

The Politics of Intelligence in Grand Strategy: The Joint Intelligence Committee and Britain's War Against Japan, 1942-1945

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In March 1942, General Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief India, notified London that recent advances by the Axis Powers in both North Africa and Southeast Asia now threatened two fundamental Allied interests: the oilfields of the Middle East, and the British Empire line of communications between the Suez Canal and India. Wavell warned that the enemy could now try to effect such an “Axis junction” by advancing towards each other, to seize or interdict those Allied interests. Wavell sent this warning to bolster his plea for reinforcements to help hold India and the Indian Ocean, confronted by menacing Japanese advances by land and sea.¹ The British authorities responsible for considering that plea, the Chiefs of Staff (COS) and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, could not dismiss this warning. Any such junction would jeopardize the global British war effort. But Wavell could not cite any evidence that either Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan were actively planning to try any such thing. The COS turned to the body responsible for evaluating such problems: the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), which reported directly to both COS and Prime Minister. The JIC replied on 17 March. Because strong German ground forces were advancing towards Allied held oilfields in both the Caucasus and the Middle East, that threat was significant. The Japanese on the other hand did not present such a proximate menace, nor was there any evidence they intended to try any such operation. However, the JIC concluded that because British Empire forces in the Indian Ocean area were now so weak, British weakness might tempt the Japanese to give it a try – or at least to launch naval raids to disrupt Indian Ocean sea lanes, which could cause major problems.²

That JIC warning had consequences. At that same time, military planners in both London and Washington were considering whether or not the Allies should launch a so-called “Second Front” invasion of Western Europe in 1942, to try to relieve German pressure on their Soviet ally on the Eastern Front. For various reasons, American planners decided to make such a proposal. But the British COS were convinced any such invasion would fail disastrously. So as part of their strategy to defeat this proposal, they raised this concern about an “Axis junction” between the Suez Canal and India.³ In April, the Combined Fleet of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) did sortie into the Indian Ocean, launch raids against Ceylon and the east coast

¹ National Archives United Kingdom (NAUK), CAB79/19, COS minutes, 9, 14, 16, 17 March (JIC(42)75); Cabinet Office, Cabinet History Series, *Principal War Telegrams and Memoranda* (PT), 7 Vols. (Liechtenstein: KTO Press, 1976), Vol. 1, Wavell to COS, 14, 15, 25 March 1942; Brian P. Farrell, *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy 1940-1943: Was There a Plan? Vol. 1* (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen, 1998), 277, 281.

² NAUK, CAB81/106, JIC(42)75(O), 14 March 1942; CAB79/19, COS minutes, 17 March 1942; Farrell, Vol. 1, 281.

³ Farrell, Vol. 1, 281-88.

of India, and skirmish with the Royal Navy's (RN) Eastern Fleet. But then it returned to the Pacific Ocean. There was no "Axis junction," nor any decision in Tokyo to try to effect one. But this did not really matter. The JIC report seemed plausible. The Eastern Fleet was indeed outmatched; after its close call it withdrew temporarily to the east coast of Africa, to avoid destruction. And the IJN did seem to have the capability to exploit further west. That was enough to bolster the successful argument to reject any Second Front attempt in Europe in 1942.⁴

This episode can tell us much about our principal concern in this paper: the British JIC and its role in making British grand strategy for the war against Japan. The JIC evaluated and analysed the strategic situation and, taking capabilities into consideration, suggested what the enemy might do, and to what ends. Its analysis was considered by those responsible for making and executing plans, but formed only part of a larger picture, one influenced not only by the fact the JIC could not provide any confident indication of Japanese intentions but also by wider considerations already engaged by the COS. And the JIC analysis of what to do regarding Japan was intimately connected to the ongoing war in Europe, which, to the British, was a higher priority. These factors shaped the role the JIC played in grand strategy against Japan: its acknowledged function in the central direction of the war, the way it operated, the limitations to what it could do, the agency and agendas of the COS and the Prime Minister, and the relationship between the war in Europe and that against Japan. This paper will argue that the experience of the JIC in formulating grand strategy in the war against Japan is a concrete example of an old truth: even well designed intelligence systems can only in the end strengthen those willing or able to heed them.

Military intelligence at every level, from the infantry section to the central direction of the war, rests on information. It is an important expression of "information warfare": the better informed you are about the situation and the possibilities, in every respect, the better chance you have to succeed. But access to information is necessary but not sufficient. Information must be acquired, organized, collated, contextualized, assessed, and then disseminated intelligently in order to be of any use. It must also be correctly or at least intelligently understood, and actively considered as an integral part of planning and execution. The mere existence of information – intelligence – is useless if it is not circulated, understood, or applied. This requires some method by which intelligence can be brought to the attention of whoever makes war plans and whoever implements them. Many different methods or systems were used across the broad sweep of military history. They all revolved, in some way, around the relationship between two factors: machinery and men. It mattered what sort of structure, or system, or chain of command and control was established in order to connect intelligence to operations – or whether there was any at all. It also mattered who exactly played what role, and what their individual attitudes were to intelligence and making war. Generalizations are fraught, but we will make two here. Well-designed systems for applying intelligence to war still always depended on being effectively used. And such systems, or the absence thereof, usually reflected the broader

⁴ Farrell, Vol. 1, 269-89.

organizational culture, or “way of war,” they were part of.

All these general considerations apply to any study of the British JIC and its role during the Second World War. The JIC was first established in 1936, and cut its wartime teeth from September 1939 onwards, when war broke out in Europe. By the time it was compelled in 1941 to pay close attention to the prospect of war with Japan, two things had evolved to almost their final form: the British system and machinery for the central direction of total war, and the JIC as part of that machinery. That machinery was designed around the principle of combining interested branches of government and or the military in committees, and working through those committees to define, decide, and execute policies on matters that affected them all. In broad outline, as defence and war machinery its roots dated back to 1902; but the form and structure by which it waged war against Japan evolved directly from adjustments driven by Winston Churchill, when he assumed executive office as Prime Minister in May 1940.

When it was established in 1936, the JIC was composed of representatives of the intelligence branches of the three armed services. Before the outbreak of war in Europe it did not play a major role in shaping British policy, for a number of reasons. Intelligence as a part of the profession of arms did not have the influence or standing enjoyed by operational command, or planning. High flyers were generally not attracted by nor steered towards it. The decision to establish the subcommittee in 1936 did however fit well with the larger and now established British practice to bring together the three armed forces to cooperate more systematically, and in a more organized manner. The idea was to preserve their professional autonomy yet improve their combined functioning. Rather than one unified command, there would be cooperating combined direction. The apex of the machinery was the COS, which assumed collective responsibility for providing advice to the government on defence matters and direction to the armed forces on implementing government decisions. The JIC was at first designed to support the Joint Planning Staff (JPS), to “act as the channel by which the planners would obtain intelligence on all subjects where more than one service might be involved.” Thus informed, the JPS would support the COS. In addition to this relatively low status and modest role, the JIC was hampered by being largely ignored by the Foreign Office (FO), the ministry that provided by far the most political analysis and intelligence to the government and armed services. That reflected older notions that the political and military departments should be kept at arms-length below the executive level, to prevent the political from becoming unduly influenced and the military from becoming unduly politicized.⁵ But the approach of war started to change all this.

From autumn 1938 the FO began to attend JIC meetings more regularly. The COS encouraged this. As tensions in Europe rose they felt and cited the need for more systematic political guidance, and for more effective consideration of problems that affected more than one service. In summer 1939, as tensions became crisis, fundamental changes were made in

⁵ Michael S. Goodman, *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee, Vol. 1* (London: Routledge, 2014), ch. 1; F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations* (London: HMSO, 1979), chs.1-2; Percy Craddock, *Know Your Enemy: How the Joint Intelligence Committee Saw the World* (London: John Murray, 2002), 7-10; Noel Annan, *Changing Enemies: The Defeat and Regeneration of Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 63.

response. First, at the suggestion of the War Office (WO) the FO representative assumed the chair of the committee, not only to place a disinterested party in the middle of debates between services but also to tap more effectively into the FO's vast global network of information and intelligence gathering and political analysis. This provided a bonus when the FO appointed William Cavendish Bentinck to be its representative. He evolved into an inspired choice and held the appointment for the duration of the war. Second, it now became expected and routine for the directors of intelligence of the armed services to attend the committee. Third, in July the COS clarified its responsibilities with a sharper new directive, charging it with:

The assessment and co-ordination of intelligence received from abroad with the object of ensuring that any Government action which might have to be taken should be based on the most suitable and carefully co-ordinated information available.

The co-ordination of any intelligence data which might be required by the COS or the JPS for them.

This elevation to a direct link to the COS was strengthened when war broke out in September by reconstituting the JIC as a sub-committee of the new War Cabinet, which ranged it, theoretically, alongside rather than below the JPS.⁶

There was however a third clause in the directive, charging the JIC to consider "any further measures which might be thought necessary in order to improve the efficient working of the intelligence organization of the country as a whole." That complicated matters, by requiring the committee to try to cope with an array of administrative issues, and manage the multi-faceted machinery of intelligence, when it did not have either the secretariat or staff support of the JPS, or its acquired status. But ineffective efforts to try to improve appreciations from the enemy's point of view wound up helping, when their obvious shortcomings persuaded the COS, in March 1941, to establish a subordinate Joint Intelligence Staff (JIS). This allowed the JIC to delegate much of both the administrative work, and the task of composing first drafts of appreciations, to this new staff, organized in two teams of five officers each.⁷ Such changes enabled the JIC to exploit more effectively the most important change in its position: the accession of Winston Churchill to the executive office of Prime Minister in May 1940.

Churchill took personal charge of the central direction of the war but did so by working through the British system of combined committees, which he streamlined and focused. He made himself Minister of Defence, supported not by a department but rather a small staff, and in that capacity assumed the driving role in three bodies that now ran the war: the War Cabinet, a Defence Committee of that Cabinet, and the COS, with whom he met regularly. Churchill was also, by far, the British political leader most personally interested in the importance and role of intelligence. He lost no time in driving that machinery. One of the first orders he gave the COS was to "review the system by which intelligence was related to the government's procedure for

⁶ Craddock, 10-11, 17; Hinsley, chs.1-2; Annan, 9-17; Patrick Howarth, *Intelligence Chief Extraordinary: The Life of the Ninth Duke of Portland* (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), 112, 119-23.

⁷ Goodman, ch.4; Hinsley, Appendix 8; Craddock, 10-12; Annan, 16, 60.

taking operational decisions.” The COS delivered, focusing the JIC with a directive issued on 17 May that guided it for the rest of the war. The JIC was authorized to submit papers on any information or issue that it felt should be considered by higher authority. One task in particular stood out: “to summarize broadly the available intelligence regarding the intentions of the enemy or developments in any of the ‘danger spots’ in the international situation, and to set out the conclusions which may be drawn therefrom.” This spelt out categorically the principal JIC task: strategic assessment, with particular reference to enemy intentions and friendly choices.⁸

This underlines the connection that interests us here: the role and contribution of the JIC to grand strategy in the war against Japan. Much attention has been paid to the problems of 1941, of whether or not Allied intelligence gave “fair warning” of Japanese intentions and capabilities before the onslaught that began in December that year.⁹ Less studied is the question of how intelligence contributed to the long and bloody counteroffensive campaigns the Allies launched from summer 1942 onwards, to overcome that onslaught and defeat Imperial Japan. In that focus, one consideration takes first place in any study of the JIC and British grand strategy: maturity. While the Japanese offensive and Allied defeats created an intimidating host of new and very difficult challenges, foundations were already in place. The machinery by which the British formulated grand strategy, and the men who ran the machine, were by then largely settled, teething problems largely sorted. Churchill held office to almost the very end of the Pacific War; holding office throughout the conflict were General Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), and Air Chief Marshal Charles Portal, Chief of the Air Staff, as well as Bentinck in the chair of the JIC. These men and the bodies on which they served worked in almost daily contact to formulate British grand strategy. And while the JIC continued to stretch itself to address other aspects of intelligence, we will stay focused on our three concerns: JIC appreciations of Japanese circumstances, capabilities, and strategic intentions; the recommendations it made for British and Allied grand strategy as a result; and the influence those reports had on that grand strategy.

In June 1939 the COS asked the JIC to provide an appreciation of the strategic situation from Japan’s point of view, to inform a review of British priorities in the Far East. There is no evidence this paper was ever produced.¹⁰ The British machinery and the JIC learnt much and

⁸ Hinsely, Appendix 6; Craddock, 12-18; Howarth, 128-29; Douglas Ford, “Planning for an Unpredictable War: British Intelligence Assessments and the War Against Japan, 1937-45,” in *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 27, 1, 2004.

⁹ Wesley Wark, “In Search of a suitable Japan: British naval intelligence in the Pacific before the Second World War,” in *Intelligence and National Security*, 1, 2, 1986; Antony Best, “‘This probably over-valued military power’: British Intelligence and Whitehall’s perception of Japan, 1939-41,” in *Intelligence and National Security*, 12, 3, 1997; Antony Best, *British Intelligence and the Japanese Challenge in Asia 1914-1941* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Richard J. Aldrich, *Intelligence and the War against Japan: Britain, America, and the Politics of Secret Service* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000); John R. Ferris, “Worthy of Some Better Enemy: The British Estimate of the Imperial Japanese Army 1919-1941 and the Fall of Singapore,” in *Canadian Journal of History*, XXVIII, 1993; John R. Ferris, *Behind the Enigma: The Authorised History of GCHQ, Britain’s Secret Cyber-Intelligence Agency* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 220-21.

¹⁰ Hinsley, ch. 2.

improved a great deal over the next two years, at war. In September 1941, the JIC argued that as yet Japan was not ready or able to invade Southeast Asia, and in fact might still advance north, against the Soviet Union – but warned that it would choose one or the other very soon, because Allied economic pressure, intensified in late July, now forced it to face the moment of truth. This accurately summarized both the situation and the debates then unfolding in Tokyo.¹¹ But this was a different theatre, facing a different foe, about both of which the British were far less well informed than in Europe. In late November 1941, as it became obvious the Japanese were about to attack the Western Powers, the JIC argued their most likely strategy would be to avoid confronting the USA and attack positions held by, or important to, the British and Dutch instead, starting by invading Thailand. This was possibly the most glaring mistake in appreciation the JIC made in the war against Japan.¹² But compiling a hindsight list of which appreciations turned out to be “correct” tells us nothing. We need instead to understand why the JIC presented the appreciations it did, and how these influenced grand strategy.

This requires us to engage the most important factor in historical analysis: context. That involves five things, to restate them here: JIC analysis was only part of a larger picture of appraisal and consideration; it could be weakened by lack of information and or by coming up against other agendas; it could also be hampered by its own methods of operating; it was now complicated by being integrated into a wider Allied process; and its appreciations were always influenced by what to the British was the higher priority, the war in Europe. Analyzing three examples of JIC efforts to shape grand strategy through appreciations and recommendations can allow us to address our questions through this context. The fundamental questions never really changed: what grand strategy should the Allies prosecute in order to defeat Japan, how best could British Empire forces fit into that overall outline, and therefore what should they be doing “right now” in order to bring that final offensive forward? In 1942 the Allies first began to consider a broad outline for a grand strategy by which to defeat Japan and win the war. In 1943 the Allies tried to resolve disagreements about what role British forces should play in Allied counterattacks against Japanese forces that would hopefully lead to the final phase offensive. And finally, in the second half of 1944 a heated British argument over how British forces could best contribute to both defeating Japan and advancing British longer-term interests in Asia boiled over. Like stepping stones across a stream, these episodes point out, for us, the JIC role in making grand strategy in the war against Japan.

Even as they reeled from the shock of the Japanese onslaught that evicted them from Southeast Asia in less than six months, Allied planners began to consider how to reverse this defeat, destroy the armed forces of Imperial Japan, and force it to capitulate. The key word in that sentence is Allied. Because Japan attacked all the Western Powers simultaneously, this enabled the immediate creation, and rapid construction, of the Grand Alliance led by the USA and the British Empire. While this made final victory all but certain, it also further complicated British grand strategy. For at least a year, the British had already been in such

¹¹ NAUK, CAB81/104, JIC(41)350, 3 September, JIC(41)362(Final), 13 September 1941.

¹² NAUK, CAB121/748, JIC(41)449(Final), 28 November 1941; Douglas Ford, *Britain's Secret War against Japan* (London: Routledge, 2006), ch. 1; Craddock, 20-21; Howarth, 159-61.

dire need of American economic and materiel support to wage war in Europe that they were compelled to seek American approval for their strategic plans. Now they at last could wage war in combination with this titanic ally, but must also work out what now became combined grand strategy and war plans. British machinery shaped the establishment of a combined central direction for the Allied war, including both a Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCS) and Combined Intelligence Committee (CIC), the whole operating under the direction of the political executives, Churchill for the British and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) for the Americans.¹³ This automatically added layers of complications to the tasks of applying intelligence to making grand strategy. The first Allied call for a full combined evaluation on exactly how to wage war against Japan came in fact from the CCS and it came as early as 6 February 1942, just before the Japanese invasion of Singapore island and while Allied forces fought on in Luzon. That call noted, or revealed, four problems: the enemy had the initiative and the Allies were being forced to react ad hoc and fight piecemeal; the British had as yet no idea how the Allies should overcome this problem; the Allies simply did not have enough information about the Japanese, from the tactical through the central direction of war, to analyze it with any confidence; but meanwhile they were being wedged apart by the enemy advance.¹⁴

The first problem petered out when the Japanese advance ended from exhaustion in May, bolstered by an Allied defensive naval victory in the Battle of the Coral Sea. The third problem only improved through effort and over time, and remained troublesome until nearly the very end of the war. London needed to focus on the second problem. But that was now conditioned, and complicated, by the fourth. The Japanese advance seized the central position, which forced the Allies to agree in March to divide their war against Japan into “operational spheres.” While the CCS would oversee the global war, the Americans would direct operations in the Pacific – which now by necessity included Australia, given the Japanese advance – and the British would oversee operations in the Indian Ocean and South Asia. This, as we shall see, caused multiple problems for Allied grand strategy. But at the time, all the British JPS could report, on 6 March, was that while it was premature to discuss in any detail any overall strategy to win the war, it did make sense to begin that long process by trying to identify and evaluate Japanese resources, capabilities, strengths and weaknesses. When Churchill confirmed on 17 March that the British agreed to create operational spheres, all he could say regarding the overall plan was to assume for the record that when the Allies did finally begin any “large scale offensive” against Japan, it would be directed by them both, through the CCS.¹⁵

The issue did not dangle but devolved, into the theatre of operations. British-led forces remained in contact with the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) as they retreated in some disarray out of Burma and back into India. This triggered grave challenges: a massive domestic political challenge in India to British rule, and a potentially very serious dilemma for the

¹³ Farrell, Vol. 1, chs. 5-6.

¹⁴ PT, Vol. 6, JSM 32, 6 February 1942.

¹⁵ NAUK, CAB84/4, JPS minutes, 4 March 1942; PT, Vol. 6, Pound to King, 16 March, King reply, 17 March 1942; Warren F. Kimball, *Churchill & Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence, Vol. 1, Alliance Emerging* (Princeton: University Press, 1984), R-115, 9 March, C-46, 17 March 1942.

Allies regarding China, and its place and role in their grand strategy. But to put first things first it was necessary to consider how to counterattack and regain Burma; that conversation began between London and New Delhi even before the retreat came to an end. This was unavoidable. British Empire forces remained in contact with an enemy who did seem to pose not a small threat to the very bastion of the Empire in Asia. For that reason alone, what to do about Burma now became a central issue in British deliberations. Two conversations merged in due course. In June Wavell and Churchill discussed plans for a counteroffensive into Burma. Wavell agreed it was now reasonable to plan such a campaign but warned that Allied forces remained far too weak, especially in the air and at sea, to do much beyond cautious minor probes during the upcoming campaigning season in 1942-43. Churchill impatiently dismissed such “nice and useful nibbling,” noting “What I am interested in is the capture of Rangoon and Moulmein and thereafter Bangkok.” But he also agreed nothing of the sort could be attempted unless the war in Europe went well.¹⁶ That exchange overlapped a review by the COS of the JPS first outline plan for an overall grand strategy against Japan. That plan raised issues which in the end could only be overtaken by events.

On 10 July the COS agreed to send the JPS outline plan to Washington to give the British representatives to the CCS an “unofficial” update on thinking in London. Unofficial, because it could not be agreed. The JPS doubted it was necessary to reconquer Burma in order to win the war. The COS disagreed – as did the Americans. But the more interesting feature of the draft was that it identified five ways by which Japan could ultimately be defeated: to evict the IJA from Northern China; to cut Japanese sea lines of communication to China; to smash Japan itself by strategic bombing from the air; to retake the oil reserves of Southeast Asia; and to cut Japanese sea lines of communication to Southeast Asia. The COS stepped back from this outline because it was not yet clear that the British, with the forces they expected to be able to commit to war against Japan, could play any important role in any of these campaigns. On the other hand there was an emerging “Allied” argument to reinforce the claim that Burma could not be ignored: the Americans already regarded China as a fundamental factor in the war against Japan, and supply lines through Burma appeared to be essential in order to keep the Chinese in the war. For all those reasons, including pressure from Churchill, planners continued to work on how to fight back into Burma. Those plans had to be watered down, however, due to both lack of resources and uncertainty about Japanese capabilities and intentions.¹⁷ The JIC, which underpinned by its own appraisal that JPS first outline plan to defeat Japan, now smoked out the crux of the matter by submitting on appreciation on Japanese grand strategy.

On 9 September the JIC reported that Japanese grand strategy against the Western Allies would be governed by Japanese capabilities at sea and in the air, the strength of their merchant marine, and their ability to exploit the resources of Southeast Asia. Having suffered heavy defeat at the Battle of Midway in June, the IJN was now forced to regroup. Japanese grand strategy would almost certainly be to try to consolidate in and exploit the occupied territories,

¹⁶ PT, Vol. 2, Wavell to Churchill, 9, 14, 22 June, Churchill to Wavell, 12 June 1942.

¹⁷ NAUK, CAB79/56, COS minutes, 2 June 1942; 79/22, 10 July 1942; 79/57, 28 August 1942; CAB81/110, JIC(42)325(Final), 26 August 1942.

stand on the strategic defensive and reorganize, and repel Allied counteroffensives. Overstretch would force Japan to reduce the tempo of operations in China to a necessary minimum, and to remain prepared for trouble with the Soviets but not cause any. Their conclusion was that Japan could not hope to conclusively defeat the Western Allies, so its war aim must now be to make its own defeat impossible – and it would fight accordingly, building up while on the strategic defensive. The COS neither endorsed nor rejected this appreciation, despite agreeing with most of it.¹⁸ The reason was fundamental.

The Japanese offensive that ended in May knocked the British onto the sidelines in this war against Japan. Along the way it upset the dominant pre-war British estimates of Japanese fighting power and willingness to use it to take risks, from the tactical to the grand strategy levels. And it pushed the British onto the strategic defensive, far from the central theatre of conflict, in a now global war that already badly overstretched British power. While these reactions were widespread, the service that took the brunt of the blow was the one that remained in contact with the enemy: the army. The British Army still struggled to grapple with only a small portion of enemy power in Europe. The Indian Army was at one and the same time being massively expanded, struggling with domestic upheaval, and had been badly beaten and humiliated in Malaya and Burma. These considerations shaped the attitude of the man who now laid down the guardrails for the British war against Japan: Brooke, the CIGS. Brooke was by now Chair of the COS and its strongest member, and on this he put his foot down. He reacted to the Japanese advance by deciding that until the Allies were on the point of final victory in the war in Europe, the Army would do the absolute minimum it possibly could in this new war against Japan. “Germany First” was the agreed maxim of Allied global grand strategy and Brooke was its staunchest exponent.¹⁹ This stance, from which Brooke did not budge, not only limited the effect of, but also helped to shape, JIC appreciations. This dominated the unfolding of plans and campaigns in Burma, and eventually triggered a head-on collision with Churchill.

Brooke did not dispute the JIC contention that Japan was now on the strategic defensive. But he argued that this neither enabled nor justified bolder British action, given that the JIC agreed Japanese combat power was formidable. Brooke wanted British superiority in any offensive against the Japanese to be “overwhelming,” on land, at sea, and in the air. He also pointed out that the Japanese enjoyed interior lines of communication to reinforce Burma, and supported both theatre planners and the JIC in noting that British logistics and lines of communication in Eastern India were so primitive they required considerable improvement before they could sustain any ambitious campaign. Everyone agreed the rugged mountain and jungle terrain in Burma, and seasonal monsoon rains, only made the challenges much greater. Brooke therefore supported Wavell’s contention that only cautious and limited offensives should be attempted, to avoid provoking any land battle that could not be broken off, or being

¹⁸ NAUK, CAB81/110, JIC(42)339(Final), 9 September 1942; CAB79/23, COS minutes, 9, 11 September 1942.

¹⁹ Farrell, Vol. 1, 261, 264-65, 277, 281, 309-11; Alanbrooke, *War Diaries 1939-1945* (eds. Alex Danchev, Daniel Todman) (London: Orion, 2002) refers to this theme over and over after January 1942; Ford, *Britain’s Secret War*, ch. 3.

trapped in one that could not be sustained. To this the JIC had no answer, nor did they seek one; the enemy might be on the strategic defensive, but as of yet there was little the British could do about it. By November it was agreed that nothing more than a very limited advance along the southern coast, and minor skirmishing in Northern Burma, would be attempted in the 1942-43 campaigning season.²⁰

The JIC thus contributed nothing more to British and Allied grand strategy against Japan in 1942 than summarizing the largely agreed and generally obvious. This was hardly their fault. But some dynamics exposed by their efforts are relevant to what unfolded in summer 1943. Five deserve attention now. First, it was clear that Churchill and Brooke were prone to push in different directions on grand strategy. Churchill would accept plans that were less ambitious than he desired only if absolutely convinced this was unavoidable; Brooke preferred to move methodically, more mindful of constraints on British resources overall, logistics and their affect on operations, and on what he saw as the need to minimize British commitment to the war against Japan. Both read appreciations through these lenses. Second, the Americans saw China as the base from which to mount the final offensive against Japan and wanted grand strategy to focus on this; the British COS, Brooke especially, disagreed. Brooke thought the Chinese were a broken reed on which it was dangerous to rely, and feared American pressure to restore full contact with China might place British forces in untenable situations in Burma.²¹ The next three dynamics pertain directly to the JIC and need some unpacking.

The inherent risk in any machinery designed to operate through committees is that final decisions, for example JIC appreciations, will wind up being the product of haggling and bargaining in committee debates – rather than presenting any generally commanding perspective, because it might privilege one service over another. This required all committees – Cabinet, the COS, the JPS, the JIC, Combined committees – to strive constantly to strike a professional balance by benefitting from fully inclusive discussion without allowing it to produce decisions that were trade-offs, rather than a sober response to a genuine common interest. That rested on the individuals in the machine. This was something of a problem for the JIC when it came to the war against Japan, hampered as it was by relatively fewer sources and resources, when compared to the war in Europe; that affected service perspectives. The weakest point was the army, represented by the Director of Military Intelligence (DMI), Major-General F.H.M. Davidson. Brooke so dominated the WO and the General Staff that Davidson too often focused too much on what Brooke wanted. When defeat in 1942 left the Army on point in the war against Japan, this aggravated the problem. Churchillian pressure from outside the committee helped offset this. So did the steady and professional guidance of Bentinck inside its deliberations. The JIC chair could neither overrule nor direct his service colleagues. He had to patiently debate them into the soundest possible consensus. Luckily

²⁰ NAUK, CAB79/56, COS minutes, Secretary's Standard File, 2 June 1942; 79/57, COS minutes, Secretary's Standard File, 30 September 1942; CAB81/110, JIC(42)399(O), 11 October 1942; PT, Vol. 2, Wavell to Churchill, 3 July, 31 August, Wavell to COS, 17 November, COS to Wavell, 20 November 1942; PT, Vol. 6, COS to CCS, COS(W)269, 1 September 1942.

²¹ Farrell, Vol. 1, ch. 9, Vol. 2, 565; Ford, *Britain's Secret War*, ch. 3

Bentinck was both naturally gifted in this regard and, by 1942, very experienced in this role. The problem had to be managed constantly, but was not unmanageable.²²

That was all the more important regarding the war against Japan because the machinery from which the JIC drew information was weaker, less well developed, and more hampered by Allied rivalry than it was in Europe. The British services had too few Japanese experts, and in Asia were compelled to rely more on the Americans for such things as signals intelligence. Progress was made, capabilities strengthened, but the challenges were never mastered to the degree they were in Europe. The JIC had less to work with. The enemy posed the final problem in that regard. At the operational level Japanese security was often very good, reducing the flow of information. British sources were effectively cut off from access to Japanese operations in 1938 and never fully recovered. Japanese theatre commanders were also given much independent latitude, which reduced the flow of discussion between Tokyo and commanders in the field about intentions and detailed plans. At the grand strategy level, the confusion and disarray that shaped the Japanese central direction of the war also handicapped Allied intelligence. If the IJN did not tell the IJA it was seeking battle at Midway, there was no way for the JIC to discover this either. Japanese grand strategy was disorganized and erratic. The JIC could rarely forecast Japanese intentions at this level beyond drawing such broad conclusions as to state that Japan was now on the strategic defensive. Without a more confident evaluation of Japanese intentions, the JIC, and through them Churchill and the COS, became accustomed to working more from the premise they must act on appraisals of Japanese capabilities. This was not optimal, and it opened up more room for debate and disagreement.²³

Operating under such conditions, the JIC strove to assist grand strategy as the war, and the Allies, advanced in 1943. Two key considerations emerged. First, it became both possible and necessary to produce an agreed overall Allied grand strategy that specifically aimed to defeat Japan and win the war. Second, the course of the war prompted the Americans to change their minds about where that grand strategy should focus. For the British, and the JIC, this raised two questions that became entangled: defeating Japan, and defining British war aims.

The year did not begin well for the British, when the limited offensive along the southern coast of Burma was roughly handled by the Japanese, who once again forced British Empire ground forces to retreat in embarrassing defeat. Churchill described this outcome as “lamentable,” and the COS agreed this indicated British-led forces were not yet ready to challenge the Japanese in any major encounter.²⁴ On the other hand American forces evicted the Japanese from Guadalcanal Island after a long and bloody campaign, while Australian and American forces counterattacked the Japanese on and around New Guinea. American power started to impress itself on the Pacific theatre. JIC appreciations accurately tracked this overall shift in the war. On 26 February 1943 the COS approved a JIC assessment which argued that for at least the medium term the Japanese had been forced back onto the strategic defensive

²² Howarth, 165, 169; Craddock, 13-17; Kenneth Strong, *Men of Intelligence: A study of the roles and decisions of Chiefs of Intelligence from World War I to the Present Day* (London: Cassell, 1970), and Annan, 16-17, 59-65.

²³ Goodman, chs. 3-4; Ford, *Britain's Secret War*, chs. 2-3; Aldrich, Parts 2-4; Howarth, 180-81.

²⁴ NAUK, CAB80/67, COS(43)78(O), 24 February 1943; CAB79/26, COS minutes, 19 March 1943.

everywhere. They would have to consolidate, and could mount no more than local responses to any Allied attacks. Interestingly, a week later their American counterparts agreed that the Japanese were likely to remain on the strategic defensive and would try to launch spoiler attacks, or pin Allied forces down in attrition battles, to protect their defensive barrier line while they consolidated. They also suggested Japanese focus would switch away from the Southwest Pacific, towards an effort to isolate China from Allied support.²⁵ Such differences in emphasis had become routine in Allied assessments, reflecting the different directions their planners and staffs hoped to go. The Americans defined their concerns in April: the British were again scaling down campaign plans for Burma, which would make it harder to sustain China. They articulated them at a CCS meeting on 16 April, offering a sweetener: if the British resumed planning to launch later that year a multi-pronged general offensive aimed to retake Burma, the Americans would find extra shipping to assist with necessary operations.²⁶

This rang alarm bells in London. In January the American Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) served notice at a summit conference in Casablanca that they would devote more attention and resources to the war against Japan. That commitment was kept low enough to sustain the “Germany first” consensus, but these signs of American frustrations over Burma and China coincided with British hopes to exploit belated Allied advances in North Africa, by escalating the Allied counteroffensive in the Mediterranean. There were only so many landing craft, ships, and aircraft to go around, and they were needed everywhere.²⁷ Facing another conference in Washington in May, Churchill and the COS put the issue of offensive action in Burma and or the Indian Ocean through intense discussion. JIC input only reinforced views the COS already held, but that arguably helped them forge a new consensus: because Japanese combat power should not be trifled with the British must tread warily regarding Burma, but because the Japanese were now on the defensive, and the Americans becoming impatient, they must do something. Brooke and Portal put the consensus together: it was now necessary to identify a specific Allied grand strategy to defeat Japan, to which British Empire forces could then decide how they might best contribute. The Allies must decide whether it was in fact necessary to reconquer Burma in order to defeat Japan, or whether British Empire forces could contribute some other way. On the eve of the conference the COS again approved a JIC assessment that while Japan could no longer launch major amphibious offensives against the Allies, they were consolidating and they remained formidable, especially when they could draw on strong land-based air support. The JIC also argued it was essential to keep the enemy under pressure, to disrupt these efforts to dig in. That underlined pressure to act, as did reports that American plans to escalate offensive action in the Southwest Pacific were taking shape.²⁸

At the conference in Washington in May, codenamed TRIDENT, the British agreed

²⁵ NAUK, CAB81/113, JIC(43)4(Final), 5 January 1943; CAB79/26, COS minutes, 26 February 1943; CAB81/113, JIC(43)73(Final), 24 February 1943; JCS Papers, PTO Reel 3, JIC80/1, 5 March 1943.

²⁶ JCS Papers, Meetings Reel 1, Minutes of meeting with FDR, 6 April 1943; NAUK, CAB88/2, CCS minutes, 16 April 1943.

²⁷ Farrell, Vol. 2, ch. 11.

²⁸ NAUK, CAB79/88, COS minutes, 19 April 1943; 79/60, COS minutes, 23, 28 April, 4, 10 May 1943; CAB88/2, CCS minutes, 25 June 1943; CAB81/114, JIC(43)120(O), 17 March, JIC(43)173(O), 18 April, JIC(43)196(Final), 30 April 1943.

that drastic changes must be made in order to produce more aggressive action in the Burma and Indian Ocean area. This raised the alarming possibility that British-led forces might be compelled to launch a more ambitious campaign than the COS were ready to endorse. Allied progress in the Mediterranean only complicated the problem; the British saw imperatives to pursue, the Americans saw reasons to justify greater ambition in what they termed the China-Burma-India theatre.²⁹ This underpinned the next major JIC assessment approved by the COS, on 22 June, in possibly the most overt example of Brooke imposing himself on any such paper. The Japanese now had no choice but to remain on the strategic defensive. They would intensify efforts to exploit the conquered territories, and probably launch local spoiler attacks, but nothing more – not even in China, unless, in desperation, to try to defeat any Allied effort to establish strong forces there. The COS not only endorsed this paper they also approved another that cast doubts on Chinese war potential, and directed the JIC to seek explicit American approval for both at the CCS.³⁰ Momentum was palpably shifting in the war against Japan, but for the COS this was a concern. They therefore tried to use as leverage JIC assurances that the Allies could afford to take their time preparing to launch their great onslaught against Japan, to make sure they did just that.

The dam burst in July, as Allied forces really took charge of the war in Europe. The Battle of the Atlantic was at last under control, Africa cleared, the Mediterranean reopened, and Allied forces invaded Sicily. These advances, combined with moves to reorganize the Indian Ocean theatre, smoked out what were now the two fundamental questions in British grand strategy against Japan: what kind of war effort could British national power support in the final Allied offensives to defeat Japan, and how could British combat forces make best use of that national power? The Allies agreed to arrange another summit conference, to revisit the fast moving questions of prosecuting strategic offensives in both Europe and Asia.

On 19 July Churchill, promising FDR that the British would submit proposals before the conference, warned the President it was essential for the British to have a firm idea of what the final phase of Allied grand strategy looked like, because they needed time to reorganize for “Phase II.”³¹ In British planning, “Phase II” referred to the period after Germany surrendered but while Japan continued to fight. The British central direction of the war all now understood how tricky that problem could be, because the commitment required to fight global war now placed the UK near the absolute peak limit of what its national power could generate – especially in the finite resource of manpower. Phase II now also began to affect discussions about what British Empire forces should do against Japan right now. Brooke summarized the connections for the Defence Committee on 28 July. JPS studies showed that more ambitious Indian Ocean amphibious operations Churchill wanted to undertake could not be properly resourced before Phase II. Notwithstanding Churchill’s desire to “engage the Japanese in force

²⁹ NAUK, CAB99/22, contains the detailed British records of the TRIDENT conference, minutes and papers; Farrell, Vol. 2, 576-98; Kimball, Vol. 2, Churchill to FDR, C#332, 28 June, FDR to Churchill, FDR#298, 30 June 1943.

³⁰ NAUK, CAB81/115, JIC(43)248(Final), 14 June, JIC(43)250(Final), 15 June, JIC(43)274, 3 July 1943; CAB79/27, COS minutes, 22 June 1943; Farrell, Vol. 2, 608-09.

³¹ Kimball, Vol. 2, Churchill to FDR, C#371, 19 July 1943.

wherever possible,” Brooke insisted that neither in Burma nor in the Indian Ocean should any operation be launched if it was likely to expand beyond resources already available. Clarity was imperative. The JIC warned that Japanese capabilities meant stronger forces were required to challenge them, but they could not confidently declare what the Japanese were likely to do. So clarity must be sought in Washington. To determine what British Empire forces should do, it was necessary to identify where they would best fit in to final phase Allied grand strategy.³²

Yet even this was not as clear cut as it sounds, for at least two reasons. First, the British now began to debate what war aims in Asia should influence their grand strategy choices. Second, the Americans kept pressing for more ambitious efforts in Burma. General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff US Army, complained that he considered the theatre to be operating at no more than 10% of its potential and “radical” changes were imperative. The JCS went so far as to endorse an appreciation by their own JIC they felt exaggerated IJN combat power, because they wanted to pressure the British to intensify their effort against Japan.³³ The conference codenamed QUADRANT, held in Quebec in August, finally did clear some air, laying foundations for the final offensive. The awkward American arrangement that sought to combine China, Burma, and India under one command was amended, replaced by a unified Allied Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) that did not extend into China – with a British commander and an American Deputy, to whom the CCS delegated the mission to identify how best to engage the Japanese in the Indian Ocean theatre. That sidestep was partly influenced by a quiet CCS consensus to prevent Churchill from demanding operations that would take resources away from Europe, but also by what was becoming a palpable shift in American strategic focus against Japan.³⁴

An offensive against Japanese merchant shipping by the USN submarine arm was starting to do tremendous damage to Japanese war making power. And the main body of the US Pacific Fleet was now becoming an aircraft carrier task force juggernaut, so strong that it seemed poised to open up new choices for a counteroffensive. The JIC picked up on this, reporting on 27 August that the USN now posed a critical threat to Japanese ability to transport oil from Southeast Asia to Japan by tankers – a principal reason for attacking the Western powers in the first place – and that the Allies should attack this weakness relentlessly.³⁵

SEAC made a rapid impact on Allied decision making. It recast the ongoing debate about retaking Burma versus outflanking amphibious invasions within a now firm understanding that nothing it did could rely on significant reinforcements from elsewhere. This was timely, given that later the same month the Minister of Production informed the COS their forecasts for what the armed services would require to prosecute Phase II against Japan amounted to only a 20% reduction of the peak national mobilization now required for global war – and, bluntly, national

³² NAUK, CAB81/116, JIC(43)297(O), 18 July, JIC(43)315(O), 27 July, JIC(43)320(O)(Draft), 29 July 1943; CAB69/5, Defence Committee (Operations) minutes, 28 July 1943.

³³ NAUK, CAB105/43, War Cabinet Telegrams, JSM to COS, JSM1063, 11 July 1943; JCS Papers, Meetings Reel 1, JCS minutes, 6 August 1943.

³⁴ NAUK, CAB99/23, contains the detailed British records of the QUADRANT conference, minutes and papers; JCS Papers, Meetings Reel 2, JCS minutes, 20 August; 1943; Farrell, Vol. 2, 627-48; Ford, *Britain's Secret War*, ch. 3.

³⁵ NAUK, CAB81/116, JIC(43)340, 18 August 1943; CAB79/27, COS minutes, 27 August 1943.

power could not sustain such a level of commitment. Changing American views of China also helped clarify the issue for SEAC, at least on the highest level of grand strategy. American priorities shifted from opening land routes to China to building up a strategic bomber force in that country, from which to bomb Japan.³⁶ But the Phase II problem now dominated discussion in London, and reached a level at which JIC assessments could make little difference.

In a probing discussion in November, the COS agreed that forecast manpower requirements for the final phase could not be met, so reconsideration was necessary. But they also argued that this could only be done within a framework of both a clear Allied grand strategy for a final phase and a clear statement of British priorities and war aims in Asia. They cited two statements by Churchill to indicate how tangled these things had now become. On the one hand the Prime Minister publicly pledged that the UK and the Empire would throw “their whole weight” into the final offensives against Japan. On the other hand Churchill now privately agreed with the Ministry of Production that the most the UK could provide to sustain Phase II campaigns was 50% of its peak war effort.³⁷ Something would have to give in 1944. Would the JIC influence this choice, or be swept along by it?

While the Pacific War did not end until Imperial Japan capitulated in September 1945, the outline Allied grand strategy for the strategic counteroffensive against Japan, and the final phase, was settled in 1944. First, American focus shifted, from December 1943, from seeing China as the base from which the Allies would launch their final offensives to defeat Japan to adopting a multi-pronged approach instead.³⁸ This was driven by six things. First was the now awesome striking power of the USN Pacific Fleet and its fast carrier task forces, which in summer 1944 pulverized the IJN Combined Fleet. Second was the exponential increase in the long-range striking power of the US Army Air Force’s heavy bomber force with the introduction of the B-29. Third was the slaughter of the Japanese merchant marine, including its tanker force, by the USN submarine arm. Fourth was the steady advance of Allied forces in the Southwest Pacific towards the Philippines. Fifth, two major Japanese offensives, from Burma against British-led forces in India, and in China against Allied forces there, terminated any remaining chance the mainland might still become the Allied base. The offensive in China was a success, forcing American B29 units to relocate; that only confirmed the shift to using newly captured Pacific Islands as bases from which to bomb Japan. The offensive against India was a total failure, indeed a turning point victory for British Empire ground forces in the Burma campaign, and thus also a decisive factor in SEAC campaign plan decisions. But it took time, stretching from March into July. The tough battles for Imphal and Kohima also appeared to substantiate the long-standing COS consensus that plans should assume any

³⁶ NAUK, CAB88/3, CCS minutes, 1 October 1943; CAB80/76, COS(43)657(O), 25 October 1943; JCS Papers, Meetings Reel 2, JCS minutes, 21 August 1943; Kimball, Vol. 2, FDR to Churchill, FDR#417, 10 November 1943; Farrell, Vol. 2, 661-62.

³⁷ NAUK, CAB79/67, COS minutes, 11 November 1943.

³⁸ NAUK, CAB84/59, JP(43)429(Final), 17 December 1943; CAB79/68, COS minutes, 23 December 1943 (JIC(43)494); National Archives and Records Administration USA, College Park (NARACP), RG 218, Records of the US JCS, Box 129, Folder CCS 381 Japan, Plan for the Defeat of Japan, CCS 417, Overall Plan for the Defeat of Japan, 2 December 1943; Farrell, Vol. 2, ch. 16.

British-led operation must be ready to face the strongest possible Japanese reaction. This was problematic, given the prevailing respect for Japanese tenacity and combat power and due to ongoing deficits in information about Japanese intentions. The advance into India, operation U-Go, did not achieve strategic surprise. The Japanese buildup could not be concealed. But neither theatre intelligence nor the JIC could anticipate precisely enough when and how the Japanese would advance, which contributed to some anxious early fighting before Allied airpower helped stabilize the defence. That all seemed to undermine Churchill's desire to challenge the enemy even when vital information about his intentions and capabilities seemed incomplete, and to substantiate Brooke's contention that British-led forces should take no risks with the Japanese before Phase II. Finally, there was the war in Europe.

In June 1944 the Allies at last launched the great Second Front counteroffensive against Germany. Allied forces now advanced from three directions to destroy the Nazi foe. This did, by the autumn, release resources, including sea and air power, to reinforce the war against Japan. But. The British Army embarked upon its toughest campaign in the European war from June, bleeding casualties from the D Day invasion of France onwards. When it all added up, the pressure on national resources available for Phase II was increased, not relaxed. The hard truth is that British grand strategy for global war had been based on the assumption that the war in Europe would end in 1944, easing the strain on national power. When this did not happen, the combined result of these six developments was to trigger the most bitter grand strategy arguments in London during the entire war.³⁹ In that context, the JIC finally found itself all but side-lined on the grand strategy level – at the very time its ability to collect, collate, and assess information neared its peak of efficiency.

The argument unfolded from the debris of the long debates over whether or not the Allies should concentrate on reconquering Burma or outflank it. As the British Indian 14th Army forced the IJA to retreat from Imphal and Kohima, the JIC emphasized that it remained necessary to keep these Japanese ground forces under maximum possible pressure, to take the initiative away from them once and for all and prevent them from regrouping and digging in.⁴⁰ But by August 1944 this no longer amounted to the only possible campaign British-led forces might launch against the Japanese; other useful action now seemed to be within the capabilities of forces SEAC was bringing under command. It is true that subsequent operations to retake Burma did not unfold just as planners and London hoped they might, but this campaign really rolled forward by default. 14th Army was in contact with the enemy. It was now strong enough to take the battle to them. All agreed there was good reason for it to do so, so now it did.⁴¹ The bigger grand strategy argument became what to do with British seapower, now being reinforced by units sent from the Mediterranean.

³⁹ Farrell, Vol. 2, 771-81; Charles Burgess, “‘To Treat China as a Great Power’: Great Britain, Southeast Asia and American Grand Strategy for the Defeat of Japan, 1941-1945,” in *From Far East to Asia Pacific: Great Powers and Grand Strategy, 1900-1954*, ed. Brian P. Farrell et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 179-80.

⁴⁰ NAUK, CAB81/124, JIC(44)337(O)(Final), 12 August, JIC(44)368, 20 August 1944; Ford, *Britain's Secret War*, chs. 3-4.

⁴¹ Raymond Callahan and Daniel Marston, *The 1945 Burma Campaign and the Transformation of the Indian Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2021); S.W. Kirby, *The War Against Japan Vol. IV: The Reconquest of Burma* (London: HMSO, 1965)

Three broad axes of advance emerged to contend for approval in London. The first was a variant of what Churchill pushed for since spring 1943: an amphibious invasion of Sumatra, to enable further such advances on Malaya, Singapore, and perhaps ultimately Bangkok. Against this, there emerged two proposals resting on a plan to develop in Australia a strategic base for British forces, led by a powerful RN battle fleet, from which they could advance north. One, soon called the Middle Strategy, loosely envisaged a British-led Allied advance into the eastern islands of the Netherlands East Indies archipelago, moving north from there into French Indochina. The other involved creating a British Pacific Fleet, then deploying that fleet alongside the main battle forces of the US Pacific Fleet in order to reinforce its direct offensive against the Japanese home islands themselves. While these alternatives overlapped in terms of when they became the main topic of argument, what they all reflected were the ramifications of American success in the Pacific.⁴²

By August 1944 it was obvious that American power would in the end crush Imperial Japan, and its two main axes of advance came from the Pacific. The only operations in Southeast Asia that now seemed certain to contribute directly to the final defeat of Japan were those that helped cut the region off from Japan, denying it the ability to continue to extract resources from the region or withdraw forces to help defend the homeland. This could be done by denying the Japanese the ability to move from the South China Sea to the home islands, and that was being done by the combination of the USN submarine offensive, the escalating strategic bombing offensive, and, from October, the American-led invasion of the Philippines. This threatened to relegate any other operations in the region to the status of strategic sideshow – if the objective of Allied grand strategy remained the earliest possible defeat of Imperial Japan.⁴³ The COS were heavily influenced by such considerations, and this did owe something to JIC appreciations that consistently supported American arguments about how best to inflict final defeat on Japan. Those arguments sunk in on the planning staffs. When it became possible for the RN to concentrate a powerful battle force in the war against Japan, this focus on the most rapid and direct possible concentration against Japan itself prompted the COS to consider either the Pacific Fleet option or, if the Americans did not accommodate this, the possible Middle Strategy, as the best alternative.⁴⁴

Older studies suggested that this argument about how to use the fleet became a confrontation between the COS trying to pursue a “focus on defeating the enemy” strategy that was “strictly military,” and the Prime Minister trying to address British concerns that went beyond the defeat of Japan by launching different operations for “political reasons.” A

⁴² Annan, 77-78; Brian P. Farrell, “Sideshow or Pandora’s Box? Ending the Pacific War in Southeast Asia, 1945,” in Paul R. Bartrop, editor, *The Routledge History of the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 2022); Farrell, *The Basis and Making of British Grand Strategy*, Vol. 2, 771-81; Gavin Long, *The Final Campaigns* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1963); John Ehrman, *Grand Strategy Vol. VI, October 1944-August 1945* (London: HMSO, 1956).

⁴³ The JCS recognized this as early as March when they adopted a JPS paper stating “that the greatest contribution that can be made by the Southeast Asia Command is to assist in providing timely direct support of the Pacific advance to the China-Formosa-Luzon triangle.” NARACP, RG218, Records of the US JCS, Box 21, Folder CCS 381, Burma 8-25-42, Section 7, Retaking of Burma, CCS 452/10, Strategy in Southeast Asia Command, 21 March 1944. Ford, *Britain’s Secret War*, chs. 3-4.

⁴⁴ Farrell, “Sideshow or Pandora’s Box.”

wartime American jibe captured this theme, suggesting that SEAC actually stood for Save England's Asian Colonies. But more recent work, able to draw from more substantial archives, complicates this picture. The COS were as mindful as Churchill of the danger that if the British did not play any visibly important role in what became an American victory over Japan, this could have serious repercussions for British interests in Asia, and the standing of the UK as a first-rank power. Churchill also had strong support from Cabinet colleagues and from the FO, who argued that the most certain way to preserve a highly visible British role in defeating Japan was for British-led forces to take back from Japan what they lost in 1942 – to visibly redeem themselves in Southeast Asia, from Rangoon to at least Singapore. The COS could argue that such operations risked becoming a sideshow, but the Prime Minister could reply that the course of the war now widened the considerations that national strategy must address.⁴⁵ And as this debate became ever more heated and complicated, the JIC found itself largely unable to play any significant role one way or the other.

By the time the argument peaked, the JPS were dominating the assessments from which the final debate unfolded. Time was a wasting, and it took too long to determine what must be done to build up a base in Australia in order for any Middle Strategy to emerge; it was also overshadowed by the American decision to invade Luzon. The Pacific Fleet option might have been derailed by the determination of Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations USN, to prevent the RN from playing any role in the final assault against Japan. He saw no need for British help. But he was overruled. At a second conference in Quebec in September 1944 Churchill made the offer, and FDR famously replied “No sooner offered than accepted.” It was of course not quite that simple, but the political usefulness of amassing as wide an array of Allied forces as possible – flags, more flags – to visibly finish off Japan could not be overlooked by the chief executives.⁴⁶ Churchill's last hope was that British power could both deploy a Pacific Fleet and also invade and retake Singapore. That would have happened. By August 1945 British-led forces were poised to invade Malaya and retake Singapore. But the abrupt termination of the war by the nuclear attacks on Japan stole their thunder. Sufficiency of power came too late to prevent the COS and Churchill from becoming so angry with each other that for the only time in the war their continued partnership seemed at real risk.⁴⁷

This happened because the war against Japan widened to the point where the British had

⁴⁵ On the Middle Strategy, see NAUK, PREM3/160/4, COS(44)396(O), 4 May 1944, for a comparison of both plans. For an overview of the discussions, see John Ehrman, *Grand Strategy Vol. V, August 1943-September 1944* (London: HMSO, 1956), 459-85, Marc Jacobsen, “Winston Churchill and the Third Front,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 14:3, 1991, 337-62, Ford, *Britain's Secret War*, ch. 3, and Charles J. Burgess, “A Tale of Two Grand Strategies: The Bay of Bengal and Allied Operational Planning in Southeast Asia, 1943-1945,” *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 87, 3, 2023. 703-32.

⁴⁶ Burgess, “To Treat China as a Great Power,” 179; *Foreign Relations of the United States, Conference at Quebec, 1944*, Agreement on the Pacific Fleet: Enclosure to C.C.S. 680/2, Report to the President and the Prime Minister of the Agreed Summary of Conclusions Reached by the Combined Chiefs of Staff at the “Octagon” Conference, September 16, 1944, 474-75; Ehrman, *Grand Strategy Vol. V*; W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War Vol. 6, Triumph and Tragedy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), ch. 10; Jacobsen, “Winston Churchill and the Third Front.”

⁴⁷ Farrell, “Sideshow or Pandora's Box”; Ehrman, *Grand Strategy Vol. VI*; S.W. Kirby, *The War Against Japan Vol. V: The Surrender of Japan* (London: HMSO, 1969). See also Burgess, “A Tale of Two Grand Strategies.”

to make complicated choices about how best to use growing but still limited forces, against a weakening but apparently still formidable enemy, without the same confidence in their intelligence, and familiarity with the enemy, with which they fought in Europe. In 1945, the JIC made good use of by now ample American collaboration to provide some very substantial assessments of the challenges the British Pacific Fleet faced as they prepared to join the intended invasion of Japan. But in 1944 they could not substantially influence, one way or the other, the heated argument over whether British power should now concentrate in the Pacific or remain focused from the Indian Ocean.⁴⁸ That became an argument over what national priorities should be after the great Allied counteroffensive began. Intelligence can certainly influence the political judgements required to settle such an argument, but at the time the JIC had neither the information nor the stature to command the discussion. The great shadow looming over the entire argument – represented by Brooke’s adamant military caution versus Churchill’s sense of political urgency – was the ultimate limits of national power available for Phase II. That dimension, too often overlooked by studies of these arguments over what campaigns to pursue, shaped the whole process in 1944. Everyone wanted to preserve British influence, but the principals disagreed over how. Churchill wanted to be bold while there was still time to take a calculated risk, with an eye on postwar consequences. Brooke and the COS wanted to make sure the one possible concentration of force was deployed where it could help end the war as soon as possible. No intelligence system could resolve such a debate.

So what may we conclude about the role of the JIC in making British and Allied grand strategy against Imperial Japan? The design of the intelligence system was almost a moot point. Given British strategic culture and practices of governance, the machinery for central direction of the war that used combined committees rather than unified direction was the only approach even thinkable in London in this era. A unified Ministry of Defence came only in 1964. The need to strengthen the capabilities and status of the JIC, and its access to the COS and Prime Minister, was seen and addressed before the Pacific War began. The balance on the committee itself, between service members haggling over their own agendas and a combined effort to forge a consensus genuinely rooted in a common interest, was the task eternal, the challenge that had to be faced every day on every question. It must be said that regarding strategic assessments for grand strategy, by 1943, with the partial exception of Brooke’s overbearing influence on the DMI, the JIC was managing this challenge as well as could be expected. Weaker members were weeded out at all levels, from the Prime Minister to the JIC, by the time the Pacific War really exploded. The JIC helped establish the Combined Allied versions of the machinery in Washington, which from late 1942 were operating more smoothly in coalition than almost any other example we might find in military history. That harmony was certainly tested by what became the gross disparity in power and importance, in the counteroffensive

⁴⁸ NAUK, CAB81/129, JIC(45)156(O), 11 May, JIC(45)180(O), 31 May, JIC(45)188(O), 8 June, JIC(45)195(O), 15 June, JIC(45)213, 2 July 1945; Goodman, ch. 5, discusses in detail the combinations that relatively scarce resources compelled the JIC to make in order to strengthen their appreciations of the war against Japan after 1943; Ford, Conclusion; Annan, 114, 122, spelt out the limits of JIC influence: “they attempted only to reconcile and make sense of what their respective ministries produced.”

against Japan, between the USA on the one hand and the British Empire on the other. But this had nothing to do with the JIC nor could it do very much about it.

There was a role for intelligence machinery in making grand strategy, but that role had its limits, however that machinery was designed and operated. Assessments of circumstances needed to be sober, professional, and accurate. From late 1942 they were. Assessments of enemy capabilities needed to be accurate and professional, from the tactical to the national power level. From spring 1943 they were generally reliable, if erring to the side of caution. Assessments of enemy intentions were the most important task of all for grand strategy. And here, until very nearly the end of the war, the JIC grappled with an array of incomplete and inchoate information that often made producing confident assessments seem like trying to eat jelly with a fork. But no other agency could do any better, given the nature of this enemy and how they operated. Intelligence gathering and collating capabilities did improve, but this could only go so far. Intelligence in grand strategy was also limited by such realities as the correlation of forces, the relative combat power of both sides, and the influence of the European war. The JIC did no more than underpin 1942 decisions that in any case emerged from very narrow choices. The 1943 decisions posed more of a challenge, and in this phase it can be said that the JIC played its largest role. It made timely and sober assessments of unfolding changes, in evolving situations. Those reports made some positive impression on a British grand strategy that managed, with some success, to maintain a delicate balance between moving forward more or less in step with an exponentially expanding ally while at the same time remaining within margins its limited power could support. But in 1944, when the Allies finalized their grand strategy to defeat Japan, both that grand strategy, and the challenges it posed to the British, ranged beyond the JIC's ability to make much impact.

The only British campaign of choice which finally took place was to deploy the British Pacific Fleet. 14th Army advanced into Burma after the Americans no longer needed it to restore contact with China only because it remained in contact, there were no valid arguments against keeping the Japanese under pressure on this front, and good military reasons to do so. That campaign went ahead by default. The choice was to join the Pacific War rather than bypass or outflank Burma; JIC assessments barely registered in that final decision. Intelligence rarely determines ultimate decisions in grand strategy made by national command authority, because such decisions rarely come down to considerations that ultimately rest on intelligence. Japan attacked the USA in December 1941 despite, not because of, intelligence assessments. The British gambled in 1941 that they had more time to prepare for war against Japan despite, not because of, intelligence assessments. By 1945 those assessments were far stronger, but it no longer mattered. The final choice to show the flag in the Pacific was in the end what such decisions usually turn out to be: a political judgement call based on estimates of wider national interests, informed at best by calculated intelligence assessments. The JIC role in grand strategy in the Pacific War underlined the oldest cliché of all: politics drives war, not information.