

*The 'Singapore Strategy' and the Deterrence of Japan: Winston Churchill, the Admiralty and the Dispatch of Force Z**

ON the evening of 8 December 1941, two British capital ships – the newly completed battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* and the First World War-era battlecruiser HMS *Repulse* – set out from the naval base at Singapore to disrupt Japanese landings in Malaya and Thailand. Under the command of Admiral Sir Tom Phillips, the two ships and four destroyers which accompanied them were code-named Force Z. The decision to seek out enemy forces was a calculated gamble. As the Royal Air Force could not provide continuous air cover for these ships as they traversed the South China Sea, Phillips had to count on speed and surprise for protection. The gamble did not pay off. On the morning of 10 December, Force Z, having abandoned its mission, was caught off the east coast of Malaya by Japanese land-based aircraft operating from Indo-China. Within hours, both the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* had been sunk.

The loss was a tremendous blow to wartime Britain. Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister, later claimed that 'in all the war I never received a more direct shock'.¹ The intrinsic superiority of the Royal Navy was a matter of faith for the British public and elites alike: a naval disaster of this magnitude was as unexpected as it was distressing. The director general of political warfare, Robert Bruce Lockhart, recalled that 'going into the smoking-room [of his club], crowded with high-ranking naval and military officers, was like entering a Scottish house in which the will is being read after a funeral. There were drinks on the table, but gloom on every face. Officers spoke in low tones. The atmosphere was heavy with the dead weight of tradition. Military defeats are the initial fate of the English in almost every war and can be borne with stoical courage. A disaster to the navy is unthinkable and unbearable.'²

Although the destruction of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* had little impact on the course of the war in the Pacific, nonetheless it marks a watershed. More than any other episode, the sinking of Britain's newest battleship from the air symbolizes the moment when the battleship ceased to be queen of the seas. The Royal Navy's impotence in the Far East in 1941 also points to the collapse of Britain's maritime supremacy: after centuries of ruling the waves, Britannia handed over her trident to

*I am grateful to Edward Ingram and John Ferris for their comments on an earlier version of this article, and to the Countess of Avon for permission to quote from the papers of the first Earl of Avon. Research for this article was assisted by the Churchill Memorial and Library, Westminster College through the award of a Tyler Research Fellowship.

1. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War* (London: Cassell, 1950), III, p. 551.

2. R. H. Bruce Lockhart, *Comes the Reckoning* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), p. 146.

the United States. Last, although most important, the dramatic defeat at the hands of an Asian power, followed two months later by an even more humiliating disaster, the fall of Singapore, marks the beginning of the end of Britain's imperial power in the Far East. The sun began to set on the British Empire.

The fate of Force Z fits so easily into the framework of Britain's imperial and naval decline that it too now seems inevitable. When decision-makers in London took the decision, however, peace still reigned in the Pacific: war with Japan, naval disasters, and the loss of empire appeared anything but inevitable. The ships were given a political not a military role – to deter Japan from war – only to find themselves caught up in the conflict they were meant to avert. Their *peacetime* role is often obscured, however, by the debate between Churchill and his advisers over *wartime* naval strategy. And because they arrived in the Far East less than a week before the Japanese onslaught began, London's decision to send them *to* Singapore is often conflated with Phillip's to sail them *from* Singapore. Disaster became inevitable, according to traditional accounts, from the moment capital ships were earmarked for the Far East.

The decision to dispatch the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to eastern waters was taken in October 1941 by the cabinet's Defence Committee. The motives of the main participants are frequently misunderstood. The Admiralty, for example, has been criticized for relying on inadequate forces against Japan because of its devotion to an obsolete and unworkable 'Singapore strategy'. Churchill is blamed for disregarding the threat posed by Japan, relying on a grossly inadequate deterrent to preserve peace in the Far East, and possessing a poor grasp of the principles of naval strategy. Ian Cowman, on the other hand, has argued that orthodox interpretations are inadequate because the Admiralty's resistance to the dispatch of Force Z was really a ruse to distract Churchill from its plans to build up a British fleet based on Manila. The decision-making process as a whole is typically reduced to a dialogue between Churchill and the first sea lord, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound.

This article will show that Cowman's argument is unfounded; that neither the Royal Navy's pre-war planning nor its strategy were significant factors; and that Churchill's failings as a naval strategist mattered less than his assumptions about the value of capital ships as a deterrent to Japan. It will also demonstrate that these assumptions were commonplace in Whitehall and had a long history: Churchill was neither the first nor the only civilian to advocate the movement of a small deterrent fleet to the Far East.

The idea that something had gone terribly wrong with Britain's Far Eastern naval strategy was planted by a retired flag officer, Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, shortly after the fall of Singapore. In March 1942, an

article by Richmond in *The Fortnightly Review* charged that the fate of Singapore had been sealed by 'the folly of not providing adequately for the command of the sea in a two-ocean war'. The author, an accomplished naval historian, argued that Britain's plans for sending a battle fleet to eastern waters between the two world wars were utterly unrealistic given the restrictions on the size of the Royal Navy. In *Statesmen and Sea Power*, published shortly after the war, Richmond concluded that it was 'the illusion that a Two-Hemisphere Empire can be defended by a One-Hemisphere Navy that sealed the fate of Singapore'.¹ Privately, Richmond blamed Britain's politicians for this state of affairs. 'It is Parliament which bears the responsibility for these measures which have crippled our sea power,' he maintained.²

Richmond's writings did not specifically address the loss of Force Z, but the first volume of Stephen Roskill's official history, *The War at Sea*, described the Admiralty's opposition to the movement of these vessels and provided enough evidence of political interference to convince a generation of historians that, on this occasion at least, the admiralty was not at fault.³ Most early works to address this subject concluded that Winston Churchill was principally to blame for placing these ships in harm's way in 1941.⁴

It was not until the 1970s that Britain's preparations for a Far Eastern war were closely scrutinized, and by the early 1980s a consensus had emerged that the plans developed were inherently unsound.⁵ Scholars have not been content with condemning the politicians who reduced Britain's naval strength during the interwar period: they have also censured the naval profession as a whole and criticized virtually every aspect of its preparations for war with Japan. According to the conventional view of British naval planning, the Admiralty intended to dispatch a large battle fleet from European waters to Singapore once war with Japan had begun. Before these vessels arrived, British forces already present in the Far East would prevent Singapore from falling into enemy hands. Subsequent operations would be directed exclusively towards securing a fleet action with the Japanese navy. On the basis of this

1. Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, 'Singapore', *Fortnightly Review* (March 1942); id., *Statesmen and Sea Power* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), p. 328.

2. Richmond to Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, 29 June 1942, *The Keyes Papers*, ed. Paul Halpern (Navy Records Society, 1981), III, p. 244.

3. Stephen Roskill, *The War At Sea* (London: H[er] M[ajesty's] S[tationary] O[ffice], 1954), I.

4. For example, Russell Grenfell, *Main Fleet to Singapore* (London: Faber, 1951); Bernard Ash, *Someone Had Blundered: The Story of the Repulse and the Prince of Wales* (New York: Doubleday, 1960); Stephen Roskill, *Churchill and the Admirals* (London: Collins, 1977); Arthur Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

5. In particular, Paul Haggie, *Britannia At Bay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); Marder, *Old Friends*; Ian Hamill, *The Strategic Illusion* (Singapore: Singapore UP, 1981); W. David McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-42* (London: Macmillan, 1979); Raymond Callahan, *The Worst Disaster* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1977); Malcolm Murfett, '“Living in the Past”: A Critical Re-examination of the Singapore Naval Strategy, 1918-1941,' *War & Society*, 11 (May 1993) 73-103.

superficial reconstruction of Britain's 'Singapore strategy', it has been argued that the idea of sending a fleet to the Far East was unrealistic when it was conceived in the early 1920s; that it became wholly impractical during the 1930s; and that the Admiralty stubbornly clung to it long after its defects should have been obvious. It has also been suggested that the Admiralty's unwavering devotion to this scheme was responsible for the decision to dispatch the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to Singapore in late 1941.¹

Although British naval planning is open to serious criticism, most of the charges levelled at the Admiralty are unfounded. In the first place, it is often claimed that the 'Singapore strategy' was inherently flawed because the likely existence of hostile powers in Europe made it unrealistic to expect a British fleet *ever* to be spared for the Far East. This charge contains a germ of truth, but it does not point to any inherent flaw in the strategy itself. This would only be true if there was no possibility of a fleet ever being dispatched to Singapore under any conditions, which is not the case. During the 1920s Britain possessed a comfortable margin of naval superiority over its rivals, and it might have maintained a large fleet in the Far East and still dominated European waters. This possibility was only undermined by the emergence of a triple threat from Germany, Italy and Japan in the mid-1930s, and it was only precluded by the fall of France in 1940. These events were exceptional and unpredictable. If they had been foreseen, interwar planners would have regarded Britain's position as hopeless. But because this threat seemed remote, they based their plans on the reasonable assumption that diplomacy could prevent such a threat from emerging. If they had been correct, the rise of a single European naval challenger need not have prevented the transfer of a fleet to the Far East, in which event the navy could still have contemplated a defensive strategy in that region.

The dispatch of a fleet to Singapore is often treated as an all-or-nothing proposition. In fact, by the mid-1930s the real problem facing British planners was not whether they could send a fleet to the Far East, but whether they could dispatch enough ships for an offensive strategy, or only those for a defensive one. British naval strength was still sufficient to allow a vigorous defensive stance in both regions simultaneously. As long as Britain had a reliable ally, it might even have assumed the offensive in one of these theatres. During the late 1930s Britain had such an ally in France; and even in 1939 the Admiralty could reasonably hope for the active assistance of the United States in the event of war with Japan. A two-front naval war need not have posed an insurmountable threat to the British Empire in the 1930s, and if Britain had built up to a full 'two power standard' of naval strength, most of the 'inherent' difficulties allegedly facing the Admiralty would have

1. For example, Haggie, *Britannia*, p. 211; Marder, *Old Friends*, p. 241.

disappeared.¹ A single-handed struggle against three naval powers was another matter, but because British naval strength was insufficient for this worst-case scenario, it does not follow that plans to send a fleet to the Far East could not have been implemented under *any* conditions.

The Admiralty's critics have also claimed that the Admiralty was obsessed with Mahanian visions of surface fleet actions, and that developments in air power somehow rendered its whole strategy irrelevant.² The underlying assumption is that war plans which envisaged the use of heavily gunned battleships in any capacity were both antiquated and foolish. Thus, critics such as Ian Hamill have charged that the 'concept of sea power around which the whole policy revolved was demonstrated to be obsolete. Naval engagements were no longer a simple matter of two battle fleets blasting away at each other.'³ Statements such as this are riddled with fallacies. Jon Sumida and Geoffrey Till have shown that by 1939 British fleet tactics had advanced considerably since the Battle of Jutland.⁴ The navy did underestimate the impact of aviation on naval tactics, but this was not done to the extent which is frequently charged, and it does not point to any intrinsic flaw in the admiralty's strategic thinking. The United States Navy demonstrated during the Second World War that the dispatch of a fleet to the Far East was still necessary to secure the defeat of Japan. A better understanding of the effects of modern aircraft on naval warfare would have compelled the navy to increase both the carrier- and land-based aircraft allocated to its eastern fleet, but its basic strategy would have remained essentially unchanged.

Nor were the navy's strategy and war plans dominated by a preoccupation with major fleet actions. British naval decision-makers of the interwar period had in fact learnt two important lessons from the First World War. First, the failure to annihilate the German High Seas Fleet had driven home the truth of Sir Julian Corbett's dictum that a weaker fleet cannot be expected to oblige its opponent by sailing to its certain destruction.⁵ This realization weakened the role which the idea of the single decisive battle played in naval doctrine and led officers to expect future wars at sea to be prolonged struggles of attrition. Secondly, naval decision-makers were strongly impressed by the role which economic warfare at sea could play in such a conflict. 'Economic Pressure,' the Admiralty declared 'is nowadays a cardinal doctrine of war. . . . It has been used, in greater or less degree, ever since history

1. The 'two-power standard' being sought by the navy during the 1930s would have entailed maintaining a capital ship strength at least equal to that of Germany and Japan combined. This standard was never approved.

2. See especially Hamill, *Strategic Illusion*, pp. 3, 310; Murfett, 'Living in the Past', pp. 77–8.

3. Hamill, *Strategic Illusion*, p. 310.

4. Jon Sumida, "'The Best Laid Plans': The Development of British Battle-Fleet Tactics, 1919–42', *International History Review*, XIV (Nov. 1992); Geoffrey Till, *Air Power and the Royal Navy* (London: Jane's Publishing Company, 1979), Chapter 6.

5. Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Brassey's, 1988).

began, but its irresistible power when efficiently applied has never been more effectively demonstrated than in the 1914–18 War.¹

When naval planners considered their requirements for a Far Eastern conflict, they assumed that Japan would be particularly susceptible to economic pressure applied through sea power. Japan was an island nation and the centre of a maritime empire, like Britain itself. As Britain was vulnerable to economic warfare, it was assumed that Japan, with a less developed industrial base, weaker financial position, and smaller navy, must be even more exposed. Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield, the First Sea Lord, noted in 1937 that in 'a European war economic pressure would be only a contributing factor to our ultimate victory, albeit a very important one.'

In a Pacific war, however, it was only by means of economic pressure that victory could be achieved – any idea of an invasion of Japan and her defeat by military action on her own soil was out of the question. The war would be fought at a great distance from a large part of the Empire, only part of which would be affected by it. Except in the Far East, Empire trade would not be interfered with.

Japan, however, could be almost completely isolated by naval action and her national life directly affected. The expansion of Japanese overseas trade meant that she had given a hostage to fortune. Interference with this trade would have fatal consequences for her.²

By 1937 planners had concluded that Japan could be forced to accept terms if the navy severed its essential maritime communication, and that this could be achieved without first destroying the main Japanese fleet. The navy prepared to fight a fleet action because the possibility existed that one might occur, and because it could not afford to lose one if it did. But it was hardly obsessed with visions of a Far Eastern Jutland.

The most serious criticisms of the navy stem from an assumption that it possessed only a single rigid and unchanging strategy for war with Japan, one which authorities would neither abandon nor modify. In fact, naval decision-makers considered the plan to dispatch a massive battle fleet to Singapore as only one of the options open to them in the event of war. They knew that this strategy was feasible only if the requisite bases were available and Britain's margin of naval superiority was sufficient, and that these factors could not be guaranteed.

The need to retain capital ships in home waters was also clearly foreseen. Even during the 1920s, when Britain possessed a comfortable margin of superiority over Japan and any single European naval power, planners were unwilling to leave Britain vulnerable to pressure from a state like France by dispatching its entire fleet to the Far East. During the course of the 1930s a growing number of capital ships were required in

1. Plans Division memo., 'The Possibilities of the Exercise of Maritime Economic Pressure upon Italy,' March 1931, P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], Admiralty Records, hereafter ADM 1/8739/47.

2. C[hiefs] O[f] S[taff Committee] 209 Mtg, 1 June 1937, PRO, CAB[inet Office Records] 53/7.

home waters to contain European threats. The Admiralty's reluctance to rely on the French navy to bolster British strength in Europe eventually led to an admission that the forces available for dispatch to the Far East had so far diminished that a less-than-ideal strategy against Japan might have to be adopted. As a result, a wide range of contingency plans were developed between 1937 and 1941. The nature of these plans has been obscured by the haphazard use of the term 'Singapore strategy' to cover all of the schemes produced during the interwar period.

The Admiralty intended the naval base being built at Singapore to provide essential docking and repair facilities for a British fleet operating in eastern waters.¹ However, given its distance from Japan, Singapore was considered unsuitable as a base for offensive operations. For this purpose, the Admiralty initially hoped to use Hong Kong, and to seize other bases even closer to Japan. Only from advanced bases to the north of Hong Kong did it expect to be able to exert decisive pressure on the enemy. The nature of that pressure would be principally economic. The main fleet would tie down the bulk of Japanese naval strength, thus preventing it from endangering other British interests. Meanwhile, detached cruiser squadrons in the Pacific would cut the arteries of Japanese commerce, while massive British naval construction would begin at home. Over the next few years Britain would become steadily stronger while Japan was bled into submission.

This scheme represents the Admiralty's best-case appreciation of how Japan could be forced to accept British terms. It was a remarkably optimistic assessment. To be successful, Hong Kong would have to be relieved or recaptured, a fleet must be able to operate safely from this base, and military forces would have to be available for combined operations north of Hong Kong, and possibly for the relief or recapture of Hong Kong itself. At the time these plans were drafted, between 1920 and 1931, these requirements did not appear unrealistic.² By the mid-1930s, however, the Admiralty was losing confidence that an advance from Hong Kong would be feasible, or that the fleet could operate from this base except under ideal circumstances. To further complicate matters, the admiralty was also confronted with the prospect that the scale of combined operations would be severely curtailed, if not precluded altogether, by a shortage of land and air forces. In light of these problems, planners concluded that a progressive advance northward from Hong Kong was no longer realistic.

1. The navy's plans for war with Japan were embodied in the series of War Memoranda (Eastern) prepared by the plans division of the Admiralty for the commanders-in-chief of the principal British fleets. The first War Memorandum was completed in 1920 (ADM 116/3124), and new editions were issued in 1923 (ADM 116/3124), 1924 (ADM 116/3125), 1931 (ADM 116/3118), 1933 (ADM 116/3475) and 1937 (ADM 116/4393). Each of these underwent numerous revisions during its lifetime.

2. This plan was most fully developed in the War Memorandum (Eastern) of July 1931 (ADM 116/3118).

In late 1937 the Admiralty issued a new War Memorandum (Eastern)¹ which reshaped British plans to suit the new strategic environment. In the event that European complications precluded the dispatch of naval forces at least equal in strength to the Japanese main fleet, planners now concluded that their strategy would have to be defensive in its initial stages. Hong Kong might serve as the base for an inferior fleet, but it seemed more likely that the fleet would not advance beyond Singapore. The new plans did not attempt to spell out how an inferior fleet could protect British interests in the Far East, but it was expected that the Japanese fleet's advantage would steadily diminish as it moved further away from its bases and approached Britain's. Hence, a slightly weaker British force could still meet a Japanese fleet on roughly equal terms in the vicinity of Singapore. Inside the zone in which the British fleet could operate with land-based air support, planners believed that a relatively weak naval force could provide a reasonable degree of protection for British interests. The Admiralty assumed that as long as Singapore remained secure, it could eventually reinforce the eastern fleet and switch to an offensive strategy.

Ideally, though, naval planners intended to dispatch to Singapore a fleet superior or equal in strength immediately hostilities commenced. If this was possible, the 1937 War Memorandum envisaged an offensive strategy. Under ideal conditions, the fleet would operate from Hong Kong, but planners now hoped that decisive economic pressure could be inflicted on Japan if British naval forces remained based on Singapore. This important development resulted from a reassessment of the means available to exert pressure on Japan. With large-scale combined operations no longer a realistic option, economic pressure began to assume greater prominence in the admiralty's calculations.

The problem of how to inflict this pressure without an advance base north of Hong Kong, and possibly without Hong Kong itself, was worked out in 1937 during the preparation of the Joint Planning Committee's Far Eastern Appreciation.² Whereas the navy's earlier plans assumed that the enemy fleet must be destroyed before a decisive blockade could be implemented, the Joint Planning Committee now concluded that the navy could inflict decisive economic pressure without first fighting a fleet action. Working from data supplied by the Industrial Intelligence Committee, the Joint Planners concluded that Japan could not make up all of its deficiencies in essential raw materials from the Asian mainland. They calculated that after approximately six months of war, Japan must begin 'importing raw materials by the long sea routes [across the Pacific ocean] at the rate of at least half a million

1. War Memorandum (Eastern), ADM 116/4393.

2. COS (JP) 579, 7 May 1937, CAB 53/31.

tons a month, if she is not to suffer severe industrial restriction and a consequent cumulative economic embarrassment.¹

This conclusion appeared to reduce the problems facing Britain to manageable proportions. Even if Japan's communications with China remained relatively secure, which would be the case as long as the Japanese fleet remained afloat, it now seemed possible that Japan might be forced into submission if its trans-Pacific trade were curtailed. The Joint Planning Committee believed that Britain could accomplish this, although it might take up to two years, and possibly longer, to do so. This appreciation of Japan's vulnerability to a British blockade was incorporated directly into the Admiralty's 1937 War Memorandum (Eastern). This document envisaged two means to win a war with Japan. The first was the traditional plan of provoking a fleet action so as to open the prospect of cutting Japan's short sea routes to China. This might produce a rapid decision, but as ever there was no guarantee that the Japanese would accept battle with superior British forces, while the likelihood that a fleet action could occur under conditions favourable to the British declined because of the decreased possibility of operating from Hong Kong or further north. Nevertheless, the possibility still existed and the navy intended to grasp at it. The second course was to wait for economic pressure against Japan's 'long sea routes' to disrupt the enemy's economy and force its leaders to seek terms. This appeared to be a slower but more certain route. As these strategies were complementary, they would be pursued simultaneously.

After 1936 the Admiralty also had to deal with the possibility that Italy would enter a general European war on Germany's side. In 1937 a three-front war was regarded by the Chiefs of Staff Committee [COS] as a threat Britain could not hope to meet. After the Munich crisis, however, this danger appeared both possible and imminent. In 1939 the COS acknowledged that the fleet Britain could send to the Far East might in certain circumstances not only be weaker than Japan's, but significantly weaker. The First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse, calculated that Britain must retain a force of no less than six capital ships in European waters to contain the German and Italian navies. This would only leave five or six capital ships available for the Far East, and Backhouse asserted that a force of this size 'against a Japanese Fleet of 10 ships plus her full strength in other classes of ships is not adequate in the proper meaning of that word.'²

Two schools of thought existed on how to deal with this problem. The first, represented by Admiral Backhouse and Admiral Reginald Drax, who had been brought to the admiralty to develop offensive war plans, maintained that in the event of a three-front war the navy should

1. Ibid.

2. S[trategic] A[ppreciation] C[ommittee], 4, 'Note by the First Sea Lord', 28 Feb. 1939, CAB 16/209.

concentrate first on knocking out Italy, the weakest of Britain's enemies, while providing only a covering force for the Far East. This suggestion was unorthodox and controversial. It meant reversing Britain's priorities to favour the Mediterranean over the Far East, and it violated the accepted tenet that any fleet sent to Singapore must be capable of meeting the whole of the Japanese fleet in British-dominated waters. The idea of sending a weak force to meet a stronger one was repugnant to the naval mind, but Backhouse believed that a fleet-in-being strategy would allow an 'inadequate' fleet of four or five capital ships to protect Britain's vital interests in the Far East.¹ His calculations were later refined by Drax, who suggested that it was only necessary to dispatch a 'flying squadron' composed of two fast battleships, two aircraft carriers, four large cruisers, and nine large destroyers. In an appreciation drafted in March 1939, Drax suggested that such a force could provide reasonable protection to British trade and territory in the Indian Ocean, prevent Japan from establishing a base in the region, 'hunt down Japanese raiding forces of inferior strength', and pose a 'threat to Japan itself and her communications with China'.²

Although this scheme was received with some apprehension throughout the navy, the idea of concentrating forces in the Mediterranean for a knock-out blow against Italy was welcomed in political circles.³ The cabinet's Strategic Appreciation Committee tacitly accepted that a small covering force could defend British interests in the Far East for a prolonged period when it concluded on 17 April 1939 that 'offensive operations in the Mediterranean against Italy offered the best prospects for speedy results and should not, therefore, be lightly broken off.'⁴ This decision was not unchallenged. A second school of thought on the problem of a three-enemy war was represented by Lord Chatfield, the former First Sea Lord now serving as minister for coordination of defence. Chatfield was alarmed by the suggestion that Britain should send only a covering force to defend imperial interests in the Far East, fearing that failure to send a strong fleet immediately would have serious political repercussions, and might ultimately drive Australia and New Zealand to look to the United States for their protection.⁵ He also rejected the contention that there was no possibility of making good on the pledge to dispatch a fleet in the event of a three-front war.

Chatfield failed to convince the committee of his views in April 1939, but by June the idea of a 'flying squadron' had been rejected by the COS, who now laid down the principle that any fleet sent to the Far East must

1. Ibid. See also Backhouse's minute of 24 March 1939, ADM 1/9909.

2. 'Composition of the Far Eastern Fleet in War,' 15 March 1939, DRAX 2/9, Drax Papers, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge.

3. The Mediterranean in British defence planning during this period is covered in Lawrence Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez* (Cambridge, 1975).

4. SAC 6th Mtg, 17 April 1939, CAB 16/209.

5. SAC 2nd Mtg, 13 March 1939, CAB 16/209.

be able to meet the whole Japanese fleet if it came south. The Admiralty was in fact the driving force behind this declaration. A new regime under Admiral Dudley Pound was uncomfortable with its predecessor's plans and needed little prompting from Chatfield to revert to a more orthodox line. In July, Rear-Admiral Tom Phillips, the new deputy chief of the naval staff, instructed the Admiralty's director of plans to omit all references to a 'flying squadron' from the Admiralty's war plans.¹ A revised War Memorandum stated that 'if a force is sent to the Far East it must be capable of engaging the main Japanese Fleet under conditions favourable to ourselves. In September 1939, this force must include 7 capital ships.'² No mention was made of what was to be done if British capital ships were kept in the Mediterranean and a force this size was unavailable. Pound believed, however, that a small covering force could do no more than secure communications in the Indian Ocean and deter the Japanese from major operations in the South China Seas or Australasian waters. If the Japanese fleet moved south in strength, he expected British naval forces to retire from Singapore and operate from another base, probably Trincomalee.³

After September 1939, the Admiralty continued to view the problem of war with Japan in orthodox terms. It believed that a strong fleet was essential to defend Britain's Far Eastern interests adequately; and that a weak fleet, if that was all that could be sent, would withdraw into the Indian Ocean if threatened by superior Japanese forces. With the fall of France and the entry of Italy into the European conflict in 1940, the Admiralty accepted that it could not send *any* fleet to the Far East for the foreseeable future.⁴ However, during the course of 1941 the United States began to increase its naval assistance to Britain in the Atlantic, and by mid-year the Admiralty was considering the dispatch of naval reinforcements to the Far East. In August it concluded that by March 1942 it could create an eastern fleet consisting of the battleships *Nelson* and *Rodney*, a battlecruiser, four of the old, unmodernized 'R' (*Royal Sovereign*) class battleships, and an aircraft carrier, together with cruisers and destroyers. In the meantime, Pound believed that moving the 'R' class battleships to the Indian Ocean would deter Japan from sending any of its capital ships into the area, while the presence of a battlecruiser and an aircraft carrier would deter Japanese cruisers from attacking British commerce. Pound also suggested that if the government's principal objective was to deter Japan from entering the war at all, the battleships *Nelson* and *Rodney*, a battle-cruiser and an aircraft carrier might be dispatched to Singapore before any other movements took

1. Minute by Tom Phillips, 5 July 1939, ADM 1/9767.

2. War Memorandum (Eastern), Section XVI, July 1939, ADM 1/9767. These changes were approved by both Pound and Phillips. See also revisions in ADM 116/3863.

3. See COS 928, 'The Situation in the Far East,' 18 June 1939, CAB 53/50.

4. See the COS's 'Far East Appreciation', COS (40) 592 (Revise), 15 Aug. 1940, CAB 80/15.

place. In the event of war, however, this force would fall back on Trincomalee.¹

British naval war planning prior to the dispatch of the *Prince of Wales* was thus far from static. Most of the sweeping generalizations which have been made about the 'Singapore strategy' do not hold good for the period prior to the mid-1930s, when the admiralty did expect to send a large, balanced fleet to Singapore, let alone for the years 1937–41. The Admiralty's war plans placed greater emphasis on economic pressure than sea battles and envisaged the employment of fleets which ranged, in British eyes, from pitifully small to overwhelmingly powerful. For much of 1939–41, when the 'Singapore strategy' was still allegedly exercising its stifling grip on the naval mind, service planners did not count on an eastern fleet operating from Singapore at all. In the decade prior to the Pacific war, naval leaders were acutely aware of the difficulties they would face in a war with Japan. Rather than burying their heads in the sand and clinging to a strategy that all logic should have revealed as hopeless, they lobbied for the resources they needed and re-drafted their plans in light of changing circumstances.

The opprobrium heaped on the navy's pre-war planning has made it easy to suggest a link between those plans and the fate of Force Z. According to Arthur Marder, for example, the dispatch of these ships 'goes to show how a strongly rooted mode of thought persists regardless of developments'. Paul Haggie contends that the loss of these vessels, 'in pursuit of an obsolete maritime strategy with inadequate resources, was no chance occurrence but a tragically apposite conclusion to Britain's efforts to defend her position in the Far East.'² These charges fail to distinguish between naval and civilian decision-makers, who are conveniently lumped together when blame is being assigned. Thus, even historians who acknowledge that the admiralty opposed the movement of the *Prince of Wales* to Singapore still imply that the navy's other errors were so serious that it must share in the blame for the disaster which followed. The navy's critics also assume that in 1941 Britain employed two capital ships for the purposes for which it had once earmarked an entire fleet. In fact, these ships were sent for entirely different reasons. Neither Churchill nor the Admiralty considered them to be a substitute for the balanced fleet envisaged in pre-war plans. And while Churchill thought that these vessels might act as a 'flying squadron' in the event of war, the Admiralty did not. Pound and Phillips gave this idea short shrift in the summer of 1939 and they had no desire to revive it in October 1941.

The assumption that the navy's pre-war errors were so serious that they *must* be linked to its initial wartime disasters has also led to the charge that contempt for Japanese fighting capabilities was an important

1. Pound to Churchill, 28 July 1941, Churchill, *Second World War*, III, pp. 769–73; Marder, *Old Friends*, p. 220.

2. Marder, *Old Friends*, p. 241; Haggie, *Britannia*, p. 211.

factor in Britain's 'reliance on inadequate military forces in the Far East, which ended in the shocking fate of Force Z'.¹ This claim is also unfounded. There was indeed a tendency in naval circles during the 1930s to underestimate the quality of the Japanese navy, and in particular its many technical accomplishments and major developments in its tactical thought.² But while the navy's propensity to underrate its Japanese opponents undoubtedly resulted in its forces experiencing tactical surprises off the coasts of Malaya and Indonesia in 1941–2, there is no link between these mistakes and the placement of weak forces in eastern waters. Britain did not choose to rely on inadequate forces in this region – this was forced upon it by circumstances and the dictates of grand strategy. Leading decision-makers regarded the resources available for the Far East in 1941 as being inadequate in the event of war, and Force Z was never expected to face the full strength of the enemy. In certain circumstances, planners assumed that they could afford a slight inferiority in capital ships at Japan's selected moment, but only if this could not be avoided. If a superior fleet could be sent to the Far East, the Admiralty always intended that it would be, and it always assumed that it would require a force numerically stronger than the Japanese fleet to adopt an offensive strategy. There was never any question of holding back battleships out of contempt for Japanese fighting abilities. The Admiralty thought that it could accomplish more with relatively weak forces than it actually proved able to do, but this belief was not the reason why only weak forces were employed.³

If the navy escapes responsibility for sending Force Z to Singapore, the same cannot be said of Britain's civilian decision-makers, who had a long history of employing warships for political purposes in peacetime. The navy was the most visible symbol of British power and prestige abroad during the interwar period and there were few in Whitehall who would have questioned the link between naval strength and national influence, even if they were not prepared to go as far as Admiral Sir Charles Madden's claim that the navy was 'the chief sanction of our Foreign Policy, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that every Foreign Office telegram is backed by it.'⁴

The routine movements and dispositions of minor warships and detached naval squadrons did not normally have a bearing on great issues

1. Wesley Wark, 'In Search of a Suitable Japan: British Naval Intelligence in the Pacific before the Second World War', *Intelligence and National Security*, 1 (May 1986), pp. 206–7.

2. Geoffrey Till, 'Perceptions of Naval Power Between the Wars: The British Case', *Estimating Foreign Military Power*, ed. Peter Towle (London: Croom Helm, 1982) and Marder, *Old Friends*, Chapter XII.

3. On the links between intelligence assessments of Japan, British naval war planning, and the dispatch of Force Z, see Christopher Bell, 'The Royal Navy, War Planning and Intelligence Between the Wars', *Intelligence and the International System, 1870–1970*, ed. Jennifer Siegel and Peter Jackson (New York: Praeger, 2001).

4. 'Notes by the First Sea Lord', 5 July 1929, Ramsay MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/267.

of peace and war, but it was widely thought that by 'showing the flag' in distant waters these vessels would bolster Britain's national and naval prestige, stimulate trade, and ensure the security of British interests and nationals abroad. How to use the navy as a diplomatic tool in peacetime could be a complicated matter, however, when the disposition of major fleet units was involved. The Admiralty always regarded its main fleet as the most effective deterrent to hostile powers and was loathe to disperse its forces for diplomatic effect. As long as foreigners knew that the navy could respond promptly to an attack on British interests, it assumed that the threat was unlikely to materialize. Politicians and diplomats generally shared these views, but were more likely to consider the movement of major warships as a means of sending signals to both friends and potential enemies. This was especially true in the case of Japan.

The idea of modifying Japan's aggressive behaviour by strengthening Britain's naval forces in the Far East was frequently broached prior to the outbreak of the Pacific war. The matter was first given serious consideration in 1937, when a cabinet committee recommended the dispatch of two battleships to the Far East in order to stop Japanese interference with British shipping in the region. According to Sir Alexander Cadogan, the deputy under-secretary for foreign affairs, 'it was well known that until capital ships arrived in the Far East no difference would be made regarding our situation *vis-à-vis* Japan, as at the moment the Japanese were a first class naval power and we were a second class naval power in that area, and the despatch of cruisers would merely improve our prestige locally.'¹ Chatfield, the First Sea Lord, strongly opposed the idea, however, on the grounds that such a weak force would only invite attack by offering Japan 'a possibility of defeating the divided British forces in detail'. If capital ships were to be dispatched, he insisted that they must be 'in sufficient strength to defeat the full strength of the Japanese Navy'.²

The eastward movement of capital ships was proposed again in November 1938 by Sir Josiah Crosby, the British minister at Bangkok, who felt that such a move would help to 'recover a measure of that prestige which we have been losing to Siam by comparison with our more blatant and brutally forceful opponents'. Crosby later asserted that what was wanted 'in this part of the world is a real sight of the British Navy in real force here and now, and less of indefinite assurances that we shall see it when the time comes.'³ Sir Robert Craigie, Britain's ambassador to Japan, also felt that the dispatch of capital ships 'at this

1. Committee on British Shipping in the Far East, hereafter FES (37) 1st Mtg, 8 Sept. 1937, CAB 27/634.

2. FES (37) 4, 'Reinforcement of British Naval Forces in the Far East', memo. by Chatfield, 11 Sep. 1937, CAB 27/634.

3. Crosby to Foreign Office [FO], 7 Nov. 1938 and 17 Feb. 1939, FO 371/23544; minute by Head of M branch, 16 Dec. 1938, ADM 1/9909.

juncture would afford a powerful deterrent against Japanese co-operation with the axis Powers.' In his view, the Admiralty's policy of concentrating its forces in European waters had 'created here a false impression of British naval **impotence** in Far Eastern waters but there is still time to destroy this impression even on the assumption that no more than three capital ships could be spared for the purpose at present.'¹

Foreign Office officials agreed that placing capital ships at Singapore in peacetime would provide a powerful deterrent to Japan, but worried that this would weaken Britain's position in Europe.² They only approached the Admiralty after a lengthy memorandum by one of the Foreign Office's legal advisors, G. G. Fitzmaurice, argued that even a small fleet at Singapore could 'produce a very great, and probably a decisive, deterrent effect', and that such a force could be provided if the five *Royal Sovereign* ('R') class battleships were not scrapped as planned in 1942-4. These ships were too old to be of much use in European waters, Fitzmaurice conceded, but they might still have a role to play in the Far East:

To put it at its lowest, it would seem that these five ships would be better than nothing at Singapore. If the alternative is to scrap them altogether, would it not be better to keep them and put them in the Far East for what effect they can produce? At least we should be no worse off than we are at present when we have no capital ships there, and we may be considerably better off, for . . . these ships [would] produce at least some appreciable deterrent effect . . .³

The Admiralty's reaction was mixed. Backhouse, the new First Sea Lord, accepted that a small force of capital ships 'should be quite capable not only of looking after itself but also of safeguarding our trade and our communications', but he had 'no use' for the 'suggestion to send out the 5 Royal Sovereigns, which are too slow and unsuited for that part of the world'.⁴ He also did not think the time was right to send *any* reinforcements to the Far East given the current shortage of operational battleships and the declining political situation in Europe. Backhouse admitted that he had 'often thought that we should "show" our Fleet more than we have done in recent years, but one "crisis" after another and our large Capital Ship reconstruction programme has left us nothing to spare in the way of capital ships. . . . The moral to be drawn from the situation we now find ourselves in is that our foreign policy should be largely governed by the strength of the Navy.'⁵

1. Craigie to FO, 23 March 1939, ADM 116/4087.

2. Nicholls minute, 23 Jan. 1939, FO 371/23544.

3. 'Memorandum respecting the proposal to station a British Battle Squadron permanently at Singapore', 27 Jan. 1939, FO 371/23544; *Documents on British Foreign Policy* (London: HMSO, 1974) series III, 8, appendix 1; R. J. Pritchard, *Far Eastern Influence upon British Strategy Towards the Great Powers, 1937-39* (New York: Garland, 1987), pp. 133-7; Haggie, *Britannia*, pp. 130-2.

4. Backhouse minute, 24 March 1939, ADM 1/9909.

5. Backhouse minutes, 16 Feb., 1 March, and 24 March 1939, ADM 1/9909.

The Admiralty's opposition was once again decisive, but the idea of maintaining a small fleet in the Far East continued to appeal to civilian decision-makers even after the onset of the European war. In November 1940, for example, R.A. Butler, the parliamentary under-secretary at the Foreign Office, suggested that a battlecruiser and an aircraft carrier at Ceylon might be 'useful in connexion with current difficulties in India' and 'strategically well placed to reinforce the Far East if the occasion arose'.

Meanwhile they would have a stimulating effect upon the morale not only of countries such as Indo-China, Thailand and the Netherlands East Indies which are most susceptible to Japanese pressure, but also upon the people of China and upon our own peoples in Malaya and Burma. The despatch of the ships would also hearten Australia and New Zealand and help to reassure them as to the safety of their lines of communication with Africa, the Middle East and Europe.¹

The Australian government also routinely lobbied for the dispatch of capital ships to Singapore. In December 1940, Sir Robert Menzies, the Australian Prime Minister, pressed Churchill for the transfer of three or four vessels to Singapore from the Mediterranean fleet. When Menzies visited London in March 1941, he again urged the admiralty to reinforce its naval forces in the Far East. This appeal was renewed in May, following a reduction in American naval strength in the Pacific, and again in August, when Menzies telegraphed to Churchill that 'an early despatch of capital ships east of Suez would itself be [a] most powerful deterrent and first step [towards a fleet of five capital ships].'²

Prior to the arrival of this telegram, the British government had successfully resisted Australian pleas for the dispatch of battleships to Singapore. Churchill justified the risks being run in the region by the need to concentrate British and Dominion resources on securing the defeat of Germany and the improbability of war with Japan. The latter calculation may be attributed in large measure to Churchill's long-standing blind spot to Far-Eastern dangers. As Chancellor of the Exchequer during the 1920s, Churchill was already inclined to downplay the Japanese threat to British interests:

A war with Japan! But why should there be a war with Japan? I do not believe there is the slightest chance of it in our lifetime . . . Japan is at the other end of the world. She cannot menace our vital security in any way. . . . The only war it would be worth our while to fight would be to prevent an invasion of Australia, and that I am certain will never happen in any period, even the most remote,

1. Far Eastern Committee paper, FE (40) 65, R. A. Butler memo., 'Far Eastern Situation', 23 Nov. 1940, CAB 96/1.

2. Menzies to Churchill, Dec. 1940, cited in Marder, pp. 215–20; COS (41)80(O), 'Despatch of a Fleet to the Far East', 18 May 1941; Menzies to Churchill, 11 Aug. 1941, PRO, Prime Minister's Office Papers, hereafter PREM 3/156/1.

which we or our children need foresee. I am therefore convinced that war with Japan is not a reasonable possibility any reasonable Government need take into account.¹

Fifteen years later, as First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill still considered the Japanese threat both distant and manageable. During discussions with representatives of the Australian and New Zealand governments in November 1939, for example, Churchill emphasized the great difficulties Japan would face in a siege of Singapore, 'a fortress armed with five 15-inch guns, and garrisoned by nearly 20 000 men.' In a memorandum later circulated to the war cabinet, he argued that as long as a strong British fleet could be dispatched to Singapore, Japanese operations to capture it would be doomed to failure. 'It is not considered possible,' he concluded, 'that the Japanese, who are a prudent people and reserve their strength for the command of the Yellow Seas and China, in which they are fully occupied, would embark upon such a mad enterprise.' *It appeared even less likely that they would risk an invasion of Australia or New Zealand, an operation more difficult than the capture of Singapore.* Nevertheless, in the event of a serious Japanese attack developing, he reassured the Dominion representatives that 'our duty to our kith and kin would take precedence' over Britain's commitments in the Mediterranean.²

As Prime Minister, Churchill's attention remained fixed on the war with Germany and Italy. He had no intention of denuding the Mediterranean of warships except in the event of a full-scale invasion of Australia, and little desire to transfer even modest naval reinforcements to Singapore as long as Britain and Japan were not actually at war. When Menzies requested the transfer of capital ships to Singapore in December 1940, for example, he was informed that this could only be done 'by ruining the Mediterranean situation. This I am sure you would not want to do unless or until the Japanese danger becomes far more menacing than at present.'³ Over six months elapsed before Churchill would consider the transfer of capital ships to Singapore.

On 25 August 1941, the Prime Minister informed the Admiralty that it 'should be possible in the near future to place a deterrent squadron in the Indian Ocean'. In his view, such a force 'should consist of the smallest number of the best ships. We have only to remember all the preoccupations which are caused us by the *Tirpitz* . . . to see what an effect would be produced upon the Japanese Admiralty by the presence of a small but very powerful and fast force in Eastern waters.' Churchill therefore favoured the dispatch of one of Britain's new *King George V* class battleships to serve as the nucleus of a 'formidable, fast, high-class

1. Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill* (London: Heinemann, 1976), V, p. 76.

2. Visits of Ministers from Dominions, hereafter DMV (39) 8th Mtg, 20 Nov. 1939, ADM 1/11062; war cabinet memo., 21 Nov. 1939, CAB 66/3; *Churchill War Papers*, ed. Martin Gilbert (New York: Norton, 1993-2000) I, pp. 401-3.

3. Churchill to Menzies, 8 Dec. 1940, *Churchill War Papers*, II, p. 1187-8.

squadron', which he hoped to have operating in 'the triangle Aden-Singapore-Simonstown' as early as October 1941.

The navy was unenthusiastic about these proposals and insisted on retaining all of its modern battleships in home waters in the event of a breakout by the powerful new German battleship *Tirpitz*. On 28 August, Pound informed Churchill of the admiralty's plans to create a balanced Far Eastern fleet by March 1942. Between mid-September 1941 and early January 1942, four of the unmodernized 'R' class battleships would be sent to the Indian Ocean, where they would initially serve as troop convoy escorts; and between November 1941 and mid-January 1942, the battleships *Nelson* and *Rodney* and the battle-cruiser *Renown* would move to either Trincomalee or Singapore. With the addition of an aircraft carrier, cruisers and destroyers, these vessels would ultimately form a balanced fleet which could be stationed at Singapore. In the meantime, Pound hoped that the presence of heavy ships in the Indian Ocean would 'go some way to meet the wishes of Australia and New Zealand for the Far East to be reinforced' and deter Japan from sending battleships or large cruisers into the Indian Ocean in the event of war.

Although there was much to be said for these plans, Churchill was swift to reject them. 'It is surely a faulty disposition', he complained on 29 August, 'to create in the Indian Ocean a fleet considerable in numbers, costly in maintenance and man-power, but consisting entirely of slow, obsolescent, or unmodernized ships which can neither fight a fleet action with the main Japanese force nor act as a deterrent upon his modern fast, heavy ships, if used singly or in pairs as raiders.' More importantly, he suggested that Japan would be unwilling to contemplate war with the 'combination now forming against her of the United States, Great Britain, and Russia, while already occupied in China'. It was very likely, he claimed, that Japan 'will negotiate with the United States for at least three months without making any further aggressive move or joining the Axis actively. Nothing would increase her hesitation more than the appearance of the force I mentioned, and above all of a K.G.V. This might indeed be a decisive deterrent.'¹

Churchill was willing to consider the dispatch of capital ships to the Far East in August 1941 because the tightening of Anglo-American economic sanctions against Japan after the occupation of French Indo-China in July 1941 had led to a sharp deterioration in relations between the Anglo-Saxon powers and Japan. The temptation for Japan to solve its problems by force of arms was greater than ever, and the possibility of a Japanese attack could not be ignored. Parallel to this, however, British leaders were confident that active American support would be forthcoming in the event of a Japanese attack on British

1. Churchill to Pound, 25 and 29 Aug. 1941, Churchill, *Second World War*, III, pp. 768–73.

interests, and this was expected this to act as a restraint on Japan.¹ As early as April 1941, Churchill had insisted that it was 'very unlikely' that 'Japan will enter the war either if the United States have come in, or if Japan thinks they would come in, consequent on a Japanese declaration of war.' Moreover, he told the fighting services that it 'may be taken as almost certain that the entry of Japan into the war would be followed by the immediate entry of the United States on our side.'² These views were strengthened in the months prior to August 1941.³ From Churchill's perspective, therefore, the time had come to dispatch capital ships to Singapore: this move would not only mollify the Australians, but, more importantly, it would send the right signals to both the United States and Japan.

Speed was therefore an essential element of Churchill's proposals. The messages exchanged with the admiralty at the end of August make clear, however, that the Prime Minister and his naval advisers were working to entirely different timetables. Notably, Churchill's memorandum of 29 August did not make any reference to the Admiralty's long-term goals; its criticisms were directed solely at Pound's immediate plans to employ the four 'R's as convoy escorts in the Indian Ocean. This move was, from the Admiralty's perspective, only an interim measure. Once these ships were reinforced they would have formed the backbone of a fleet which might have been expected to engage a large Japanese force under favourable conditions. This mattered little to Churchill, however, because he was not looking that far ahead: he wanted capital ships in the Far East immediately. The need for speed also dictated the composition of the proposed reinforcement. If only a small force could be employed in the short term, then a fast, new battleship would be far more likely to impress observers than a squadron of old, slow battleships which had nearly been consigned to the scrapheap only two years before.

The Admiralty was not persuaded by Churchill's argument⁴, and the matter was dropped until September 1941, when it was revived by the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. Like Churchill, Eden and the Foreign Office were optimistic that Japan could be deterred from war. On 12 September the Foreign Secretary informed Churchill that the Japanese were 'hesitating', but that their 'better mood has only been brought about by the contemplation of the forces that may confront them'.

1. David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance 1937-41* (London: Europa Publications Ltd, 1981).

2. Churchill memo, 28 April 1941, PREM 3/156/6.

3. For example, he informed the COS in July that 'Japan will not declare war upon us at the present juncture, nor if the United States enters the war on our side. . . . I do not consider that a war between Britain and Japan is likely at the present time. If contrary to the above views Japan should attack us, I am of the opinion that the United States would enter the war as the weight upon us would clearly be too great.' COS (41)139(O), 16 July 1941, CAB 80/58.

4. Gilbert, *Churchill*, VI, p. 1256; Pound to Churchill, 29 Aug. 1941, ADM 199/1934.

Russia, the United States, China and the British Empire, to say nothing of the Dutch, is more than this probably over-valued military power is prepared to challenge. Our right policy is, therefore, clearly to keep up the pressure. . . . We want the Japanese to feel that we are in a position to play our hand from strength.¹

Eden and Churchill discussed the Far Eastern situation that day over lunch. According to Eden's diary, 'Winston insisted that we could now put pressure on Japs.'

I agree in the sense that they are beginning to understand their isolation, but process must take a little longer. Nothing could help it more than arrival of *modern* battleship or two at Singapore. We agreed that 'R' ships such as Admiralty propose is a weak compromise. I told him that politically I had rather not have them. Modern battleship, Carrier and Battle Cruiser or nothing we agreed.²

This enthusiasm for naval reinforcements was bolstered by the knowledge that the defensive position of the Anglo-Saxon powers in the Far East was increasing. The transfer of American B-17 bombers to the Philippines at this time, together with the gradual increase of British air strength in Malaya, were seen as significant deterrents to Japanese aggression. In early October, the desirability of impressing the Japanese by a further show of force was backed up by leading civilian and military figures in the Far East, who emphasized the 'propaganda value of even one or two battleships at Singapore'.³ It was the fall of the Konoye government in Japan, however, that made a decision on naval movements critical. On 16 October, Eden warned Churchill that the new Japanese government would probably be under the influence of 'extreme elements', but that it should still be possible to deter them from war. 'There is nothing yet to show in which direction they will move, if any', he observed. 'But it is no doubt true that the stronger the joint front the A.B.C.D. [America, Britain, China, Dutch] powers can show, the greater the deterrent to Japanese action.' He therefore advised that the 'possibility of capital ship reinforcements to the Far East . . . has now become more urgent, and I should be glad if it could be discussed at the Defence Committee tomorrow afternoon'.⁴

This matter was duly taken up the next day. Over the course of two meetings⁵, Pound, Phillips and A. V. Alexander, the First Lord of the Admiralty, fought to prevent the dispatch of a deterrent squadron

1. Eden to Churchill, 12 Sept. 1941, FO 371/27981; Antony Best, *Britain, Japan, and Pearl Harbor* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 172.

2. Eden Diary, 12 Sept. 1941, Papers of the first Earl of Avon, Special Collections Department, University of Birmingham.

3. JP(41)816, 'Japan: Our Future Policy', 7 Oct. 1941, annex I, CAB 84/35.

4. Eden to Churchill, 16 Oct. 1941, Defence Committee papers, hereafter DO, DO(41)21, CAB 69/3.

5. DO(41)65, 17 Oct. 1941, CAB 69/2; DO(41)66, 20 October 1941, CAB 69/8.

including the *Prince of Wales* to Singapore. All of the *King George Vs* were needed in home waters, they claimed, while the placement of a single new battleship at Singapore would do little to deter Japan, which could 'easily afford to put four modern ships with any big convoy destined for an attack in Southern Waters'. In their view, the only real deterrent was a fleet of at least six battleships. Such a force would compel the Japanese to detach a large proportion of their fleet for any southward advance, leaving Japan itself exposed to the American fleet at Pearl Harbor. The Prime Minister, however, insisted that the immediate dispatch of a fast striking force would be the best deterrent, and was 'scathing in his comments on the Admiralty attitude to this matter'.¹

Churchill's objections to the use of older ships in the Far East remained unchanged since his exchange with the admiralty in August. A large force of old, unmodernized battleships could not engage the full weight of the Japanese fleet, he maintained, nor run away from a superior force. It would also be too slow to catch Japanese raiders in the Indian Ocean. A fast, powerful capital ship, on the other hand, could hunt down and destroy such vessels, and, by its mere presence in the Far East, tie down a much larger number of Japanese battleships. If the German battleship did break out into the Atlantic, Churchill was confident that carrier-borne aircraft could 'slow her up to become a prey for the heavy metal of our Capital Ships.'

Eden also urged the Defence Committee to dispatch a modern ship. Unlike Churchill, however, he did not dwell on the question of what this vessel might hope to accomplish in the event of war breaking out, but rather on the need to deter Japan from entering the war in the first place. The dispatch of a 'modern ship, such as the *Prince of Wales*, to the Far East would have a far greater effect politically', he argued, 'than the presence in those waters of a number of the last war's battleships. If the *Prince of Wales* were to call at Cape Town on her way to the Far East, news of her movements would quickly reach Japan and the deterrent effect would begin from that date.' These arguments were well received by the remainder of the committee and Pound suggested a compromise by which the *Prince of Wales* would proceed immediately to Cape Town, and any further movement would be considered in light of the situation prevailing when she arrived there. This was accepted by the committee.² There is no record of the *Prince of Wales's* ultimate destination being reconsidered. This vessel, together with the *Repulse*, reached Singapore on 2 December.

The destruction of both vessels little more than a week later has focused attention on the deliberations between August and October 1941 which led to their despatch, and in particular Churchill's disagreements with Pound over questions of naval strategy. What is often

1. Phillips to Pound, 17 Oct. 1941, ADM 178/322.

2. DO(41)66, 20 Oct. 1941, CAB 69/8.

overlooked, however, is that Churchill was motivated primarily by political considerations. The Prime Minister was determined to send the *Prince of Wales* to the Far East not because he expected it to fight, but because he thought that its presence would make fighting unnecessary. In the process, he overestimated what a modern battleship could accomplish in the event of war and the impact it would have on Japanese naval strategy, but that mistake was not the primary reason it was sent.

Churchill's most influential critic has been Stephen Roskill, whose official history contained the first detailed account of the decision-making process which led to the dispatch of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to Singapore. Roskill glossed over the political considerations which motivated the Defence Committee in October 1941 and exaggerated the significance of Churchill's shortcomings as a naval strategist. The first draft of *The War At Sea*, which was in proof form by 1953, asserted:

We to day are able to see that, quite apart from the fact that it was very improbable that the movement would successfully accomplish its designed political purpose, there are other grounds on which it must be condemned. From the point of view of maritime strategy there were, as the Naval Staff repeatedly represented, grave objections . . .¹

This view drew fire immediately. Commodore G. R. G. Allen, the naval adviser for Churchill's memoirs, complained to Roskill that he had 'overweighted' the 'strategical argument' and failed to pay sufficient attention to 'the supreme responsibility of Ministers'.² The Cabinet Secretary, Sir Norman Brook, agreed that 'in the original text of this chapter, "political" reasons were written down and too much emphasis laid on the strategic proprieties.' Allen and Brook both pressed Roskill to make changes to his text.³ As a result, the most explicit criticisms of the Prime Minister were dropped from the published version. However, Roskill's narrative still revolved around the debate between Churchill and the admiralty over naval strategy, rather than political considerations.

Churchill's memoirs, the relevant volume of which had been published three years earlier, did little to help his case. The political factors which had motivated the Defence Committee in the autumn of 1941 were not emphasized in this account, yet the Prime Minister's correspondence with Admiral Pound in August 1941 was published in full. This provided further ammunition to those who have argued that Churchill was motivated principally by his views on naval strategy; that he had pressed these views on the Admiralty for months before

1. CAB 103/327.

2. Minute by Allen to Churchill, 24 Aug. 1953, CAB 103/327.

3. Norman Brook to Churchill, 2 Sept. 1953, CAB 103/327; also see Brook to Acheson, 23 July 1953, CAB 103/326.

finally wearing down Pound's opposition; and that the role of other decision-makers in this process was insignificant.

Churchill had clearly failed to anticipate the charges that would be raised by Roskill and later critics. When the critical passages in the official history were brought to his attention in 1953, he complained that this work was 'very misleading' and 'devised with the intention or at least with the effect of throwing the blame upon civilian interference with the Naval Staff's wisdom for political or diplomatic reasons.' However, even at this date the Prime Minister was not prepared to concede that his views on naval strategy had been mistaken. 'When one has lived through the anxieties which a couple of first-class ships can produce as long as their whereabouts at the moment are not known, one does not underrate the fact that similar reactions may be excited from the enemy.' He insisted that his goal had been for the ships of Force Z to 'go to Singapore, [that they] should be known to have arrived at Singapore, and should then disappear into the immense archipelago which lies within a thousand miles of it. Thus they would have exerted all the deterrent effects upon the Japanese in any moment to attack which the TIRPITZ and at other times other vessels have brought to bear upon us.'¹

Roskill's account was also influential in minimizing the role of other British politicians, and in particular Anthony Eden, in the decision-making process. The Prime Minister had actually been prepared to drop the matter of naval reinforcements for the Far East in August 1941 when Pound insisted that the navy could not meet his wishes, and it was Eden who put the matter back on the agenda in October. This is seldom noted. Eden did not challenge the Admiralty's views on naval strategy during the Defence Committee's deliberations, and he has faced little criticism for his part in this episode.² And while the Committee's minutes are largely silent on the views of its other members, there is no evidence that they had to be overborne by Churchill. Indeed, Churchill's views on the value of two capital ships against Japan in wartime were not even necessarily a critical factor in the Defence Committee's willingness to overrule the Admiralty. Churchill probably did no more than raise vague doubts as to the validity of the navy's arguments, which may have made it easier for committee members to reach a decision based on the *political* desirability of sending a new battleship to the Far East. Given the inclination of civilian decision-makers to view battleships as symbols of British power and prestige, Eden's arguments, backed by the expertise

1. Churchill to Allen, 11 Aug. 1953, CAB 103/327.

2. Eden glosses over this episode in his memoirs, admitting that he was the one to place the question of naval reinforcements on the agenda, but suggesting that he and his colleagues were swayed by Churchill's arguments. Anthony Eden, *The Reckoning* (London: Cassell, 1965), pp. 313–14. Elisabeth Baker, *Churchill and Eden at War* (London: Macmillan, 1978) contains no mention of the decision to send the *Prince of Wales* to Singapore, and the standard biographies of Eden have also been silent on this issue.

of the Foreign Office, probably carried at least as much weight on this occasion as Churchill's.

Churchill's willingness to use battleships to deter Japan from war has also been attacked. There has been much confusion over how the deterrent was expected to work. It is sometimes asserted that this move was nothing more than a giant bluff – that Churchill believed Japan would hesitate to declare war on Britain because it feared the ability of these two ships to frustrate Japanese operations. However, the deterrent value of these ships was thought to derive from what they symbolized, rather than what they might do. In 1941 Churchill and Eden shared the same basic views on the political uses of battleships as the diplomats and politicians who had urged the dispatch of capital ships to the Far East between 1937 and 1941. In their eyes, even a small force of capital ships could demonstrate resolve, bolster British prestige, reassure friends, and threaten potential enemies. Prior to mid-1941 Churchill had resisted the employment of capital ships in the Far East because he did not think a deterrent was necessary. This was no longer the case during the latter half of 1941, when Churchill, and later Eden, concluded that the presence of a ship like the *Prince of Wales* at Singapore would symbolize Britain's still considerable national strength, rather than reveal the shortcomings of its present naval capabilities. More importantly, it would emphasize the close relationship that was developing between Britain and the United States.

It should also be remembered that Force Z was not the only deterrent employed at this juncture. During the last months of peace in the Pacific, London also strengthened its defences in Malaya, tightened economic sanctions against Japan, and asked the Canadian government to reinforce the hopelessly exposed garrison at Hong Kong. This was all part of the attempt to create an impression of growing British strength and resolve in the Far East. But even this was not expected to deter war. Ultimately, it was the *combined* strength of Britain and the United States that was counted on to restrain Japan. British efforts to impress Tokyo were therefore also aimed at the United States. By the summer of 1941, Churchill and the Foreign Office believed they must follow the United States's lead in matters relating to the Far East.¹ Keeping in step with American efforts to deter Japan seemed to offer the best means of presenting the sort of united front which would overawe decision-makers in Tokyo, and of encouraging Anglo-American collaboration. Churchill's speech of 10 November 1941 at the Guildhall, which promised British support for the United States in event of a Japanese attack, was also part of this attempt to align British and American policies in the Far East so closely that both the Americans and the

1. Best, *Pearl Harbor*, Chapter 8; Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978), pp. 71–4.

Japanese would take Anglo-American co-belligerency for granted.¹ These efforts were not lost on decision-makers in Washington. In November 1941, for example, President Roosevelt suggested to Churchill that Japan might still be deterred by the United States's 'continuing efforts to strengthen our defences in the Philippine Islands, paralleled by similar efforts by you in the Singapore area, which will tend to increase Japan's distant hesitation'.²

Although Churchill skilfully advanced the cause of Anglo-American cooperation in the Far East, these efforts failed to avert war. Why did deterrence fail? From the Admiralty's perspective the problem was credibility. Between 1937 and 1941 naval leaders attached more weight to the capabilities of their Far Eastern forces than to their symbolic value. They knew that two capital ships could do no serious harm to Japan and were just as likely to demonstrate weakness and vulnerability as they were resolve and strength. This view was justified, but it has little bearing on the question of Japan's decision for war, which was not influenced either way by the movement of Force Z, or by any other British measures in the Far East.³ American efforts to build up a sufficient deterrent in the Far East also failed. However, the problem was not 'illogical reasoning', as some have claimed.⁴ Churchill rightly judged that the Americans were serious about standing up to the Japanese, that they were prepared to support Britain in the event of war, that Japan could be crushed by the enormous military potential of the United States, and that the Japanese were aware of these things. The only flaw in his reasoning was one widely shared by informed British and American decision-makers: thinking that Japan would give in to Anglo-American pressure rather than begin a war it could not hope to win. Japan's leaders took a very different view of the situation, concluding that war was not only a viable option, but the best one open to them.

The controversy over the dispatch of Force Z was recently given a new twist by Ian Cowman, who claimed that the Admiralty was not defeated over this issue, but actually outmanoeuvred Churchill to further its long term objectives.⁵ Cowman's argument stems from the confusion which

1. *War Speeches of the Rt Hon Winston S. Churchill*, ed. Charles Eade (London: Cassell, 1952), II, pp. 101–5.

2. Roosevelt to Churchill, 7 Nov. 1941, *Churchill and Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence* (London: Collins, 1984), I, p. 267.

3. Japan's leaders were aware of Britain's efforts to strengthen its position in the Far East. At the Imperial Conference of 1 December 1941, for example, Admiral Nagano, the chief of the Japanese naval staff, noted that the 'British navy has recently acquired reserve power and is gradually adding to its strength in the Orient. At present they are sending the following into the Indian Ocean area: two battleships for certain, and four battleships less certain.' Nagano also noted the movement of Canadian troops to Hong Kong, but concluded that these measures did 'not call for changes in the deployment of our forces. It will have no effect on our operations.' *Japan's Decision for War*, ed. Nobutaka Ike (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1967), pp. 280–1.

4. Thorne, *Allies of a Kind*, p. 4.

5. Ian Cowman, *Dominion or Decline* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), and id., 'Main Fleet to Singapore? Churchill, the Admiralty, and Force Z', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (March 1995), 79–83.

arose following the 20 October meeting of the Defence Committee. The Admiralty, apparently forgetting the compromise by which the *Prince of Wales's* initial destination would be Cape Town, immediately prepared for its transfer to Singapore. Churchill, on the other hand, continued to think that the vessel's ultimate destination was not formally settled. Various mundane explanations have been offered for this discrepancy, such as the admiralty's need to ensure that the facilities at Singapore would be ready to receive capital ships in the event that they were dispatched there.

Cowman, however, thinks differently. Having noted the Admiralty's interest in using Manila as an advanced fleet base during the latter half of 1941, he concludes that Pound's true objective was to build up a British fleet at Manila which could operate north of the Malay barrier. In October 1941, the argument goes, Pound decided that the best way to commit the United States to the defence of British interests in the Far East was by assigning British naval forces to the defence of American possessions in the region. For this purpose a deterrent squadron at Singapore was insufficient; nothing less than a full fleet at Manila would convince the Americans that Britain would adequately defend its position in the Far East. Since Churchill had previously opposed the dispatch of the 'R' class battleships to Singapore, Pound began to commit British forces to the defence of Manila, believing that he could later use this commitment to force Churchill to approve his plans. To conceal this scheme, Pound deliberately provoked Churchill by putting up strong opposition to his cherished goal, the dispatch of the *Prince of Wales*, a matter of great interest to the Prime Minister, but purportedly 'an issue of only conditional concern to the admiralty'. Distracted by this smoke-screen, Churchill failed to realize what the Admiralty was doing until it was too late to stop it.¹

Ian Cowman was the first scholar to take the navy's offensive plans seriously and he correctly noted the Admiralty's interest in Manila during the latter half of 1941. From the Admiralty's perspective, a British fleet at the Philippines was both politically and strategically desirable at this time, as it provided for increased cooperation between the British and American navies, and hence a greater likelihood of US support in the event of war. It was also a logical extension of the navy's pre-war planning. Like the defensive strategy in the most recent War Memorandum (Eastern), a relatively weak fleet operating under land-based air cover in its own waters would protect British interests until more substantial forces could be mustered for offensive operations. The difference between 1937 and 1941 was that the Admiralty now hoped that Manila would serve as its advance base rather than Hong Kong or Borneo, while the presence of a US fleet in the central Pacific reduced the

1. Cowman, 'Main Fleet to Singapore?', p. 88.

likelihood of a British fleet having to face the full might of the Japanese navy.

Cowman, however, has misrepresented the Admiralty's interest in Manila. The few British documents which mention the use of this base prior to 17 October refer only to the strategic advantages for Britain: the Admiralty thought a fleet at Manila would be more secure from attack and better placed to interfere with Japan's maritime communications than a comparable force at Singapore. Cowman correctly noted naval planners' belief that employing Manila would facilitate the formulation of joint Anglo-American war plans, but there is no basis for his assertion that political objectives were foremost in their minds. And even if they were, the Admiralty would not have been so naive as to think that the promise of a British fleet at Manila would guarantee American political and military support. Furthermore, if Pound *did* believe this was a possibility, it is difficult to see why he would have gone to such great lengths to conceal the far-reaching political implications of his plans from Churchill, or have suddenly felt himself better qualified to navigate the complex waters of Anglo-American cooperation.

Cowman also fails to appreciate that the Admiralty only began seriously to explore the possibility of using Manila *after* the decision was taken to send the *Prince of Wales* to the Far East. The Americans were not even informed that this prospect was under consideration until early November. It is at this point that Cowman's logic completely breaks down. If Churchill really was determined to oppose the Admiralty's plans for Manila, he could have vetoed the idea just as easily in November as in October, particularly as the Americans had not yet been formally approached on the matter. Cowman glosses over this critical gap in his argument by suggesting that Churchill could not have disrupted the Admiralty's plans without jeopardizing the 'delicate state of Anglo-American relations at a particularly critical juncture'. Why this should be is not explained. If the Americans did not know that these plans were afoot, they could hardly have been offended by their cancellation, particularly as they had already told the Admiralty that Manila was not sufficiently defended to serve as a wartime base. Even more damaging to Cowman's thesis is the fact that Churchill did not object when the Americans were notified of the Admiralty's plans to build up a fleet there, even though this was the moment when he supposedly discovered Pound's deceit. The suggestion that Churchill did not offer even a mild protest because he was stunned into silence is unconvincing, to say the least. Clearly, Churchill himself did not feel he had been deceived.

Cowman is also untroubled by the abundance of evidence which suggests that the Admiralty was genuinely anxious to keep the *Prince of Wales* close by in the event of a break-out by the *Tirpitz*, and that it feared for the safety of a small, unbalanced force at Singapore.¹ The

1. See in particular Marder, *Old Friends*, pp. 239–41.

Admiralty was, in fact, entirely forthright about its intentions before and during the Defence Committee meeting of 20 October. It wanted a balanced fleet in the Far East, and it had concrete plans to produce one by March 1942. After 20 October, Churchill and Pound did have different views on what was going to happen next, but that is because the Admiralty had by then altered its plans to take account of changed circumstances.

The Prime Minister expected the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to proceed to Singapore to serve as a deterrent and the 'R' class battleships to go to the Indian ocean to perform escort duties. The Admiralty, on the other hand, realized that Churchill would get his way over the *Prince of Wales* and hoped to lessen the danger to this vessel by forming a balanced fleet around it at the earliest opportunity. Rather than concealing his long-term goals from Churchill, Pound reminded him on 20 October that the 'R's were ultimately to form part of a balanced eastern fleet. With the dispatch of the *Prince of Wales* in October, this goal would have appeared more important than ever. And since the Defence Committee had expressed no opinion on the movement of the 'R's to Singapore at some future date, Pound would have felt himself free to transfer these vessels, which he began preparing to do in early November.¹ On 12 November he informed the war cabinet that it would be possible to operate a small fleet of six capital ships along the Malay barrier by January 1942.² This fell short of the Admiralty's original goal, but in the circumstances it was the best that could be managed. Churchill's willingness to endorse this scheme suggests that his real argument with the Admiralty in October was whether the *Prince of Wales* would go *immediately* to Singapore, not what it might do once it was there. Having achieved his goal on 20 October, there was nothing left to fight about and he acceded to the movement of further capital ships to the region.

Cowman's elaborate conspiracy theory to explain the movement of the *Prince of Wales* to Singapore even though the Defence Committee had only agreed to its dispatch as far as Cape Town is less convincing than the explanation offered by Sir Norman Brook in 1953. In a memorandum for the cabinet office's historical branch, Brook noted that at a meeting like the Defence Committee's of 20 October, ministers were 'often reluctant to formulate . . . a firm conclusion contrary to the views expressed on one side of the argument, even though it is clear that the majority are against that view and that their opinion will in the end prevail.'

1. Pound to Admiral Stark, 5 Nov. 1941, Admiralty telegram to British Admiralty Delegation, Washington, ADM 116/4877.

2. Minutes of the War Cabinet, WM 112 Conclusions, 12 Nov. 1941, CAB 65/24; Cowman, 'Main Fleet to Singapore', 93.

It is not uncommon on such occasions for the chairman to find some formula which will allow the meeting to terminate without a specific surrender by those holding the minority view. And when this happens both sides usually realize that a decision has been taken in principle even though the firm final decision has been deferred.

'Though it cannot be proved,' he concluded, 'when Ministers and the COS left the Cabinet Room on 20 October, they all knew that the "Prince of Wales" would go on from Capetown to Singapore unless the situation changed in the meantime.'¹

No clear consensus has emerged on where to place blame for the destruction of Force Z. Churchill has usually been singled out as the main culprit, but the civilian and naval decision-makers of the interwar period are now frequently held to share in a sort of collective guilt for this event, which is seen as the culmination of years of misguided planning. The idea that Britain's naval leaders were guilty by association rests on weak foundations. The navy made many mistakes during the two decades in which it prepared for war with Japan, but this was not one of them. Except for a few months in 1939, the Admiralty consistently opposed the dispatch of anything other than a balanced fleet to the Far East. This goal remained unchanged throughout 1941, and if war had been delayed by even a month it might have been achieved. Pound and Phillips had no desire to send a 'flying squadron' to Singapore in 1941, even though the latter attempted to use his ships in this capacity after war began.

To appreciate why the dispatch of capital ships to Singapore was on the agenda in October 1941 it is necessary to look beyond Churchill's message of 25 August to the Admiralty. The presence of a deterrent force at Singapore held a strong appeal for civilian decision-makers in Britain and Australia from at least 1937. The idea was raised over and over again during the next four years, and took on a life of its own long before Churchill suggested it to the Admiralty. When the issue went to the Defence Committee in 1941, the Prime Minister was determined to place a modern battleship at Singapore as soon as possible. His views on what this force might accomplish in the event of war were unrealistic, but they are less important than his arguments about its potential impact on Japan's decision for peace or war. When Eden reinforced the case for rushing the *Prince of Wales* to Singapore, the civilian members of the Defence Committee agreed that the political advantages of this course were great enough to 'outweigh objections hitherto advanced by the Admiralty'.² They might have been prepared to do so even if Churchill had not challenged the Admiralty's strategic arguments. In any event, this decision was mistaken, but not unreasonable. Other measures were

1. Brook to Acheson, 23 July 1953, CAB 103/326.

2. DO(41)66, 20 Oct. 1941, CAB 69/8.

being taken at this time to improve Britain's defences in the Far East; American support in the region appeared almost certain; and the strength of the US and Britain compared to Japan seemed overwhelming. In these circumstances, there were sound reasons to think that Japan could be deterred, and that the presence of a fast new capital ship at Singapore would contribute to the overall deterrent. The Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary pursued a policy carefully calculated to strengthen Britain's ties with the US and persuade Japanese leaders that they could not profitably embark on war with the British empire. The decision to move the *Prince of Wales* to Singapore must be viewed within this context.

The origins of Force Z lie in the assumptions of British decision-makers about the symbolic value of capital ships and the willingness of Japan's leaders to resort to war. Churchill and Eden erred on both counts, but the question of blame remains a complicated one. The decision to send the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* to Singapore made their destruction possible, even probable, but not inevitable. Churchill may have been unduly optimistic about the ability of such a small squadron to protect British interests in wartime, but this had nothing to do with Phillips' decision to seek out enemy targets on 8 December. The recently promoted Phillips lacked war experience and was notorious for underestimating the vulnerability of capital ships to aircraft. A different commander might not have endangered his ships on such a reckless mission. Force Z was destroyed in circumstances which could have been avoided, and in pursuit of objectives which neither the Admiralty nor Churchill had approved. On two occasions prior to the outbreak of war Pound even suggested to Phillips that he consider taking his ships away from Singapore.¹ When Japan initiated hostilities, Churchill himself believed that these vessels should be moved out of harm's way. His memoirs record how, on the night of 9 December, a meeting, 'mostly Admiralty', was convened in the cabinet war room to consider the naval situation in the Far East. According to Churchill, there was general agreement that these ships 'must go to sea and vanish among the innumerable islands.'

I thought myself that they should go across the Pacific to join what was left of the American Fleet. . . . But as the hour was late we decided to sleep on it, and settle the next morning what to do with the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*. Within a couple of hours they were at the bottom of the sea.²

Churchill was more blunt in 1953. 'The last thing in the world that the Defence Committee wished', he stated, 'was that anything like the movement which Admiral Phillips thought it right to make to intercept

1. On 1 and 3 December. See Correlli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely* (New York: Norton, 1991) pp. 405–6.

2. Churchill, *Second World War*, III, pp. 547–8.

a Japanese invasion force should have been made by his two vessels without even air cover.¹ A distinction might usefully be drawn, therefore, between the decisions which placed two capital ships at Singapore on the eve of war, and subsequent decisions, taken thousands of miles away, which resulted in these ships being caught in the open and without air cover off the coast of Malaya on the morning of 10 December 1941.

U.S. Naval War College

CHRISTOPHER M. BELL

1. Churchill to Allen, 11 Aug. 1953, CAB 103/327.