

**By the Seat of the Pants?
Allied Strategy and the Japanese Onslaught in Southeast Asia
December 1941-May 1942**

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Winston Churchill invited himself to Washington to discuss the global war with Franklin Delano Roosevelt right after the armed forces of Imperial Japan attacked British and American forces in December 1941. The summit conference they convened, codenamed ARCADIA, decided to establish a unified Allied command to defend Southeast Asia against the Japanese onslaught. The mission of this new command, ultimately stretching from Burma into northern Australia, was to prevent the Japanese from expelling Western forces from the entire region. Churchill spelt out its objective: defend and hold the 'Malay Barrier,' prevent the Japanese from overrunning Southeast Asia and dividing the Allies. The new command failed completely. One reason is universally acknowledged: the tempo and power of the Japanese onslaught. Another is often overlooked, or misunderstood. The new unified command needed a truly unified strategy. This proved beyond its grasp, for reasons that deserve closer examination.

Western discussions about coalition strategy to defend Southeast Asia against a Japanese attack went back at least to secret conversations regarding naval strategy between American and British officers, in January 1938. More substantial efforts came through staff talks involving British, American, Dutch, Australian and New Zealand officers in autumn 1940 and spring 1941. Such talks produced something resembling the draft outline of a coalition strategy, in principle. This outline was presented to governments for consideration, well before the Japanese offensive forced everyone to scramble to pull together a truly common defence plan.¹ By November 1941 the putative Allies widely agreed the Japanese posed a clear and present danger to their positions in Southeast Asia, but could not endorse any unified defence strategy for the region. The most familiar reason is that the Roosevelt administration refused to make strategic commitments in advance. It would not even spell out the *casus belli* over which it would wage war against Japan, fearing a domestic political backlash that could jeopardize the President's policy to lead a united

¹ NA, AIR23/1970, FECB appreciation, 18 February 1941; AIR23/1868, Anglo-Dutch-Australian Discussions, February 1941; WO172/5, GHQ Far East War Diary, Report of the Anglo-Dutch-Australian Conference 22-25 February 1941; WO172/7, GHQ Far East War Diary, ADB Conversations Singapore, 21-27 April, 1941; AIR23/1873, Memorandum China No. 04707/36, PLENAPS, Commander-in-Chief China Station, 13 November 1941.

nation towards ever closer support for Allied resistance to Axis aggression.² There was however another reason: despite the clear and present danger, each power still focused on different national strategic priorities.

Whereas the Japanese realized that overrunning Southeast Asia called for coordinated offensive action and planned accordingly, the Western Allies found it difficult to translate the assertion that the defence of Southeast Asia must be seen as a common problem into a realistic coalition war plan. Any such plan seemed to call for one ally to place its national strategic priorities at risk in order to address those of another. Real differences in capabilities, and practical problems of space, resources and commitments elsewhere, only aggravated that problem. The national agendas that stymied prewar efforts to forge coalition strategy predictably crippled the new Allied command's efforts to define one under pressure. Three problems underline this conclusion: the design and operation of this new unified Allied command; the strategic concept of a 'Malay Barrier;' and the collapse of Allied naval power in Southeast Asia. This paper will examine those problems. It will argue that Allied failure to pull together as a defensive coalition in Southeast Asia had deeper roots than being overwhelmed by the tempo and power of the Japanese offensive. The Japanese exploited Napoleon's favourite operational maxim, to exploit the central position, because they shared another advantage with him: the good fortune of fighting a coalition that could not set aside prior differences quickly enough to salvage a common position.

The man nominated to become Supreme Allied Commander Southwest Pacific, also called the American-British-Dutch-Australian or ABDA Command, was British General Sir Archibald Wavell. Wavell had no illusions about his new assignment, complaining 'I had been handed not just a baby but quadruplets.'³ There is indeed no doubt his new Allied command faced daunting circumstances. The only Allied force near and strong enough to challenge the Japanese onslaught into Southeast Asia, the US Pacific Fleet, was knocked onto the sidelines on the first morning of the war by the Japanese attack on its battle line and base at Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii. A dangerous but small British squadron, led by the battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser HMS *Repulse*, was sunk off the coast of Malaya by Japanese naval aircraft on the third morning of the war. Remaining Allied naval forces in the region or close enough to intervene were too weak

² NA, ADM199/1472B, Supplementary Report on Events in the Far East 1940-1945, Admiral Sir G Layton, April 1947 [Layton Report]; CAB106/40, Despatch on the Far East 1940-1941, Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham [Brooke-Popham Despatch]; Brian P. Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940-1942*, Stroud, Tempus, 2005; Brian P. Farrell, *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy 1940-1943: Was There a Plan?* Lewiston N.Y., Edwin Mellen, 1998; Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988.

³TWM, Miscellaneous Subject Files, Malaya and Singapore, Wavell to Joan Bright, 4 January 1942.

to stop the Japanese. Japanese forces advanced relentlessly, racing to destroy Allied forces in Southeast Asia before strong reinforcements could arrive from elsewhere in the world. Wavell first heard he was to take on the new command on 30 December 1941.⁴ By that time the Japanese had overrun Hong Kong, effectively isolated the Philippine Islands and were advancing on Manila, subjugated Thailand, attacked Borneo, and were attacking central Malaya, threatening to isolate Singapore. The Japanese moved faster into the new command's theatre of war than the Allied high command could assemble it—but their design was also flawed.

General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff United States Army, formally proposed on Christmas Day that the Allies establish a unified theatre command to defend Southeast Asia. Marshall's premise was sound in theory. The Allies faced a single enemy whose armed forces were operating according to a common plan, effectively coordinating their different activities. The Allies on the other hand struggled to overcome disagreements between services, let alone coordinate operations effectively across the coalition. Fighting widely separated battles in Burma, Malaya, Borneo and the Philippines, this was inviting the enemy to divide their forces and defeat them in detail. Marshall argued that events on the spot were already forcing the Allies to cooperate, citing an agreement between the US Asiatic Fleet and Dutch naval authorities to coordinate naval efforts in the whole region. Such cooperation could only be effective when directed by one central authority, which could determine where and when to concentrate forces according to overall priorities.⁵ But there were two serious problems with Marshall's proposal: purpose and detail.

By arguing the Allies should start waging global war by unifying command in the theatre most immediately threatened, Marshall tried to use the tail to wag the dog. The American armed forces were disposed to see unified command as the only way to prevent disagreements between services from compromising plans and operations. Discussions with the British about grand strategy for global war were exposing many differences in plans and priorities. Marshall hoped the model of unified command, exercised through clear directives, would pull the coalition together in two directions. Moving upwards, it could force the central direction of the war to make arrangements for effective coordination of global grand strategy, to provide effective direction to theatre commanders. Moving downwards, unified command providing coherent supervision could minimize disagreements between services and make it possible to concentrate different national forces as and when required. But the Allies had already confirmed a prior British-American agreement which underpinned the now global war: the coalition must concentrate on defeating

⁴NA, CAB106/38, Despatch on Operations in Southwest Pacific 15 January-25 February 1942 [Wavell Despatch].

⁵ Farrell, *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy*; Mark A. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, The Grand Alliance and US Strategy in World War II*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000; Mark Perry, *Partners in Command: George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower in War and Peace*, New York, Penguin, 2007.

Germany first, as the most dangerous enemy, notwithstanding the Japanese offensive. The deepest problem was how to mobilize American national power for total war and apply it effectively as it became available. The British argued the first priority should be to bolster ongoing campaigns in Europe. Taken literally, this could seriously delay the massive mobilization of the American armed forces in favour of supporting British Empire forces already heavily engaged. Marshall wanted command arrangements that would harmonize with grand strategy that did not delay American mobilization, nor disperse American forces, but still gave the coalition a chance to coordinate to a common purpose. Southeast Asia was a stalking horse for much bigger challenges.

Marshall's agenda suggests the real purpose was to establish the principle of unified command per se, rather than make arrangements best suited to face the specific challenge in Southeast Asia. His suggestions for a charter for the new commander bear this out. The new unified commander should act as a supreme authority providing direction and coordination, rather than an executive deploying forces without restriction or caveat. He should not have the authority to transfer ground forces from one zone to another, should only direct those air forces specifically assigned to him rather than automatically control all air forces in his theatre, should not be able to relieve national commanders, should not be entitled to alter field commanders detailed plans or dispositions, and should not interfere with national commanders communications to home authority. Such a narrow mandate would make the new unified command little more than a figurehead. Marshall's justification was broad: failure to coordinate cost the Allies dearly in the First World War, this was at least a step forward, and some measure of coordination was the only way the Allies could prevent the Japanese from running them right out of Southeast Asia by defeating them in detail. Carrot followed stick: Singapore might still be held, but only if Allied power could be coordinated and concentrated, rather than dispersed and divided.

Rolling discussions produced an intriguing consensus on 27 December. The British accepted Marshall's premise that the only hope to stop an enemy pursuing a common strategy through coordinated command was to make similar arrangements. But they argued a unified command must have real authority over all forces assigned to the theatre for which it was responsible. Admiral Harold R. Stark, Chief of Naval Operations, agreed, arguing the main point was to establish the principle of unified coalition command. British and American Chiefs of Staff duly recommended such a command be immediately established in Southeast Asia. Each had larger agendas. The British hoped to foster American commitment to defensive action that might yet preserve Singapore and the central position, but also to build arrangements for coalition warfare that would preserve a full British voice in the central direction of global war. The stronger the Americans became, the more important this would be to the British. The Americans wanted to

establish their practice of unified command of operations, and develop arrangements for coalition warfare that would allow them to prevent British campaigns from dispersing or delaying American mobilization. The proposal used to close the deal revealed its real purpose, as well as its defects: to appoint Wavell to command.

The traditional argument is that Marshall nominated Wavell to be the first Allied Supreme Commander in order to signal American willingness to operate within coalition command, to recognize deeper British military engagement in the war, and on the grounds he was the best available man for the job, something that must trump national political considerations. British service chiefs were reluctant to agree; defeat was already probable in Southeast Asia, disaster and humiliation were real possibilities, so this was a poisoned chalice. Churchill required his colleagues and advisers to accept the proposal on the grounds it was generous recognition that would bind the coalition together in adversity. This is all fair enough, but not the main point. For the Americans, accepting a British officer as supreme commander for this command seemed a small concession that might earn larger return. Wavell would not in practice be able to redeploy American ground or air forces from the Philippines to anywhere else. Those already there were all but trapped. Those that might still be sent in were not yet on hand, leaving time for decision. Wavell might find some way to bolster the defence of Burma, Singapore and Java without drawing much on American resources. The key point of his command was that it now existed, setting the model for coalition arrangements in theatres of war that suited American preferences. For the British, there was at least the possibility the Americans might try to support a command they proposed, which might help salvage Singapore and their lines of communication to Australia. More important, unified command granted them by right a share in directing operations in theatres in which coalition forces operated together. Still more important, the Americans agreed to reserve major decisions to the two largest Western Allied powers, which delighted the British but angered the Australians and the Dutch. Most important, this agreement spurred the larger decisions to establish a system for the central direction of coalition global war: the Combined Chiefs of Staff, based in Washington, answering directly to President and Prime Minister, combining the newly formalized American Joint Chiefs of Staff and the British Chiefs of Staff, represented in their absence by senior delegates. ABDA Command was designed to be a stalking horse for coalition warfare on the grand scale. Any military success it achieved in Southeast Asia would only be a bonus.⁶

⁶ Documents pertaining to the discussions in Washington and London may be found in NA, CAB99/17, ARCADIA papers, in CAB80/61, COS(42)12(O) and COS(42)15(O), 13-14 January 1942, and in CAB65/29, War Cabinet minutes, Confidential Annex, 17 January 1942; see also Farrell, *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy*; Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*, and David Bercuson, Holger H. Herwig, *One Christmas in Washington: Churchill and Roosevelt Forge the*

Wavell's directive, dated 3 January 1942, ordered him 'not only in immediate future to maintain as many key positions as possible but to take offensive at the earliest opportunity and ultimately to conduct an all-out offensive against Japan.'⁷ The mission was defined in detail: to hold the 'Malay Barrier', 'defined as line Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Java, North Australia as basic defensive position of ABDA area ...' and commit his forces 'in as great depth as possible forward of barrier in order to oppose Japanese southward advance.' Wavell's authority seemed sufficient, defined as 'You will coordinate in ABDA area strategic operations of all armed forces of ABDA.' But the devil was in the detail, as were the contradictions. Wavell had to coordinate operations through national commanders, could not interfere with their communications to national higher authority, could not transfer any land forces from a given area without consent of the national commander or higher authority—but was directed to 'reestablish communications through Dutch East Indies with Luzon and to support Philippines garrison.' It was already too late to do any such thing. Directing Wavell to try was of course partly in order to appease General Douglas MacArthur, Commander US Army Forces in the Far East, whose forces were already retreating towards the Bataan Peninsula to fight it out under siege. But it also reflected a starting point that did much to hamper Wavell's command: the tendency to strategize according to long standing national priorities.

From the comfortable postmortem of the armchair, it can be argued that ABDA Command started from such a dire strategic position the Allies simply could not afford to cling to any prewar focus on national strategic priorities. The Japanese were moving too fast to allow such indulgence. The same armchair perspective might suggest the coalition needed to respect the ancient strategic principle 'selection and maintenance of the aim'—find out what mattered most, to the coalition as a whole and to its power to wage war, and focus on it. Three points stand out as operational imperatives. First, the Allies must deny the natural resources of Southeast Asia, especially the oilfields of Borneo, Sumatra and Burma, to the Japanese. If they could not hold them they must devastate them, then impede Japanese efforts to exploit them. Second, the Allies must prevent the Japanese from disrupting three base areas the coalition required to launch any general counteroffensive in due course: India, Australia, and Hawaii. This conflict ranged far beyond Southeast Asia; developments in one theatre could not be firewalled from the others. Finally, even if the Allies were defeated in Southeast Asia they could not allow themselves to be humiliated. Western ascendancy in Asia rested very heavily on prestige and the aura, not just substance, of

Grand Alliance, New York, Overlook Press, 2005.

⁷NA, CAB99/17, ARCADIA papers; Louis Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years*, Appendix A: Directive to the Supreme Commander ABDA Area, 3 January 1942 (ABC4-5), Washington, Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept of the Army, 1952.

Western power. This war was being fought to determine whether or not Japan would define the future political order of Asia, something the Allies saw as a vital interest. The manner in which they waged war, not just the outcome, would define postwar possibilities. This armchair vantage point can combine with the strategic situation at the end of 1941 to frame our question: did the Allies seriously try to connect a unified command to a unified strategy, based squarely on coalition imperatives? If not, why not? If so, to what end?

Wavell's directive did not ignore such strategic imperatives. The order to hold the 'Malay Barrier' covered the oilfields of Burma and Sumatra, as well as the best line of communication between India and Australia. Protecting Hawaii was not the concern of ABDA Command, while holding the 'Malay Barrier' meant preserving a buffer in front of India and Australia. But the order to hold such a line, plus the order to engage the enemy north of it as heavily as possible, did expose the Allies to defeat that might be humiliating. Losing Southeast Asia was one thing. Losing it without imposing serious delay, or exacting serious price, would be more serious.

The 'Malay Barrier' was not a military line of naturally strong defensible positions. It was a combination of coastal and island positions stretching from Rangoon to northern Australia that the Allies must hold, in order to protect their main base areas and contest Southeast Asia. The only chance ABDA Command had to hold it was to be powerfully reinforced before the Japanese reached positions from which they could shatter it. Combat ready air forces were especially needed, because the Japanese advanced methodically if rapidly under an air umbrella--making sure strong land-based and naval air forces were up front to protect each major seaborne and ground advance. Wavell flew into the region to begin to exercise command on 7 January, a week before his headquarters could be properly established in Java. That same day the Japanese overran the 11th Indian Division at Slim River in central Malaya. Wavell quite sensibly ordered Malaya Command to break contact and retreat to southern Malaya, where it could regroup and dig in. But this allowed the Japanese to seize airbases from which they could interdict the Malacca Straits, forcing the defenders of Singapore back to the last mainland position from which they might still keep the Japanese at bay from its bases. MacArthur's forces had already retreated into the Bataan peninsula under siege, while other Japanese forces moved towards southern Borneo and Celebes. The Japanese had the initiative and were poised to cut the 'Malay Barrier' along three axes of advance, before Wavell could even take charge of his command.

Wavell, as man on the spot, had to decide whether his orders still made sense. He was clear sighted on one challenge: what to do about MacArthur's beleaguered forces in Bataan. By the time Wavell formally assumed command on 15 January he was blunt: 'I could see no prospect with the resources available of sending support to [MacArthur].' Japanese advances on Borneo

and Celebes now cut off even the air route to MacArthur's forces. All Wavell could offer were words of encouragement and a submarine full of ammunition. This decision stemmed from days of discussion with American and Dutch officers who urged the Supreme Commander to try to hold important airbases in northern Sumatra, Borneo and Celebes, to give depth to the Allied position and retain contact with Luzon. Wavell disagreed, standing on his original appreciation: the most his command could hope to do was hold the line of positions running from Singapore through Java to Darwin. Allied naval and air forces based along that line would contest further Japanese naval advances toward this core of the 'Malay Barrier,' but ABDA Command would not lean further forward.⁸ This rather decisively sidestepped the complication posed by American national desires to rescue their army in Luzon. But there were reasons why Wavell evaded this particular national obstacle to unified strategy yet fell foul of others—and they started at home.

The American government and Joint Chiefs of Staff had a problem regarding Luzon: how to lose it without the world concluding they abandoned an American army, and the Filipino people, to their fate. Prewar decisions and plans blew up in Washington's face: taking responsibility for defending the Philippines as it moved towards full independence; recalling MacArthur to active US Army service to signal American resolve to defend the Philippines; reinforcing his army, but not fast enough to match the Japanese threat; deciding that deploying a B17 heavy bomber group suddenly made the Philippines defensible—above all, relying on the US Navy to prevent the Japanese from isolating the islands. Japanese sea and airpower threw a gauntlet around the islands the US Navy simply could not break through, not before it regrouped and reinforced after Pearl Harbor. Japanese airpower revealed how little difference 35 heavy bombers made against a balanced air force and battle fleet. The cruisers and destroyers of the small Asiatic Fleet redeployed to the Dutch East Indies, the first effort to concentrate coalition naval forces. That left MacArthur.

MacArthur's ground forces, most of them Filipino, most neither trained nor equipped to cope with this enemy, could not stop the Japanese from advancing deep into Luzon. They could and did dig in on strong natural ground in the Bataan peninsula and force the Japanese to come after them, according to another prewar plan. These dramatic developments attracted much attention from the American press, as did MacArthur and his bombast. This increased the already great moral and political pressure on Roosevelt and the Joint Chiefs to do whatever they could to 'rescue' the forces in the Philippines. This made no strategic sense. Japanese naval and air forces in the area were so strong only an all out effort by the US Pacific Fleet might break through the

⁸NA, CAB106/38, Wavell Despatch; Cabinet Office, UK, *Principal War Telegrams and Memoranda 1940-1943*, [PT], vol. 1, Lichtenstein, KTO Press, 1976.

gauntlet—but any such attempt would certainly allow the Japanese Combined Fleet to seek the decisive battle the US Navy was not ready to fight. Marshall saw the dilemma: the war aim was to defeat Japan, not to hold the Philippines. Grand strategy must focus on holding essential bases from which to mount an eventual counteroffensive. The Philippines were already compromised and any serious effort to rescue them might jeopardize the larger grand strategy. Reinforcements sent towards the region made for Australia, from which ostensibly they could relieve the Philippines—but in which, in fact, they could establish an Allied strategic base. Unfortunately, Roosevelt and Marshall flinched from the political heat and led MacArthur to believe they were in fact making an all out effort to rescue his army.⁹ This reluctance by the central direction of the war to square up to ugly facts on the ground did poison American command relationships, and could have disrupted coalition strategy. It is to Wavell's credit he refused to allow it to do so, firmly rejecting calls to help MacArthur by trying to reopen the link to Luzon from the south. Wavell identified the correct role for MacArthur's forces in coalition strategy under prevailing circumstances: stand and fight as hard and long as possible, pin down as much Japanese strength as possible, without draining Allied strength any further.¹⁰ But he only got away with this because Roosevelt and Marshall were also ready to write off the Philippines, even though they would not admit this in public.

The Dutch urged their Allies to defend as much Dutch colonial territory as possible. But their national strategic priorities did not seriously complicate the effort to forge a coalition strategy. The Dutch were simply not strong enough to dictate where the Allies should fight to defend Southeast Asia. Dutch plans rested on British plans, but this indicated not harmony between allies but rather a disparity in military power that forced one to rely on the other. Dutch core positions, southern Sumatra and Java, were the hinge of Wavell's main defensive line along the Malay Barrier. Geography, plus American reluctance to make advance commitments before the war, shoved the Dutch towards the British and their strategy to hold Singapore as the main base from which to defend the region. British plans to concentrate forces to screen Singapore compelled the Dutch to provide what naval and air forces they could spare to reinforce that defence, which might at least keep the Japanese at bay from Sumatra and Java. Hopelessly overstretched Dutch colonial ground forces had to spread out to defend principal naval and air bases, and major installations, on major islands from Sumatra to Amboina. The cruisers and destroyers of the Dutch East Indies

⁹ Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*; Perry, *Partners in Command*; Morton, *Strategy and Command*; William Leary (editor), *MacArthur and the American Century*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2001; Geoffrey Perret, *Old Soldiers Never Die: The Life of Douglas MacArthur*, Holbrook MA, Adams, 1996.

¹⁰ NA, CAB106/38, Wavell Despatch; Brian P. Farrell (editor), *Leadership and Responsibility in the Second World War*, Montreal, McGill-Queens University Press, 2004.

Fleet were deployed to operate from Java as a fleet in being, around which coalition naval forces might concentrate. Other than that, Dutch prospects rested on how well their allies defended Luzon and Malaya.¹¹

The Australians also depended on great power allies to provide the muscle they never could. But that did not stop them from demanding substantial revisions to coalition strategy. Three factors influenced Australian behaviour: an ambivalent relationship with the British, fear of the Japanese, and the dispersal of their own military forces. The prewar Australian debate over defence strategy was resolved in practice by deciding to rely on the British for general security and conform to their grand strategy. This led to decisions to commit strong ground and air forces to the European war, then smaller ground and air forces to defend Malaya, Timor, Amboina, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands—all in a forward defence strategy, rather than directly defending Australia itself.¹² When the Japanese attacked Southeast Asia, most of the small Royal Australian Navy was at hand, but the great preponderance of Australia's combat ready ground and air forces were fighting in the European war. They went there on the understanding the British would hold Singapore, which would allow the Royal Navy to deter or destroy any Japanese advance on Australia itself. The rapid Japanese advances in Southeast Asia, especially in Malaya, triggered real alarm in Australia. This provoked an explosive public quarrel between the Australian and British governments. That provoked the decision to recall two of the three Australian combat divisions from the Middle East. Their advance parties boarded transport ships even as Wavell went to Southeast Asia. Australian forces in southern Malaya went up front to resist the Japanese advance on 14 January, the same day ABDA Command headquarters opened in Java.

Australians approached this battle, and Allied efforts to unify command and strategy, in an ugly mood. The Australian government was seething, the Chiefs of Staff were alarmed, the Australian people were beginning to panic. Australian decision makers reached a consensus: British assurances they accepted in good faith were abused by British decisions that exploited Australian power without due regard for Australian security. As a result Singapore was now in danger, most of Australia's trained combat forces were too far away to protect it, and if it fell

¹¹ H.P. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies To April 1942*, Annapolis, United States Naval Institute Press, 1982; P.C. Boer, *The Loss of Java*, Singapore, NUS Press, forthcoming 2010; Farrell, *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy*.

¹² W.J. Hudson, H.J.W. Stokes (editors), *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937-49, Vol. IV-V, July 1940-June 1942 [DAFP]*, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1980-82; Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939-1941*, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1952; Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1957; David Horner, *High Command: Australia's Struggle for an Independent War Strategy 1939-45*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1982; David Day, *The Great Betrayal: Britain, Australia and the Onset of the Pacific War 1939-42*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1989; Farrell, *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy*; Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore*.

Australia would be invaded by strong Japanese forces. Australian decision makers now demanded concrete measures to bolster the direct security of Australia itself.¹³ Some of these measures reflected narrow national rather than broader coalition imperatives, and such pressure did complicate Wavell's efforts to unify coalition strategy.

Three Australian demands stand out. First, the Australians complained they should no longer be excluded from the central direction of the war. Second, they demanded changes in ABDA Command and a larger voice in its direction. Above all, they insisted on defending Singapore by all possible means, to the bitter end. All three reflect how strongly fears of invasion now affected Australian concerns, all three damaged efforts to forge a unified coalition strategy, and all three point towards a root cause: the nature of Western ascendancy in Southeast Asia.

The Australian government clearly no longer trusted the British to act on their behalf and pressed for a role in what became the Combined Chiefs of Staff, and access by right to grand strategy discussions. The British were relieved when the Americans refused to widen the central direction of the war, fobbing off the Australians, Dutch and other minor allies by agreeing to establish Pacific War Councils in London and Washington, through which allied concerns could be communicated to the Combined Chiefs. But this also put the British in a difficult position. More friction would further damage their relationship with the Dominions, something Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff could not take lightly. The British could only put up the numbers that would preserve their own seat at the head table by speaking on behalf of the fully mobilized collective power of the British Empire, exercising broad direction over all its forces. Alienating the Australians could endanger their ability to direct Australian forces, which could cost them dearly in grand strategy; such pressure did influence British and therefore coalition strategy.¹⁴

The influence was not positive, for an important reason: the more the Japanese advanced, the less Australian demands reflected any consideration for broader coalition strategic imperatives. From the start the Australians complained they were not given sufficient voice in ABDA Command, and its directive did not take Australian security concerns seriously enough. They defined those concerns very narrowly: the direct defence of Australian territory. Earlier decisions committed Australian forces to defensive positions in the Indies, New Guinea and the Solomons, to

¹³ Hudson and Stokes, *DAFP*; Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*; Horner, *High Command*; Day, *The Great Betrayal*; Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore*; Brian P. Farrell, Sandy Hunter (editor), *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited*, Singapore, Eastern Universities Press, 2002.

¹⁴ NA, CAB65/25, War Cabinet minutes, 22, 26 January, 2 February 1942; CAB65/29, Confidential Annex, 26 January 1942. The Americans agreed the British should continue to "coordinate" Dominion "political" views for the war against Japan, especially the ABDA theatre, and Dominion officers would only be invited to brief the CCS as and when relevant: W.F. Kimball (editor), *Churchill and Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence*, Princeton, University Press, 1984, Roosevelt to Churchill, FDR-78, 30 January 1942. Hudson and Stokes, *DAFP*; Farrell, *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy*; Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore*; Horner, *High Command*.

bolster forward defence. These decisions were confirmed, as was the policy to build up Darwin as a main base for operations in Southeast Asia. But the massive commitment of Australian forces to the European war and to Malaya left no trained combat ready army or air force units in Australia to defend Australia. The last remaining trained Australian Imperial Force battalion was committed to Malaya in January; it reached Singapore as the bulk of the 8th Australian Division engaged the Japanese on the mainland. The Australian government now confirmed an earlier discussion: because the most direct threat to Australia would come through the Eastern Indies aiming at the populated east coast of Australia, and because the British were now overstretched in Malaya and Burma, Australia could only rely on the Americans to help confront the worst case scenario. The Australian government duly invited the Americans to establish a major Allied base area on their territory.

Part of the problem came from poor communication between allies, well into March. The British and American governments unwisely did not inform their Australian counterparts that the Combined Chiefs of Staff had already decided to develop Australia as a strategic base for an Allied counteroffensive and American ground and air forces were already en route. On the other hand, when the Australians complained about not having enough voices in ABDA headquarters, they could not meet Wavell's request for qualified senior officers to coordinate logistics, or direct ground forces. What the Australians really wanted was to provide the Deputy Commander, as they had in the Middle East, but that job was reserved for the Americans. Australia's political and military leaders did not communicate effectively in Washington, London or Java, nor were their most serious concerns properly heeded.¹⁵ There were consequences.

The Australians took out their frustrations on the unified command as the Japanese advanced. Canberra contested orders to ground and especially air forces, Australian and Allied, to reinforce ABDA Command. Wavell argued they would defend Australia more effectively by building up ABDA Command's power to hold the 'Malay Barrier', but had to spend much energy arguing against pressure to divert combat air squadrons to Darwin and Queensland. Australian pressure did compel the Allies to formally extend ABDA Command's area of responsibility to the northern areas of Australia. In principle this made sense. Darwin was a major staging and support base for efforts to hold the 'Malay Barrier', as well as a crucial outpost for defending Australia itself.¹⁶ In practice the problem was to determine how best to balance these two strategic

¹⁵ NA, CAB106/38, Wavell Despatch; Hudson and Stokes, *DAFP*; Horner, *High Command*; Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*.

¹⁶ NA, CAB106/38, Wavell Despatch; Hudson and Stokes, *DAFP*; Horner, *High Command*; Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*.

objectives. The problem became acute over the disposition of Australian ground forces. This also smoked out the most explosive issue connecting Australia to coalition strategy: Singapore.

The Australians complained bitterly when they concluded the British were going to abandon Singapore to its fate, along with more than 15,000 Australian personnel deployed to defend it. The ensuing argument captured the root problems of trying to forge a unified coalition strategy to defend Southeast Asia. On 19 January Wavell finally made Churchill realize the Japanese were going to conquer Singapore, sooner rather than later. But defending Singapore was not only the long standing focus of British strategy for defending the Empire in Asia, it was also the focal point of Wavell's coalition strategy to defend the 'Malay Barrier.' All the broader plans his staff drafted rested on defending Singapore by holding a line in southern Malaya that guarded the approaches to the island. This would pin down Japanese forces long enough for serious Allied reinforcements to arrive; they would enable ABDA Command to accomplish its mission. These forces included I Australian Corps, but first in the queue was the 18th British Division. One brigade was already in action in Malaya but the balance of the division was at sea in the Indian Ocean. The Twenty Fifth Japanese Army attacked Malaya Command's defences in southern Malaya on 14 January and advanced rapidly, despite stiff resistance from elements of the 8th Australian Division. By the 19th it was obvious Malaya Command would not hold out on the mainland, and Wavell had discovered the island could not be held against a close siege. His reports prompted Churchill to pose a crucial question to his colleagues and advisers: should they not divert the balance of 18th Division to another important area that might still be held, particularly Burma, leaving Malaya Command to do what it could without further reinforcement?¹⁷

This was the same dilemma Marshall pondered regarding the Philippines. If the imperative now was to do what could still be done to defend coalition strategic priorities, did it make strategic sense to reinforce an untenable position? When the Australian government heard about this discussion it reacted very strongly. Canberra saw both the larger strategic issue and a particular Australian concern, but drew a clear line between them. Wavell's staff had an optimal plan. I Australian Corps would move through Singapore into Malaya to lead a powerful counteroffensive that would drive the Japanese away from the central position and the 'Malay Barrier.' Malaya Command must hold southern Malaya until March, when the main body of the corps would arrive. The speedy Japanese advance aborted this plan and changed the question: should ABDA Command strategy still revolve around holding Singapore, or must it now reconsider? Canberra

¹⁷ NA, CAB106/38, Wavell Despatch; ADM199/1472B, Layton Report; CAB79/17, COS minutes, 19 January 1942; CAB65/29, War Cabinet minutes, Confidential Annex, 19 January 1942; *PT*, vol. 1; Winston S. Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1950; Farrell, *Leadership and Responsibility*; Farrell and Hunter, *Sixty Years On*.

fixated on one point: abandoning Malaya Command to do what it could meant Singapore would fall sooner rather than later, taking nearly all Australian forces committed to war against Japan with it, putting Australia squarely on the Japanese target list. This last point could already be rebutted from the point of view of unified strategy; the Australian government had itself already reached out for American help to defend east coast Australia, writing off British assistance. But the Australian government threatened dire trouble if the British did not fight on for Singapore, declaring that refusal to reinforce it would constitute ‘an inexcusable betrayal.’ This bitter reaction underlines a cardinal fact: Australian strategy was committed to supporting British strategy, and British strategy focused on defending British Empire interests by holding the naval base in Singapore.¹⁸

So long as it seemed possible to hold Singapore, that strategy for imperial defence might be blended into a new coalition strategy to hold the Malay Barrier. When the Japanese advance forced British and Australian authorities to face the moment of truth, they could not agree on how to make such a blend. The result compromised any effort to rework a unified coalition strategy to save what might still be saved. Australian pressure forced the British government to send the rest of the 18th Division to Singapore, rather than Burma. This underlined how impossible it was to separate operational from broader political considerations when defining grand strategy. On 23 January it still seemed possible to hold southern Burma, but not Singapore. But the British government did not want to be blamed for abandoning it, thus putting Australia in direct danger, after insisting for so long that holding Singapore was the only way to defend British Empire interests against Japan. And the Australian government did not want to be condemned for leaving the country defenceless by relying on a British strategy that was not fought to the finish. Canberra demanded its pound of flesh and Churchill buckled. The Japanese drove Malaya Command onto Singapore island on 31 January; 18th Division stepped into a siege. Twenty Fifth Army invaded Singapore on 8 February; by the 11th it was demanding capitulation.

Collapse in Singapore forced ABDA Command to decide whether it could still fight on effectively in Southeast Asia. The immediate problem was to decide where to deploy the strong reinforcements now expected within weeks: the two strong Australian infantry divisions and a British armoured brigade. But the situation changed so rapidly it proved impossible for a unified command to think through a reworked coalition strategy. Wavell diverted the armoured brigade to

¹⁸ NA, CAB106/38, Wavell Despatch; CAB65/25, War Cabinet minutes, 22 January 1942; CAB69/4, DC(O) minutes, 21 January 1942; CAB79/56, COS minutes, Confidential Annex, 21 January 1942; CAB80/33, COS(42)37, 20 January 1942; CAB80/61, Churchill to Ismay, 21 January 1942; *PT*, vol. 1; AWM, 73/2, excerpts of telegrams to and from Bowden, 9-26 January 1942; Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*; Homer, *High Command*; Farrell, *Leadership and Responsibility*; Farrell and Hunter, *Sixty Years On*.

Burma after an inspection visit on 6 February, but as a British general he could do this without serious interference. The real issue was the Australian force. On 14 February Japanese forces invaded southern Sumatra. That same day Lt.-General Sir John Lavarack, commanding I Australian Corps, having gone ahead to ABDA Command headquarters to prepare for the arrival of his force, recommended to his government that they divert his force from Java, which now seemed compromised, to Burma, which might still be held. Wavell made a similar recommendation to the Combined Chiefs of Staff. The next day Malaya Command capitulated in Singapore. While the Australian government debated reports and recommendations, the Combined Fleet's carrier strike force attacked Darwin in strength on 19 February, pounding the port facilities and Allied shipping. Meanwhile, Japanese ground forces advanced towards the Sittang River in southern Burma, the last major defensive barrier between them and Rangoon. In that context ABDA Command argued it could only hold Rangoon if the 7th Australian Division, then at sea, was diverted to Burma. From the vantage point of a unified coalition military strategy, this made some sense. Holding Rangoon would deny the oilfields of central Burma, keep the Japanese at bay from India, and allow the Allies to threaten Japanese operations in the Dutch East Indies. But the Australian government and Chiefs of Staff were no longer willing to entertain broader arguments. Now they insisted I Australian Corps come home to defend Australia.¹⁹

This Australian demand marked the low point of trust between allies, a prerequisite for any coalition strategy. Fittingly, it emerged through much confusion. When Lavarack first recommended diverting 7th Australian Division to Burma, he did not know how alarmed his colleagues in Canberra were about the direct threat to Australia. The Australian government representative in London misread his Prime Minister's intentions, pressed hard for the diversion, and led Churchill to believe Canberra would agree; Churchill unilaterally diverted the convoy as a result, further poisoning the discussion when Canberra overruled him. The dispute infuriated Wavell and his staff; Wavell described the Australians as 'our most difficult ally.' The Australian government also did not make its own views clear enough to prevent Wavell from deploying the advance guard of the corps in Java, where it wound up fighting a hopeless battle alongside the Dutch, and small British and American contingents. The Australian government asserted its national prerogative not having been properly informed about plans to build up in Australia with strong American forces. The Allies thus paid a price for refusing to allow junior partners to participate in forging grand strategy. The British further compromised the coalition by failing to

¹⁹ NA, CAB106/38, Wavell Despatch; CAB79/18 and 79/56, COS minutes, 20-23 February 1942; CAB88/1, CCS minutes, 17 February 1942; CAB106/153, Wavell to Brooke, 17 February, and Appendix B, precis of telegrams relating to employment of I Australian Corps, 31 January-20 February 1942; Homer, *High Command*; Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*.

turn their imperial strategy into a viable coalition strategy, then trying to avoid paying the price for failure. Allied governments agreed on 21 February to Wavell's request to transfer Burma back to India Command, on the grounds it made more sense to defend it as an outwork of India than as one end of a Malay Barrier now severely compromised. In that context it would have been surprising had the Australian government agreed to sustain a distant Allied fight in Burma, rather than concentrating the army at home to face what appeared to be dire emergency. Australian historian David Horner famously described pressure to reinforce Singapore in January as 'strategic analysis versus politics and emotion.' But what was arguable in January became impossible by the end of February. British problems and capabilities both then seemed too distant to matter to Australia's clear and present danger.²⁰

It is not unfair to say the British provoked this Australian reaction by their failure to make imperial strategy work as coalition strategy. British planners regarded their strategy for imperial defence as the only viable plan by which British and Australian interests could be protected against Japan. Far East Command repeatedly warned the British government in 1941 that Singapore could not be defended if the Japanese overran Borneo or Sumatra. But the British government consistently refused to make any commitment to defending the Dutch East Indies. It would not formally assume larger obligations before being assured the USA would intervene against any Japanese attack on either British or Dutch territory. Roosevelt only so assured them six days before the Japanese invasions began. British strategy fell between two stools: geography required military cooperation with the Dutch, but political pressure obstructed the detailed planning required to make such cooperation effective. As for direct threats to Australia, Far East Command and the Chiefs of Staff in London both insisted that holding Singapore would screen Australia. Dutch and Australian forces went into battle accordingly, to defend Singapore.²¹ ABDA Command inherited these decisions, which by default made defending Singapore the centre of gravity of coalition strategy. That legacy was also rooted in prewar decisions that reflected separate national concerns.

For the British, the 'Singapore strategy' represented a promise the Mother Country would defend the Empire against Japanese attack. It was not a realistic plan of war, but a political statement. It rested on the decision to take a military rather than a political risk. In order to speak for the Empire and direct its collective military power the British government had to promise to

²⁰ NA, CAB106/38, Wavell Despatch; *PT*, vol. 1; Horner, *High Command*; Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*. From the start Wavell disagreed Burma should be within ABDA Command, arguing it was best defended from India. The issue was difficult: was Burma better treated as a buffer for India or an end link in the 'Malay Barrier'? Only the fall of Singapore settled the matter.

²¹ Farrell, *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy*; Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore*; S.W. Kirby, *Singapore: The Chain of Disaster*, London, Cassell, 1971.

defend its interests. To secure Australian and New Zealand support, it promised to defend Singapore. But it never answered the criticisms that exposed the military risk inherent in its strategy: the base was too small to support the size of fleet necessary to engage the Japanese main fleet; there were no realistic battle plans by which the fleet when based in Singapore could defeat a Japanese attack on the region; the forces required to hold the naval base before the fleet arrived were never strong enough to meet the threat that arose; and the Japanese only attacked when the main fleet was already heavily engaged in Europe, preventing it from responding promptly and in force. From 1938 the British tried to persuade the Americans to fill this gap in their plans by deploying naval forces in Singapore. From 1940 the Churchill government and the Admiralty made a sustained effort to bring American power to bear to strengthen such British plans. By spring 1941 the outline of an agreement was emerging: some major American fleet units would transfer from the Pacific to the Atlantic, to allow the Royal Navy to detach strong forces to Singapore. But the war in Europe did not go well enough to make this possible. Nothing more than the flying squadron destroyed on 10 December ever went to Singapore. The war in Europe also prevented the Royal Air Force from deploying strong enough forces in Malaya to keep the Japanese at bay before the fleet could steam to the Far East.²² The result was stark. When the ARCADIA conference established ABDA Command, the new command inherited a strategic centre of gravity, based on a national strategy, that had no foundation on which to rest. Capitulation in Singapore brought that strategy to the point of collapse.

Wavell faced the moment of truth in the third week of February as he made recommendations to the Combined Chiefs of Staff. The position in the Philippines was beyond recovery. Without Singapore and southern Sumatra, he could no longer hold Java. Without strong air forces, which would not arrive in time, he could not hold any remaining positions between Burma and Australia. Allied naval forces in his area were badly outgunned and could not prevent further invasions. ABDA Command had not been able to pull the separate Allied battles together to screen the core of the 'Malay Barrier.' The Allies should now concentrate on trying to hold southern Burma, defend northern Australia, and build up for a counteroffensive. It had been necessary to try everything possible to hold the core Dutch islands, but it was now time for the coalition to cut its losses and regroup. Churchill, Roosevelt and the Combined Chiefs agreed. ABDA Command was formally disbanded on 25 February. Dutch commanders were placed in command of Allied forces deployed in and around Java and the Eastern Indies, all of whom were

²² NA, CAB106/40, Brooke-Popham Despatch; Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore*; Farrell and Hunter, *Sixty Years On*.

directed to fight on as long as they could. Wavell returned to India, to resume command there and try to hold southern Burma.²³

The decision to disband ABDA Command was painful but unavoidable, as the Japanese made clear by their relentless advance in March and April. Roosevelt ordered MacArthur to escape the Philippines. He escaped to Australia intending to lead the earliest possible counteroffensive to rescue the army he left behind. He found instead that he was expected to organize a larger but more deliberate Allied counteroffensive, not to stop the Japanese advance through Southeast Asia but rather to roll it back, when the Allies were finally strong enough to advance. Failure to concentrate in either Singapore or Burma led to the loss of both. Failure in Burma was compounded by bitter discord between British, American and Chinese governments over their respective priorities in Burma, and how they related to Allied grand strategy. British and Indian forces only just avoided destruction in Rangoon, thanks in part to the armoured brigade sent there by Wavell, and staggered back to the Indian frontier by early May after a long and bloody retreat. Darwin was attacked again, and Japanese forces penetrated the Eastern Indies, New Guinea and the Solomons. This left them poised to either invade Australia or cut off its lines of communication through the Pacific to the USA. The coalition was completely evicted from Southeast Asia. The Allies failed to deny its natural resources to the Japanese. The Allies failed to stop the Japanese from securing positions from which they could threaten India and Australia. Finally, apart from the inspiring defensive battle fought by American and Filipino forces in Bataan and Corregidor, the Allies were militarily humiliated by Japanese arms all over the region.²⁴

This was nowhere more evident than in the futile effort to concentrate Allied naval power to defend Java and the Malay Barrier. Japanese prewar plans did identify any American naval deployment in Singapore as a trigger that would compel a military response. But from the American point of view this was inviting them to place their fleet in an overextended position, which would expose the central Pacific and American interests to Japanese attack. The Pacific Fleet's plans did not go beyond the Philippines. When the British failed to deploy strong naval and air forces to Singapore and Malaya in 1941, that made it almost impossible to provide the foundation for any really unified coalition strategy when the Japanese invaded. Allied naval forces were hammered in detail, from Pearl Harbor, to the coast of Malaya, and in the Java Sea. More could have been done, against a Japanese advance that stretched their force to space ratio to the

²³ NA, CAB106/38, Wavell Despatch; CAB106/163, Wavell to Brooke, 17 February 1942; *PT*, vol. 1; Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*; Homer, *High Command*; Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*; Boer, *The Loss of Java*.

²⁴ *PT*, vol. 1; Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries*; Morton, *Strategy and Command*; Leary, *MacArthur and the American Century*; Perrett, *Old Soldiers Never Die*; Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*; Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War 1941-1945*, London, Phoenix Press, 1984; Horner, *High Command*.

limit. Japanese invasion forces were twice caught around Borneo in vulnerable positions and escaped serious losses only because Allied forces were not strong enough to drive home crippling attacks. But there was no real centre of gravity from which Allied seapower could safely concentrate, even given sufficient forces, to effectively contest the Japanese advance. Singapore was too far from the Americans, the Philippines too close to the Japanese.

Had the British battle squadron been ordered to steam from Singapore to Java as soon as Japanese invasion forces put to sea, it might have provided a strong nucleus around which to concentrate a truly ABDA fleet in being. Such a fleet might have menaced the Japanese advance towards the 'Malay Barrier.' The British capital ships provoked concern among the Japanese high command as it was, forcing it to concentrate strong forces to match them. But such a decision could only have come from national command authority as an act of grand strategy. Receiving no such order, Admiral Sir Tom Phillips steamed north to defend Malaya and the Allies lost the core of their fleet before it could ever be formed. Dutch commanders led Allied cruisers and destroyers against daunting odds and were defeated in detail in and around the Java Sea. When the Australian Chiefs of Staff called for an early concentration of Allied naval power to counterattack the Japanese before they could attack Australia, their appeal fell on deaf ears. The Pacific Fleet could do no more than regroup in Hawaii and try to protect convoys approaching Australia. The British Eastern Fleet temporarily abandoned the central Indian Ocean when the Combined Fleet sortied there in April, bombing the coasts of Ceylon and India before it returned to the Pacific. When it returned to Ceylon the Royal Navy focused on what the British Chiefs of Staff had already decided, in 1940, was the best it could do if war broke out before the fleet could concentrate in Singapore: 'to limit the extent of the damage and in the last resort to retain a footing from which we could eventually retrieve the position when stronger forces became available.' That position was India, not Singapore.²⁵

It is not the purpose of this paper to consider what happened after the Allies failed to defend Southeast Asia. The task here is to explain why the Allies failed to forge a realistic unified military strategy, to defend their shared and common interests in Southeast Asia against the Japanese onslaught. The first reason was that onslaught. British prewar plans rested on two assumptions: the Japanese would not move fast enough nor hit hard enough to overrun Singapore before the British Empire could reinforce it effectively; the US Pacific Fleet would underwrite this by effectively distracting Japanese striking power from Southeast Asia. The Japanese destroyed both these assumptions before Wavell assumed command, then never allowed the Allies to dig in

²⁵ NA, CAB80/15, COS(40)592(Revise), The Situation in the Far East in the Event of Japanese Intervention Against Us, 15 August 1940.

anywhere long enough to regroup. The second reason for failure was the design of the unified command the Allies established to defend Southeast Asia. Wavell was given the mandate but not the muscle. The ARCADIA conference looked beyond his command at the war as a whole and used this headquarters as a trial run for establishing the machinery by which it would wage global war. This different priority made the summit conference less willing to tackle the inherent weaknesses separate national priorities imposed on Wavell's new command. The third reason was those separate national priorities and their influence on strategic planning. Wavell escaped unrealistic pressure to rescue MacArthur only because his own superiors in Washington were also ready in practice to write off his army. He did not escape Australian pressure to defend Australia while at the same time trying to hold the Malay Barrier, because he could not escape the weakest link in his chain: the unrealistic British strategy to defend Singapore as the lynchpin of defence in the Far East. The hollow core of that imperial strategy doomed his coalition strategy.

It is not easy to suggest how the Allies might have done better in Southeast Asia, either in Washington or at ABDA Command. They might have left Malaya Command to fight on without reinforcement in order to concentrate on defending Java and southern Burma. But the Japanese might have overrun these positions no later than they actually did, had they not been forced to fight through to the Malay Barrier. The Japanese did not always use their strategic dominance to full effect, but they did dominate the sea lanes and air space of Southeast Asia before Wavell took command. The Japanese, not ABDA Command, held the strategic initiative. The Allies might have been able to avoid military humiliation, especially in Singapore, but it is impossible to speculate whether a different Allied defensive strategy in either Burma or Java would have produced the kind of stubborn defence that in Bataan and Corregidor turned defeat into defiance. Much would have depended on when they made the hard decision to abandon Singapore. And only a truly inspiring defensive stand could have gained enough credit to offset the real humiliation: the political spectacle of the Western Powers being evicted from this vast region by an Asian power they did not see, before it was too late, as a grave danger to their ascendancy. The deepest roots of the Allied failure to forge any kind of coalition strategy in Southeast Asia lie, in fact, in the very nature of that Western ascendancy.

American, British, Dutch and Australian strategic plans to defend their interests in Southeast Asia had deep roots based on a simple premise: they were designed to defend the particular imperial interests of a particular Western power, not the collective ascendancy and position of the West in the region. French plans reflected the same narrow roots, before the debacle of 1940 compromised French Indochina and forced its commanders to submit to Japanese demands. American strategy, dating back to 1907, focused on defending the American position in

the Philippines and bringing the Japanese main fleet to a decisive battle in the Pacific. The American presence in China was a token written off as indefensible in a major war against Japan. Australian concerns about a Japanese threat also dated back to the 1900s but were subsumed by the decision to tie Australian strategy to a British strategy to defend the Empire in Asia, ‘forward defence’ for Australia. This was sometimes contested but never overturned, and focused on a general military partnership with the British, rather than on defending Southeast Asia as a buffer for Australia. Such thinking led Australian forces to Africa before Malaya. Dutch strategic plans, dating back into the nineteenth century, focused on preserving Dutch power in the Indies, looking as much in towards rebellion as out towards invasion. Defeat in Europe in 1940 crippled efforts to change that focus. British strategic plans focused on imperial defence, which meant defending maritime trade and the sea lanes east of India.

These long standing roots of strategic planning reflected the fact that there were separate Western strategic interests in Asia, defined in national terms, usually with more friction than harmony. From an Asian perspective it perhaps seemed as if Western ascendancy in Asia was a collective strategic position that would be defended as such. The Imperial Japanese Navy certainly assumed this when it refused to consider attacking only the British and Dutch, insisting it was too dangerous to leave the US Pacific Fleet unmolested on its flank just to try to make it harder for Roosevelt to bring the USA into war. By December 1941 they were right to assume the Americans would not stand aside—but wrong to assume this meant the Allies were ready to wage war according to a unified coalition strategy. From a Western point of view, there was no Western imperial ascendancy in Asia—rather there were competing Western imperial interests, united only by a vaguely sensed underlying common interest to maintain an overall Western preponderance of power in Asia. This national cast of mind defined strategic planning to the point at which the Japanese posed a clear and present danger to all Western interests in the region. Even then, the British Far East Command insisted the Japanese would not attack until well into 1942, by which time the Allied position would be much stronger—and almost its only reason for so insisting was that the Japanese would not do something the British could not do themselves. Separate Western imperial projects established a framework for strategic planning that addressed separate imperial interests before any collective Western imperatives. The Japanese onslaught of December 1941 aimed squarely at this fundamental weakness by driving straight for the central position between separate Western national strategies—and by moving too far, too fast, to allow the Allies to pull together and unify their strategy. Imperialism divided by national rivalry could not pull together fast enough to prevent humiliation. The price was a long and bloody war which forever changed the nature of the Western presence in Asia.

Abbreviations for archives used in endnotes:

AWM	Australian War Memorial
IWM	Imperial War Museum, United Kingdom
NA	National Archives United Kingdom