

**THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD: ECONOMIC DISTRESS,
STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE AND THE FALL OF SINGAPORE**

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INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Second World War, scholars of British military history have busied themselves with attempts to explain the British defeat at Singapore to Japan in February 1942. Research reveals that there existed what Peden has called an “imbalance between limited military power and extensive commitments” in the interwar era.¹ Put simply, the economic and military resources at Britain’s disposal were incommensurate with the scale of effort required to adequately defend her empire. This raises the question of why such an imbalance existed. One prominent explanation is the idea of ‘Imperial Overstretch’, popularised by Paul Kennedy in *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*. With specific regards to the defeat at Singapore, Abshire’s contention that “When Britain had to channel so many of its resources to the war in Europe as well as Africa and the Middle East, there was little that could be spared for the relatively late arrival to the war in Southeast Asia”² sums up the prevailing view quite well. The theory merges the view that the empire had grown beyond Britain’s ability to defend it with the story of Britain’s relative economic decline in comparison to challenger states such as Germany, the United States and Japan.³ The story that is told is thus one of territorial commitments growing at a rate faster than the growth of Britain’s economic ability to meet said commitments.

As Florig has pointed out, however, the problem with ‘Imperial Overstretch’ is that it fails to account for policy decisions that play a role in the mismatch between commitments and resources. Its application to the British Empire as well as precursor empires makes the process of decline seem like an “inexorable mechanical process” and in so doing acquits key

¹ George C. Peden, “Winston Churchill, Neville Chamberlain and the Defence of Empire,” in *The Limitations of Military Power: Essays Presented to Professor Norman Gibbs on his Eightieth Birthday* eds. John B. Hattendorf & Malcolm H. Murfett, 160-172. (London: Macmillan, 1990), 160.

² Jean E. Abshire, *The History of Singapore*, (Oxford: Greenwood, 2011), 99.

³ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 317, 320. This is especially significant as Britain’s yearly defence budgets were to an extent tempered by the military prowess of these countries amongst others.

decision makers of responsibility.⁴ If we are to believe the dictum of Kennedy et. al., then it would appear that all empires eventually grow beyond the ability of the metropole to defend them.⁵ Indeed, that is the reasoning taken by many scholars today who boldly proclaim that today's Anglophone empire – the United States – is destined to go down the same path as its British predecessor.⁶ Florig proposes an alternate theory termed 'Hegemonic Overreach' which takes into account policies enacted by key decision makers that precipitate an imbalance between military obligations and available resources. This paper intends use 'Hegemonic Overreach' to account for the mismatch between commitments and resources which precipitated the British defeat at Singapore.⁷ To this end, the paper examines the factors that led to defeat from the British perspective. All the primary and secondary sources used reflect this stance.⁸ The defeat at Singapore could also be looked at from the Japanese perspective i.e. 'What did Japan do right' rather than 'Where did British policy fail'. Indeed, a more encompassing account of the defeat might well examine both perspectives. This paper, however, has a much narrower purview. Its focus is on examining how long run British economic and military policy failures contributed to defeat with the objective of supplanting the dominant theory of 'Imperial Overstretch' with that of 'Hegemonic Overreach'. As such, events are examined purely from the British viewpoint.

Before applying the theory to Britain's defeat at Singapore, it is necessary to first define the term 'hegemon' and secondly establish that Britain was indeed one at the time. For

⁴ Dennis Florig, "Hegemonic Overreach vs. Imperial Overstretch," *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 4 (2010): 1104.

⁵ The term "metropole" describes the imperial centre; the capital of the empire through which imperial resources are channelled and allocated. Regarding other fallen empires, Lundestad applies the theory to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Here too the focus is on the scale of imperial commitments outpacing the Soviet economy's capacity to meet said demands rather than policy failures that accounted for Soviet economic stagnation and decline – Geir Lundestad, *The Rise and Decline of the American "Empire": Power and its Limits in Comparative Perspective*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 132-148.

⁶ See for instance Kennedy Op. Cit.

⁷ It is the cause of the disparity between commitments and resources rather than the actual defeat itself which is the focus of study in this paper.

⁸ All the primary sources used in this paper are British cabinet papers.

the purposes of this paper, a conflation of Wallerstein and Pigman understanding of the term will be applied. Wallerstein defined a hegemon as “a state that is significantly stronger than other strong states,”⁹ while Pigman characterised hegemons as states that underwrite a liberal international economic order.¹⁰ Below, these definitions are applied to interwar Britain.

Unlike its counterparts on the European mainland, Britain had traditionally exercised armed strength predominantly through its navy. The 18th century political philosopher Henry St John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke, put it best in *The Patriot King* when he surmised that “Like other amphibious animals we must come occasionally on shore: but the water is more properly our element, and in it ... we find our greatest security, so we exert our greatest force”.¹¹ To establish the extent of British naval power in the interwar era, we must look at the number of battleships in the Royal Navy compared to other navies. This is because up until 1943, battleships were regarded as the pinnacle of naval power.¹² In 1935, Britain had 15 battleships to America’s 15 and Japan’s 10.¹³ After 1943, the aircraft carrier replaced the battleship as the main form of naval power projection.¹⁴ Up to 1941, the Royal Navy held a slight edge with 11 carriers constructed since 1918 to Japan’s 10 and America’s 8.¹⁵ These numbers do not by themselves put Britain “significantly” ahead of America and Japan, holders of the next two largest navies, however, by the mid-1930s Britain still possessed the world’s largest warship building industry with over £100 million invested in plant and so her

⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein, “Three Hegemonies,” in *Two Hegemonies: Britain 1846-1914 and the United States 1941-2001* eds. Patrick Karl O’Brien & Armand Cleese, 357-362. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 357.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Allen Pigman, “Hegemony Theory, Unilateral Trade Liberalisation and the 1996 US Farm Bill,” in *Two Hegemonies: Britain 1846-1914 and the United States 1941-2001* eds. Patrick Karl O’Brien & Armand Cleese, 258-283. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 258-260.

¹¹ Quoted in Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, (London: Penguin, 2001), 4.

¹² David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

unparalleled ability to put warships to sea gave her a form of latent power that she could bring to bear with devastating effect if her politicians ever found the political will to do so.¹⁶

In turning to Pigman's definition, we have to ascertain to what extent Britain underwrote a global liberal economic order in the years preceding 1939. Between the wars, Sterling remained the world's primary reserve currency.¹⁷ This was primarily due to the Sterling bloc, the world's largest trade zone, comprising the formal and informal British Empire,¹⁸ in which members pegged their respective currencies to the Pound and kept the bulk of their foreign reserves in Sterling.¹⁹ Additionally, in the interwar era, almost a third of world trade passed through British ports or was carried aboard British ships.²⁰ Lastly, though after 1924 Britain had slipped behind America as the world's largest source of foreign direct investment, it recovered its old role after 1931.²¹ Sterling therefore remained the world's primary reserve currency for most of the interwar era. Thusly, Britain was very much the world's foremost banker and global trade facilitator during the interbellum.

Now that it has been established that interwar Britain was indeed a hegemon, we can finally delve into our main argument. The paper will begin by providing an outline of the link between economic power and naval might. This will provide context for the subsequent discussions on relative economic decline and its attendant effects on British naval power. We will then survey long term British relative economic decline starting in the late Victorian era before looking at how the First World War compounded Britain's economic woes and led to a sea change in public attitudes towards military spending. The rationale behind tracing long

¹⁶ John Ferris, "'It is Our Business in the Navy to Command the Seas': The Last Decade of British Maritime Supremacy, 1919-1929," in *Far Flung Lines: Studies in Imperial Defence in Honour of Donald Mackenzie Schurman* eds. Keith Neilson & Greg Kennedy, 124-170. (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 161.

¹⁷ John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 434.

¹⁸ 'Informal Empire' refers to British spheres of influence outside areas of formal imperial rule or suzerainty.

¹⁹ Darwin, 434.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 438.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 438-9.

term relative economic decline is to reveal that the process itself was the result of a lack of remedial economic and industrial policy. The focus on economics more generally will provide a financial context to the constraints felt by politicians which led them to enact policies which impinged on Britain's naval might. The survey of public attitudes to military spending intends to prove that interwar naval budgets were slashed by politicians in order to appease an anti-militarist public and provide extra funds for new welfare programs.

Following this will be a survey of the deleterious effects of economic turmoil and a war weary public on interwar defence spending followed in turn, by an overview of the effect of limited defence spending on imperial military readiness. We will then look at the effect of political developments in Europe on British imperial defence policy. To help understand how limited defence spending was rationalised, we will survey official beliefs about possible Japanese aggression. Overall, this essay will argue that the theory of 'Hegemonic Overreach' provides a thorough explanation for the defeat at Singapore as it emphasises policy decisions taken in the imperial centre and their effect on military readiness. These policies were partly the conscious effort of politicians to appeal to their voter bases. This in itself should be seen as a conscious policy decision. Simply put, domestic constraints hastened by policy failure led politicians to enact defence policies which undermined Britain's hegemonic position and ultimately led to defeat at Singapore.

THE ECONOMIC UNDERPINNINGS OF SEA POWER

As the late E.B. Potter noted, "soundness of economy" and "industrial efficiency" were two key factors inextricably linked to a state's ability to wield significant naval muscle.²² The question then is upon what base was the British economy built? Until the mid-1870s, Britain remained the world's foremost industrial economy. In 1870, it accounted for 31.8% of global manufacturing output. This compared favourably to its two closest

²² Quoted in Kennedy, *Naval Mastery*, 4.

challengers: The United States at 23.3% and Germany at 13.2%.²³ The other basis of Britain's economic strength was its massive invisible income which boosted its balance of payments.²⁴ Between 1875 and 1913, British overseas investment increased from £1,000 million to £4,000 million.²⁵ By 1913, £200 million was coming in annually in overseas earnings from overseas investments.²⁶ At the same time, British ships carried most of the world's seaborne trade thereby boosting invisible income further.²⁷ In 1870, Britain alone accounted for a quarter of global seaborne commerce.²⁸ France, its nearest challenger in this arena, accounted for a relatively paltry 10.4%.²⁹ This, then was the basis upon which British sea power was maintained.

This section has provided an appraisal of the pillars of British economic might. We now have the contextual basis to observe how British economic primacy was undermined by conscious policy decisions. This will be the focus of the following section.

LONG TERM ECONOMIC DECLINE

The years after 1875 saw the steady erosion of British economic primacy. By 1906-10, Britain had declined from its pre-eminent position in 1870. Its share of global manufacturing output had dropped to 14.7% while Germany's and the United States' had risen to 15.9% and 35.3% respectively.³⁰ Similarly, already by 1898, Britain's share of world trade had fallen to 17.1% while the respective figures for the US and Germany had seen modest appreciations to 10.3% and 11.8% respectively.³¹

²³ Ibid., 189-190.

²⁴ Invisible income can be understood as income from trade that does not result in a physical transfer of goods e.g. Shipping services, overseas investments etc.

²⁵ Kennedy, *Naval Mastery*, 181.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 190.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Kennedy points out that to prescient observers in the late Victorian era, it was clear that relative economic decline would eventually lead to a parallel decline in naval power as well.³² As naval power was inextricably tied to the strength of a state's industrial output, the fact that Britain's industrial lead was being worn down by other powers meant that its naval lead would be worn down as well. This view, however, has an air of inevitability about it. It gives the impression that little could have been done in the economic and naval arenas to prevent relative decline. While a reasonable case can be made that a more populous and resource rich country such as the United States was bound to surpass Britain economically, it is undeniable that the lack of adequate remedial policies on the part of the British hastened this outcome. As we shall see in subsequent sections, concerns over American economic power and hence shipbuilding capacity ironically led to policies which crippled the Royal Navy thus facilitating defeat at Singapore – hence the current focus on Britain's economic position relative to the United States. Had relative decline been postponed by necessary economic reform, Britain would have been in a stronger economic position than it was otherwise at the time that concern over America reached a precipice.

The briskness of relative economic decline was largely a result of *policy failure*. British manufacturers failed to compete with foreign competitors due to complacency and a lack of innovation. There was very little investment, by both the government and the private sector, in research and new forms of production.³³ Firms preferred to stay small instead of coalescing into more competitive conglomerates much unlike their German and American counterparts.³⁴ The lack of innovation can at least be partly blamed on an inadequate education system. Public school education overemphasized philosophy and the classics to the

³² Ibid., 185-186.

³³ Ibid., 187; Kennedy disagrees slightly with Hobsbawm who argued that there was heavy investment which, however, was directed towards obsolete plant and industry - Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day* 2nd ed., (London: Penguin, 1999), 167. Both scholars, however, agreed that there was little investment in modern industry.

³⁴ Ibid; This point is championed by Hobsbawm who cites this as one reason British firms tended to be uncompetitive against their foreign rivals. – Hobsbawm, 168-169.

detriment of maths and science.³⁵ There were thus less trained professionals to take up the mantle of industrial innovation. All this meant that British industry was less productive than its foreign counterparts and its manufactures were less competitive than those of their more economically robust competitors. This reality necessarily entailed a gradual reduction in income derived from British industry. Our previous discussion on the link between industry and Seapower should make it plain that this would slowly start to impinge on Britain's naval standing.

It is useful to ask why there was no tangible effort on the part of the state to modernise the economy. Kennedy and Porter opine that politicians chose the easy path and doubled down on the other pillar of British economic strength – invisible incomes, rather than risk painful and potentially politically suicidal industrial reform.³⁶ The state encouraged increasing investment in both the formal and informal empires which of course led to increasing yields from invisible income.³⁷ The reliance on income from overseas investment thus served to mask structural flaws in British industry. However, the problem with relying on income from overseas investment is that if the sources of such income were ever liquidated due to the exigencies of war, as was the case after 1914, they would be lost forever.³⁸ A dynamic industrial economy, on the other hand, assuming a roughly stable global economy, (a perfectly reasonable assumption according to Kennedy)³⁹, is a continuous source

³⁵ Kennedy, *Naval Mastery*, 187; That elite secondary schools and universities did not place an emphasis on scientific and technological education led to generation after generation of business and political elite who were not scientifically inclined and therefore did not see the urgent need for industrial reform. This also led to a lack of scientific entrepreneurs with the know how to take advantage of the 2nd industrial revolution. Only in 1900 were significant steps taken to alleviate deficiencies in the British education system These arguments are developed further in Peter Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation: An Economic History of Britain 1700-1914* 2nd ed., (London: Methuen, 1983), 388-391.

³⁶ Kennedy, *Naval Mastery*, 187-188; Bernard Porter, *The Absent Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 32.

³⁷ Kennedy, *Naval Mastery*, 187.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

of fresh wealth. What should be clear by now is that relative economic decline was catalysed by policy failure on the part of both the government and business interests.

ECONOMIC COMPLICATIONS AFTER THE GREAT WAR

By 1921, Britain's GDP had fallen to 87.1% of its 1913 level.⁴⁰ 1913 levels, in fact, were not to be reached again until 1925.⁴¹ Thus in real terms, Britain's economy shrunk after the war. Between 1913 and 1929, Britain's GDP grew by only 11.9% as opposed to 78.9% in Japan.⁴² It might seem improper to compare the two as Japan's economy wasn't nearly as dislocated by the war as Britain's but even France experienced GDP growth of 21.6% over the same period.⁴³ This was in no small part due to the fact that Britain had been forced to liquidate the vast extent source of its invisible income during the war and was now more dependent on an industrial base that could not unjustly be described as calcified in comparison to those of other leading economies.

The economy had thus entered a slump that put the country in a tailspin of high unemployment and struggling exports.⁴⁴ Unemployment benefit thus became an ever increasing strain on the national budget.⁴⁵ As the government's overarching economic objective was a balanced budget year in year out, that more money was being devoted to welfare in during a recession meant that cuts had to be made elsewhere.⁴⁶ As we shall see, defence spending was to be the sacrificial lamb of the nascent welfare state.

⁴⁰ George C. Peden, *Arms Economics and British Strategy: From Dreadnoughts to Hydrogen Bombs*, (Cambridge: Cambridge: University Press, 2007), 127.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 128.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Kennedy, *Naval Mastery*, 268.

⁴⁵ Peden, *British Strategy*, 129-130.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Winston Churchill's 1925 decision, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, to return Britain to the gold standard served to compound Britain's economic woes.⁴⁷ The pound, now severely overvalued, only served to make British goods more expensive, thereby further hurting exports and hence raising unemployment.⁴⁸ The decline in exports exacerbated Britain's balance of payments situation. In effect, Britain was living off its capital.⁴⁹ Here again we see the continuing trend of economic turmoil brought on by deliberate policy decisions.

From 1919 onwards, the government faced pressure from several sectors to reduce taxation. Business interests, supported by Members of Parliament and sympathetic sections of the press, called for cuts in corporate income tax.⁵⁰ Unions likewise, pressed for the restoration of pre-war tax exemptions for those in the lowest income brackets.⁵¹ Furthermore, members of the middle class wondered out loud why those in the lowest income brackets, who nonetheless had seen their incomes rise during the war, would escape taxation while they would see their own taxes rise – to make up for the lost tax revenue on the lowest income brackets – even though there had been no meaningful appreciation in their salaries.⁵² Politicians sought to appease this middle class anguish with welfare programs such as wives' allowances and child welfare payments – additional pressures on the national purse.⁵³ In a country where tax revenues were declining, but the proportion of the budget spent on welfare was increasing, something had to give if a balanced budget was to be achieved. As we shall soon see, this was defence expenditure.

⁴⁷ Churchill served as Chancellor of the Exchequer from 6 November 1924 to 4 June 1929.

⁴⁸ Kennedy, *Naval Mastery*, 268.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁵¹ Martin Daunton, *Just Taxes: The Politics of Taxation in Britain, 1914-1979*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 75.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

THE BRITISH PUBLIC AND MILITARY EXPENDITURE

One of the other main factors that shaped interwar defence policy was the political desire to keep spending priorities in line with public opinion. The penalty for those who failed to do so was clear. McDonald's Labour government was brought down in 1931 mainly due to public consternation over welfare cuts necessitated by the exigencies of the Great Depression.⁵⁴

The bloodshed and carnage of the Great War had left a huge scar on British society. Just about everyone could name at least one person they knew who had perished during the fighting. This led to a profound shift towards pacifism and a veritable sense of hostility towards any calls for increased defence expenditure as this was seen to smack of militarism.⁵⁵ Politicians consequently took heed of public opinion. Such was the fear of a public backlash that in none of the general elections of the 1920s was defence spending a major issue.⁵⁶ This shows how little the electorate cared for matters of defence at the time.

As Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1924 to 1929, Churchill continually argued for the reduction of naval budget estimates as he did not believe the public would support high naval expenditure and would possibly a Labour government in outrage.⁵⁷ In discussing the budget for 1925-26, he stressed to cabinet that the government's primary interest should be in the "social sphere".⁵⁸ This meant low income housing and insurance schemes.⁵⁹ Churchill

⁵⁴ David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century*, (London: Longman, 2000), 118-9.

⁵⁵ Christopher M. Bell, "Winston Churchill, Pacific Security, and the Limits of British Power, 1921-41," in *Churchill and Strategic Dilemmas before the World Wars: Essays in Honour of Michael I. Handel* ed. John H. Maurer, 51-87. (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 63-64.

⁵⁶ Ian Hamill, *The Strategic Illusion: The Singapore Strategy and the Defence of Australia and New Zealand 1919-1942*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981), 61.

⁵⁷ Bell, 56.

⁵⁸ 'Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, held at 10, Downing Street, S.W.L., on Wednesday, November 26, 1924, at 11-30 a.m.,' November, 26, 1924, The National Archives (TNA) CAB/23/49/0006, p. 69.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

wanted spending to be directed towards welfare while keeping taxes low.⁶⁰ This shows the strength of the previously outlined distaste amongst the various branches of society for high levels of taxation. Thus, in the 1920s, welfare provision remained the government's spending priority to the detriment of the Royal Navy.

THE EFFECT OF ECONOMIC WEAKNESS ON INTERWAR DEFENCE POLICY

After World War One, London feared a new naval arms race against either the U.S., Japan or both.⁶¹ It was felt that such an arms race had to be avoided at all costs as debt incurred during the war precluded a successful outcome for Britain in this hypothetical naval race.⁶² No doubt, the lack of economic reform surveyed in the last section also contributed to this state of affairs. A Britain more reliant on industry than invisibles would have come out of World War One in better economic shape. Once more, it must be stressed that reform would not have prevented economic decline relative to America, but it would have delayed it, perhaps long enough to sufficiently postpone the post - 1918 fears of the debilitating economic impact of an Anglo-American naval arms race.

What also has to be taken into account is that, as we have already noted, those in government felt that any significant increase in defence expenditure would see them voted out of office by an anti-militarist public. These then were the underlying motivations behind the 10-year rule, the one power standard and the pursuit of naval disarmament in 1921 and 1930. The combined effect of these outcomes was that the Royal Navy was deliberately crippled and was thus unable to adequately defend the empire.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Hamill, 15.

⁶² Ibid.

Officially introduced in 1919, The 10-year rule was a regulation requiring the three branches of the armed forces to prepare their budget estimates on the assumption that Britain would not fight a war within the next 10 years.⁶³ It was motivated chiefly by the desire to fit expanding welfare programs, debt repayments and reduced tax income within a balanced budget.⁶⁴ Of course, the strong anti-war sentiment of the British public no doubt played on the minds of politicians as well. To be fair, British leaders in 1919 could be content at the global situation. The German navy was at the bottom of the sea and its armies were defeated. France seemed just as exhausted as Britain was, if not more, America seemed to be relapsing into isolationism and, for the time being at least, Japan remained an ally.

The One Power Standard ran in parallel with the 10-year rule and the desire for balanced budgets.⁶⁵ The problem with the one power standard, though, was that its definition was in a constant state of flux. Between 1919 and 1925 it received six different official interpretations.⁶⁶ The standard was initially based on the U.S. navy.⁶⁷ Thus, in theory at least, the Royal Navy was supposed to be built up to a strength that matched that of the U.S. navy.⁶⁸ By 1925, this had shifted to a standard relative to Japan.⁶⁹ The one power standard should be seen as a function of the desire to meet domestic political sentiment by capping naval strength and hence expenditure.

Curiously, powerful figures were not even keen on the one power standard. In January 1925, Chancellor of the exchequer, Winston Churchill, said that with the Admiralty's proposed naval estimates for 1925-6, there would be no room for a reduction of direct

⁶³ Peden, *British Strategy*, 98.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ John Ferris, "Treasury Control, the Ten Year Rule and British Service Policies, 1919-1924," *The Historical Journal* 30, no. 4 (1987): 861.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Christopher M. Bell, "Winston Churchill and the Ten-Year Rule," *Journal of Military History* 74, no.4, (2010): 1111.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1116.

taxation and no money for projected increases in welfare expenditure.⁷⁰ He warned that approving the naval estimates would bring about the fall of the government and its replacement by a radical socialist one.⁷¹ He also cautioned that this could lead to an arms race between Britain and Japan and/or the United States.⁷² Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon agreed with Churchill stating that war with Japan was not even on the distant horizon.⁷³ This view was accepted by Cabinet – in keeping with the ten year rule.⁷⁴ In the Cabinet's defence, there had been a sharp decline in Japanese naval expenditure in the year since 1921. The 1921-2 fiscal year had seen a budget of 357 million yen while by 1924-5 this had dropped to 154 million yen.⁷⁵ British predictions for the next fiscal year expected a further drop to 105 million yen.⁷⁶ This does lend credence to the view that war with Japan was unlikely. However, in evaluating British decision making, we have to keep in mind that as a regional power, Japan could afford to concentrate its naval strength within a single theatre whilst a global power such as Britain could not afford such luxuries.

The Admiralty was forced to accept a longer life expectancy for its existing capital ships and fewer support ships were approved than had been asked for.⁷⁷ The treasury, however, held that even this reduced program was not fiscally prudent and agreed to give its seal of approval only if it was delayed for a year.⁷⁸ Fiscal prudence here refers to the desire to maintain a balanced budget. In view of the desire to keep taxes low and as welfare was considered a sacred cow to which no budget cuts could be applied, the axe had to fall on defence spending.

⁷⁰ 'Navy Estimates: Memorandum by Chancellor of the Exchequer,' January 25, 1925, The National Archives (TNA) CAB/24/171/0039, pp.2-3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ 'Naval Program Committee: Report,' July 13, 1925, The National Archives (TNA) CAB/24/174/0041, p. 2.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

As Murray has argued, it was the desire to avoid what would have been an economically disastrous naval arms race that drove the British government to agree to the 1921 Washington Naval treaty.⁷⁹ The level of taxation required for such an arms race would have caused uproar amongst a war weary anti-militarist populace.⁸⁰ We also have to take into consideration the influence of the treasury. The treasury had been against a post-World War One proposal large build-up of a far eastern fleet because it worried that this would prompt a naval arms race with Japan.⁸¹ Additionally, there were also fears about the strength of the Japanese warship building industry and its resultant ability to put warships to sea. Thus in 1921 the navy's budget was slashed by £21 million.⁸²

Before the conclusion of the 1921 Washington naval treaty, the Admiralty had hoped to maintain 40 capital ships.⁸³ This would have in effect been a two power standard and would thus have provided the navy with enough ships to simultaneously bring significant force to bear in both hemispheres. With a two power standard, the Admiralty would have been able to station a fleet of significant strength at Singapore with the hope that such a fleet would provide a credible deterrence against possible Japanese aggression. The treaty, however, placed a 10-year moratorium on capital ship construction and additional limits on the number of ships of other classes that Britain could construct.⁸⁴ Murfett has asserted that the effect of the Washington naval agreement was especially deleterious to Britain as it inhibited its ability to station adequate naval forces to properly protect its global interests.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Williamson Murray, "The Collapse of Empire: British Strategy, 1919-1945," in *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War* eds. Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, Alvin Bernstein, 393-427. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 406-7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ John Ferris, *Men, Money and Diplomacy: The Evolution of British Strategic Foreign Policy, 1919-1926*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 90.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Hamill, 15.

⁸⁴ Peden, *British Strategy*, 99.

⁸⁵ Malcolm H. Murfett, "An Enduring Theme: The "Singapore Strategy"," in *A Great Betrayal? The Fall of Singapore Revisited* eds. Brian Farrell, Sandy Hunter, 1-19. (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2010), 8.

Regional powers like Japan did not face this issue as they could afford to concentrate their forces in a single theatre of operations.⁸⁶

It cannot be said with a full degree of certainty whether if the Admiralty had been allowed to build up to 40 capital ships, the Japanese would have reconsidered their eventual course of action. What can be said, though, is that the presence of a powerful British fleet at Singapore would have at least presented Tokyo with reason to pause and, if push came to shove, would have presented the British with the means to interdict Japanese landings of the Eastern Malayan coast in December 1941. The latter was viewed as a credible option in London and explains the genesis of the 'Main Fleet to Singapore' concept. This idea emerged because in the era of the one power standard, splitting the navy between Europe and the Far East would diminish the strength of the respective fleets to such an extent that the basis for their existence would be diminished.⁸⁷ Thus, the only practical idea was to keep the fleet in home waters and send it to Singapore in case of war with Japan.⁸⁸

The agreement reached at the 1930 London naval conference further compounded the Royal Navy's woes. The Labour government agreed to extend the 10-year capital ship building holiday established at Washington to 1936, scrap plans for new capital ships, scrap old capital ships and accept limitations on British cruiser strength⁸⁹ - British cruiser strength was capped at 50 ships.⁹⁰ The cap on cruiser strength was primarily motivated by the desire to appease Washington which made known its desire for parity in that particular arena.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Charles Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 21-22.

⁸⁸ Unfortunately, this strategy only allowed for the dispatch of a fleet to the Far East once Japan was at war with Britain. In the time it would take a British fleet to reach Singapore, the island, as well as other British possessions in the region, would invariably have already suffered some form of attack and possibly invasion.

⁸⁹ Christopher M. Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, (London: Macmillan, 2000), 25.

⁹⁰ Paul Haggie, *Britannia at Bay: The Defence of the British Empire Against Japan 1931-1941*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 8.

⁹¹ Christopher M. Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 136.

The agreement to scrap existing capital ships meant that the navy's capital ship strength decreased from twenty to fifteen.⁹² Of course, it is necessary to account for ships in need of repair or refitting. One cannot assume that all of a navy's ships will always be in service. Taking away ships being serviced or refitted, Britain only had 9 ready capital ships by war's eve.⁹³ Thus, until 1936, the navy would remain crippled by treaty obligations imposed from above.

Bell has asserted that the reason the Royal Navy was unable to conduct simultaneous operations in European and Far Eastern waters was more due to the deleterious effects of the quantitative restrictions imposed by the 1921 and 1930 naval treaties than the one power standard.⁹⁴ This is a reasonable claim to make, especially since, as has been pointed out, the Royal Navy was never allowed to reach the one power standard. Bell, however, misses the wider point. Britain's accession to these two treaties was the end product of a political desire to reduce naval expenditure in order to resonate with public sentiment and increase welfare spending. The desire to keep taxes at reasonably low levels meant that welfare and defence spending were in a zero sum game of sorts with only the latter being the only politically expedient option to cut. Thus, the naval treaties were only a manifestation of this political desire. It is this desire that should be seen as the overarching cause of naval weakness. As stated in the thesis, this desire should itself be seen as a conscious policy decision.

THE EFFECT OF RETRENCHMENT ON IMPERIAL SECURITY

The effect of retrenchment on imperial security was clear to those willing to acknowledge reality. In February 1932, the First Lord of the Admiralty observed that the 10-year rule and the two naval disarmament treaties had created serious deficiencies in the

⁹² Kupchan, 146.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Bell, *Seapower and Strategy*,

navy's ability to guard the full extent of the empire.⁹⁵ He left no doubt as to where he thought blame lay for this state of affairs when he squarely placed it on the shoulders of the cabinet.⁹⁶ He was even more emphatic, and perhaps a bit far-sighted, the following year when he suggested that the 10 year rule had crippled the navy's ability to fight a war in the Far East while simultaneously engaged in Europe.⁹⁷ In his estimation, even if funds were then made available, it would take several years to erase the defence deficit.⁹⁸ The Chiefs of Staff committee somewhat concurred when it came to the conclusion that the pitiful state of the empire's far eastern defences was the sole result of the 10-year rule.⁹⁹ This was followed by an admission from the subcommittee that Japan had been emboldened by Britain's weakness in the sub-region.¹⁰⁰

THE EFFECT OF POLITICAL AND MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS IN EUROPE ON FAR EASTERN DEFENCE POLICY

The Royal Navy's woes were compounded by the fact that it was not even first in the pecking order to receive the limited defence spending was available. As Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1924, Churchill made clear his view that out of all three services, the Royal Air Force (RAF) warranted the most funding.¹⁰¹ Throughout the interwar era, there had been a popular fear of the threat the French (and later German) bomber force posed to cities.¹⁰² British politicians tried to appease this sentiment by devoting much of what little of a defence

⁹⁵ 'Naval Construction Programme 1931: Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty,' February 5, 1932, The National Archives (TNA) CAB 24/288/0014, pp. 63-63. The First Lord of the Admiralty did not make these statements simply to secure increased funding. Their truth can be gleaned from the fact that they have been echoed by historians such as Bell who's views we discussed in the previous section.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁹⁷ 'Navy Estimates for 1933: Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty,' February 8, 1933, The National Archives (TNA) CAB/24/237/0026, p. 177.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ 'Imperial Defence Policy (Previous C.I.D. Paper No. 1082-B,' March 17 1932', The National Archives (TNA) CAB/24/229/0005, p.42.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 2

¹⁰¹ 'Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, held at 10, Downing Street, S.W.L., on Wednesday, November 26, 1924, at 11-30 a.m.,' November, 26, 1924, The National Archives (TNA) CAB/23/49/0006, p. 69.

¹⁰² Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 185.

budget there was to aviation. To put things in context, Churchill wrote in 1937 that Germany posed a greater threat than Japan as its geographical location meant its bombers posed a viable threat to British cities.¹⁰³ Here again we see another example of defence priorities being based by public sentiment.

Moreover, the challenge posed by German and Italian building programs from the 1930s onwards meant that the Royal Navy had to cut down its estimates of the number of ships it could send to the Far East in the event of war.¹⁰⁴ Churchill, however, was unsympathetic to this decision, believing that as long as Italy remained neutral, a naval task force of significant deterrent effect could be dispatched to Singapore if need be.¹⁰⁵ Apart from revealing a regard for the deterrent effect of battleships, what this also tells us is that the security of the Far Eastern empire was now dependent on the actions of foreign actors. In effect, Britain's self-inflicted retrenchment had caused it to lose the initiative.

Before the Battle of France, British planners had hoped that in the event of war with Japan, the Royal Navy's Mediterranean fleet could be repurposed and sent to Singapore, leaving the French fleet to protect British interests in the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁶ They understood, though, that the fall of France, however improbably it seemed at the time, would disrupt these plans. The governor general of New Zealand was told bluntly on June 14, 1940 that France's collapse would make it "improbably that we could send adequate reinforcements to the Far East".¹⁰⁷ France's collapse in June 1940 meant that the Royal Navy was now alone in the Mediterranean. This of course meant that a fleet capable of significant deterrent effect could not be dispatched to Singapore if need be. Singapore was thus left exposed. What this section

¹⁰³ Bell, *Winston Churchill, Pacific Security*, 67.

¹⁰⁴ Peden, *British Strategy*, 146.

¹⁰⁵ 'War Cabinet: Australian Naval Defence (Winter 1939): Memorandum by the First Lord of the Admiralty,' November 17, 1939, The National Archives (TNA) CAB 66/3/25/0001 p.2.

¹⁰⁶ Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), 9-10.

¹⁰⁷ Quote from I.C. McGibbon, *Blue Water Rationale: The Naval Defence of New Zealand 1914-1942*, Wellington, NZ: P.D. Hasselberg, Government Printer, 1981), 357.

has shown is that the conscious decision to keep naval expenditure to the bare minimum meant that British naval policy was now, in effect, held hostage by the decision of other powers.

A QUESTION OF PRIORITIES

As Churchill once put it, Europe was “where the weather came from”.¹⁰⁸ In an era of diminished military resources, Britain’s priority was always going to be in Europe. This was perhaps due to the European mainland’s proximity to Britain. We have already seen how geographic calculations played on the minds of British politicians vis-à-vis the bomber threat and the resultant prioritisation of the RAF over the Royal Navy. As much as Churchill and those like him claimed to value the empire, the reality was that if push came to shove, the security of Britain was paramount over that of the colonies.

The remainder of this section will discuss the prioritisation of Europe and the Mediterranean over East of Suez. Before doing so, however it is necessary to provide some context about defence preparations in the Far East. As early as 1921, it had been understood that in order to hold Singapore, it was necessary to hold the Malayan peninsula as well.¹⁰⁹ Still, the view that the main threat to Singapore was a naval one remained predominant. This assumption was based on the belief that the swampy jungle terrain of the Malayan peninsula precluded a landward Japanese attack.¹¹⁰ This presupposition view, unfortunately, revealed an understanding of the peninsula that was stuck in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. As the interwar era wore on, more and more rubber plantations came to be

¹⁰⁸ Darwin, 306.

¹⁰⁹ Ong Chit Chung, “The Landward Defence of Singapore (1919-1938),” *National University of Singapore Centre for Advanced Studies: Occasional Paper* (1998): 22-23.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32-24,37-38; Malcom Murfett, et al., *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore From the First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 199), 165.

established in Malaya.¹¹¹ With these plantations came roads and hence the facilitation of transport.

It was only after November 1935, when William Dobbie was appointed head of Malaya Command that the defence of the peninsula attracted increased attention. In 1937, Dobbie conducted mock invasions of the peninsula during the monsoon season and proved the ease with which a Japanese invasion of the peninsula could occur – even in monsoon season.¹¹² Thus come war time, this was the accepted wisdom.¹¹³ The defence of Malaya was officially assigned to the R.A.F. – more due to insufficient troop numbers than any special reasons for suitability for this task.¹¹⁴ This appreciation, however, did not mean that adequate steps were taken to defend Malaya. It was recognised that to adequately defend the peninsula, 366 aircraft of various classes were needed.¹¹⁵ However, as of August 1940, 88 planes were in the theatre, barely 24% of what was required.¹¹⁶ To make matters worse, all of these aircraft were obsolete.¹¹⁷ By June 1941, the figures had increased to 150 aircraft, but even these additions were only of obsolete aircraft.¹¹⁸

The previous paragraph detailed just how underequipped Malaya Command was. The question that now needs to be answered is why this was so. Answering this returns us to the quote from Churchill at the start of this section. After becoming prime minister in 1940, Churchill's grand strategy was predicated on the desire to protect Britain and her interests on the European periphery i.e. the Suez Canal and the Middle Eastern approaches to India. This meant securing Britain herself, protecting the Suez Canal and winning the Battle of the

¹¹¹ Chung, 37-38.

¹¹² Stanley Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, vol. 1, *The Loss of Singapore*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1957), 15.

¹¹³ 'Chiefs of Staff Committee: The Situation in the Far East in the Event of Japanese Intervention Against Us,' July 31, 1940 The National Archives (TNA) CAB 66/10/33/0001 p.6

¹¹⁴ James Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire, 1919-1941*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 160.

¹¹⁵ The exact numbers of each class of aircraft are outlined in CAB 66/10/33/0001 p. 19-20.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹⁷ Peden, "Defence of Empire", 165.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Atlantic. He was willing to go to great lengths to achieve his goals, even to the detriment of wider imperial security.¹¹⁹ He explicitly stated that the safety of Britain would never be endangered to help the dominions.¹²⁰ Likewise in a directive issued on April 28, 1941, he asserted that the loss of Egypt (and hence the Suez Canal and what that entailed for India) would be a “disaster of the first magnitude to Great Britain, second only to successful invasion and final conquest”.¹²¹ In June 1941, he rejected a request to boost Malaya’s air defences on the basis that those planes were needed in Europe and the Mediterranean.¹²² Even after the British victory at Taranto, Churchill resisted calls to send even a few capital ships to Singapore because he thought they could be better employed against Germany rather than sit idly in port at Singapore.¹²³

Curiously, Churchill even chose to place Malaya below the Soviet Union on his list of priorities. This was based on the rather rational assumption that the fall of the U.S.S.R would release the 149 German divisions that were engaged on the eastern front for operations against Britain in the Near and Middle East.¹²⁴ The spectre of the loss of the Suez Canal and all this entailed meant that Churchill was willing to send modern Hawker Hurricane fighters to the U.S.S.R whilst starving Malaya of modern aircraft.¹²⁵

This discussion returns us to our earlier discussion of British industrial decay. Churchill, in effect, had to ration materiel precisely because there was not enough to go around. The need to ration can be attributed in part to Britain’s afore discussed self-induced industrial weakness which meant it was unable adequately supply all theatres of operation.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ Neidpath, 167.

¹²⁰ McGibbon, 360.

¹²¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, note 48.

¹²² Peden, “Defence of Empire,” 166.

¹²³ Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 233.

¹²⁴ Neidpath, 179.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹²⁶ For a fuller discussion see David Greasley, “The Coal Industry: Images and Realities on the Road to Nationalisation,” in *The Political Economy of Nationalisation in Britain 1920-1950* eds. Robert Millward &

It would not be fair to Churchill to discuss his attitude towards Far Eastern defence without exploring his outlook on the possibility of Japanese aggression. Truth be told, ever since his days at the treasury, he had always seen claims of possible Japanese aggression as a ruse to secure increased defence spending.¹²⁷ It is fair to say that this belief followed Churchill to Number 10 and hereafter colouring his belief of the possibility of Japanese attack and hence the need to adequately equip Malaya with, above all else, modern aircraft. Churchill also believed that the U.S. Pacific Fleet would be enough to deter Japanese aggression.¹²⁸ This was encouraged by secret talks between Roosevelt, his senior advisors and the British.¹²⁹ Nonetheless, that Roosevelt never made a firm commitment to Britain in the Far East should have made Churchill reconsider this view.

CONCLUSION

Britain's surrender at Singapore in 1942 was the end result of a decades long sequence of economic policy failures with the direct result being the armed forces, particularly the navy, were starved of resources. This self-inflicted armaments shortage, meant that after 1939, Britain, in effect, had to ration its scarce military resources amongst its various theatres of obligation. As Malaya was quite far down the pecking order, its defences were not brought up to par. The decision to relegate Malaya to a position of relative unimportance vis-à-vis the supply of armaments was a conscious policy decision that undermined Britain's hegemonic position in East Asia and engendered defeat to Japan.

Concerning Far Eastern naval power, slavish adherence to the whims of the voting populace by British politicians combined with a struggling economy and a bloated welfare

John Singleton, 37-64. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38-39; Robert Parker, *The Second World War: A Short History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 57; David Reynolds, *From World War to Cold War: Churchill, Roosevelt, and the International History of the 1940s*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 29.

¹²⁷ Bell, "Winston Churchill, Pacific Security", 51.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹²⁹ Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 235.

state to lead to policies which emasculated the Royal Navy. It was thus did not have the strength to position a fleet of significant deterrent effect at Singapore thereby engendering Japanese attack.

What should be taken away from this paper's argument is that imperial decline and demise is not inevitable – it is a product of failed and misguided policies. Even passive adherence to Kennedy's theory of 'Imperial Overstretch' entails the possibility of a sense of complacency amongst the political class as belief in this policy reveals a feeling of inevitability about decline. Empires are not fated to decline and fall. Imperial collapses are a result of policy failure. This is an especially important lesson for today's Anglophone empire and its dealings with yet another rising Asian giant. As The United States prepares to face up to the rising Chinese threat, we are already witnessing murmurings and even open pronouncements of American imperial overstretch. If America is indeed overstretched, it is a result of policy failures rather than an inevitable decline.

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