficit the RN perceived at this time in the Atlantic and Western Mediterranean which they hoped the USN would fill. D of P specifically states at the end of his note – "From the appendix it will be seen that our present numbers are totally inadequate for the task and it is for these reasons that the proposed dispositions of the American Fleet have been put forward". The deficit figures do indeed closely match the figures for support desired from the US in the Atlantic subsequently provided by Bailey to Ghormley on 22 November (Column 2).
- (ii). Column 2 is extracted from the US naval dispositions proposed for the Atlantic provided by Bailey to Ghormley on 22 November. The figures are included in Bailey's record of the 22 November meeting, in ADM 199/1159, at Appendix II.
- (iii). Column 3 is extracted from the British proposals for US forces in the Atlantic and Western Mediterranean included in the Instructions for Naval Delegates in COS (40) 1052 of 19 December 1940, "British – United States Technical Conversations", CAB 80/24, TNA.
- (iv). Column 4 is taken from Miller's Table 24.1, "Principal US Naval Forces, Disposition, 1940 – 1941", in *War Plan Orange*. Miller's source was Navy War Plan WPL-44. The figures here accord closely with those provided by Turner to Clarke on 7 December 1940 and recorded in Washington tel 2952 of 6 December 1940, ADM 199/1232, TNA.
- (v). Column 5 is also from Miller's Table 24.1 and is derived from Navy War Plan WPL-46.

The final problem with the British negotiating position was the failure to recognise and exploit a missed opportunity. As described above, the British knew from Turner that the US was contemplating substantial reinforcement of the Asiatic Fleet. Although the Americans had not said so, it was reasonable to assume this would base at Singapore or at least agree to fall back there if Manila became untenable. The British could have immediately encouraged this Asiatic Fleet reinforcement in two ways: by suggesting early deployment of *Force H* to support the US Asiatic Fleet task force from Singapore rather than keeping it in the Indian Ocean; and by proposing a joint approach to building up air strength, along with the Dutch, in the Far East theatre. This might have achieved the basis of a modern joint task force which, with a modest upgrading of land-based airpower, had sufficient strength and capability credibly to contest the southern part of the South China Sea in late 1941. The British could then have acquiesced in the main US Fleet remaining at Hawaii while pressing the US to keep at least three carriers there rather than two. There is no guarantee such a policy would have succeeded given the growing USN commitment to the Atlantic, their reservations over dividing their forces, and doubts about the survivability of Singapore as a base. However, it would have demonstrated British flexibility and willingness to work within the grain of US thinking, encouraging the Americans to be more collaborative through 1941 even if there was no immediate agreement. It would also have required the RN leadership to develop a defence concept for the Malay Barrier using something closer to the Drax “Flying Squadron” than Pound’s “adequate battle-fleet”. Although this was arguably exactly the concept Cunningham and Somerville were applying with success in the Mediterranean, Pound showed no appetite to translate new thinking to the East.<sup>116</sup>

Table 7 below illustrates the scope for alternative patterns of USN and RN distribution in the Pacific and Far Eastern theatres from December 1940 to July 1941.

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<sup>116</sup> At his meeting with Ghormley on 7 January, he reiterated that his preferred option for Far East defence was a substantial US Fleet at Singapore. He seems to have made no effort to explore how deterrence could be achieved from Hawaii as set out in the ABC-1 instructions. Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, Chapter 13, p 213 and footnote 41.

**Table 7**

**US and RN Naval Forces in the Pacific and Asiatic Theatres 1940 – 1941**

	USN				RN	
	Pacific Fleet		Asiatic Fleet		China Fleet	<i>Force H</i>
	Dec 1940	July 1941	Dec 1940	July 1941	July 1941	
	Rainbow 3	Rainbow 5	Rainbow 3	Rainbow 5		
Capital Ships	12	9	0	0	0	1
Aircraft Carriers	2	3	1	0	0	1
Cruisers	13	16	6	2	13	1
Destroyers	71	45	22	13	5	5
Submarines	38	33	17	17	0	0

Notes:

- (i). Column 1 is taken from Miller's Table 24.1 in War Plan Orange. It derives from Navy War Plan WPL-44. It shows the strength of the Pacific Fleet after the proposed despatch of Asiatic Reinforcement (Column 3).
- (ii). Column 2 from Miller's Table 24.1 from Navy War Plan WPL-46. It shows the strength of the Pacific Fleet after transfers to the Atlantic and cancellation of Asiatic Reinforcement.
- (iii). Column 3 from Turner's figures for Asiatic Reinforcement provided to Clarke on 6 December 1940 and recorded in Washington tel 2952 of 6 December, ADM 199/1232, TNA.
- (iv). Column 4 from Miller's Table 24.1 from Navy War Plan WPL-46.
- (v). Column 5 figures represent an average for the second half of 1941 taken from the table attached to D of P minute dated 27 September 1941, ADM 116/4877, TNA. It should be assumed that only four of these cruisers were modern with the balance old vessels of the "C" and "D" classes.
- (vi). Column 6 from D of P minute dated 23 February 1941 which formally designated *Force H* as the "Immediate Reinforcement" for the Indian Ocean in the event of Japanese intervention and confirmed its current strength. ADM 116/4877, TNA.

If the July strength of the Pacific Fleet is taken as a minimum, then the reinforced Rainbow 3 Asiatic Fleet as proposed by Turner to Clarke on 7 December (Column 3)

would have to be achieved by holding back one carrier, four cruisers and nine destroyers from the transfers to the Atlantic in the first half of 1941.<sup>117</sup> This would still leave an Atlantic Fleet substantially larger than the Rainbow 3 Fleet contemplated in December (Column 4 of Table 6) in capital ships, destroyers and submarines. This reinforced Atlantic Fleet would also remain strong enough to replace the Gibraltar Force on US entry into the war thus relieving *Force H* for deployment to the Far East. The combination of *Force H* with a reinforced Asiatic Fleet and the existing China Fleet and Dutch forces would have yielded an overall Allied Force of: one modernised battle-cruiser, two carriers, 23 cruisers<sup>118</sup>, 40 destroyers and 30 submarines without taking account of significant Australia and New Zealand forces<sup>119</sup>. This would have been broadly comparable in strength and capability to the IJN Southern Task Force which executed the invasion of Malaya and the Philippines in December 1941.<sup>120</sup>

The RN could not have provided *Force H* immediately in the conditions of early 1941 but what was needed was a clear joint strategy for holding Japan north of the Malay barrier, enabling local commanders to develop operational plans with confidence. In the event, Asiatic Fleet reinforcement died in mid-January as “Atlantic First” took hold and “Plan Dog” translated into the Rainbow Five war plan.<sup>121</sup> By promoting a major Atlantic transfer, the British therefore encouraged a process by which they were set to get the worst of all worlds before ABC-1 even started. They lost the opportunity for meaningful cooperation with the US in the Far East theatre, which would now be the subject of endless and unproductive wrangling through 1941, they ended up with a Pacific Fleet incapable of exercising credible deterrence, and they got the promise of help in the

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<sup>117</sup> This figure represents Column 3 minus Column 4. It is worth noting that, following Pearl Harbour, the USN immediately transferred Task Force 17, comprising the fleet carrier *Yorktown*, two light cruisers, and four modern destroyers, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The newly commissioned *Hornet* followed in January, leaving just the light carriers *Wasp* and *Ranger* in the Atlantic. Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-boat War*, Vol 1, p 434.

<sup>118</sup> However, only half of this total would be modern.

<sup>119</sup> Australia and New Zealand forces would have added about five modern cruisers and five modern destroyers.

<sup>120</sup> Roskill gives the composition of the Southern Task Force at Appendix L of *The War at Sea*, Vol II. It comprised: two battle-cruisers, two small carriers, 14 cruisers, 54 destroyers and 18 submarines.

<sup>121</sup> The US Atlantic Fleet was formally established under Admiral Ernest King on 1 February 1941. Prior to that there was a single “US Fleet” based in the Pacific with detached squadrons only in the Atlantic. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two Ocean War*, p 38.



Atlantic which was more than they needed and much of which could not take effect anyway until the US entered the war.

### **ABC-1 and its impact on Far East naval strategy**

The ABC-1 talks which began on 29 January lasted almost exactly two months. Leutze, Marder and Cowman have all provided detailed accounts and other historians have summarised what they see as key issues.<sup>122</sup> There are, however, important, and often surprising, gaps and misunderstandings in all the main accounts. In general, they give too much emphasis to the differences over Far East strategy and too little to the remarkable agreement on overall strategic priorities as well as the important pre-hostilities cooperation initiated in the Atlantic theatre. In exploring the Far East arguments, the standard accounts give a rather partial and distorted view of what British goals actually were, not least in exaggerating the significance of apparent differences between the PM and the COS and Naval Staff.<sup>123</sup> They also exaggerate the possibility that the conference might have broken down over the Far East.<sup>124</sup> None of the accounts adequately explain how the concept of an RN Eastern Fleet came to be resurrected, and endorsed by the Admiralty, just three weeks into the conference, with major consequences for British naval reinforcement later in the year. They also omit important insights into how the Admiralty weighed the comparative importance of the Far East and Middle East at this time.

The British objectives for ABC-1 have already been described. The comparable US objectives prior to war were: to ensure the security of the Western Hemisphere from intervention by hostile powers; to provide material and diplomatic assistance to the UK; and to oppose by diplomatic means Japanese incursion into new territory. If the US

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<sup>122</sup> For example: David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, chapters 7 and 8; and Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II*. (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1988) Chapter 2. Others, notably Roskill and Barnett, make no mention of ABC-1.

<sup>123</sup> Leutze heads Chapter 14 of *Bargaining for Supremacy* “‘Heavy Weather’ at ABC”. Cowman heads a section with an almost identical title “Heavy Weather at ABC-1”, *Dominion or Decline*, p 192. The term “heavy weather” derives from a PM minute to the FSL of 12 February. ADM 116/4877, TNA. Marder too quotes this at length.

<sup>124</sup> Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, p 249.

entered the war, its overall goal was the defeat of Germany and her allies and its primary military effort would be made in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. It would prefer to keep Japan out of the war, but, if it intervened, Pacific and Far East operations would be conducted to minimise distraction from the primary theatres.<sup>125</sup> There was much common ground with British policy in these initial overarching goals and it is important to recognise that the arguments that would erupt over the Far East were therefore not so much about end points but rather the credibility of the ways and means of achieving them. Given the comparative start points, the striking feature of the final ABC-1 agreement from a British perspective is not just the clear commitment to dealing with the “ultimate enemy” first, and the extent to which British proposals for US support in the Atlantic and Western Mediterranean were agreed, but also how far it supported existing British views on overall Grand Strategy.<sup>126</sup> Thus ABC-1 endorsed the principles of: blockade; a maximum air offensive against Germany; and the early elimination of Italy. Critically, from the British viewpoint, it also confirmed the need to maintain the British and Allied position in the Mediterranean and to prevent any extension of Axis control in North Africa. Britain certainly failed to get its preferred outcome in the Far East, or even adequate assurances, as will be discussed. Nevertheless, the US agreed that resources must be provided to guard against Japanese intervention and promised that, in the event of war, the US Pacific Fleet would operate offensively to weaken Japanese economic power and divert Japanese forces from Malaya.<sup>127</sup> It also undertook to augment forces in the Atlantic and Mediterranean to allow the RN to release forces for the Far East.

The limits to US support in the Pacific and Far East theatres, and the prospect that Britain would have to deploy substantial naval forces of its own if it wished to secure Singapore,

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<sup>125</sup> The conference began with an exchange of “Opening Statements that established the respective “national military positions. The British statement was a précis of the Instructions to Delegates in COS (40) 1052 and is recorded in the Conference Papers as B.U.S. (J) (41) 2 of 29 January 1941. The US paper is B.U.S. (J) (41) 2. Both are in CAB 99/5, TNA.

<sup>126</sup> The final ABC-1 Report is recorded as B.U.S. (J) (41) of 27 March 1941, CAB 99/5, TNA. There is also a copy under COS (41) 255 of 22 April 1941, CAB 80/27, TNA.

<sup>127</sup> An internal US memorandum summarised the US naval commitment under ABC-1 as follows: “Initial US naval operations will be to maintain a strategic reserve in the Pacific in order to influence Japan against further aggression; and to relieve Britain of responsibility for shipping in the Western Atlantic including the North Atlantic route to the British Isles”. Watson, *US Army in World War II, Chief of Staff: Pre-war Plans and Preparations*, p 380, quoting an undated memo prepared in US Army War Planning Department for a conference on 16 April 1941, WPD 4402-9.

were clear within a week of the talks starting. In line with their instructions, and contrary to what many historians imply, the British team did not re-open the issue of US basing at Singapore. They did try hard to explain why the security of Singapore mattered to the overall war effort and the serious threats to Australasia, the Indian Ocean and ultimately the Middle East supply route that they judged would follow its loss.<sup>128</sup> They also addressed the relative importance of the Middle East and Far East. There were powerful arguments why neither could be abandoned but “on a long term view, the Far East is to the British Commonwealth of greater importance than the Middle East”.<sup>129</sup> In seeking US help, they focused on two points: how the US Pacific Fleet would exert effective deterrence on Japan; and the desirability of the US reinforcing its Asiatic Fleet although without the parallel RN contribution suggested above. The US insisted they would maintain sufficient forces in the Pacific to maintain pressure on Japan but that these must be concentrated at Hawaii. There would be no further detachments to the Far East theatre. They also questioned the ultimate importance of Singapore, dismissing the prospect of any significant Japanese threat to Australia or the Indian Ocean. The British delegation found US assurances that they could contain Japan from Hawaii inadequate<sup>130</sup> and judged they saw Malaya and the NEI as expendable. The Americans did not think Singapore was defensible with existing or planned forces and felt any US reinforcements such as the carrier task group the British sought for the Asiatic Fleet would be left exposed and vulnerable.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Most historians, including Leutze, at least imply that, in stressing the importance of Singapore to their war effort, the British continued to promote US basing. Some, e.g. David Reynolds, go further. At p 185 of *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance* he states: “The Admiralty delegates continued to press the USA to send a fleet to Singapore”. The record is quite clear that they did not.

<sup>129</sup> B.U.S. (J) (41) 6 of 31 January, Annex 1, “Relative Importance of Middle and Far East Theatres”, CAB 99/5, TNA. In suggesting that the Far East took ultimate priority over the Middle East, the Annex was reflecting the “last resort” pledges re-affirmed to the Dominions by Churchill in August i.e. in the event of a direct and immediate threat to Australasia, the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet would be withdrawn and sent to their rescue. The Annex did not emphasise this quite specific PM qualification.

<sup>130</sup> True to their instructions, the British pressed the Americans on the possibility of carrier attacks against the Japanese homeland at the third ABC-1 meeting on 3 February. The Americans brushed this option aside. Even with four carriers, such attacks would be too difficult and the weight they could deliver “ineffective”. B.U.S. (J) (41) of 3 February, Record of 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting, Section V, CAB 99/5, TNA.

<sup>131</sup> Bellairs informed Pound in a personal letter dated 4 February, written after the third ABC meeting, that it was clear there was no prospect of inducing the Americans to move the Pacific Fleet to Singapore. Pressing them on this “would do no good – indeed the reverse”. He would, however continue to push them on exercising pressure from Hawaii and Asiatic reinforcement. ADM 178/322, TNA.

The possibility that the British might provide their own reinforcement to the Far East if the Americans took over obligations in the Atlantic was first raised by Ghormley and Lee during the passage out to the talks. The formal British response was revealing in view of developments later in the year. It acknowledged that such assistance would release older battleships from escort duty but their “armour, endurance, and AA armament” were insufficient for duty either in the Eastern Mediterranean or engaging the Japanese Fleet unless supported by “heavier types”.<sup>132</sup> Turner pursued this point at the third ABC meeting on 3 February. One reason for ruling out Asiatic reinforcement was that US lines of communication to the Far East theatre were “extremely hazardous” whereas British lines through the Indian Ocean were secure. He therefore proposed that the US should further reinforce the Atlantic thus releasing British naval forces for the East. It is arguable that the British had at least helped to bring this undesirable option on themselves. By emphasising the importance of Singapore to their war effort, they had provoked the response: “well, if it is so important, defend it yourself”. And, by proposing that the US should take over the Gibraltar Force, as well as North-West Atlantic escort, an option the US proved willing to accept, they had rendered the creation of an Eastern Fleet at least possible.

By 11 February, Bellairs clearly felt the prospects of meeting his original instructions, the assurance of credible cover from the main US Fleet at Hawaii along with reinforcement of the Asiatic Fleet, were bleak. He intended to have a last go at explaining the risks in the hope this might yet unlock meaningful Asiatic reinforcement but wanted to know whether the COS would contemplate as an alternative, the creation of an RN capital ship force following US Atlantic reinforcement.<sup>133</sup> Bellairs’ message provoked the first of the two

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<sup>132</sup> B.U.S. (J) (41) 6 of 31 January, para 16, answers to questions raised by Lee and Ghormley, CAB 99/5, TNA. The “older battleships” referred to were of course the *R-Class*. Their limitations, fully acknowledged up to now by the Admiralty, have been noted in earlier chapters. Over the next six months, the Admiralty would move steadily towards the view that they might after all be capable of assuming a central role in a new Eastern Fleet.

<sup>133</sup> Washington tel Gleam 6 of 11 February 1941, Bellairs for COS, ADM 116/4877, TNA. This tel reflected discussion at the 6<sup>th</sup> ABC-1 meeting held the previous day, 10 February. The meeting concluded with an American request for a British paper covering: Japanese options for attacking Malaya; consequences arising from the loss of Singapore assuming the US Pacific Fleet remained active in the Pacific theatre; and whether Britain would send a fleet to the East if the US provided compensating forces in the Atlantic. Record of 6<sup>th</sup> meeting, CAB 99/5, TNA. In Gleam 6, Bellairs stated that, while he hoped his paper might persuade the American to reconsider Asiatic reinforcement, US capital ships in Singapore must be ruled out.

important interventions by the PM in which he famously accused Bellairs of making “heavy weather”. The PM was relaxed about the US basing at Hawaii, and disinterested in Asiatic reinforcement, arguing that, if Japan intervened, events would draw the Americans forward. Significantly, he also saw no need for the US to maximise their effort in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. The simple principle was that the US should deal with Japan and limit assistance in the Atlantic to convoy escort. He dismissed the idea of an RN capital ship force as “quite foolish”.<sup>134</sup> Leutze provides a detailed summary of the PM’s minute and rightly judges that he failed to understand both the strength of US commitment to the Atlantic and minimised the risks in the Far East. He fails, however, to make three crucial points. First, that Bellairs had been faithfully executing the instructions he had received from the Defence Committee chaired by the PM. Second, that those instructions had advocated almost precisely the US Atlantic reinforcement now on the table. The PM might be intuitively right about what was really needed in the Atlantic but it was not what the Admiralty had sought and he had approved in December and it certainly fell far below what the Americans thought was now needed. Third, Pound immediately challenged the PM’s line on RN capital ship reinforcement and Pound’s view prevailed in the reply to Bellairs.<sup>135</sup>

Pound told the PM that, to fight the three Axis powers, Britain and the USA required a battle-fleet in three theatres (Home waters, Mediterranean, and Far East) and the ideal was a single fleet in each.<sup>136</sup> The economical way to control the Pacific was a single battle-fleet at Singapore strong enough to fight the Japanese fleet. A single fleet at Hawaii was not sufficient to deter Japan from moving south. The Admiralty had not previously proposed sending capital ships to Singapore while the Americans maintained their fleet at Hawaii because they hoped to convince the Americans to base in Singapore. If the Americans ruled this out, as now seemed certain, but sent six capital ships to the Atlantic and Mediterranean, Britain must decide whether to use the ships they replaced to create a

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<sup>134</sup> PM minute to COS, First Lord and FSL, dated 12 February, ADM 116/4877, TNA.

<sup>135</sup> Minute from First Sea Lord to PM of 13 February, ADM 205/10, TNA. Leutze does not refer to this minute. Cowman and Marder do mention it but perhaps understate its significance.

<sup>136</sup> Pound was obviously arguing here for power of concentration and economy of effort. However, he was also being over simplistic. Theory was one thing and the practical reality of dealing with multiple threats across wide areas quite another. The RN effectively had two battle-fleets in the Mediterranean and wanted the US to provide a second one in the Atlantic.

capital ship force for the Far East. Pound judged that, if US ships could take responsibility for Atlantic escort and *Force H*, it would be possible to create an Eastern Fleet comprising *Rodney*, *Nelson*, three *R-class*, and *Renown*. Within two days, on Pound's instructions, D of P had completed detailed plans for this new Eastern Fleet.<sup>137</sup> D of P noted it would be weaker than any fleet previously considered but it would suffice to hold Malaya given the US presence on Japan's flank.<sup>138</sup>

These exchanges demonstrate unequivocally that, by 15 February, two weeks into the ABC-1 talks, the PM, COS and Naval Staff in London, and the UK Delegation in Washington all agreed that the US Pacific Fleet would not shift from Hawaii and any prospect of a major US fleet basing at Singapore was a non-starter.<sup>139</sup> However, the PM judged the risk of Japanese intervention remained low, regarded a fleet at Hawaii as sufficient deterrent, and saw further probing into potential US plans and dispositions in wartime as an unnecessary distraction from the core goal of cementing a grand strategic alliance. By contrast, the Naval Staff felt a US fleet at Hawaii would provide inadequate cover for Singapore, the Dominions and Indian Ocean and were prepared to cover the gap

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<sup>137</sup> D of P confirmed that, if the US would not be shifted from concentration at Hawaii, this would provide inadequate protection for the Dominions and essential communications in the Indian Ocean, that the RN must therefore take on this task, for which capital ship cover was essential, and that, so long as the Americans provided the Atlantic reinforcements they were now promising, it would be possible to create an Eastern Fleet based around six capital ships and one carrier. The proposed fleet would comprise: the battleships, *Rodney* and *Nelson*, released from the Home Fleet by the commissioning of the new *King George V* and *Prince of Wales*, the modernised battle-cruiser *Renown* and carrier *Ark Royal*, released by the Americans taking over the Gibraltar Force (*Force H*), and three *R-Class* battleships relieved by the Americans from the Halifax escort force. These heavy ships would be accompanied by ten cruisers and 32 destroyers. At this point, *Rodney* and *Nelson* were still the most heavily armed battleships in the world and broadly comparable to the best IJN battleships, *Nagato* and *Mutsu*. D of P's dispositions assumed a total US commitment to the Atlantic, as notified by Bellairs, of six battleships, three carriers, 16 cruisers, and 82 destroyers. This reinforcement compared with the Admiralty proposals in mid-December of: five battleships, four carriers, 18 cruisers and 72 destroyers. D of P minute, paper on "Far East", and draft response to Bellairs, dated 15 February, ADM 116/4877, TNA.

<sup>138</sup> The proposed new Eastern Fleet was smaller than the "maximum fleet" available for the Far East defined in Naval War Memorandum (European) in August 1939 by one battleship, one carrier, seven cruisers and 23 destroyers. The composition and therefore the quality of the capital ship force were similar to 1939 and no doubt D of P used those dispositions as his start point. However, only *Renown* and *Ark Royal* from *Force H*, and to a lesser extent the two *Nelsons*, were equipped for the modern war environment of 1941. The proposed fleet was hardly competitive therefore with the forces the IJN were expected to have by the end of the year. Admiralty circular tel dated 4 August 1939, ADM 1/9767, TNA.

<sup>139</sup> The Far East appreciation sent to the Americans by Bellairs on 11 February, in response to their request at the 6<sup>th</sup> ABC-1 meeting the previous day, fully accepted the Pacific Fleet would remain at Hawaii and advocated only the detachment of a carrier and four heavy cruisers to the Asiatic theatre. He suggested these might be based at Singapore but the British had made it clear that Manila was a reasonable alternative. B.U.S. (J) (41) 13 of 11 February, Far East: Appreciation by the UK Delegation, CAB 99/5, TNA.

with RN resources but also agreed with Bellairs that a stronger Asiatic Fleet and commitment to offensive operations by the Pacific Fleet would make RN cover more effective. There were therefore still differences between the PM and Naval Staff but they were not over Singapore basing as so many historians suggest.<sup>140</sup> These same historians see the PM's second intervention on 16 February, when he savaged Bellairs' appreciation setting out the importance of the British position in the Far East, as a directive to the Admiralty to tell Bellairs to shut up about Singapore basing.<sup>141</sup> Leutze is representative of most historical opinion here. He states: "Although Churchill's reaction made his intent of embroiling the US in the war more explicit than ever before, it offered no new route round the strategic stumbling block in the Far East. Thus, even though the COS shared Bellairs' sentiments, Churchill's view would have to prevail or there would be a major confrontation (with the US). The only course seemed to be to act as if there were no strategic stumbling block and move on to other subjects."<sup>142</sup> This interpretation is fundamentally wrong. While the PM's minute certainly underlined both his personal attitude to the US negotiations and his prejudices over Far East defence, it had minimal practical effect on the British policy shaped by Pound and the Naval Staff between 12 and 15 February as described above. This policy, effectively a role reversal, whereby the US substituted for RN forces in the Atlantic so they in turn could fill the gap the US refused to take on in the Far East theatre, was a compromise and a poor substitute for the original British aspiration of the US taking over both Pacific and Far East naval defence. But, whatever its shortcomings, it was a clear way forward, one confirmed in new COS instructions to Bellairs on 19 February.<sup>143 144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Notably, Leutze, Cowman, Marder and Reynolds.

<sup>141</sup> Bellairs summarised his Appreciation in tel Gleam No 8 of 15 February which was not circulated in London until am of 16 February. Both the Appreciation and the PM's minute dated 17 February are in ADM 116/4877, TNA. Leutze quotes the PM's minute in full at p 241 – 2 of *Bargaining for Supremacy*. The full Appreciation, as shared with the Americans is in B.U.S. (J) (41) 13 of 11 February, CAB 99/5, TNA. There are some significant omissions in the version telegraphed to London.

<sup>142</sup> Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy*, p 242.

<sup>143</sup> The PM evidently regarded the Bellairs Appreciation as a long-winded and pointless reiteration of ground already covered and which appeared to reopen a basing argument already decided. Bellairs was certainly long-winded for a telegraphic account and also provided a rather poor summary of his original paper but, on the substantive points covered, the PM's strictures were unfair. Reduced to essentials, the Appreciation set out the strategic importance of Singapore in standard British terms and argued that, if it was not possible to place a capital ship force (either British or American) at Singapore, then it was desirable to reinforce the US Asiatic Fleet sufficiently to threaten Japanese communications in the South China Sea, thus rendering operations against Singapore more difficult. Responding to the PM on 18 February, Pound acknowledged

These instructions incorporated conciliatory language suggested by the PM to soothe the Americans and emphasised British acceptance of US naval dispositions in the Pacific theatre which all key parties in London agreed were now immutable.<sup>145</sup> However, they also confirmed that Britain would now send a substantial fleet to the Far East, including six capital ships, as soon as the US relieved RN forces in the Atlantic.<sup>146</sup> The COS noted that the Atlantic changeover would take time to implement. During the interim before RN forces arrived, the defence of the Malay Barrier would therefore depend heavily on US willingness to threaten Japanese communications. Furthermore, the RN fleet would be insufficient to take on the whole IJN fleet so US pressure would be essential to prevent Japan sending a maximum force south. The COS still hoped the US would see merit in reinforcing the Asiatic Fleet but, significantly, they would prefer reinforcement here to come at the expense of the Pacific Fleet not the Atlantic.<sup>147</sup> Although these British queries over the time involved in Atlantic release and the effectiveness of US pressure from Hawaii could be interpreted as caveats, and were subsequently discussed at length, notably on 26 February, in practice, the British had little option but to accept US assurances. The Far East deal implicit in these instructions was the one incorporated in the final ABC-1

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that Bellairs “argued that the US Fleet should be at Singapore rather than Hawaii”. However, this was rather misleading. Bellairs had mentioned this as the only fully satisfactory strategic solution while also recognising it was not possible. Pound rightly stated that the PM’s claim that Bellairs had advocated splitting the Pacific Fleet between Singapore and Hawaii was not borne out by the text. FSL minute of 18 February, ADM 116/4877, TNA.

<sup>144</sup> David Reynolds agrees both that the basis of a compromise agreement on the Far East was achieved with the COS instructions of 19 February, and that Leutze fails to recognise this. Reynolds, however, suggests that the main factor driving agreement was the renewed insistence by the PM that Britain concede to the US on Hawaii basing. The evidence suggests this was never really in dispute across the British leadership. It was the US offer of Atlantic substitution that made an acceptable compromise possible. *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, p 226.

<sup>145</sup> See D of P minute to VCNS and ACNS (F) of 17 February. This stated that, while basing the US Pacific Fleet at Singapore remained the best way “to check the Japanese”, it is not practicable for the Americans and they will naturally reject any splitting of their fleet between Honolulu and Singapore. D of P therefore submitted that the PM had “the only practicable answer”: i.e. accept the US dispositions and hope better options will emerge when they are up against reality. Meanwhile their offer to relieve RN forces in the Atlantic for the Far East should also be taken up.

<sup>146</sup> The PM offered a draft reply to Bellairs in his minute of 16 February which went through successive amendments in the Admiralty not least to incorporate RN commitment to a capital ship force. The final outcome was therefore significantly different. See D of P minute to VCNS and ACNS (F) of 17 February, ADM 116/4877, TNA.

<sup>147</sup> Tel Boxes No 5 dated 19 February 1941, ADM 116/4877, TNA. This again illustrates the primacy Britain gave to Atlantic security at this time.



agreement.<sup>148</sup> Despite some robust initial exchanges over Far East strategy, it was never likely the talks would break down on this issue as suggested by Leutze. There was too much political capital invested in success on both sides, there was consensus on Atlantic primacy, and the British delegation arrived under clear instructions to defer to the US on the Pacific. The British would ultimately have accepted Hawaii basing on whatever terms the US offered and no Asiatic reinforcement. The US offer to release RN forces from the Atlantic for the Far East was therefore a bonus and the ready British acceptance made the outcome more collaborative and comprehensive than it would otherwise have been.<sup>149 150</sup>

The British decision to create an Eastern Fleet, subject to US Atlantic reinforcement, has not only received little emphasis in historical studies of the ABC-1 negotiations but the subsequent implementation of the decision has been virtually ignored. Yet it is fundamental to understanding Far East naval policy and the evolution of Far East naval reinforcement over the rest of 1941 and indeed the first months of 1942. It is impossible

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<sup>148</sup> The relevant section of the final agreement is worth quoting: "If Japan does enter the war, the Military Strategy in the Far East will be defensive. The US does not intend to add to its present military strength in the Far East but will employ the Pacific Fleet offensively in the manner best calculated to weaken Japanese economic power and to support defence of the Malay Barrier by diverting Japanese strength away from Malaya. The US intends to augment its forces in the Atlantic and Mediterranean to enable the British Commonwealth to release forces for the Far East. United States – British Staff Conversations – Report, para 13 (d), B.U.S. (J) (41) 30 of 27 March 1941, CAB 99/5, TNA.

<sup>149</sup> Leutze speaks of an "extraordinary crisis over Far Eastern strategy that flared so dramatically in late February" and "actually threatened the continuance of the conference and presumably of Anglo-American cooperation". He sees Britain, faced with inability to protect an area they judged vital, pushing America to a point where it hazarded the larger prize of US involvement in the war. The British discovered therefore the "outer limits of coercion". This interpretation is not borne out by the underlying objectives of the two parties and the record of the discussions and, above all, overlooks the fact that, as explained in this thesis, effective agreement on the Far East had been achieved by 15 February. There could not therefore be a major "crisis" over the substance of Far East strategy later in the month. There was, it is true, a related row which might have escalated if the British had not moved quickly to defuse it. Lord Halifax, the British Ambassador, unwisely, and without Bellairs' knowledge, showed a copy of Bellairs' 11 February Far East Appreciation to the US Secretary of State, Cordell Hull. The US Delegation saw this as "political lobbying" against the agreed terms of the talks, threatening suspension until they received an explanation. Bellairs quickly provided assurances that this was a mistake which would not be repeated and this was accepted. This row, however awkward for a few days, was about protocol rather than substance. *Bargaining for Supremacy*, Chapter 15, esp p 249 – 50.

<sup>150</sup> David Reynolds makes the important point that the President and State Department, including Secretary of State Cordell Hull, were almost certainly more understanding and supportive of the British position in the Far East than were the US military. They recognised the damage to British Empire cohesion and war fighting potential that might follow Far East losses, and they also recognised that Malaya tin and rubber was vital to the US economy, and especially potential war production, as well. Awareness of their views undoubtedly ensured the US Delegation remained constructive and disposed to find a way forward. *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, p 226 - 227.

to make sense of the well-known debates between the PM and Admiralty in August and October which led to the despatch of *Force Z* without understanding how the ABC-1 decision evolved. For the Admiralty moved surprisingly quickly to translate the 19 February instructions to Bellairs into a formal policy for Far East naval reinforcement. Within a week it was agreed that, if the US and Japan entered the war together, immediate reinforcements would still be sent to the Indian Ocean comprising *Force H* and the Dominion naval forces in the Mediterranean.<sup>151</sup> D of P emphasised these forces were primarily to protect vital communications in the Indian Ocean not to “dispute Japanese control of the South China Sea”. He expected Indian Ocean routes to suffer heavy attack from surface raiders at the start of a war with Japan.<sup>152</sup> Once the USN was fully mobilised and able to take on agreed responsibilities from the RN in the Atlantic and Western Mediterranean, which might take some months, the main body of the new RN Eastern Fleet would concentrate and move to the Indian Ocean to join the “immediate reinforcement” and then ideally move on to Singapore.<sup>153</sup> The composition, mobilisation and deployment of this new fleet were reviewed again in early March<sup>154</sup>, in early April<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> *Force H* still comprised: the modernised battle-cruiser *Renown*, the carrier *Ark Royal*, the modern heavy cruiser *Sheffield*, and five destroyers. The Dominion forces comprised the modern RAN cruiser *Perth* and five RAN destroyers. Two submarines from the Home or Mediterranean Fleets would be added.

<sup>152</sup> D of P minute dated 23 February 1941. The details were also communicated to Far East naval commanders in AT 1135 of 24 February. Both items are in ADM 116/4877, TNA. The raider threat evidently referred primarily to raids by IJN heavy cruisers but clearly incursions by IJN battle-cruisers and carrier groups were possible too. The PM and FSL saw cruiser raiders as the main risk from the IJN in the spring of 1941. DO (41) 12<sup>th</sup> meeting of 9 April, CAB 69/2, TNA. This proposed RN Indian Ocean immediate reinforcement, along with Dominion cruisers already in the East, was a reasonable minimum response to the cruiser threat. It would have struggled to cope with one or more IJN hunting groups with capital units, let alone a major force of the type that would attack Ceylon in April 1942. This is relevant to the debate around *Prince of Wales* later in the year. As D of P acknowledged, such a force could do little to protect Malaya or the wider Malay barrier.

<sup>153</sup> AT 417 to CinC China of 25 February 1941, ADM 116/4877, TNA. This includes the succinct sentence: “We have been asked if in the light of the above (US) dispositions we should be prepared to send a capital ship force to the Far East and have replied “Yes””.

<sup>154</sup> D of P minute dated 6 March 1941, ADM 116/4877, TNA. Details were also shared with Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies at the end of this month. COS (41) 217 of 2 April, CAB 80/27, TNA.

<sup>155</sup> AT 666 to CinC China of 4 April 1941, ADM 116/4877, TNA. This was an extremely detailed exposition of the new Far East naval strategy sent to Far East naval commanders immediately after the end of ABC-1. It explained the respective British and US roles now agreed and broke RN Far East naval reinforcement into two phases. Phase 1 covered the period before the arrival of the Eastern Fleet with reinforcements comprising the “immediate reinforcements” of *Force H* and Dominion forces. Phase 2 comprised the main Eastern Fleet, composed of five capital ships, ten cruisers and 27 destroyers, which would concentrate at Freetown following relief by US forces in the Atlantic. The plans anticipated that it would take 80 days from US entry into the war to get the full Phase 2 fleet to Singapore. If Singapore had fallen, considered unlikely, the fleet might use Port T at Addu Atoll in the Maldives as its main base. This is one of the first references to Port T which will feature extensively in Chapter Eight.

and in May<sup>156</sup> with minimal change.<sup>157</sup> Indeed, the plans first defined in mid-February would remain extant through the summer and autumn and are still visible in a JPC paper issued the day before Japan attacked on 8 December.<sup>158</sup> As Chapter Six will argue, the deployment of *Force Z* in October is better seen as an elaboration of these plans and not a fundamental departure.<sup>159</sup>

Far East naval historians have generally portrayed ABC-1 as a setback for British Far East strategy. For Marder it confirmed the British were unable to defend an area they considered vital without US naval assistance of a far more substantive kind than ABC-1 had produced.<sup>160</sup> Cowman argues that, in the Far East, Britain had ceded independence in strategic matters to the US. Indeed, he goes further. “The Admiralty had made every conceivable attempt to bring the USN into the fold, to set the agenda and to establish dominion over how the war would be fought and where, and had failed.” Far East strategy

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<sup>156</sup> AT 1904B of 13 May 1941, ADM 116/4877, TNA. This communicated the division of responsibilities and force dispositions, following US entry into the war, which had been agreed at ABC-1, to all RN CinCs. Dispositions for the Far East were unchanged from the April tel to CinC China.

<sup>157</sup> The Naval Staff also considered how Far East reinforcement should be modified if the US entered the war against Germany and Italy but Japan remained neutral. This scenario was first considered in a paper, “The Situation if the US enters the War and Japan remains neutral”, circulated by D of P on 6 March. It sought to strike a balance between having sufficient forces close to the Far East theatre credibly to deter Japan, and conduct initial defence if she attacked, without distracting from the primary goal of defeating Germany and Italy. The provisional conclusion within the Naval Staff was that the Phase 1 force would be sent to the Indian Ocean, three *R-Class* battleships would be deployed on convoy escort in the Indian Ocean, and that ideally two other RN carrier task forces (centred on *Eagle* and *Hermes*) should be established in the Indian Ocean and South Atlantic area. It was also agreed that the two *Nelsons* were not suitable for raider hunting in the Indian Ocean due to their lack of speed. These proposals provide important context for the arguments between the PM and Naval Staff which would take place in August.

<sup>158</sup> Annex II of COS (41) 727 of 7 December, ‘Far East: United States – British – Dutch Staff Conversations’, CAB 80/32, TNA. This identifies RN strength by warship category in two columns: planned strength in early 1942; and additional reinforcements that “may” be sent later. Five battleships are listed in the early 1942 column (which would be *Prince of Wales* and the four *R-class*), one battle-cruiser (*Repulse*) and one aircraft carrier (clearly *Hermes*), nine modern cruisers and 13 destroyers. A further carrier, five cruisers, eight destroyers and ten submarines were earmarked as reinforcements. The overall total is virtually identical to the combined Phase 1 and Phase 2 force defined in February.

<sup>159</sup> The only historian who has recognised the continuum in Admiralty planning for Far East reinforcement, from ABC-1 to the autumn, as set out in this paragraph, is Cowman. *Dominion or Decline*, p 233 – 234. However, even Cowman does not adequately bring out how comprehensive and consistent it was and nor does he adequately explain the ABC-1 origins. Leutze does not cover the period after ABC-1 apart from a brief epilogue. Marder notes the plans for a new Eastern Fleet evolved at ABC-1 but does not really address their subsequent implementation and certainly does not describe a continuum. *Old Friends, New Enemies*, Vol 1, p 197 – 200. Roskill and Barnett ignore ABC-1 and its aftermath only picking up the story with the debate between the PM and Admiralty in August.

<sup>160</sup> Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies*, Vol 1, p 200.

now depended “less on demands from the Dominions” than “sanctification” by the US.<sup>161</sup> Leutze sees it as beginning a power shift with Britain obliged to defer to US wishes and accept ultimate US naval dominance.<sup>162</sup> Miller, writing from the US perspective, is much harsher and accuses the British of behaving “self destructively” at ABC-1. They obtained a US pledge to beat Germany first, yet “contrary to that intent they sought to gamble America’s strongest military asset on a mission of extreme peril”, pushing the Americans to move the bulk of their Pacific fleet forward to command the approaches to Malaya and the NEI, thereby exposing it to superior Japanese forces. The Americans would be protecting assets in which they had little direct national interest while leaving Hawaii and California open to attack and making it more difficult quickly to reinforce the Atlantic in the event of British collapse. He regards the British argument that their global war effort depended on the resources of Australasia and India, which in turn depended on the security of Singapore, as specious. The fall of Singapore a year later did not collapse the Empire war effort. By contrast, the loss of the Pacific Fleet off Singapore might well have caused the US to turn its back on Europe to focus on Japan with incalculable consequences.<sup>163</sup>

There are at least four powerful counter arguments to this “setback” interpretation of ABC-1.<sup>164</sup> First, as suggested earlier, ABC-1 both consolidated and promised broad US endorsement of Britain’s overall “grand strategy” for defeating Germany and Italy. The Far East outcome must be set in this wider context.<sup>165</sup> This US endorsement obviously

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<sup>161</sup> Cowman, *Dominion or Decline*, p 197. His view here of course explains the title of his book.

<sup>162</sup> Hence his title – *Bargaining for Supremacy*. Leutze provides a useful summary of the key developments in British – US naval relations during the nine months between the signing of ABC-1 and US entry into the war, including the implementation of pre-war Atlantic escort, in his “Epilogue” at Chapter 16. However, he does not really address the full impact and value of ABC-1 on the British war effort during this period.

<sup>163</sup> Miller, *War Plan Orange*, p 264-266.

<sup>164</sup> It is also important to emphasise that there is no evidence in COS or War Cabinet records that the overall ABC-1 agreement was viewed by the British war leadership as unsatisfactory or a setback. It was approved successively by the COS on 5 May and Defence Committee, chaired by the PM, on 15 May with surprisingly little comment. See: COS (41) 161<sup>st</sup> meeting of 5 May, CAB 79/11, COS (41) 304 Of 12 May, CAB 80/28, containing COS presentation to the Defence Committee, and DO (41) 30<sup>th</sup> meeting of 15 May, CAB 69/2, all papers in TNA.

<sup>165</sup> David Reynolds sums this up well. “Both sides found ABC-1 invaluable. There was a fundamental agreement that Germany was the primary threat to the security of both countries, that the defeat of Germany and Italy was the priority, that the Atlantic lifeline between Britain and the USA must be secured and that a purely defensive deterrent policy should be maintained against Japan. Here was the core of Anglo-

reflected US self-interest but the scale of commitment to the Atlantic, and the distinct commitment to the Mediterranean, arguably went further than strict self-interest required.<sup>166</sup> <sup>167</sup> Second, ABC-1 established the framework under which the US would assume full responsibility for the security of Iceland and for protecting convoys in the Western Atlantic from September, three months before the US entered the war. The immediate impact on Atlantic losses of this US intervention is hard to assess but it possibly saved 500,000 tons of shipping in 1941 alone.<sup>168</sup> It also enabled the RN to begin Far East naval reinforcement well in advance of the Japanese attack in December even if the reinforcement was mishandled as discussed in later chapters. Third, the established historical view seriously understates the degree of US support agreed at ABC-1 for

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American cooperation – a commitment to mutual control of the Atlantic as the key to both countries' survival." *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, p 184.

<sup>166</sup> The report by the UK Delegation to the COS concluded: "...there has never been any divergence of opinion in regard to the paramount aim of defeating Germany and the concentration of US forces in the Atlantic area for this purpose. Their view agrees with ours that the gravest danger to the Allied cause is the Axis threat against the sea communications of the British Isles, and that every help the US can give for protecting these communications should receive the maximum priority". COS (41) 250 of 2 April 1941, British – US Staff Conversations, Report by the UK Delegation, para 12, CAB 80/27, TNA.

<sup>167</sup> It is vital to appreciate that, at the mid-point of the year, from the British perspective, the situation in the Atlantic remained as bleak as that painted in the December Strategic Survey and the threat it posed to Britain's survival here came second only to invasion. In mid-June, the JPC assessed that the rate of shipping loss was still an unsustainable 4.5 MT per year and the only prospect of improving the situation was decisive US intervention in the Atlantic. JP 444 of 14 June 1941, Draft Future Strategy: Review, attached to minutes of COS 213<sup>th</sup> meeting on 16 June, CAB 79/12, TNA. It follows that, for Britain's war leadership, any differences between Britain and the US over support in the Far East (which, perhaps significantly, were not mentioned in this JPC paper) were far outweighed by what the US could offer in the Atlantic.

<sup>168</sup> Shipping losses from U-boats fell by about 50% in the second half of 1941 compared to the first half (750,532 tons down from 1,548,182 tons). If the losses of the first half had been repeated in the second half, and a further adjustment is made for an average 60% increase in frontline U-boat strength in the Atlantic, total losses for the year should have been around 4.0MT whereas in reality they were 2.3MT, representing an apparent net benefit of 1.7MT. Figures and calculations drawn from Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-Boat War*, Vol 1, Appendix 18 and other data in this volume. Historians have proposed three possible explanations for this benefit: the breaking of U-boat Enigma from the end of June and the use of this "Ultra" intelligence in diverting convoys; the strengthening of RN convoy escorts as more vessels came available from new build; and the introduction of US escorts in the Western Atlantic. The last factor was a double win because it not only meant convoys were relatively secure while under US escort but RN forces were released to increase escort support elsewhere. It is clearly impossible to produce any definitive figures for the relative importance of these factors though few historians doubt that Ultra played the greatest role. Professor F H Hinsley has suggested that virtually all the above saving, perhaps 1.5 million tons, can be put down to the exploitation of Ultra. F H Hinsley, "The influence of Ultra in the Second World War", in F H Hinsley and Alan Stripp, *Code Breakers* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p 6. That seems significantly to underplay the other factors. If 1.7 million tons is taken as a reasonable figure for total shipping saved, and there are clear limits to this sort of statistical exercise with so many variables, a contribution of 500,000 tons from US escort seems feasible. The fall in losses in 1941 H2 meant the overall losses from U-boats in 1941 at 2,298,714 tons were actually lower than for 1940 when they were 2,462,867 tons. Clay Blair, Appendix 18. Shipping losses from all causes in all theatres were nevertheless up by 10% at 4,328,558 tons compared to 3,991,641 tons in 1940. Roskill, *War at Sea*, Vol 3, Part II, Appendix ZZ.

Britain's position in the Far East. The role of the US Pacific Fleet moved from theoretical deterrent prior to the agreement to active participation in a common strategy to contain Japan and a promise to deploy offensively to draw Japan away from Malaya. The commitment to replace and thereby release RN forces in the Atlantic and Western Mediterranean, especially *Force H*, was viewed by Britain as an uneconomic use of available Allied forces but was a substantial US concession to meet a British interest which the US felt was at best overstated.<sup>169</sup> The British certainly regarded the creation of their own Eastern fleet through Atlantic substitution as second best to a US fleet at Singapore or even Asiatic reinforcement.<sup>170</sup> However, the war leadership as a whole, and certainly the Admiralty, appear to have embraced the ABC-1 solution as an acceptable alternative, even if it was inefficient.<sup>171</sup>

Finally, the Miller accusation of self-destructive behaviour is a gross misrepresentation of the British stance albeit one promoted by other historians in less extreme language. As demonstrated earlier, the British regarded basing the US fleet at Singapore as the most effective way to contain Japan but they never insisted this was the only option, they never pressed the US to adopt it, and they had abandoned this option before ABC-1 opened. Miller is correct that, as matters turned out, the loss of Singapore had limited strategic impact on the war, therefore apparently vindicating that judgement of the US COS. But that does not necessarily mean British fears of the wider risks posed to the Allies by Japanese conquest of South-East Asia were unreasonable, even if they overstated the

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<sup>169</sup> It was "uneconomic" because, as the British pointed out on 26 February, the Allies ended up with a plan to deploy 15 capital ships (six RN at Singapore and nine US at Pearl Harbour) to check a force of ten IJN capital ships. It was a "concession" because the US was agreeing to substitute for RN ships rather than reinforce them. As a result there would be no net increase in capital ship forces in the primary war theatre. B.U.S. (J) (41) 11<sup>th</sup> meeting of 26 February, CAB 99/5, TNA.

<sup>170</sup> One of the best expositions of this view, and indeed one of the best summaries of the ABC-1 agreement as a whole, is set out by Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir John Slessor who, as an Air Commodore and Director of Air Plans, represented the RAF at the ABC-1 talks. Slessor insists that the US refusal to commit to forward naval deployment in the Far East theatre was a mistake. However, he also emphasises how important the US Atlantic commitment was to Britain and that this was not a foregone conclusion. His testimony is perhaps unique in combining the perspective of a witness and senior strategic planner at the time with the benefit of post war hindsight drawing on a range of senior military positions through the war and after. Marshall of the Royal Air Force Sir John Slessor., *The Central Blue: Recollections and Reflections by Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir John Slessor*, p 343 - 347.

<sup>171</sup> There is no sign that "Atlantic substitution" was questioned, let alone criticised, when the COS and Defence Committee successively reviewed and approved ABC-1. Likewise there is no evidence of criticism in the various Admiralty planning papers relating to the implementation of "Atlantic substitution" in ADM 116/4877.

specific importance of Singapore, and were naïve about the political and military constraints on US deployment. The risks were real. A determined Japanese effort might have taken Ceylon in the spring of 1942, destroyed the Eastern Fleet, cut Indian Ocean communications and made Britain's position in the Middle East untenable.<sup>172</sup> That might not have knocked Britain out of the war but the consequences would have been as great as Miller's hypothetical loss of the Pacific Fleet and might then reasonably be ascribed in part to US failure to commit more forces to Far East defence at ABC-1.

Miller and other critics of ABC-1 do not adequately address whether a better outcome to ABC-1 was possible and what this might have looked like. As suggested earlier, it is just possible that the Americans would have maintained their commitment to Asiatic reinforcement if Britain had entered the negotiations with a more credible commitment to providing adequate forces to defend the Malay Barrier. This would not only have required deployment of *Force H* to Singapore as a "matching force" but also a wider scale of force commitment on the lines of the Far East Commanders' assessment at the end of 1940 but with additional light naval forces and ideally a few submarines. The last would be important to match the substantial US and Dutch submarine forces and give the RN some influence over their deployment. Such a British commitment would have raised all the difficult trade-offs with the Middle East discussed in Chapter Three and, given the stance of the PM, was never likely. Nor would the US have easily compromised on their growing determination to provide the maximum possible force in the Atlantic. The problems associated with different national priorities and prejudices and the inevitable misunderstandings and mistrust were formidable.

A second question which historians do not sufficiently explain in assessments of ABC-1 is why Britain was so quick to resurrect the concept of an RN Eastern Fleet once it was clear the Americans would not shift from a defensive strategy based on Hawaii. The US refusal either to reinforce the Asiatic Fleet, or commit to offensive carrier operations against the Japanese homeland, let alone accept primary responsibility for defence north of the Malay Barrier was a major disappointment but did not fundamentally change the position

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<sup>172</sup> Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, p 437-438.

established in the 1940 FEA. The COS had never said then that direct US support was essential to an FEA “holding strategy” based on air and land power (although Chapter Three has argued that in reality defence of the NEI did require it). If Far East defence without a fleet based in the theatre was judged viable in August 1940, then nothing obvious had changed to make it less so six months later. The British had certainly taken some comfort from the existence of a US fleet on Japan’s flank when reviewing the FEA but that comfort factor still applied. Failure to achieve the maximum aspirations from the US in the November Bellairs paper, or the lesser goals in the December ABC-1 instructions, merely took Britain back to the *status quo ante* and did not automatically imply the need to create an RN Eastern Fleet. Britain still had choices. These included faster and stronger air reinforcement or accepting Singapore was not defensible in all circumstances, as Churchill at least seemed willing to accept, and developing an “outer ring” defence to protect Chamberlain’s Eastern Empire inner core as discussed in Chapter Three.<sup>173</sup> Even if Britain wished to take advantage of the US transfer to the Atlantic to reinforce its Far East forces, then that did not necessarily imply a substantial battle-fleet capable of contesting the South China Sea in traditional terms. Britain could merely have deployed the *Force H* “immediate reinforcement” further forward at Singapore in substitution for the “Asiatic Reinforcement” carrier task force she sought from the US.<sup>174</sup>

The Admiralty records do not provide a definitive answer here. The mid-February minuting justifying the decision to create a fleet demonstrates that the Naval Staff did not believe a US fleet at Hawaii along with the planned RN “immediate reinforcements” could provide adequate cover for the Dominions or the Indian Ocean. They also evidently judged that the strategic penalties in the “last resort” option of withdrawing the East

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<sup>173</sup> The Churchill view reflects his minute of 17 February to the FSL and First Lord where he stated Australia could be adequately defended by a fleet based at Darwin. ADM 116/4877, TNA.

<sup>174</sup> There is indeed a puzzle here. Had the US agreed to provide the Asiatic reinforcement carrier task force which was the core provision sought by Bellairs in his 11 February Appreciation, then there would presumably have been no US offer of “Atlantic substitution” and no RN planning to create a major new Eastern Fleet. The conclusion therefore is that the Admiralty believed Asiatic reinforcement along with the Pacific Fleet at Hawaii provided adequate Far East assurance. It follows that *Force H* at Singapore in substitution for Asiatic reinforcement would provide the same assurance. The Admiralty might still have required an additional carrier task force in the Indian Ocean to meet the putative IJN raider threat but that was achievable without deploying a battle-fleet. The irony here is that both Asiatic reinforcement and a putative *Force H* substitute equated to the Drax “Flying Squadron” concept of 1939 and to *Force Z* plus carrier later in 1941.



Mediterranean Fleet were greater now than six months earlier and they certainly judged the potential damage resulting from IJN attacks on Indian Ocean communications, including the vital Middle East traffic, to be much higher.<sup>175</sup> However, a further possibility, clearly in Pound's mind at this time, was that Japan might intervene in the war while the US continued to stand aside at least in the Far East.<sup>176</sup> He told the PM that, in a war with Japan, fought without American support, the main threat was not the loss of Far East possessions but attack on vital communications in the Indian Ocean including those that sustained operations in the Middle East. The only means of countering this threat at present was to withdraw naval forces from the Mediterranean undermining all the successes so far achieved in that theatre and giving Germany access to oil and other vital supplies. Japan's intervention would then have offset all the aid so far provided by the US to Britain.<sup>177</sup> Had Pound been aware of the US response to Bellairs' Appreciation circulated three days later, he would have been even more concerned. This stressed that there was indeed no guarantee the US would go to war with Japan if she attacked southern Indo-China, Thailand, or even Malaya, while avoiding direct attack on US territory or interests. The US could not assume direct responsibility for the defence of substantial parts of the British Empire. So far as possible, territorial interest should dictate how US and British forces were deployed.<sup>178</sup>

It is also essential to emphasise that committing to an Eastern Fleet in February 1941 was hypothetical. It clearly depended on US intervention in the Atlantic war but the scope and timing of this intervention remained uncertain.<sup>179</sup> It depended on Japanese actions too. The US offer of "substitution" gave Britain another option for Far East naval reinforcement beyond "last resort" withdrawal from the Eastern Mediterranean but, whether, and in what form, Britain finally exercised the option could, as with the Cunningham doctrine of April 1939, "depend on circumstances at the time". It must have

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<sup>175</sup> See paper "Far East" attached to D of P's minute of 15 February, ADM 116/4877, TNA.

<sup>176</sup> It was in Pound's mind at this time, i.e. mid-February, because the British believed a Japanese attack might be imminent. This is known as the "February crisis". See: e.g. Haggie, *Britannia at Bay*, p 190 – 191 for background.

<sup>177</sup> Minute from First Sea Lord to PM of 16 February dealing with the implications of a guarantee to the NEI. ADM 205/10, TNA.

<sup>178</sup> B.U.S. (J) (41) 16 of 19 February 1941, "Statement by the US Staff Committee: US Military Position in the Far East", CAB 99/5, TNA.

<sup>179</sup> First Sea Lord statement in DO (41) 31<sup>st</sup> of 19 May, CAB 69/2, TNA.

appeared to the Admiralty therefore that, given US intransigence on forward deployment and basing, Britain lost nothing in accepting the alternative US offer, while it both widened her options and confirmed “distant” US deterrent cover in the Pacific.

A related issue is what role the Naval Staff expected the hypothetical new Eastern Fleet to play in containing a Japanese southward attack. Here too a definitive answer is hard to pin down. Because of the inevitable uncertainties over how quickly substitution could take effect and because the proposed Eastern Fleet would be smaller than any previously contemplated by the RN, initial planning had a defensive cast. The April guidance to Far East commanders said it was difficult to prejudge the situation facing the Fleet during Phase 2 on arrival in the Indian Ocean. It was unlikely Singapore would have fallen but Japanese occupation of Sumatra and Java might make it unusable. Immediate priorities would then be to secure the Indian Ocean and safeguard vital communications. The Fleet would operate initially from Trincomalee or from the refuelling base and anchorage at Addu Atoll in the Maldives known as “Port T”.<sup>180</sup> The thrust of the guidance was cautious and suggested that, even if Singapore was available, any operations north or east of the base would be limited.<sup>181</sup> This view was questioned by Far East Commanders who, perhaps surprisingly, given their earlier pressure for more reinforcements, argued that there were sufficient Allied submarine and air forces available to dispute control of the South China Sea even in Phase 1.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> “Port T” was one of four discreet anchorages identified to support movement of a fleet to the Far East when planning for this began in the early 1920s. Steven Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt 1935-1940*, p 182. It featured subsequently in all Admiralty Far East war plans. However, according to the main historian of “Port T”, there were no permanent facilities there until surveying to establish rudimentary refuelling and anchorage arrangements began in late 1940. Peter Doling, *From Port T to RAF Gan*, (UK: Woodfield Publishing, 2003), p 14.

<sup>181</sup> AT 666 of 4 April 1941, ADM 116/4877, TNA.

<sup>182</sup> ‘Far East – Effect of US and Japanese Intervention’, JP (41) 291 of 16 April 1941, attached to COS (41) 137<sup>th</sup> of 17 April, CAB 79/10, TNA. The reference to submarine forces here reflects the fact that Dutch and USN strength in this arm was significant. The Dutch had 15 boats at this time of which 11 were relatively modern. The USN force, within the Asiatic Fleet, built up through 1941 to a total of 29, with 23 of these modern. On paper therefore, this was a substantial force which should have presented a major threat to IJN operations and certainly vulnerable troop convoys. The judgement here, presumably originating from CinC China, Vice Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, himself a submariner, was therefore reasonable. In practice, when the Japanese attacked, the Dutch did perform well but the American force was a major disappointment and achieved little. This reflected poor training pre-war, torpedo defects, and lack of logistic support. See: Captain John F O’Connell, *Submarine Operational Effectiveness in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Part Two 1939 – 1945*, (USA: iUniverse Inc, 2011), chapters 4 and 8. Also: Layton paper, ‘Remarks on the operations in Malaya and the defence of Singapore’, ADM 199/1472A, TNA.

While the Admiralty may indeed have hoped that Atlantic substitution, at a minimum, extended their defensive options in the Far East, it was soon clear that the terms of the ABC-1 Far East settlement were less flexible than perhaps the British anticipated.<sup>183</sup> The first problem was that Britain had assumed primary naval responsibility for the new Far East theatre defined in ABC-1.<sup>184</sup> At the time of signing, Britain may not have fully understood how the US would interpret this responsibility. However, it was soon evident that, if Britain wanted US support in holding the Malay Barrier, there was a price to be paid. Britain had to demonstrate a serious naval commitment to Barrier defence and not just to holding the Indian Ocean. Britain therefore found it had rather less freedom over Far East naval reinforcement than it originally hoped. This is demonstrated in the letter from the US COS to the British COS in early August which expressed US objections to the report of the American-Dutch-British (ADB-1) Conference convened in Singapore in April to produce a joint operating plan for the Far East theatre based on the ABC-1 principles.<sup>185</sup> The letter criticised ADB-1 for failure to appreciate “the great strategic

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<sup>183</sup> Rear Admiral Danckwerts, as Head of British Admiralty Delegation Washington, warned VCNS (Phillips) in a letter dated 23 June that the Americans were inclined to be litigious over ABC-1. They regarded the contents as a “definite commitment” even though most of the elements could not take effect until the US actually entered the war. They were nevertheless inclined to view it as more “sacrosanct” than justified by a constantly evolving global situation. CAB 122/4, TNA. Turner made this point even more explicitly during the Riviera Summit at Placentia Bay in August. At the meeting between the British and US COS on 11 August, he noted that some aspects of the “Future Strategy” paper presented by the British were at variance with ABC-1. In the words of the British record: “He regarded ABC-1 as still sound, and he considered that it had been drawn up as a guide to action, not only after the US came into the war, but as a guide to British action before that. These points would be touched on in the official US reply.” None of the US COS questioned this interpretation. COS (41) 504 of 20 August 1941, “Riviera”, COS (R) 7, CAB 99/18, TNA.

<sup>184</sup> The Far East Area was distinct from the Pacific and Australia and New Zealand Areas which are all defined in the ABC-1 final report. The Far East Area was bounded by latitude 30 degrees North, longitude 140 degrees East and the southern boundary of the Malay Barrier crescent. It therefore incorporated: Formosa; the Philippines; the NEI; Indo-China, Thailand and Malaya; and wide sea areas around them including all of the South China Sea. It was an area of joint responsibility between Britain and the US but, importantly, CinC China had “strategic direction” over all naval forces in the area except those directly committed to defence of the Philippines. In that sense therefore, Britain had “primary naval responsibility” but there was ample scope for ambiguity. B.U.S. (J) (41) 30 of 27 March 1941, Report, paras 29 – 32, CAB 99/5, TNA.

<sup>185</sup> The ADB-1 report is contained in COS (41) 387 of 21 June 1941, “Report of the American – Dutch – British Conversations held at Singapore April 1941”, CAB 80/28, TNA. Acknowledging that the strategy of the “Associated Powers” in the Far East was defensive, the report defined two main objectives: the security of sea communications; and security of Singapore. A “subsidiary” objective was to operate air and submarine forces from the Philippines for as long as possible to threaten Japanese communications. The report purported to address the situation before (Phase 1) and after (Phase 2) the arrival of an RN Eastern Fleet but, in practice, concentrated on the former. During Phase 1, it did indeed expect the US and Dutch to

importance of holding the NEI and particularly Sumatra and Java” adding “it will be impossible to hold Singapore if the Dutch islands are captured by Japan”. It noted that, during ABC-1, the British repeatedly stated that defence of the Malay Barrier was “vital to the continued security of UK itself”. However, of 48 RN warships identified as immediately available on the outbreak of a Far East war, only three were allocated to defence of the Barrier and none north of it. The RN proposed to devote almost all its forces to escort and patrol work, often at great distance from the position the British had insisted was vital. The letter accepted that the RN planned to constitute a “strong Eastern Fleet” from forces released by the arrival of the USN in the Atlantic which could make a significant contribution to Barrier defence. However the US viewed the arrival of such a fleet as “problematic”. In consequence, unless the RN planned a contribution to Barrier defence in the first phase of a war, the US would not allow the Asiatic Fleet to operate under RN strategic direction as ABC-1 had envisaged.<sup>186</sup>

This letter is important on several counts. It demonstrated that the US recognised what Britain remained reluctant to admit formally that Singapore was untenable without Sumatra and Java.<sup>187</sup> It also demonstrated that the US was not prepared to take on the entire burden of helping the Dutch defend the NEI. If Britain attached such importance to security of the Malay Barrier it must contribute. Cowman quotes a contemporaneous

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take on all operations north of the Barrier while the RN focused on protection of Indian Ocean communications. Reading the report, it is not surprising the US reacted negatively. Essentially, they were invited to bear the whole burden of protecting Singapore, whose ultimate importance they disputed, during Phase 1.

<sup>186</sup> ‘American-Dutch-British Conference’, COS (41) 160 (O) of 6 August 1941, CAB 80/59, TNA. Rear Admiral Danckwerts, as Head of British Admiralty Delegation in Washington, was first briefed on the contents of this letter by Turner on 1 July. Washington Embassy Memo M M 41 75 of 1 July. However it was not formally signed off by the US COS until 23 July. Washington Memo M M 41 106 of 29 July. Both memos are in CAB 122/8, TNA.

<sup>187</sup> Through most of 1941, the Admiralty doggedly resisted providing any formal guarantee to the Dutch on defence of the NEI despite regular pressure to do so from the Foreign Office. Churchill deferred to the Admiralty view. Haggie puts the issue well when he says the Admiralty showed “a curious failure to distinguish between liabilities and obligations”. He points out that the defence of the NEI was always a British liability in the sense that she could not afford, in the last analysis, to fail to support the Dutch. “The assumption of a formal obligation would in no sense have increased this liability; indeed it might even have lessened it by improving defence coordination and thereby making an attack on the islands less attractive to the Japanese.” Haggie, *Britannia at Bay*, p 187. CinC Far East, Air Chief Marshal, Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, would acknowledge the interdependence of Singapore and the NEI after the Japanese attack. In a telegram to the COS on 29 December, he stated: “Protracted defence of Singapore means defence of Southern Malaya, Sumatra and Java”. ‘Far East – Strategic Appreciation by the CinC’, JP (42) 10 of 2 January 1942, CAB 79/17, TNA.

memo from US Plans Division that the British evidently planned to leave the naval fighting to the US and Dutch pending the arrival of their Far East reinforcements. The memo recognised RN resources were limited but argued they could provide a reasonable force for the Malay Barrier if they did not scatter assets throughout the Indian Ocean.<sup>188</sup> US attitudes therefore began to sway both the shape of Britain's naval forces in the East and their employment.<sup>189</sup> Ultimately, the RN began to realise that, only when it had a substantial force at Singapore, would it exert any influence on the USN dispositions which it judged so vital to Far East defence. As the risks of Japanese attack, and the consequent need to bind the US into Far East defence, increased, the Admiralty was increasingly tempted therefore to deploy inadequate RN forces further forward than was sensible in the circumstances.

A second problem was how the US transfers from the Pacific to the Atlantic, executed in accordance with Rainbow Five and the ABC-1 principles, translated into practical intent and capability within the residual Pacific Fleet. The transfers began rapidly and their scale aroused concern in the Admiralty and other parts of the British War leadership<sup>190</sup> since the deterrent effect of the Pacific Fleet remained critical if the new strategy based on a small Eastern Fleet was to be credible.<sup>191</sup> The Defence Committee saw a tricky balance here. A reduction in the Pacific Fleet might encourage Japan to strike while, on the other hand, reinforcement of the Atlantic could suggest to Japan that early US entry into the war was more likely.<sup>192</sup> It was also likely to have a positive effect on important neutrals such as

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<sup>188</sup> Cowman, *Dominion or Decline*, p 228.

<sup>189</sup> US objections to the British dispositions in ADB-1 were further emphasised during the Riviera conference in Placentia Bay. "Turner remarked that the initial British dispositions contained in the (ADB) Report showed practically all the British naval forces as being employed on British trade routes instead of operating along the northern line of the NEI. He considered this disposition unsound." COS (R) 9, Informal discussion between FSL and CNO, dated 11 August, CAB 99/18, TNA.

<sup>190</sup> Although not Churchill, who was happy to see virtually any scale of transfer to the Atlantic if it promoted early US intervention, and was furious with Rear Admiral Danckwerts, head of British Admiralty Delegation Washington, for suggesting there would be British reservations.

<sup>191</sup> At the end of April, the Americans raised the prospect of a much more substantial transfer than anything previously contemplated under ABC-1. Turner told Danckwerts that the Pacific Fleet might be reduced to just three to four battleships, eight cruisers (only four modern), and 30 – 40 destroyers. Washington tel 1883 of 29 April 1941, CAB 105/36, TNA.

<sup>192</sup> There were differing views in the US as well. In general, the War and Navy Departments, including their political leaders, Henry Stimson and Frank Knox, favoured a maximum transfer to the Atlantic while both the President and the State Department, especially Cordell Hull, remained more anxious about encouraging

Spain.<sup>193</sup> This caused the Admiralty to focus on the minimum acceptable Pacific Fleet which it judged to be seven battleships and three carriers and was indeed the final strength when the Japanese attacked.<sup>194</sup> However, by late May, the Pacific Fleet had not only lost a significant proportion of capital units but also substantial support forces and almost all its amphibious capability. Its freedom of movement westward was also severely circumscribed by Washington in case further transfers to the Atlantic were needed.<sup>195</sup> Its ability therefore to conduct offensive operations that Japan would consider a major threat, with a realistic hope of diverting a significant part of the IJN away from the Malay Barrier, let alone inflicting serious damage was, in the short term, limited. Miller insists that, despite these limitations, and the ambiguity from Washington, the Pacific Fleet nevertheless remained committed to an offensive strategy right through to the outbreak of war.<sup>196</sup> Rear Admiral Danckwerts, now Head of the British Admiralty Delegation Washington, warned Pound to limit his expectations of what the Pacific Fleet could and would do following his visit to Pearl Harbour together with Captain Clarke, in early April.<sup>197</sup> It is not clear how much significance London attached to Danckwerts' report but it should have raised hard questions about the validity of a British Far East strategy that still placed heavy reliance on the deterrent value of the Pacific Fleet and continued to use this as an excuse to go slow on Malaya air reinforcement.<sup>198</sup> The steady reduction in the

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Japan. David Reynolds provides an excellent overview of thinking in both Washington and London in *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, p 227 – 228.

<sup>193</sup> DO (41) 31<sup>st</sup> meeting of 19 May, CAB 69/2, TNA. Exchanges between London and the Washington Embassy on the issue are in CAB 122/4, TNA.

<sup>194</sup> D of P minute of 30 April, ADM 116/4877, TNA.

<sup>195</sup> Miller, *War Plan Orange*, p 284-285 and Cowman, *Dominion or Decline*, p 217-224.

<sup>196</sup> Miller is frank about the limitations faced by the Pacific Fleet at p 276-279 and again at p 286 – 288 of *War Plan Orange*. However, in his Chapter 25, he presents detailed evidence showing that CinC Pacific Fleet, Admiral Husband Kimmel, who took command in February 1941, remained committed to offensive operations and would have sortied to put these into effect if the Japanese had not pre-empted him with their attack on Pearl Harbour. Miller accepts, however, that Kimmel was heavily outnumbered in critical areas such as carriers and that many aspects of his planning look badly flawed when viewed against subsequent war experience.

<sup>197</sup> 'Visit of Rear Admiral V H Danckwerts and Captain A W Clarke RN to the United States CinC Pacific Fleet', COS (41) 308 of 14 May, CAB 80/28, TNA. Danckwerts' personal covering letter to the FSL, dated 17 April, and the telegraphic summary of his report, dated 19 April, is in CAB 122/294, TNA. His personal letter notes that according to RN officers seconded to the Pacific Fleet, USN long range AA fire was "years ahead of our own".

<sup>198</sup> Pound's attitude is particularly hard to understand here. In the period leading up to ABC-1 and throughout the conference itself, a key British concern, never adequately satisfied, had been the effectiveness of US deterrence conducted from Hawaii. The Americans had dismissed the possibility of carrier attacks on Japan. On 19 April he had received the warning from Danckwerts that the Pacific Fleet

US Pacific Fleet also inevitably provoked understandable nervousness in Australia and New Zealand and pleas for RN reinforcements in compensation. Britain insisted this would only be possible when the US became a belligerent or at least took on operational responsibilities short of formal war.<sup>199</sup> Meanwhile the policy of reinforcement from the Eastern Mediterranean only as “last resort” stood.<sup>200</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown therefore that the increasing US inclination to prioritise Atlantic security over the Pacific following the fall of France was strongly encouraged by Britain who sought to channel US effort against Germany as primary enemy. By the end of the year, Britain was seeking a scale of US naval contribution not only in the Atlantic but also the Western Mediterranean which has been under recognised by historians. The resulting “Atlantic first” commitment agreed at the ABC-1 talks was all that Britain hoped, helped to guarantee Britain’s survival, and largely endorsed Britain’s blueprint for defeating Germany. However, Britain overestimated US will and ability to cover two divergent theatres and did not adequately recognise that the US help it sought in the Atlantic was not consistent with the scale of and nature of US naval cover it wanted against Japan in the Far East. The Far East compromise of “Atlantic substitution” agreed at ABC-1, although it was a “second best” alternative, appeared to offer Britain additional options for securing its specific interests in the Far East while retaining reasonable US deterrence cover as

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was ill prepared for even the more limited offensive role agreed at ABC-1. Yet, the record of the War Cabinet meeting on 8 May, which reviewed the British response to the proposed transfers from the Pacific Fleet to the Atlantic, states: “The FSL thought the US Fleet left at Hawaii would be as capable of raiding the Japanese coast as the whole fleet now concentrated there”. His advice therefore was that a significant transfer, some 25% of Pacific Fleet strength, with more under consideration, would make no difference. Clearly this could not literally be true for the position in the Pacific whatever the advantages in the Atlantic and it took scant account of Danckwerts’ warning. WM (41) 48<sup>th</sup> meeting, dated 8 May 1941, Conclusions, Item 5, CAB 65/22/18, TNA. Phillips, as VCNS, who had been so anxious to explore carrier raids on Japan in December, apparently now shared Pound’s view. In March, he had stated that, unless Japan showed signs of definite intervention, a large Pacific Fleet, based at Hawaii, “making faces at Japan”, “was a waste”. VCNS comment dated 10 March on D of P minute dated 6 March 1941, ADM 116/4877, TNA. At the end of May, he endorsed the view of ACNS (F) (Harwood) that US transfers to the Atlantic would facilitate earlier release of RN capital ships for an Eastern Fleet. Also, ADM 116/4877.

<sup>199</sup> ‘Despatch of a Fleet to the Far East’, COS (41) 80 (O) of 18 May 1941, CAB 80/57, TNA.

<sup>200</sup> See Haggie, *Britannia at Bay*, p 194 – 195, for a good summary of Australian lobbying here and the British response.

well. In reality, it promised forces that were too widely dispersed and too ill-suited to cope with the risk posed by Japan with any confidence.