

The Singapore Maritime Trade Protection Strategy: 1921 and 2023

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Current historiography of the rebalancing of the British Empire's global strategy in the 1920s is incomplete. Their strategy was built on protecting Imperial global maritime trade, itself based on returning global mobility to the fleet and building a fleet base at Singapore to block Japanese fleet entry into the Empire's demographic heartland of the Indian Ocean. This was a Corbettian seapower strategy, now obscured by the events of 1941-42. This article examines the nature of the Singapore strategy as it was developed to allow a new oil-fired fleet to operate as globally as the pre-war coal-fired fleet.

L'historiographie actuelle du rééquilibrage de la stratégie mondiale de l'Empire britannique dans les années 1920 est incomplète. Cette stratégie reposait sur la protection du commerce maritime mondial impérial, lui-même fondé sur le rétablissement de la mobilité de l'escadre à l'échelle mondiale et la construction à Singapour d'une base pour l'escadre visant à bloquer l'entrée de l'escadre japonais au cœur démographique de l'Empire de l'océan Indien. Il s'agissait d'une stratégie corbettienne en matière de puissance maritime, ayant été depuis éclipsée par les événements de 1941-1942. Le présent article porte sur la nature de la stratégie de Singapour telle qu'elle a été élaborée pour permettre à un nouvel escadre alimenté au mazout d'exercer ses activités à l'échelle mondiale tout comme le faisait l'escadre alimenté au charbon d'avant la guerre.

Introduction

This article challenges the lens through which the so-called Singapore strategy has often been viewed – that of the events of 1941-1942. Instead, it examines the role of trade protection in the development of British global strategy in the 1920s and 1930s. This lens makes clear that the Singapore strategy was a seapower strategy aimed at returning global fleet mobility to the Royal Navy and providing a fleet base from which it could protect the British Empire’s Asian and Indian Ocean trade against a North Asian-based threat.¹ This approach illuminates larger and non-Atlantic perspectives based on Britain’s global experience in the era of the two world wars. It also sheds new light on Admiral Jellicoe’s 1919 report to the Commonwealth of Australia, highlighting that the admiral’s central intent was the need for trade protection in light of First World War experiences and the possibility of conflict with Imperial Japan. In the twenty-first century, a broadly similar North Asian based strategic threat has arisen within a similar maritime trade and geographic framework. A similar global strategic mobility is required to address this threat, and this is currently being constructed within such mechanisms as the new Australia, United Kingdom, United States security partnership (AUKUS) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) between the United States, India, Japan, and Australia.²

The Singapore strategy was the major strategic initiative of the British Empire during the early 1920s. It constituted one of the two questions considered by the Committee on Replacement of Fleet Units other than Capital Ships and Singapore (the Clynes Committee) – the considerations of which are crucial to understanding Britain’s global strategy during the interwar period. The Singapore strategy had two strategic aims and one strategic intent. The first aim was to return global mobility to the fleet as it converted from coal firing to oil firing by replacing the global nineteenth century coaling network.³

¹ Professor Andrew Lambert’s definitions are used here as expressed at the three Corbett 100 Conferences 2022-2023. “Seapower” (proper noun) refers to the totality of a nation’s commercial and military activities at sea. “Sea power” refers to the nation’s military and law enforcement activities at sea. “Maritime power” refers to the vast majority of national activities at sea, its commerce in every aspect. This ranges from fisheries to mining, to oil and gas and to the data flowing through undersea cables. Of note, these definitions are now used by the Royal Australian Navy in developing its current Maritime Domain Concept.

² AUKUS is the 2022 relationship between Australia, the US, and UK to share nuclear propulsion and other sensitive technologies. As a result of AUKUS, Australia is endeavouring to build the capability to operate nuclear-powered general-purpose attack submarines. The Quadrilateral is a developing multifaceted security arrangement between Australia, India, Japan, and the US.

³ See S. Gray, *Steam Power and Sea Power: Coal, the Royal Navy, and the British Empire*,

The second aim was the construction of a base able to support the fleet at Singapore in the event of war with Japan. The strategic intent was to prevent Japanese main fleet units from passing through the Malay and Indonesian barriers to attack imperial maritime trade in the Indian Ocean. This strategy was dictated by the geopolitical structure of the Empire, which had two heartlands. The industrial heartland lay in the North Atlantic and was structured around the United Kingdom and Canada. The demographic heartland was the Indian Ocean littoral, which contained two thirds of the empire's population. Geography made the Mediterranean the essential transport link between the imperial industrial and demographic heartlands. These realities shaped the British way of war.

Economic considerations (including economic warfare) lay at the heart of Sir Julian Corbett's understanding of the British way of war.⁴ The Singapore strategy was philosophically attuned to this, using the fleet to achieve a strategic aim with an economic outcome. A fleet based at Singapore represented a denial strategy with offensive potential, masking the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) to prevent its main force from entering the Indian Ocean or attacking the Australian Station.⁵ This achieved an economic aim by protecting imperial maritime trade, which First Sea Lord Beatty explained in detail to the Clynes Committee. The strategy also enabled offensive operations against Japan by a powerful submarine force based at Hong Kong, reinforced firstly by the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and then by the arrival of the main force of the Royal Navy. Philosophically, this was a Corbettian intent, yet it did not exclude fleet actions per the more battle-focused philosophy of Alfred Thayer Mahan.⁶

The British Empire reacted to the changed post-First World War imperial overstretch by developing strategies to make multiple use of limited resources.

c. 1870-1914 (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018). This work describes how the British used coal as a mechanism to reinforce and expand their maritime power.

⁴ A. Lambert, *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 337.

⁵ Minutes of the Clynes Committee Meeting dated 27 February 1924, 380-381, reproduced in, B. Ranft (ed), *The Beatty Papers: Selections from the Private and Official Correspondence and Papers of Admiral of the Fleet Earl Beatty* (Naval Records Society: Scolar Press, 1993), 373-384. It is noteworthy that the Minutes state that "Singapore was well placed ...[and the location of the base] could not be to the south-east as this would leave the gate open into the Indian Ocean..."

⁶ J.B. Hattendorf, "Mahan is not Enough: Conference Themes and Issues," in *Mahan is not Enough: the proceedings of a conference on the works of Sir Julian Corbett and Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond*, eds. J. Goldrick and J.B. Hattendorf (Newport: Naval War College Press, 1993), 7-12. This conference proceedings marks an important point in establishing that naval strategists create a spectrum of conceptualisation and not mutually exclusive schools of thought. Mahan had a different focus from Corbett as one of his intents had been to influence the US Government of his era to expand the US Navy.

The global institutionalisation of Naval Control of Shipping (NCS) across the empire was part of this – a critical response to a major wartime lesson.⁷ Maritime trade remained foundationally critical. The global shipping industry remained disrupted post-war. In 1922, shipping overcapacity was twelve million tons and overcapacity continued to depress freights until global trade revived and excess tonnage was scrapped.⁸ In 1923, mean freight rates were about sixty to seventy percent below those of 1920 and excessive construction continued, especially in the US.⁹ The post-war economic world was broken into currency trading blocs with a large oversupply of maritime cargo capacity, making nationally flagged merchant fleets more dependent on national and intra-empire trade than they had been before 1914. In 1929, total trade with the UK by the dominions (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Newfoundland, South Africa, and the Irish Free State) was £414,000,000, while dominion and colonial trade with foreign countries (including Canada-United States trade) and inside the empire was £729,000,000. Thus, intra-imperial trade was very significant economically.¹⁰ The Admiralty's Corbettian approach to global trade protection protected all dominion trade equities as a common good.

This approach towards assessing the Singapore strategy contrasts with the standard historiographical lens through which the strategy is seen, which is the fall of Singapore. Most works contain a discussion of Singapore as the Asian fleet base in case of war with Japan and discuss the non-arrival of that fleet. The arrival of HM Ships (HMS) *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* is also discussed as is the way the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) *Genzan*, *Kanoya*, and *Mihoro* Air Groups promptly sank both. What followed was a signal catastrophe to imperial arms and the collapse of the empire in Southeast Asia. Justifiably, the fall of Singapore is extensively explored in scholarship. What is not covered in the historiography is the full nature of the Singapore strategy – that it was one part of a strategic concept to return global mobility to the fleet, the other part being a global oil fuel storage and bunkering system, with the whole concept aimed at protecting imperial maritime trade.¹¹

⁷ Admiral of the Fleet and Viscount of Scapa Jellicoe, *Report of the Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Jellicoe of Scapa on Naval Mission to the Commonwealth of Australia (May-August 1919)*, vol III (Sydney: Government Printer, 1919): 214-219.

⁸ R.W. Johnson, "The Freight Depression," in *Brassey's Naval and Shipping Annual 1923*, eds. E. Richardson and A. Hurd (London: Clowes & Sons, 1923), 209-212.

⁹ Johnson, "The Freight Depression," 210. Compared with 1914, the oversupply of tonnage had increased to 14 million tons.

¹⁰ Admiral Sir H.W. Richmond, *Imperial Defence and Capture at Sea* (London: Hutchison & Co., 1932), 64.

¹¹ W.D. McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942* (London: McMillan, 1979).

Loss of HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*, 10 December 1941. Photograph taken from a Japanese aircraft during the initial high-level bombing attack. *Repulse*, near the bottom of the view, has just been hit by one bomb and experienced several near misses. (Wikimedia Commons)



A re-evaluation based on the original intent of the strategy is overdue. From the viewpoint of the 1920s planning period in which the strategy was built, the intent was to allow an oil-fired fleet to operate as freely as the pre-war coal-fired fleet had done. As a result, the Singapore strategy should be understood as a global mobility strategy with an associated fleet base. This strategic intent meant that the base was just one node in a multinational global strategic burden-sharing project. The strategy was actually successful in its three objectives, for it: 1) returned global strategic mobility to a now oil-fired fleet; 2) secured the Malay-to-Australia archipelagic barrier against passage by major elements of Japanese sea power; and 3) protected maritime trade in the demographic heartland of the Empire. The global oil fuel network, combined with the base, enabled a one-hemisphere navy to meet two hemispheres of strategic responsibility, although not simultaneously, serving as strategic answer to imperial overstretch, which explains the strength of dominion and colonial support for the Singapore strategy.

The Role of the Base in War

The Singapore strategy developed from strategic concerns rooted in the rise of Japanese power from the 1890s onwards, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, Japanese actions during the First World War, and the Jellicoe report of 1919.

These events focused attention on the potential threat posed by Japan should it not be constrained by the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Australian disquiet concerning Japan increased once the alliance was ended by the Washington Naval Treaty. In historical retrospect, the Washington Treaty's requirement that the Anglo-Japanese Alliance be ended really was the strategic error some realized in 1922.

The location of the main fleet base in Singapore was driven by two factors. Firstly, a fleet based there posed little direct threat to Japan's home islands in the 1920s, so it was not escalatory. Secondly, the location allowed the fleet to fulfil its most important function: "masking" the Imperial Japanese Navy to deny it the ability to bring its main power to bear against the British Empire's critical Indian Ocean trades.¹² This accorded with Corbett's philosophy of sea power, which regarded the fundamental role of a navy to be the protection of maritime trade.

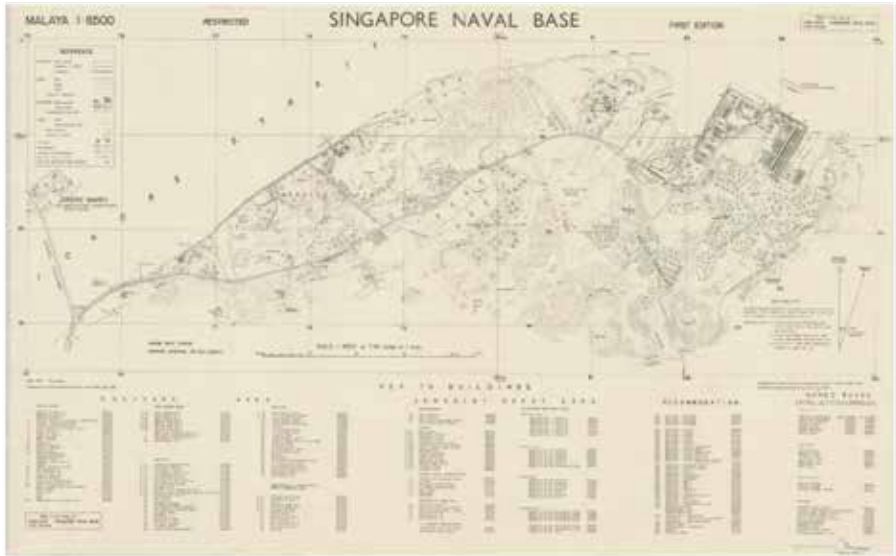
The empire's strategic trade protection intent and bringing a war with Japan to a negotiated end through blockade could have been achieved without any form of Mahanian-style fleet action. This was in no way dismissed within the strategy. After the base was built and the fleet deployed, only defeat in such fleet actions, followed by the conquest of Malaya and Singapore, could expose the Indian Ocean to attack by Japan's main forces. This was beyond Japan's ability in the 1920s and into the 1930s.

From the early 1930s (after the Manchurian Incident), there was formally agreed imperial defence cooperation and burden-sharing within the Far Eastern war plans. For example, the modern units of the RAN would proceed to Singapore to join China Fleet in harassing the Japanese advance. Meanwhile, lighter forces and the RAN's destroyers would concentrate on Singapore. The powerful submarine force based at Hong Kong would attack Japanese merchant shipping. Distant blockade would commence: Japan would be blockaded from Singapore and from Darwin, to stop Japanese shipping from passing through the Netherlands East Indies. Movement of the RN from European waters would also commence. This demanded millions of tons of fuel oil and stores for the transit, and establishment of a secret base in the Indian Ocean at Addu Atoll.

The Australian government voiced strong support for the strategy to London as a replacement for the security which had been provided by the Anglo-Japanese Alliance.¹³ The dominion and colonial governments in Asia

¹² Minutes of the Clynes Committee Meeting dated 27 February 1924, 376-378, in Ranft (ed), *The Beatty Papers*, 373-384.

¹³ Minutes of the Clynes Committee Meeting dated 27 February 1924, 383, in Ranft (ed), *The Beatty Papers*, 373-384. The Committee noted that Straits Settlements had already donated the



Map of Singapore naval base compiled and drawn by Survey Production Centre in 1945.
(National Library of Australia)

and Australasia shared similar concerns regarding the potential Japanese threat, a reason for their financial contributions to the scheme. Admiral Jellicoe focused Admiralty and government attention on the economic and strategic concerns of the dominion and colonial governments in Asia and recommended a powerful Asian fleet to protect maritime trade.¹⁴ These considerations forced the British governments of the 1920s to keep the strategy active even as they sought reasons to cancel it.

The Role of Blockades

The term blockade is normally understood as stopping the enemy's shipping. This is incomplete, describing only an effect of a complex system of systems. As Nicholas Lambert describes in *Planning Armageddon* (and the writer of this paper notes in his thesis), metrics such as "ships stopped or intercepted" and "submarines sunk vs merchant tonnage sunk" are inadequate.¹⁵ They do not adequately describe even the German counter-blockade efforts of the world wars, which were attacks on the complex maritime system of systems

land for the base.

¹⁴ Jellicoe, *Report of the Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Jellicoe of Scapa on Naval Mission to the Commonwealth of Australia (May-August 1919)*, vol.1, 14-15.

¹⁵ N.A. Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

which formed imperial maritime trade. What matters is the carrying capacity of this system of systems: sinkings were a lower order effect rather than a useful measurement metric of impact on maritime system carrying capacity. The Germans were degrading not just a tonnage pool, but an integrated global system composed of multiple subsystems including financial, political, policy, construction, communications, rail, transit shed, labour (in all its aspects), road, riverine, coastal, telecommunications, information processing, cargo movement, and other systems. The British did the same in return with their own blockade of Germany – in reality, this “blockade” was full-fledged economic warfare across all aspects of the global economic structure.

Table 1: Shipping and Imports in Trade of the UK¹⁶

Year	Tonnage Entered with Cargoes			Estimated Weight of Imports	Imports per 100 tons of Shipping Entered	Ratio of Export to Import values percent
	British	Foreign	Total			
1913	68	32	100	100	111	83
1915	56	25	81 (-15 percent)	85 (-15 percent)	138	57
1916	50	24	74 (-26 percent)	81 (-19 percent)	147	64
1917	46	10	56 (-44 percent)	68 (-32 percent)	160	56
1918	49	8	57 (-43 percent)	64 (-36 percent)	151	40

The German First World War submarine offensive interdicted British maritime trade and can be quantified as if it was a blockade of the British import and export system. By 1918, imports were down by forty-three percent in terms of cargoes entered, and by thirty-six percent in terms of cargo weights

¹⁶ G.E. Fayle, *Official History of the Great War, Seaborne Trade, Vol III: The Period of Unrestricted Submarine Warfare*, facsimile edition (Nashville: Battery Press, 1997), 276.

compared with 1913. Thus, the German submarine offensives were about forty percent as efficient as a blockade. The table above also shows the success of schemes to improve use of carrying capacity. When tonnage entering with cargo was down by forty-three percent, but weight of imports was down by thirty-six percent, then carrying capacity waste was minimised.¹⁷

The British advantage was that they dominated the information architecture and infrastructure of the global maritime system of systems and the Germans did not. Neither did the Japanese. British infrastructure dominance of global trade systems was what enabled them to protect their own trade, while conducting multidimensional economic warfare against the Central Powers. However, the Central Powers did strike a heavy blow against the global maritime system through withdrawal of their own carrying capacity from the global system of systems. In 1914, removing the 6.18% of the global carrying capacity that the Central Powers' merchant shipping represented damaged the global maritime system, forming one facet of a far larger economic conflict.¹⁸

The Japanese merchant fleet expanded rapidly during the First World War. It became the world's fourth-largest fleet by 1923 and operated mostly in the Pacific in internal Japanese and Asian trades until the 1930s.¹⁹ It became the third-ranked merchant fleet by 1929.²⁰ A war with Japan would deny this carrying capacity to the global maritime system – but it was a carrying capacity mostly supporting Japan itself in Pacific trades in a de-globalised world and would have a lesser impact than the withdrawal of the Central Powers carrying capacity had in what was a globalized system in 1914.

The British understood and acted upon one of the primary lessons learned in the First World War. In any conflict with Japan, they were not going to blockade Japan by attacking ships. Instead, they intended full spectrum economic warfare against the Japanese as part of a war of systems extending to every aspect of the Japanese economy.

The Singapore Strategy and Imperial Trade

Jellicoe's 1919 report to the Commonwealth of Australia originated from a November 1918 request from the Australian minister for the navy, Sir Joseph Cook, to the first sea lord for a senior figure visit to review Australian naval

¹⁷ See Fayle, *The Period of Unrestricted Submarine Warfare*; and Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*.

¹⁸ Sir W. Abell, "American Shipbuilding During the War," in *Brassey's Naval and Shipping Annual 1920-1*, eds. E. Richardson and A. Hurd (London: Clowes & Sons, 1920), 194-202.

¹⁹ A. Richardson and A. Hurd, "Standing of the World's Merchant Fleets," in *Brassey's Naval and Shipping Annual 1923* (London: Clowes & Sons, 1923), 220-223.

²⁰ J.P Taylor, "Standing of the World's Merchant Fleets," in *Brassey's Naval and Shipping Annual 1930* (London: Clowes & Sons, 1930), 125-127.

policy.²¹ This review had its roots in a resolution passed at the Imperial War Conference on 30 March 1917 proposing an Imperial naval defence scheme, which First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Rosslyn Erskine Weymss reiterated in 1918.²² A separate 1919 review predicted the end of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Any fleet transit in response to “war in the Far East” required tankers, transports, and specialised naval auxiliaries, including a mobile naval base. However, “there were not enough oil tankers in the world to take the Fleet to the Far East and maintain it there in a mobile state in the absence of local reserves.”²³

Jellicoe’s report on the RAN stitched together these challenges, focusing on nine major issues, six of which related to trade protection:²⁴

1. Uniform administration and training patterned on the RN.
2. Concern for personnel comfort, well-being and discipline.

²¹ Proposed Visit of Lord Jellicoe to the Dominions and India to Advise on Naval Matters, dated 17 December 1918, ADM 116/1815 Naval Defence of the British Empire, The National Archives (TNA), Kew. A memorandum was placed before the War Cabinet on 17 May 1918 articulating the 1917 proposal and it generated responses which, while they did not concur with the Admiralty’s preferred model, did indicate a universal dominion desire for the greatest possible uniformity in construction, armament, equipment, training, administration, and organisation. This the Admiralty found very encouraging and it led directly to the Admiralty proposing that the tour proceed. Prime Ministers Hughes (Australia) and Borden (Canada) had already strongly endorsed this stance. See also Memorandum by the First Sea Lord dated 31 March 1918, ADM 1/8520/103 Naval Defence of the British Empire 1918, TNA. Attached to this memorandum is a draft “Admiralty view” relating to a unified post-war imperial fleet.

²² Memorandum by the First Sea Lord dated 31 March 1918, ADM 1/8520/103 Naval Defence of the British Empire 1918, TNA. Attached to this memorandum is a draft “Admiralty view” relating to a unified post-war imperial fleet. While it was a good concept embodying wartime lessons, Weymss did not account for the impact of dominion nationalism in his draft proposal. A summary of prior negotiations was prepared for Weymss in April 1918 and dominion views regarding dominion fleets was included (Australian and Canadian views were similar). The Admiralty was in favour of a fully integrated imperial fleet, Australia of separate dominion fleets operating on defined stations and becoming fully integrated when released in time of general war. It was the perception that there was a caveat on their release which concerned Weymss. New Zealand was described as according with the Admiralty position. “Naval Defence of the British Empire: short précis of past negotiations etc, prepared for 1st Sea Lord 9 April 1918,” ADM 1/8520/103 Naval Defence of the British Empire, TNA. For more information on Jellicoe’s mission and dominion responses, see Ian Yeates, “Admiral Jellicoe Goes to Sea: The Naval Mission and the Ambition for an “Imperial Royal Navy,” *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord* 33, no. 1 (2023): 43-80, <https://doi.org/10.25071/2561-5467.1082>.

²³ Minute Director of War Plans Division (Captain B Domvile) to Deputy Chief of Naval Staff (Vice Admiral R. Keyes) dated 3 November 1921, War in the Far East, para 2, ADM 116/3604, TNA. The Mobile Naval Base organisation was discussed late in 1921 and it also required Dominion support. MNB was needed to provide secure anchorages in the Laccadives for the fleet to bunker and store en route to Singapore. Addu Atoll was selected for this role in 1922.

²⁴ Points 3,5,7 and 9 related directly to trade protection, 6 and 8 related to trade protection and power projection and reconnaissance respectively. Reconnaissance is essential to trade protection and other seapower requirements.

3. Employment in training roles of carefully selected RN officers.
4. Preparation in peacetime of a global trade protection and convoy system to be implemented on outbreak of war.²⁵
5. Provision of DEMS for merchant ships including training and global fitting on outbreak of war.
6. Development of globally distributed oil fuel supplies to support transit and operations of a Far East Fleet.
7. Dominion responsibility for local defence.
8. Development and use of aircraft.
9. Expansion and decentralisation of the global naval intelligence system.

While Australian officials thought the report recommended excessive force levels, Jellicoe's emphasis on trade protection was convincing.²⁶ It replaced Germany with Japan as a potential enemy threatening the Asian portion of the empire.²⁷ The report noted that trade protection was the primary RAN responsibility, stating that, "A very complete system for issuing route and other war instructions to shipping was devised by the Admiralty during the war. ... It is recommended that ... detailed arrangements [be] made to enable them to be put into force immediately on the outbreak of war."²⁸ The Asian, trans-Pacific, and Australasian trades were demonstrably vulnerable to disruption, requiring local protection, itself dependent on the Japanese fleet being locked out of the region.²⁹

In 1924, A.C. Dewar noted that it was important "to have a clear appreciation of the relationship of the fleet to the base." He explained that,

The base is there to maintain the fleet, but the fleet is not there primarily to defend the base. In war the defensive exists in order that the offensive may act more freely. In sea warfare the offensive is

²⁵ Report "Post-War Naval Requirement's" dated 3 March 1919 and submitted from Port Said to the First Sea Lord, reproduced in A.T. Patterson, *The Jellicoe Papers, vol. 11, 1916-1934* (London: Naval Records Society, 1969), 291-292 and 295. Of the eighty-nine cruisers Jellicoe recommended, forty-nine cruisers were required for "world wide convoys" and, of these, seven were to be Australian.

²⁶ Jellicoe, *Report of the Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Jellicoe of Scapa on Naval Mission to the Commonwealth of Australia (May-August 1919), vol. 1*; and Patterson, *The Jellicoe Papers*, 267-268. Australia rejected the concept of a unified imperial navy, which Jellicoe also recommended.

²⁷ S. Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars Volume 1* (London: Collins, 1968), 281.

²⁸ Jellicoe, *Report of the Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Jellicoe of Scapa on Naval Mission to the Commonwealth of Australia (May-August 1919), vol. III*, 215. Details were listed ranging from convoy routes to the equipment required for smaller escorts and minesweepers which would be required at each Australian defended port.

²⁹ Jellicoe, *Report of the Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Jellicoe of Scapa on Naval Mission to the Commonwealth of Australia (May-August 1919), vol. II*, 154-158.

assigned to the fleet, and it must not be asked to abandon this attitude and undertake the task of defending ports, which is the business of a composite and specially organised defensive force.³⁰

Singapore was already a refueling and naval base.³¹ It was the logical fleet base location for trade protection. At 2,900 miles from Japan, it posed the Japanese no direct threat.³² Hong Kong “tend[ed] to fall within Japan’s natural sphere of control – in other words, Japan would be able to maintain her trade and security of passage there more easily and economically than any other Power.”³³ Hong Kong was essential to trade, but unsuitable as a primary naval base.³⁴ Sydney was unsuitable, Esquimalt too remote.³⁵ As a result, Singapore was locked into strategic planning assumptions in 1919.³⁶ The main weakness in the strategy was the fiscally vulnerable bunker fuel oil stocks, which had to be accumulated gradually.

The intention of the Eastern strategy was protection of imperial possessions and trade by forcing Japan to the defensive by severing their international trade and attacking their intra-imperial and regional trade.³⁷ During the 1924 Labour government of Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, First Sea Lord Admiral Beatty unsuccessfully lobbied the Clynes Committee for funds to build the naval base at Singapore, using the protection of trade as a key argument:³⁸

³⁰ Captain A.C. Dewar, “British Trade and Maritime Strategy in the Far East,” *The Naval Review* XII, no.1, (February 1924): 634-641 at 637.

³¹ McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942*, 3. Hong Kong became a forward base, Sydney a defensive base with access to the best available industrial infrastructure, Colombo and Aden support bases for the fleet in transit.

³² British Imperial Naval bases in the Pacific 1919, Plans Division report “British Imperial Naval Bases in the Pacific” dated 26 April 1919, para.2, ADM 1/8570/287, TNA.

³³ Dewar, “British Trade and Maritime Strategy in the Far East,” 634-641.

³⁴ British Imperial Naval bases in the Pacific 1919, DOP, DOD and DNI comments on Minute P.D. 1434 of May 1919, ADM 1/8570/287, TNA. Hong Kong was indefensible and sufficient oil fuel storage to base a fleet there could not be built.

³⁵ CID Memorandum dated 7 June 1921, Singapore, Development of as a Naval Base, CAB 5/4 CID 143-C, TNA. The Overseas Defence Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence noted in 1921 that Pacific options were to maintain an alliance with Japan in all circumstances or to accept this strategy.

³⁶ British Imperial Naval bases in the Pacific 1919, “Naval Situation in the Far East” memorandum by the Admiralty to the War Cabinet dated 21 October 1919, ADM 1/8570/287, TNA. Also, Naval Situation in the Far East, Admiralty Paper for the War Cabinet, “Imperial Naval Defence,” 8, ADM 1/8571/295, TNA. Of note, dominion participation in the First World War was also underpinned by the implicit understanding that their defence efforts would be reciprocated, and this logic extended to the Singapore strategy.

³⁷ A. Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East 1919-1939: Preparing for War against Japan* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 9-13. This would also force a decisive fleet action on favourable terms.

³⁸ Letter Beatty to his wife dated 23 February 1924 [BTY/17/65/88-91], in Ranft (ed), *The*

I've seen the Prime Minister three times and am waiting to go and see him again now. It's all about the Singapore question and the Government intend to turn it down, but I say they must in consequence release the Admiralty of the responsibility of protecting the Empire and the trade, and then we shall be satisfied, but otherwise we shall not.³⁹

For this strategy to work, a global oil bunkering system was essential and had been under review since 1918.⁴⁰ The replacement of the global coaling system was proposed in 1921, commencing Pacific war planning.⁴¹ The annual requirement for an oil-fired fleet to move to Singapore and operate for 12 months was 3,430,000 tons, requiring 48 tankers (which themselves needed 460,000 tons of fuel per annum to operate) with 1,200,000 tons of local storage.⁴² The force involved was twenty capital ships, twenty light cruisers, eighty destroyers, thirty submarines, and ten other large ships. This fleet would have to steam to the theatre, and the Cape route was impossible due to insufficient fuel storage. It had to come through the Mediterranean. In addition, Australia and New Zealand required 58,000 tons of fuel a week and 200,000 tons of other supplies per month.⁴³ By 1933 Singapore was planned to have 1,250,000 tons of oil.⁴⁴

As Beatty explained at the 1921 Imperial Conference, in the event of a

Beatty Papers, 274-275 and 362. In this letter Beatty describes his success in obtaining the cruiser numbers needed, but he lost the debate on Singapore.

³⁹ Letter of Beatty to his wife dated 27 February 1924 [BTY/17/65/108-109], in Ranft (ed), *The Beatty Papers*, 385.

⁴⁰ Board of Admiralty Minutes and Memoranda, Memorandum "Oil Fuel" dated 23 December 1918, ADM 167/55, TNA. It was noted that an oil reserve of 4,500,000 tons would be required in Britain, and with only 1,750,000 tons of storage available it would involve the construction of 2,750,000 tons of bulk storage tanks in the UK.

⁴¹ Empire Naval Policy and Co-operation 1921, "Empire Naval Policy and Co-Operation: Outline of Empire Naval Policy prepared by the Admiralty to form a basis for Discussion at the Imperial Cabinet, 1921, dated February 1921," Ch. IX, ADM 1/8605/81, TNA. This chapter contains detailed assessments and recommendations for a 14-year global plan to build oil stocks. Australia had a requirement to build tankage for and accumulate 400,000 tons of reserves.

⁴² Oil Fuel Reserves, Recommendation by Vice Admiral Sir Osmond de Brock, DCNS, 24 May 1921, 285, NA ADM 116/3102, TNA. That Australia would be required to construct oil fuel storage was identified early, a total of 420,000 tons being contemplated as early as 1923. See also 1923 Imperial Conference: Admiralty Policy with Regard to Dominion Navies, ADM 116/3438, TNA.

⁴³ Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East 1919-1939*, 57. This was 2,500,000 tons per annum, equating to one thirteen to twenty-two ship convoy a week.

⁴⁴ Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East 1919-1939*, 93. Consumption was estimated to be 110,000 tons per month, requiring a tanker convoy (fourteen to twenty ships) each week. Oil was at the time approximately £5/12/- per ton, so the cost of a County-class cruiser would purchase about 360,000 tons of bunker oil.



Senoko 4th Fuel Oil Depot at Singapore naval base. From catographic material compiled and drawn by Survey Production Centre in 1945. (National Library of Australia)

war with Japan, “it is all-important that the Fleet should be able to reach the Far East in the shortest possible time, and provisions to enable them to do so must be made today. Also provision must be made to maintain them in bases fully equipped with fuel and repair facilities when they get there.”⁴⁵ He further noted that, “the main object of our Fleet is the destruction of the Japanese Fleet, with a view to holding the sea communications.”⁴⁶ Beatty clearly identified Singapore as the base.⁴⁷ From Singapore, the fleet would shield Australia, New Zealand and India, with Hong Kong being the forward base for offensive operations.⁴⁸

The termination of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance created a serious strategic problem.⁴⁹ At the Washington Naval Conference of 1921 the British delegates

⁴⁵ “Beatty’s Address to the Imperial Conference” dated 4 July 1921, Document 87a, CAB.32/2, Ranft (ed), *The Beatty Papers*, 177.

⁴⁶ “Beatty’s Address to the Imperial Conference,” 178.

⁴⁷ Empire Naval Policy and Co-operation 1921, Empire Naval Policy and Co-Operation: Outline of Empire Naval Policy prepared by the Admiralty to form a basis for Discussion at the Imperial Cabinet, 1921, dated February 1921, 6, ADM 1/8605/81, TNA. “... no more suitable a position can be suggested than Singapore.”

⁴⁸ “Beatty’s Address to the Imperial Conference,” 179.

⁴⁹ 1923 Imperial Conference: Admiralty Policy with Regard to Dominion Navies: Admiralty policy with regard to Dominion Navies, CID Paper 194-C Empire Naval Policy and Co-operation 1923 dated 19 June 1923, ADM 116/3438, TNA.

were told not to enter into any agreement “which will in any way interfere with the development of Singapore as a British naval base, since such development is purely defensive and is already overdue.”⁵⁰ As Lord Sydenham noted, the positioning of a base at Singapore was dictated by geography and trade patterns. “If we had no trade in the North Pacific, or if India did not exist, we might fall back on Australia or New Zealand. Vital considerations forced us to select Singapore....”⁵¹ These considerations also dictated fleet strength. As an anonymous 1927 article on the defence of trade summarized: “Our main fleet must be kept at full strength in battleships, and at sufficient strength in cruisers and smaller vessels, to be prepared at the enemy’s selected moment to accept action and make it decisive, thus setting free all our resources for Regional Defence, if indeed any further defence of trade is then necessary.”⁵²

Dominion and Colonial Support

The international aspect related to the structure of the Second British Empire. The dominions were independent nations in a voluntary association with Britain that had deep mutual cultural, economic, and strategic benefits. The colonies, crown colonies, and protectorates also had varying degrees of self-government and autonomy and could address their strategic concerns with London.

The dominions understood the importance of the new base and oil fuel network. They opposed the 1922 Bonar Law government decision not to proceed with this network. New Zealand had already voted £100,000 and Prime Minister Massey stated that: “I must say that if the defence of the Empire is to depend upon the League of Nations only, then it may turn out to have been a pity that the League was ever brought into being. The very existence of the Empire depends upon the Imperial Navy....”⁵³ The Admiralty also objected, making an incontestable strategic case – which foundered on the MacDonald government’s international disarmament ideology. First Sea Lord Beatty made clear to MacDonald that the Navy would not be held responsible for any failure to protect the Empire’s trade if the means to do so were not

⁵⁰ 1923 Imperial Conference: Admiralty Policy with Regard to Dominion Navies: Admiralty policy with regard to Dominion Navies.

⁵¹ Colonel Lord Sydenham of Combe, “The Singapore Naval Base,” *The Naval Review* XIII, no. 3 (August 1925), 463-469 at 466.

⁵² Anonymous, “The Defence of Trade,” *The Naval Review* XV, no. .4 (November 1927): 833-839 at 834.

⁵³ Prime Minister Massey to Prime Minister MacDonald, telegram Governor General of New Zealand Jellicoe dated 11 March 1924, Parliamentary papers 1924, vol. XV, 841-855, 25 March 1924, CMD 2083, TNA.

forthcoming.⁵⁴

The Clynes Committee minutes illustrate the Admiralty's campaign. Beatty noted that the mistake made in removing the fleet from Asia was recognised as early as 1914 and that dreadnought armoured cruisers of the Invincible class were enroute when the First World War commenced. The details of the Singapore scheme shows the degree to which maritime trade drove the requirement for the overall strategy. The Singapore strategy had been approved by Cabinet during the Washington Treaty negotiations. Not building the base exposed all Indian Ocean trade to Japan, there being 742 ships of 3,000 gross register tonnage and over (gross value of £180 millions) there on any day. Regional annual trade was £890 millions and the naval base cost represented an insurance premium of just 2/- per £100 on that trade. Lack of a base exposed India, Australia, and New Zealand to direct attack, and Malaya, Singapore, and British Borneo to invasion.⁵⁵ Beatty's testimony before the Clynes Committee established that the Singapore strategy and the base were driven by the requirement to protect Imperial trade in an area where much of Britain's wealth was generated. Admiralty planning continued and pressure from the Pacific dominions and crown colonies forced continued work.⁵⁶ The Admiralty consistently highlighted that the suspension of the base construction "prejudiced our power to defend British interest in the Pacific" and that the "loss of Singapore, in the event of war in the Far East, would mean far more and would in fact be a disaster of the first magnitude."⁵⁷

Costs of the Singapore Strategy

By 1921, the Admiralty was re-evaluating the requirements of an oil-fired one-hemisphere Navy which had to cover the Atlantic, Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and western Pacific. The original full Singapore base project or "Green

⁵⁴ Clynes Committee minutes of meeting dated 27 February 1924, in Ranft (ed), *The Beatty Papers*, 373-384 at 377.

⁵⁵ Clynes Committee minutes of meeting dated 27 February 1924, in Ranft (ed), *The Beatty Papers*, 373-384.

⁵⁶ Revised financial estimate for Naval defences at the Singapore Base; Historical review of the base's function and proposals for the construction of a graving dock, also CID 281C Singapore Base Revised Estimate of Cost dated November 1928, ADM 1/8741/89, TNA. Appendix K notes that donations (cash, exclusive of land from Straits Settlements) from Hong Kong, Federated Malay States, and New Zealand would total £3,250,000 by 1934.

⁵⁷ Singapore Naval Base, P.D.02033/24 Director of Plans Minute dated 23 June 1924, ADM 116/2416, TNA. The Director of Plans was Captain Dudley Pound and handwritten comments by Admirals Keyes and Beatty supported his positions on the base. The file contains discussion documents detailing the strategic need for the base and the inadequacy of the defences. Of note was that the fuel farm contained much of the planned reserve and the planned total of 1,250,000 tons would be present by 1928: a prize of great value in itself.

Scheme” was replaced by the cheaper, reduced “Red Scheme,” approved on 21 February 1923. Before the 1923 Imperial Conference, Australia considered a contribution of £1 million spread over a decade, in addition to funding part of the oil stocks.⁵⁸ Lack of bulk oil storage restricted the British fleet outside UK waters, where bulk oil storage had been built during the First World War. Capital costs made it necessary to build storage and reserves progressively over fourteen years. Australia’s contribution was 400,000 tons of storage,⁵⁹ while New Zealand was tasked to build 26,000 tons.⁶⁰

Green Scheme: Not implemented. This was the full base.

Red Scheme: A reduced scheme approved 21 February 1923.

Base £11,600,000 plus a £1,000,000 contingency fund

£1,250,000 for War Office defences

£400,000 for Air Ministry air bases

£300,000 for floating dock

£1,900,000 for oil tanks and jetties

£9,000,000 for approximately 3,000,000 tons of oil

Keppel Harbour modifications £787,000

The reduced scheme was expected to expend £7,750,000 on the base alone to 1935

Cost of the fixed defences cost was £3,250,000

Estimates

1923/24: £160,000 for preliminary site preparations

1924/25: £787,000 for the water supply, borings and anti-malarial work

1925/26: £204,000 for floating dock preparations

Contributions

Hong Kong: £250,000 (December 1924)

Federated Malay States: £2,000,000 (June 1926)

NZ: £1,000,000 (23 April 1927, in £125,000 lots over 8 years)

2845 acres of land was gifted by Singapore at a cost of £145,833

The Australian contribution lapsed when the MacDonald government

⁵⁸ Memorandum by First Lord of the Admiralty dated 21 June 1921, Reserves of Oil Fuel.

⁵⁹ Memorandum by First Lord of the Admiralty dated 21 June 1921, Reserves of Oil Fuel. ff.95-96, Enclosure 2, CAB 5/4, CID 145-5, TNA.

⁶⁰ Enclosure 6 to Deputy Chief of Naval Staff Memorandum dated 24 May 1921, Oil Fuel Reserves, ADM 116/3102, TNA. New Zealand had no oil storage whatsoever in 1923.

suspended the base and the money went towards new Australian cruisers. Hong Kong, however, offered £250,000 which was the proceeds from control of shipping operations during the First World War. Hong Kong's contribution and the £2 million provided by the Federated Malay States revived the project, as it was under discussion in early 1926 and provision of the funds was contingent on the project remaining active.⁶¹ So important was their maritime trade that it was the Pacific dominions and colonies that forced the UK to keep the Singapore base construction active.

Imperial donations prevented cancellation during the 1920s.⁶² The date for the completion of the main contract became September 1935 and September 1937 for the equipment. The strategy was discussed at the 1930 Imperial Conference by a special committee, including the Australian and New Zealand prime ministers, the chancellor of the exchequer, the foreign secretary, and the three British service heads.⁶³ The New Zealand government opposed cancellation, while the Australian government noted that of the £2,230,000 spent to date only £200,000 was British.⁶⁴ During funding discussions, New Zealand considered funding the graving dock, proposing it be opened by their prime minister.⁶⁵ Of the £3,145,000 expended by 30 September 1930, £2,279,000 (plus the land) had been donated. Although the British had planned liabilities of £15,347,580 to be spent on the base (mostly this cost was the oil fuel stock), the actions of the dominions and colonies again ensured that base construction could not be abandoned.⁶⁶

Admiralty Planning and the Manchurian Crisis

⁶¹ Letter Chief Secretary of the Federated Malay States to British High Commissioner Kuala Lumpur dated 27 February 1926, CO 717/48, TNA.

⁶² The threat of cancellation was a continued issue and donations from dominions and colonies prevented this. Letter Chief Secretary of the Federated Malay States to British High Commissioner Kuala Lumpur dated 27 February 1926, CO 717/48, TNA; see also Minutes dated 10 July 1928, CAB 16/63, TNA)

⁶³ Commander C.N. Robinson, "Naval Forces of the British Empire," in *Brassey's Naval and Shipping Annual 1931*, eds. C.N. Robinson and H.M. Ross (London: Clowes & Sons, 1931), 1-33 at 12.

⁶⁴ McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942*, 95.

⁶⁵ Director of Plans Memorandum dated 19 October 1926 New Zealand Naval Policy, ff.75-80, ADM 116/2311, TNA.

⁶⁶ Minutes dated 10 July 1928, 8th Meeting of the Sub-Committee on Singapore Committee of Imperial Defence, ff. 63-65, CAB 16/63, TNA. There were additional imperial donations flowing in for a total of £3,396,000. New Zealand remained a strong proponent throughout. These were large amounts of money: the dominions and colonies were exercising their financial capability to make abandonment of the Singapore strategy politically impossible for any British government.

In August 1919, the British government first adopted a guideline which became known as the Ten-Year Rule.⁶⁷ It meant that the armed forces estimates should be drafted on the assumption that the empire would not be engaged in a war during the next decade. In 1928, Churchill (then chancellor of the exchequer) urged that the rule be made self-perpetuating. In 1931, Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald wanted to abolish it, considering it unjustified due to the changed strategic circumstances, but this was opposed by Foreign Secretary Arthur Henderson.⁶⁸ Cabinet finally rescinded it on 23 March 1932.

Imperial vulnerability was understood, being raised annually from 1919 at the chief of staff sub-committee and at each Imperial Conference.⁶⁹ China Fleet was shaped as a trade protection force with cruisers and submarines to delay a Japanese advance. The Fourth Submarine Flotilla was based at Hong Kong during the 1920s with L-class submarines. In 1931, it received the new long range submarines HMS *Orpheus* and HMS *Phoenix*.⁷⁰

In April 1931, a national leadership conference of the Republic of China agreed to assert China's sovereignty in Manchuria. Believing that conflict was in Japan's interests, the Kwantung Army's Colonel Seishirō Itagaki and Lieutenant Colonel Kanji Ishiwara independently planned to provoke war. Minister of War Jirō Minami dispatched Major General Yoshitsugu Tatekawa to Manchuria to curb adventurism, but Itagaki and Ishiwara staged an incident on 18 September 1931 precipitating invasion. The Manchurian Crisis changed everything, for, in the words of British naval historian Donald McIntyre:

If Japan were ever to prepare for operations on a wider scope it must be assumed that these preparations would be concealed with equal care and her blows delivered with equal suddenness, in order to gain the maximum advantage at the outset. This would be consistent with the Japanese attack on the Russian Fleet at Port Arthur, 48 hours before the outbreak of war in February 1904.⁷¹

The Manchurian Crisis destroyed the Ten-Year Rule because in 1931 the Japanese moved an army from Japan to Manchuria by sea with no strategic warning at all. The Admiralty had revised the Eastern War Plan in August

⁶⁷ P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Penguin, 2004), 273. The concept was suggested by Winston Churchill, then secretary of state for war and air.

⁶⁸ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, 296.

⁶⁹ Annual Review of Imperial Defence Policy 1932 by the Chief of Staff Sub-Committee, ff. 285-286, CAB 4/21 CID 1082-B, TNA.

⁷⁰ Commander C.N. Robinson, "Naval Forces of the British Empire," in *Brassey's Naval and Shipping Annual 1932*, eds. C.N. Robinson and H.M. Ross (London: Clowes & Sons, 1932), 1-33 at 7. This indicated a change in RN policy from local defence to longer ranged offensive submarine activity.

⁷¹ McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942*, 139-141.

1931, revising it again in 1933.⁷² The plans were constantly updated as the decade progressed.⁷³

The RAN role in the Eastern War Plan was to patrol between Darwin and Java before moving to Singapore.⁷⁴ By 1933, the Admiralty had intelligence on Japanese plans to attack Singapore – a serious strategic problem given the “lamentable state of the defence of Singapore” that perturbed both the general officer commanding of Malaya and the governor of the Straits Settlements.⁷⁵ The December 1928 decision that the defences of Hong Kong had priority over Singapore was revealed as a mistake, as was suspension of work on Singapore’s defences in 1930. The Manchurian Crisis sparked a new Far Eastern Appreciation, which, in March 1932, noted that the defences of Singapore would remain inadequate for at least two years even with “the 10 year rule being withdrawn.”⁷⁶ While the Italian and German crises of the later 1930s meant that the European theatre was given higher priority, the Japanese threat was clearly understood and revealed the bankruptcy of the Ten- Year Rule. The 1932 Appreciation included these comments:

7. The Admiralty has recently received secret information from the Far East that the Japanese have a definite scheme for an attack on Singapore by a force consisting of one division, probably with some light artillery, to be carried in 18 transports and to be routed via Pelew

⁷² Admiralty letter M.00518/33 dated 27 October 1933, MP1185/8 2028/2/268, National Archives of Australia (NAA). The new war plan incorporated planning for the passage of the fleet through the Mediterranean to Singapore and Hong Kong, as well as dispositions of armed merchant cruisers and cruisers.

⁷³ War Plan Eastern 1937, ADM 116/4393, TNA. Referred to as the “Naval War Memorandum Eastern,” each iteration had many small changes, yet the main thrust remained clear, and this was steady development of planning to reinforce Singapore with main fleet units as the facilities there improved and oil storage enroute increased. The RAN had a role in both reinforcement and building fuel stocks, although details varied and the main role of the bulk of RAN units was trade protection.

⁷⁴ Navy Office Minute SC 1933/2/72, “War orders for H.M.A. Ships” dated 29 October 1931, MP1049/9 1933/2/71, NAA. This plan did not change although it did evolve, see Naval Policy in event of Far Eastern war, Enclosure 7 to China No.587/01501/8 dated 6 April 1938, ADM 1/9530, TNA.

⁷⁵ War on the China Station, Report by C-in-C China Station dated 18 July 1933, 3, ADM 116/3471, TNA. The general officer commanding of Malaya in 1933 was Major-General L.C.L. Oldfield, the governor, Sir Cecil Clementi, and both were well aware of the inadequate state of the defences at this stage.

⁷⁶ Memorandum prepared by Chatfield dated 28 February 1933, for the 107th Meeting, Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, Committee of Imperial Defence, 114-117, CAB 53/4, TNA. The “Far Eastern Appreciation” was a formal analysis of the threat posed to the empire and its interests by all hostile or potentially hostile powers in Asia.

Islands (a Japanese base) – South of Philippine Islands – North of Borneo – Singapore. The estimated time from Japan to Singapore is 8-10 days. The information stated that this force was actually ready to embark at the time of the Shanghai crisis of 1932 and is possibly ready now.

8. It now appears that many purchases by Japan of British ships, ostensibly for scrap, have been completed during the last 12 months. Information from Japan shows that some of these ships are being retained in Japan for use as military transports, thus increasing the supply of Japanese shipping already laid up and available for transports.⁷⁷

The Singapore Strategy and Trade Protection

The actual nature of the base was decided with adoption of the 1926 “truncated scheme,” due for completion in 1936 at a cost of £7,750,000, with £5,145,916 authorised by 11 February 1932.⁷⁸ On 4 March 1932, the Admiralty requested £380,000 to complete the graving dock and, with Cabinet approval given on 11 October 1932, construction recommenced.⁷⁹ The graving dock opened in February 1938 and, on 22 April 1938, a £43 million program was announced, of which £24,800,000 (over three years) was for new projects.⁸⁰

The Royal Air Force (RAF) was also involved in trade protection out of Singapore. In 1929, the Supermarine Southampton-equipped No. 205 Squadron was stationed in Singapore for trade protection and reconnaissance.⁸¹ 205 Squadron first conducted a flight from the UK to Australia, which it circumnavigated.⁸² Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Southampton’s

⁷⁷ Memorandum prepared by Chatfield dated 28 February 1933, for the 107th Meeting, Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, Committee of Imperial Defence, 114-117, CAB 53/4, TNA.

⁷⁸ £407,500 was needed to get the dockyard working and the balance (£2,196,584) was for subsidiary works. At Singapore in 1932 there were no guns larger than the pre-war 9.2-inch batteries, no mines, boom or airfields, and five years was required to construct these defences.

⁷⁹ Naval Estimates and Naval Construction Programme 1937, Naval Estimates 1937 First Lord’s Statement, 6, ADM 116/3596, TNA.

⁸⁰ In January 1938, the Lyons government assured Chamberlain that Australia would assist to the full extent of its ability.

⁸¹ The squadron was reformed from the Far East Flight on 8 January 1929, becoming the RAF’s first squadron to be permanently based there. A full accounting of RAF Squadron movements and equipment can be found in Wing Commander C.G. Jefford, *RAF Squadrons, a Comprehensive Record of the Movement and Equipment of all RAF Squadrons and their Antecedents since 1912* (Shrewsbury: Airlife Publishing, 1988).

⁸² Commander C.N. Robinson, “Summary of Contents,” in *Brassey’s Naval and Shipping Annual 1929*, ed. Commander C.N. Robinson (London: Clowes & Sons, 1929), xi-xiv at xiii.

worked with 205 Squadron during this flight, but cooperation was not confined to Australia. A result of the October 1930 Imperial Conference was that the New Zealand government commissioned a strategic appreciation: *Imperial Defence as Affecting New Zealand*.⁸³ It noted that Singapore was pivotal in the protection of Australasian and Pacific trade – including trade to Canada – in an increasingly unstable region. This instability was proven by the Manchurian Crisis and by the later Shanghai Incident which threatened £150 million of British investment, 6,000 Britons, and the two British battalions in Shanghai. The Deputy Chiefs of Staff Committee was alarmed that India was exposed without the Singapore base. After three years of effort by the Admiralty, China Fleet, and senior Whitehall civil servants, the earlier assumptions about the imperial strategy in Asia were discredited, and construction of the base received funds and priority.⁸⁴ Planning was also re-invigorated in relation to transit of ships to Singapore from the UK and the role of the RAN.⁸⁵

The Admiralty again recommended that Australian and New Zealand units be used to support Hong Kong, Singapore, or Trincomalee. The RAAF Air Staff recommended a 10-Squadron RAAF-RAF air expeditionary force with a focus on maritime reconnaissance and strike. Australian Prime Minister Earle Page and Attorney General Robert Menzies discussed the idea of an Australian capital ship with Chatfield in London in May 1938, but delivery of a King George V-class vessel could not occur before 1943 and the Admiralty discouraged the concept.⁸⁶ When Japan advanced into southern China, Australia's high commissioner in London, Stanley Bruce, discussed purchase or loan of a British battleship and the possibility of Australia building up to three capital ships in the UK "by combination of other Dominions and Colonies mostly concerned."⁸⁷ Discussions between the Australian Naval Board and Admiralty

⁸³ It was completed in March 1931.

⁸⁴ C.M. Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy Between the Wars* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Bell pursues this argument in Chapter 3: Far Eastern War Plans and the Myth of the Singapore Strategy.

⁸⁵ Naval Policy in event of Far Eastern war, ADM 1/9530, TNA. See folder M03546/38 which contains correspondence between the Admiralty and ANB resulting from the review of the 1937 War Memorandum Eastern during 1938, especially Navy Office Melbourne letter 02651 dated 22 April 1938 and Admiralty's Letter M.03546/38 dated 15 July 1938.

⁸⁶ Memorandum for First Sea Lord M 02220/39 dated 14 March 1939, ADM 1/9831, TNA. In marginalia, the First Lord noted that "Under such conditions it was not in our interest to have one of our few capital etc ships confined to Australian waters and we discouraged Australia from owning one – or at least did not encourage her to do so." The context was the government focus on the way agreed force ratios with Germany tied down capital ships in UK waters.

⁸⁷ Capital Ships for Defence of Australia, Telegram First Naval Member to First Sea Lord dated 14 March 1939, ADM 1/9831, TNA. The options presented included loan of an existing ship until a replacement could be built, with Australia paying for both maintenance of the existing ship and construction of the new ship. The first naval member noted that this might also



Map showing disposition of Allied ground forces in Singapore, including naval base, in early February 1942, prior to the Battle of Singapore. (Wikimedia Commons)

regarding how long a fleet would take to steam to Singapore had commenced and the Admiralty noted that 1939 was a difficult year in terms of warship construction, although in 1940 new construction was to be commissioned.⁸⁸

Contemporary Relevance

Sir Julian Corbett noted that the sea is a medium which cannot be conquered as it is not susceptible to ownership in the sense that land is. What matters is commercial activities at sea, from passage of cargo to resource winning (from fishing to mining) to data traffic via undersea cables. Therefore, command of the sea (or sea control) is relative, not absolute, and can be general, local, temporary, or (rarely) permanent. It is not absolute. Corbett defined the fundamental means of obtaining sea control as a spectrum bounded by the physical destruction of enemy forces and merchant shipping, combined with economic warfare, including naval blockade.⁸⁹ The Singapore strategy

be a mechanism to speed up construction of a graving dock and would also calm popular fears.

⁸⁸ Capital Ships for Defence of Australia Telegram First Sea Lord to First Naval Member dated 17 March 1939, ADM 1/9831, TNA. Thought was therefore given to Australia taking over payment for a King George V-class vessel from the 1938-39 program and acquiring a battleship that way, but fears that it might not be made available beyond Australia Station contributed to the idea being shelved.

⁸⁹ Sir J. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longmans, Green & Co.,

addressed this spectrum, maximising imperial options in a potential war with Japan. It did this by restoring global mobility to the fleet as it changed from coal to oil firing and providing a fleet base from which the Royal Navy could protect Asian trade and prevent Japanese fleet forces from passing in to the Indian Ocean. It was a trade protection strategy, using imperial sea power to protect imperial maritime power.

A similar strategic situation has developed in the South China Sea since 1995, when the Philippines-owned Mischief Reef was seized by the People's Republic of China (PRC). This Manchurian Crisis equivalent resulted in PRC seizure of control of the South China Sea inside the nine-dashed line by coordinated dredging and island-base construction from 2013 at Mischief, Hughes, Subi, Gaven, Johnson South, Fiery Cross, and Cuarterton Reefs. These bases are locations for People's Liberation Army systems, including sensor and maritime strike elements of their "anti-access/area denial" (or "coast defence") network. This system is lethal to any surface force, including USN carrier battle groups within about 600 nautical miles of the Chinese island fortresses and is very dangerous to about 1000 nautical miles.⁹⁰ This is a continentalist concept, as these Chinese military bases are considered as "forts" guaranteeing Chinese occupation of the area: they even use terms such as "blue soil" for the South China Sea.⁹¹

This Chinese seizure ended the uncontested strategic dominance over the South China Sea previously held by regional states, the Five Power Defence Alliance, and the USA. The Chinese have extended a continentalist concept into the maritime environment: their strategy has created a chain of *de facto* fortresses along their maritime trade route. Yet, the sea is neither the Silk Road nor the Belt-and-Road initiative and it cannot be dominated by fortresses and coast defence systems.⁹² Seapower is not expressed by fortresses or coast

1911), chapter 1. This chapter explores what command of the sea is and is not, describing the complex interplay between offensive and defensive war at sea.

⁹⁰ This assumes a Chinese ability to maintain their multi-sensor-fed kill-chains out to these distances. A kill chain discovers the potential target, interrogates and validates it as a target, precisely locates it in space and time, initiates a strike on the target, constantly updates the strike package until engagement impact, then assesses the success of the strike. It is a very complex, dynamic, and difficult process which uses sensor systems from seafloor arrays to space-based systems and everything in between.

⁹¹ See D. Cheng, "China's 'Blue Soil,' *War on the Rocks*, 2 August 2013, <https://warontherocks.com/2013/08/chinas-blue-soil/>.

⁹² This point is little discussed in Western scholarship or strategic discussion as the focus is rightly on the threat posed by PRC hegemony over the region. The author discussed this with the late Rear Admiral James Goldrick from 2019 onwards. He had held discussions 2019-2021 with senior (retired) PLA-N officers. These informed him that they disagreed with the Western designation of "anti-access/ area denial" (A2AD) as it was, in their eyes, simply coastal defence at such ranges available technology could reach.

defence, but by the combined synergies of national sea power (see footnote 1) and maritime power at all distances from the nation itself. Even modest sea powers like Australia can ensure beneficial global effects upon their maritime power through alliance with the globally dominant seapower (currently the USA).

In 2016, the Center for Strategic & International Studies reported on trade transiting the South China Sea. Australia's share in export trade alone was then \$65 billion (USD). Australia imported about \$110 billion (USD) through the same sea in 2022.⁹³ Australia is also exposed to disruption in the South China Sea as about forty percent of Australia export trade transits it. About sixty percent of Australian import and export trade passes through or the South China Sea or areas adjacent to it.

Table 2: Trade transiting the South China Sea 2016.⁹⁴

Country	% Share of World GDP	Trade through China Sea (billions)	Value South (USD)	South China Sea Trade As % of All Trade in Goods
United States	24.5		208	5.72
China	14.8		1470	39.5
Japan	6.53		240	19.1
Germany	4.58		215	9.00
United Kingdom	3.46		124	11.8
France	3.26		83.5	7.77
India	2.99		189	30.6
Italy	2.45		70.5	8.14
Brazil	2.37		77.3	23.4
Canada	2.02		21.8	2.67

Study of available Australian and US strategic documentation shows that control of the South China Sea is clearly recognised as lost to the PRC. So the current situation in the South China Sea parallels but is not identical to the situation between 1931 and 1942. Today's Singapore Naval Base already exists: the Republic of Singapore's Tuas and Brani naval bases can support

⁹³ Trading Economics, "Australia Imports by Country," *Trading Economics*, n.d., <https://tradingeconomics.com/australia/imports-by-country>.

⁹⁴ Center for Strategic & International Studies, "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?" *China Power*, n.d., <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

anything in regional inventory and the new Changi base can (and does) support US aircraft carriers.⁹⁵ The Republic of Singapore Air Force is on par with the Royal Australian Air Force and is much more powerful than the 2024 Royal Canadian Air Force.⁹⁶ It also operates within a dense, modern and resilient air defence system backed by a strong civil defence system. The Singaporean Navy is carefully designed to be at least as powerful as both the RAN and RCN within its strategic environment, and the Republic of Singapore Army (295,000) dwarfs the combined manpower of the Australian (49,500) and Canadian armies (44,000).⁹⁷ Should they choose to fight in alliance with the US and other regional powers, no People's Liberation Army/Navy forces will pass Singapore.

As with the RN in 1941, the issue remains the provision of a fleet capable of masking Chinese main force units so as to prevent their egress into the Indian Ocean, so preserving what really matters there – unimpeded maritime trade. In turn, this means that much of the strategic conceptual heavy lifting has long since been done, and resides in archives. Close study of what has been done in the past and of the reasons for the failure of that strategy will save time and effort, provide insights into future actions, and guide modelling, experimentation, and wargaming, while providing a solid intellectual foundation on which to base such activities.

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⁹⁵ The old RN base is now a commercial facility which also hosts commander, logistics group Western Pacific. It is not purely commercial even now, as it routinely supports RAN task units deployed to the region. The original King George VI dock there is now one of five at Sembawang.

⁹⁶ This is a natural reflection of Singapore's strategic insecurity and proximity to threats, Australia's relative strategic security, and the Canadian position of having no proximate strategic threat.

⁹⁷ The author has been in active ADF service since 1979 and has many years of experience with the Singaporean armed services including postings to region and participation in many Five Power Defence Arrangement exercises. While public sources show the scale and equipment of the Singaporean armed services, they do not show the deep integration of defence into all aspects of Singaporean society and civil infrastructure. Highways are actually military runways, underground carparks are battalion and brigade headquarters or service areas, civil high-rise complexes are fortresses, SAM sites lie in public spaces and there is also a large and unremarked US military-logistics presence. Singapore is also a member of the Five Power Defence Arrangement, an alliance which holds the largest exercises in the world which do not involve US participation.