

# UNCHAINED INTERESTS: AMERICAN-BRITISH- DUTCH-AUSTRALIAN COMMAND 1942

A Monograph

by

MAJ Rene W. A. van den Berg  
Royal Netherlands Army



School of Advanced Military Studies  
United States Army Command and General Staff College  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

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MONOGRAPH APPROVAL PAGE

Name of Candidate: Major Rene W. A. van den Berg

Monograph Title: Unchained Interests: American-British-Dutch-Australian Command 1942

Approved by:

\_\_\_\_\_, Monograph Director  
Alice A. Butler-Smith, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_, Seminar Leader  
Jerry A. Turner, COL

\_\_\_\_\_, Director, School of Advanced Military Studies  
Henry A. Arnold III, COL

Accepted this 22nd day of May 2014 by:

\_\_\_\_\_, Director, Graduate Degree Programs  
Robert F. Baumann, Ph.D.

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## ABSTRACT

UNCHAINED INTERESTS: AMERICAN-BRITISH-DUTCH-AUTRALIAN COMMAND 1942,  
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In January 1942, Allied forces established the American, British, Dutch, Australian Command (ABDACOM) — the first operational level multinational command that was established in a desperate effort to stem the Japanese invasion of South East Asia. The Allied defense of the Netherlands East Indies, as part of the “Malay Barrier”, is one of the little known campaigns of World War II. Few histories have appeared in English, contributing to the myth that the Dutch conducted an incompetent and halfhearted defense of the Netherlands East Indies archipelago. The characteristic of a myth is that it lacks gradation and that it represents a simplified reproduction of the truth.

This monograph aims to explore the Dutch perspective on the failure of ABDACOM. It will argue that ABDACOM failed because of divergent national objectives of the ABDACOM nations—the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Australia. The evidence adduced in the course of the research for this monograph revealed that the pathway to failure stemmed from Allied inability to reconcile political agendas and rationalize national objectives to coalition strategic ends prior to the outbreak of hostilities in the Far East. As a result, the ABDACOM nations had to establish a unified command under fire and lacked the time to conduct combined exercises, develop common doctrine, and establish an effective command and control architecture

Centered on a historical snapshot of coalition warfare during the initial stages of World War II, this monograph aims to contribute to the professional education of officers of Allied partners by discussing the factors that potentially inhibit effective coalition operations. It presents examples of the challenges that operational planners might face when confronted with the undertaking of reconciling divergent national agenda’s in pursuit of coalition objectives. Lessons learned from this first Allied unified command of World War II will contribute to a better understanding of the tenets of coalition operations and more explicitly the challenges that smaller nations face when contributing to coalition operations.

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## ACRONYMS

NEI	Netherlands East Indies
ABDACOM	American-British-Dutch-Australian Command
CCOS	Combined Chiefs of Staff
KNIL	Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army)
ABDAfloat	ABDACOM combined naval forces
ABDAair	ABDACOM combined and joint air forces
ABDAarm	ABDACOM combined land forces
LCDR	Lieutenant Commander

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## INTRODUCTION

### General

On 12 December 1941, the Netherlands East Indies Navy submarine Hr. Ms. O-16, under the command of Lieutenant Commander (LCDR) A.J. Bussemaker, sank four Japanese troop transport ships off the East coast of Patani, Malaya. It was one of the first successes of the Allied forces in a desperate effort to stem the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 8 December 1941.<sup>1</sup> As a result of one of these first Allied successes, the Commander of the British forces in Malaya, Air Field Marshall Sir Robert Brooke Popham, sent a telegram of greeting to the commander of the Netherlands East Indies Navy, Admiral Helfrich.<sup>2</sup> On the same day, the Netherlands East Indies Navy achieved a second success against the Imperial Japanese Navy. The submarine Hr. Ms. K-12, under the command of LCDR H.C.J. Coumou, sank an additional Japanese transport ship off the east coast of Malaya, near Kota Baroe. On its egress route to Singapore, the port-bound Hr. Ms. O-16 struck a British sea mine, four sea miles off the Malayan coast. As a result the submarine broke in two parts and sank, killing its crew, with the exception of four survivors, including LCDR Bussemaker, Leading Seaman G. de Wolf and two Sailors. Three of them drowned, in a desperate effort to reach the Malayan coast. Only de Wolf survived. After a thirty six hour swim under rough sea conditions, Seaman de Wolf reached the Malayan coastline and was accommodated by Australian troops. For their remarkable efforts LCDR Bussemaker received the British Distinguished Service Order (DSO), the Dutch Militaire Willems Orde (MWO), the highest Dutch decoration for valor

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<sup>1</sup>C. E. L. Helfrich, *Memoires van C.E.L. Helfrich, Eerste Deel: De Maleise Barriere* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1950),199.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



posthumously, and Seaman de Wolf received the British Distinguished Service Medal (DSM), and the Dutch Bronze Cross.<sup>3</sup>

This is just one example of heroic acts by Allied servicemen in the battle against the Imperial Japanese Navy during those confusing early days of the battle for Southeast Asia. It is indicative for the dedication these servicemen had for their common cause—the Allied defense of Southeast Asia against Japanese expansionism. But this example also raises a question—why were Dutch submarines operating outside their own territory? At the time Malaya was British territory and one would assume that the defense of Malaya would be the sole responsibility of the British armed forces. The answer is simple—the Dutch were supporting British troops in the defense of Singapore, living up to their commitment to a common Allied defense, as agreed upon during the so called Singapore Staff Talks in 1941. During a series of staff talks, the Allied forces—the British, the Australians, and the Dutch (and later the United States in an observing role)—reached informal agreements about the defense of the so called “Malay Barrier.” These Singapore agreements were the precursor of the first coalition command of World War II—the American, British, Dutch, Australian Command (ABDACOM)—the operational level multinational command that was established in a desperate effort to stem the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia in February 1942.<sup>4</sup>

The Allied defense of the Netherlands East Indies, as part of the “Malay Barrier”, is one of the little known campaigns of World War II. Few histories have appeared in English, contributing to the myth that the Dutch conducted an incompetent and half-hearted defense of the Netherlands East Indies. ABDACOM was the creation of the British Prime Minister Winston S.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Brian P. Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940-1942* (Gloucesterchire: Tempus, 2006), 95.

Churchill and the United States President Theodore Roosevelt and its creation was decided during the ARCADIA conference in December 1941 in Washington.<sup>5</sup> ABDACOM was established without the consent of the nations of the second half of its acronym—the Dutch government-in-exile in London and the Australians. The Dutch expected that, as the defense of the Netherlands East Indies seemed to be one of the primary tasks of ABDACOM, and its headquarters would be established on Java—the largest and most prominent island of the Netherlands East Indies—they would be appointed some major command positions.<sup>6</sup> Owing to the lack of Dutch influence on the establishment of ABDACOM and its main decision making mechanism—the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCOS) in Washington—key positions were occupied by British and American officers.<sup>7</sup> The lack of influence and resulting command and control and interoperability challenges would ultimately surface during the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia. ABDACOM was short-lived and ultimately disbanded in March 1942, again without the consent of the smaller nations, even before the battle of the Netherlands East Indies would begin.<sup>8</sup> By the end of February the Dutch found themselves in command of the remaining small Allied forces defending Java. On 8 March 1942 the Dutch surrendered to the Japanese forces while maintaining a guerilla war against the Japanese invaders throughout the vast East Indies archipelago.

The characteristic of a myth is that it lacks gradation and that it represents a simplified reproduction of the truth. This monograph aims to explore the Dutch perspective on the failure of ABDACOM. It will argue that, from a Dutch perspective, ABDACOM failed because of

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<sup>5</sup>H. P. Willmott, *Empires in the Balance: Japanese and Allied Pacific Strategies to April 1942* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1982), 259.

<sup>6</sup>Helfrich, *Memoires van C.E.L. Helfrich, Eerste Deel: De Maleise Barriere*, 376.

<sup>7</sup>James R. Leutze, *A Different Kind of Victory: A Biography of Admiral Thomas C. Hart* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1981), 130.

<sup>8</sup>Helfrich, *Memoires van C.E.L. Helfrich, Eerste Deel: De Maleise Barriere*, 376.

divergent national objectives of the members of ABDACOM—the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Australia. Centered on a historical case study of coalition warfare in the initial stages of World War II in the Pacific theatre it aims to contribute to the professional education of officers of Allied partners by discussing the factors that potentially inhibit effective coalition operations.

Additionally, The United States Strategic Guidance shows a strategic rebalance of the security approach to the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>9</sup> U.S. strategy for this region is anchored on enduring bilateral alliances, and a series of strong strategic partnerships. Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Austral-Asia all have very different dynamics, traditions, and relations with each other. Coalition building requires nuanced and differentiated approaches. These are the same challenges that the ABDACOM planners and political leaders faced when confronted with a common enemy. This monograph offers examples of the challenges that operational artists might face when planning coalition operations. Operational art is defined as “the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.”<sup>10</sup> This monograph presents examples of the challenges that operational planners might face when confronted with the undertaking of reconciling divergent national agenda’s in the pursuit of coalition objectives. Lessons learned from the first Allied unified command of World War II will contribute to a better understanding of the tenets of coalition operations and more explicitly the challenges that smaller nations face when contributing to coalition operations. Additionally, it is fully recognized that this monograph

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<sup>9</sup>David Shambaugh, “Assessing the U.S. Pivot to Asia,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* no. 2 (2013): 10.

<sup>10</sup>Headquarters, Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0: *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2012), 4-1.

provides a historical snapshot of only one specific theater during the early stages of World War II. During the period covered, American mobilization was only beginning to accelerate. As the major troops and resources contributor, the U.S. had to focus resource allocations over several fronts. It is fully understood that, as a result, the United States took a major role in Allied strategy and decision making. Last, it must be emphatically clear that this monograph—an exploration of the causes for the failure of ABDACOM from a Dutch perspective—is not intended to impugn the courage and sacrifice of the men from all the coalition partners of ABDACOM. Nothing in this monograph should be taken as detracting from the bravery of those men.

### Methodology

As this Monograph aims to explore the Dutch perspective on the failure of ABDACOM, research has been centered on a thorough analysis of related primary and secondary Dutch sources. An analysis of historical records from the National Archives of the Netherlands proved pivotal to this project and formed the foundation of the historical narrative of this Monograph. Analysis of 1800 of these records revealed the Dutch perspective of ABDACOM through the lens of Dutch foreign policy revealed the Dutch operational approach to the defense of the Netherlands East Indies, and uncovered the strategic discourse of the Dutch government-in-exile and its highest military and political representative in the Netherlands East Indies—the Governor-General. Memoires of Dutch general officers that commanded Dutch forces during the period covered by—like Admiral Helfrich, commander of the Netherlands East Indies Navy and later commander of ABDAFLOAT—the naval component of ABDACOM—contributed largely to the construction of the historical narrative. Next, primary sources from the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library provided insight in the official documents of the ARCADIA conference minutes and agreements pertaining to the establishment of ABDACOM.

Additionally, secondary sources provided the necessary context for this project. These sources contributed to valuable insights of the road to war, the strategic objectives of the Allied

partners and the war plans of the Imperial Japanese Navy, and the actual battles for the Netherlands East Indies. Last, memoirs from general officers of Allied partners that occupied key positions within ABDACOM, like the British General Archibald Wavell, Commanding Officer of ABDACOM, and the United States Admiral Thomas C. Hart, initially commanding ABDAFLOAT, further shaped the necessary context for this Monograph. Contemporary doctrinal terms will be used to enhance application of lessons for the contemporary operational environment.

### Structure of the Monograph

To substantiate the contention that, from a Dutch perspective, ABDACOM failed because of divergent national objectives, poor interoperability, and an ineffective command and control structure this monograph consists of five sections. The first section will explore the strategic context to set the conditions for a further exploration of the causes for the failure of ABDACOM. First it will provide background information of the Netherlands East Indies, necessary to understand the Dutch perspective on coalition building. Additionally, it will articulate the architecture of the Dutch defense plans for the Netherlands Indies archipelago that was centered on asymmetric warfare through an innovative submarine warfare concept of operations. It will show that the Dutch operational approach was characterized as strategic defensive but operational offensive. Next, it will set out the road to war in order to describe the Japanese threat and the Dutch efforts to secure support from the British and the Americans for an Allied defense of Southeast Asia. This strategic context will be used as an embarkation point for a further analysis of the causes for failure of ABDACOM.

The second section will describe the roots of failure of ABDACOM. It reveals how divergent strategic agendas and national policies during interwar Allied deliberations inhibited political agreement and a defined common Allied approach against Japan and how the Associated Powers entered the war with a lack of common operating plans. The third section will set out the

establishment of a unified command in the war against Japan in the South West Pacific area: ABDACOM. It will describe how the Dutch were excluded from Allied strategic decision making and lacked influence in the body that would give directives to the Supreme Commander of ABDACOM—the Combined Chiefs of Staffs in Washington.

And finally, the fourth section will describe operations in the ABDACOM area. It will explore how divergent operational approaches—driven by national agenda's and priorities contributed to the failure of ABDACOM. Defeat is a common—but inadequate—measure of organizational effectiveness. Exogenous factors like adversarial size, capabilities, effectiveness, and resources play a central role. It should be noted that, although the author recognizes that the Japanese invaders—acting on strategic surprise—technically and numerically outmatched the Allied forces, this historical case study focuses on internal deficiencies to explore the failure of ABDACOM.

#### Literature Review

Various authors have written about operations in the Pacific theater during World War II, but the ABDACOM campaign for the defense of the Netherlands East Indies has not been studied extensively. Its short duration and events with a higher profile in other theaters of operations, like the European and Middle Eastern theaters of operations have tended to obscure the events that unfolded during the initial stages of Japanese aggression towards Southeast Asia.

There are two prevailing viewpoints that dominate historical work that considers ABDACOM operations in the period between December 1941 and March 1942. The first view holds that the Dutch contribution to the Allied defense of the “Malay Barrier” was halfhearted and incompetent. This perspective, for the most part British and American, paints the Netherlands East Indies contribution as indecisive, reluctant and even selfish. In the November 1993 volume of the scholarly journal *War and Society*, Jack Ford articulates through his article “The Forlorn Ally—The Netherlands East Indies 1942,” that an example of this view of incompetency can be

found in a book about the Australian 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion that was captured in the Netherlands East Indies in 1942. According to Ford in this book it is expressed that the Australians had been forced to surrender to the Japanese because the Dutch surrendered without a fight. Similarly, Ford asserts that in a British volume on the Netherlands East Indies campaign the view is expressed that the Dutch instead of a conviction of ultimate victory had a view of ultimate defeat.<sup>11</sup> Ford continues that the reality is far different.

Also in this collection is a memorandum from Admiral Stark, United States Chief Naval Operations (CNO) sent to the Secretary of the Navy. This memo dealt with U.S. strategy in a two-ocean war. In it Stark described four strategic options for the U.S. president. He recommended that the fourth option—Plan Dog—would form the basis of U.S. strategy after the U.S. entered the war. In this memorandum Stark articulates the estimated Dutch devotion towards a coalition. He stated that the Dutchmen “will act in what they believe is their own selfish best interest.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the biography of Admiral Thomas C. Hart, the initial commander of ABDACOM reveals Hart’s perception of the Dutch. This volume, based in part on the twenty-one-volume Hart diary, investigates the forces and circumstances that shaped Hart’s actions. Hart asserted that the Dutch were “too defense-minded.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Hart articulated his impression that “[the Dutch] are the more reluctant of the Allied partners toward the mutuality of the cause.”<sup>14</sup> In his book *Eagle Against The Sun—The American War With Japan*—Ronald H. Spector theorizes that the real problem of the meager successes at sea of ABDACOM was the Dutch Admiral

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<sup>11</sup>J. Ford, “The Forlorn Ally—The Netherlands East Indies in 1942,” *War & Society*, 11, no. 1 (May 1993): 105.

<sup>12</sup>Steven T. Ross, ed., *U.S. War Plans: 1938-1945* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Pub, 2002), 58.

<sup>13</sup>Leutze, 194.

<sup>14</sup>Leutze, 230.

Doorman. According to Spector, Doorman had missed several good opportunities because of excessive caution and conservatism—expressing a lack of offensive spirit with the Dutch.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, but not always in outright opposition, is a more nuanced view of the performance of the armed forces of the Netherlands East Indies. This general interpretation of events explores the failure of ABDACOM from the vantage point of internal deficiencies. It identifies and sympathizes with the considerable problems ABDACOM found itself facing in the desperate struggle against the Japanese overmatch, and it articulates convergent strategic agendas, a lack of common doctrine, interoperability, and even logistical issues as the major deficiencies of ABDACOM. Both theses view ABDACOM operations from a United States vantage point. In his authoritative Master Thesis *American, British, Dutch, and Australian Coalition: Unsuccessful Band of Brothers* LCDR Steven B. Shepard, USN, asserts that differing objectives and priorities by the Allied components influenced the ability of ABDACOM to fight effectively. Shepard identified the poor command and control structure as additional causes for failure.<sup>16</sup> This view is shared in Jeffrey C. Nelson's master thesis *ABDACOM: America's First Coalition Experience of World War II*. Nelson addresses the diplomatic differences between the Allied partners of ABDACOM. Furthermore, Nelson identified that logistical challenges contributed to the poor performance of ABDACOM.<sup>17</sup>

Both interpretations usually identify the causes for the failure of ABDACOM from an Anglo-Saxon or American vantage point, founded on British or American primary and secondary sources. This monograph builds on the second, more nuanced, argument, but with a focus on the

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<sup>15</sup>Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: the American War with Japan* ed. (New York: Vintage, 1985), 132.

<sup>16</sup>Shepard, Steven B., LCDR USN, "American, British, Dutch, and Australian Coalition: Unsuccessful Band of Brothers" (Master thesis, Command and General Staff College, 2003), iii.

<sup>17</sup>Jeffrey C. Nelson, "ABDACOM: America's First Coalition Experience in World War II" (Master's thesis, Kansas State University, 1994), 88.



Dutch perspective of ABDACOM operations. Based on research of Dutch primary and secondary sources, this monograph aims to contribute to a more balanced history of ABDACOM by providing another perspective of coalition warfare during the ABDACOM period.

## SECTION 1: STRATEGIC CONTEXT

### Background

Dutch involvement in the Pacific dates from the first quarter of the sixteenth century when European countries entered upon an expansionist phase that was largely dictated by increasing demographic pressures and growing strain on resources. The Dutch destroyed Portuguese power in the Far East in 1667. This was followed by a period of annexation policy and colonization. In 1619, the Dutch seized Jakarta and renamed it Batavia and established the headquarters of the United East India Trading Company in Batavia.<sup>18</sup> Over the next two hundred years the Dutch colonists charted the East Indies and subjugated them and exploited the rich island resources. During the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, when the Dutch were forced into an alliance with France, Britain, the powerful maritime nation, took most Dutch East Indies possessions and established British trading companies. In 1814, by terms of the Convention of London, the British returned control of the East Indies to the Dutch government.<sup>19</sup> In the course of the nineteenth century the Dutch became uncomfortably aware that national prosperity stemmed from their exploitation and the wretchedness of the Indies. The Dutch committed themselves to the “ethical policy”—a program of investments in the Indies to improve the lot of the population and to create a new native elite, assimilated to western culture. This approach would eventually have to evolve into the new native elite bringing the Netherlands East

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<sup>18</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 4.

<sup>19</sup>Gordon L. Rottman, *World War II Pacific Island Guide, a Geo-Military Study* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 195-198.

Indies into a partnership with the Netherlands, along similar lines as the British dominions.<sup>20</sup> The colony was tapped for its wealth. The Netherlands East Indies possessed an impressive array of base ores, tin, rubber, tin, bauxite, quinine, and oil.<sup>21</sup> The exploitative nature of Dutch rule gave impetus to a latent force of local sentiment and new forces of nationalism became challenges by the turn of the century. As a result the Dutch fought many wars following the rising of local resistance.<sup>22</sup> The evolution of the Indonesian insurgency is beyond the scope of this monograph.

During the period of colonial rule in the Netherlands East Indies, it was administered by a governor who was appointed by the Dutch Queen. For defense policies, the governor acted as the Commander-in-Chief for the Netherlands East Indies. The governor was accountable to the Dutch Minister of Colonies, and was assisted by a cabinet, selected by the Crown. During the period covered by this monograph—1941 till March 1942— the Dutch population in the East Indies numbered approximately 220,000, mostly working in government services or trading companies. The local population consisted of almost 70,000,000 Indonesians, 1,300,000 Chinese and 120,000 other Asians and Arabs.<sup>23</sup> The Netherlands East Indies constituted a vast empire. The East Indies archipelago stretches from the west coast of the Malayan Peninsula and runs east above Australia to western New Guinea, a distance of 3,200 miles with a width of 1,200 miles. Put differently, the total amount of coast line of the archipelago equals the total circumference of the globe.

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<sup>20</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 15.

<sup>21</sup>G. Teitler and P. J. Drooglever, *De Val van Nederlands-Indië* (Dieren: Bataafsche Leeuw, 1982), 82.

<sup>22</sup>Rottman, 195-198. The evolution of the Indonesian insurgency is beyond the scope of this monograph.

<sup>23</sup>Rottman, 195-198.

### Forward Defense: The Dutch Operational Concept Against Japan

To defend the vast archipelago the Dutch had a substantial military presence in the Netherlands East Indies. The armed forces were composed of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger, or KNIL) with its own aviation squadron, and a strong naval presence—the Netherlands East Indies Navy—including a naval aviation service. The KNIL was an all-professional force of about 38,000 officers and men of whom about 10,000 were Europeans. In support of the KNIL were local militias and town guards—a paramilitary force. The KNIL functioned primarily as an adjunct to the civil power in policing the Indies. Its central task was to maintain Dutch authority against possible indigenous unrest throughout the vast archipelago. Based on geography, the architecture for the defense of the Netherlands East Indies against external threats was centered on the Netherlands East Indies Navy and its naval aviation service.<sup>24</sup>

The Netherlands East Navy anticipated the enemy it would eventually fight in 1942.<sup>25</sup> The Netherlands East Indies fleet was tailored to the specific emergent and most immediate threat—the emergent Japanese Empire and its expansionist ambitions. Based on this specificity the Dutch could anticipate the future area of operations, the time and space factors, and could project the anticipated enemy fleet capabilities. Based on these strategic calculations the Dutch tailored their fleet and built ships designed specifically for the projected tasks founded on these strategic calculations. Furthermore, grounded in these strategic calculations Dutch naval authorities developed an offensive strike capability—centered on submarines that offered the

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<sup>24</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 266.

<sup>25</sup>R. W. A. van den Berg, “Patterns of Innovation: A Historical Case Study of Military Innovation In The Netherlands East Indies Navy From 1900-1942” (Master’s thesis, Command and General Staff College), 142.

right balance between endurance, speed, range, and armament.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, based on this factor of specificity Dutch naval officers could tailor the operational concepts to the geographic conditions of the Indies archipelago. A thorough analysis of Japanese naval capabilities vis-à-vis the geographic conditions in the Netherlands East Indies led Dutch naval officers to initiate the development of *Roedel* tactics—known as wolf pack tactics in modern parlance—initially designed for employment against the enemy transport fleets in the narrow straits leading to the Java Sea and the outlying areas of the archipelago—like the oilfields of Tarakan and Balikpapan on Borneo. The Dutch concept of operations was designed to deny the enemy footholds in the outlying areas of the archipelago and was based on the principle of forward defense.

The Dutch further refined these *Roedel* concepts into a highly innovative and very offensive submarine warfare concept as a result of the lessons learned from German submarine warfare during World War I and imported German technology and know-how, and technological innovations.<sup>27</sup> An offensive mindset and rapid concentration, based on early strategic and tactical reconnaissance, formed the basic underpinnings of the concept. This reconnaissance task was performed by flying boats of the Dutch Naval Air Service. Fundamental to the *Roedel* tactics was an effective integration of the submarines with this Naval Air Service (*Marine Luchtvaartdienst* or *MLD*) and surface vessels, like destroyers, cruisers and minesweepers. Although the Dutch mastered these *Roedel* tactics—eventually further developed and employed by the German *Kriegsmarine* in the unrestricted warfare against Allied convoy ships—intra-service rivalry, characterized by a debate between proponents of torpedo centric fleets and blue water-big gun fleets led in the final years before the outbreak of World War II to a drifting defense policy.<sup>28</sup> A

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.

strong navalist discourse emerged resulting in Dutch plans to build powerful 28,000-ton battle cruisers very similar in their characteristics to the German Gneisenau and Scharnhorst designs envisaged to counter Japanese heavy cruisers.<sup>29</sup> The German invasion of 10 May 1940 pre-empted the Dutch from building these cruisers. As a result, although the new navalist discourse led to decreased budgets for maintenance, replacement, and innovation of the Dutch submarines, Dutch defense plans were still based on the offensive submarine warfare concept at the outbreak of the war with Japan.

#### Strategic Dichotomy: The Neutral Dutch Seek Out Coalition Partners

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, free trade and neutrality on the one hand and determination to defend the Dutch colonial empire on the other hand were the dominant components of Dutch foreign policy. Involvement in international power struggles could complicate Dutch trade and colonial designs. In his book, *Law of War and Neutrality*, General J.C. Den Beer-Poortugael, Governor of the Royal Netherlands Military Academy, defined neutrals as “those states that under no conditions participate in a war between other states and that do not accept war related activities at its sovereign territory.”<sup>30</sup> After the Napoleonic wars, the Netherlands seized to be one of the influential nations of Europe. It effectively became a third-rate power when Belgium seceded in 1839.<sup>31</sup> Successful Dutch diplomacy during World War I, coupled with trade negotiations with the warring parties—especially Great Britain and Germany—helped the Dutch maintain its neutrality during this Great War. The Dutch

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>30</sup>Jacobus. C. C. Den Beer Poortugael, *Oorlogs-en Neutraliteitsrecht*, Vijfde Boek (‘s-Gravenhage: De Gebroeders van Cleef, 1900), 237. General J. C. den Beer Poortugael would later serve as a member of the advisory member of the Dutch Parliament.

<sup>31</sup>Maartje M. Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral: the Netherlands in the First World War, 1914-1918* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 30.

government and its population perceived the policy of armed neutrality as successful but failed to recognize that military-strategic and political considerations of the belligerents had guaranteed Dutch sovereignty. In the decades leading up to World War II the Netherlands developed a strong self-image and foreign reputation as a champion of international law and codified the rights and obligations of neutral states.<sup>32</sup> International developments, like the establishment of the League of Nations and the Kellogg Briar Pact—in which the signatories renounced the use of war except for self-defense—combined with a domestic pacifistic discourse, contributed to tight defense budgets in the Netherlands<sup>33</sup>

The German invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940 delivered a foreign policy dilemma to the Dutch government. After a few days of fighting, the Dutch Queen Wilhelmina, the Dutch royal family, and the Dutch government evaded German capture and established a government-in-exile in London. Technically, the Dutch were at war with Germany and could no longer adhere to their neutrality policy. In the Pacific, however, peace still existed. The Dutch had become an ally of the British in the West but maintained its strict neutral posture in Southeast Asia in order not to antagonize Japan. Further complicating matters was the Dutch reliance on British and American support for its rearmament program for the East Indies. Even before the war the Dutch government had tried to discuss British support in the event of a Japanese attack.<sup>34</sup> During secret meetings the British declared that the status quo in the Pacific, including the integrity of the Netherlands East Indies was a major British interest but they did not discuss any kind of

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<sup>32</sup>Herman Amersfoort Wim Klinkert, ed., *Small Powers in the Age of Total War, 1900-1940* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2011), 10.

<sup>33</sup>John T. Kuehn, *Agents of Innovation: the General Board and the Design of the Fleet That Defeated the Japanese Navy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 159.

<sup>34</sup>H. Th. Bussemaker, “Paradise in Peril. Western Colonial Power and Japanese Expansion in South-East Asia, 1905-1941” (Dissertation, Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2001), 302.

support.<sup>35</sup> The British were interested in encouraging the Dutch to take steps for their own defense. The British rationale was that Britain's fleet would be necessary in Europe against Germany and, based on its One-Power standard, lacked capacity to give credible support to the Dutch in the event of Japanese aggression.<sup>36</sup> The British made Dutch armament programs for the Netherlands East Indies a precondition for talks over support and even recommended the Dutch government acquisition of British fighter planes for interoperability purposes.<sup>37</sup> Till that time the Netherlands East Indies would officially be "a matter of concern" to the British government.<sup>38</sup> The real reason for Britain's caution against guarantees for the Dutch was that it needed American guarantees, because of its military weakness in the East. The British believed that their support to the Dutch could draw them into a war with Japan which it was bound to lose without American support. As events began to assume an ominous hue in 1941, the fundamental problem for the Allies was essentially political.<sup>39</sup> Neither the Americans nor the British were clear in their own minds about whether their policy should be one of deterrence or defense. A defined and reasoned campaign plan for dealing with Japanese aggression was denied by contradicting national postures—the British were belligerents, the Dutch part belligerent-part neutral, and the United States was neutral. President Roosevelt was not prepared. But before this monograph turns to examine Allied diplomacy and strategy in the last eighteen months of peace in the Pacific—a period during which the Allies embraced the alliance through a series of staff talks in Washington

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<sup>35</sup>UK National Archives, "Defense Problems Holland and the Netherlands East Indies," CAB 24/263/0025, 1936.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Bussemaker, 209.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 222.

<sup>39</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 95.

and Singapore—it is useful to explore the emergence of the Japanese threat first in order to understand the differing national postures relative to this threat.

### Emerging threat

For Japan the interlude between World War I and the outbreak of the hostilities in December 1941 in the Pacific was one of confounding contradictions that, taken together, resulted in a drift into war. It was a period that began with a policy of moderation and attempted reconciliation with China. But that was to finish with Japan totally committed to a war in China and a period during which Japan unaffectedly sought good relations with Western powers and was anxious to secure peace throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific in order to expand her industries.<sup>40</sup> The need to secure resources and markets, on which her industry and expanding population depended, brought Japan under intense pressure to move against Western interest in the Southeast Asia. From 1940 onwards, there was a powerful inducement for Japan to go to war.

In 1939 the United States had taken economic action against Japan by an unannounced withdrawal from the 1911 Trade Treaty, causing shortages for the Japanese who had urgent requirements for raw materials. The Japanese tried to escape the closing net by trading directly with the Dutch. This resulted in a Japanese request to the Dutch government for a trade conference in February 1940. The Japanese agenda was to neutralize existing trade barriers between the Netherlands East Indies and Japan. In essence the Japanese requested a disproportional volume of raw materials from the Dutch. The Japanese punctuated its demands by announcing that the Netherlands East Indies were part of Japanese designs of a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.”<sup>41</sup> The Dutch government, anxious not to antagonize the Japanese and

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>41</sup>Farrell, 84.



in need for time to strengthen its defenses for the inevitable war, declined the request but offered constructive talks over feasible amounts of shipments. These trade talks started on 16 September 1940.<sup>42</sup>

These Japanese trade talks centered on oil supplies. The Japanese demanded vast volumes of oil from the Dutch. By contrast to existing trade agreements— the annual shipment of Netherlands East Indies oil products to Japan normally approximated 650,000 tons per year, the new Japanese demands totaled 3,150,000 tons per year. The Japanese met Dutch refusal and signed contracts for significantly smaller volumes of oil products. This meant a diplomatic victory for the Dutch, and Dutch stubbornness signaled a changing posture towards Japan.<sup>43</sup> Next to fears about supporting the Japanese war economy, the Dutch were apprehensive that the Japanese would ship materials to its Axis Allies in Europe. After the war these suspicions were proved accurate. Captured German documents showed evidence that the Japanese were using the Trans-Siberian railway to transport raw materials to Germany. The American oil embargo further exacerbated relations with the Japanese on 26 July 1941. The United States had frozen Japanese assets. The Japanese, lacking hard currency, could not obtain Netherlands East Indies oil.<sup>44</sup>

After the United States had established the oil embargo against the Japanese, they appealed to the British and the Dutch to take the same posture. To underscore the request, the United States seized the supply of armament to the Netherlands East Indies.<sup>45</sup> The Dutch tried to leverage this American display of so called soft power in their desperate search for Allies by linking subscription to the embargo with United States security guarantees against the Japanese.

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<sup>42</sup>Bussemaker, 317-318.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 328.

<sup>44</sup>Edward S. Miller, *Bankrupting the Enemy: The U.S. Financial Siege of Japan Before Pearl Harbor* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 191.

<sup>45</sup>Bussemaker, 325.

Furthermore, the Dutch attempted to strengthen its position for negotiations for security guarantees from the British by declaring that formal British security guarantees might persuade the Dutch officials to join the British-United States oil embargo. This was *realpolitik* in *optima forma* and another indicator that the Netherlands had abandoned its strict neutrality policy. The Dutch had taken a more pragmatic approach to protect its own interests. Another indicator of this strategic shift was a Dutch government decision on 28 October 1941 to declare war on Japan in the event of Japanese aggression against the United States, Britain, or Russia.<sup>46</sup> This decision was shared with potential Allies. It clearly signaled Dutch efforts to demonstrate its commitment towards the Allies in a desperate effort to secure support.

The economic pressure brought against Japan by the Americans, the British, and the Dutch left Japan with no option other than to go to war, unless they were prepared to see their empire reduced to an irrelevant Asiatic nation.<sup>47</sup> The Japanese held that the terms for a resumption of trade—Japanese evacuation of China and Indo-China—were impossible to meet and therefore unacceptable. On 1 December 1941 the Japanese leadership formally accepted that there could be no peaceful method of resolving embroiled relations with the United States and the European powers and made the decision to go to war to secure its interests.<sup>48</sup>

As indicated, the British War Cabinet articulated that it was only willing to consider security guarantees towards the Dutch if Britain in turn received American security guarantees. The resolution of this conundrum came on 1 December 1941, just short of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. During a meeting with the British the United States President Roosevelt showed sudden resolve and stated that “we should obviously all be in [this] together,” after questions

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 67.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 66.

about an American response to potential Japanese aggressions against the British dominions in the Far East. The British perceived this as American guarantees of support. During a subsequent meeting President Roosevelt confirmed the American support.<sup>49</sup> Based on these guarantees, Britain finally confirmed security guarantees to the Netherlands East Indies on 5 December 1941. In a letter to the Dutch government-in-exile in London, the British Minister of Foreign Affairs, Anthony Eden, confirmed cooperation with the Dutch to the fullest extent.<sup>50</sup> After the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and against selected targets throughout Southeast Asia, the Dutch government-in-exile declared war on Japan seven hours later, even before the United States declared a state of war with Japan<sup>51</sup>

#### Japanese War Plans

By 1940 Japan had accepted the likelihood of a war with the United States. The Japanese knew that probably they would never again find themselves in such an advantageous position as in the early 1940s. The Japanese were fully aware of United States fleet armament programs, as articulated in its Two-Ocean Naval Expansion Act. As a result Japanese calculation indicated that the position of relative naval advantage would be no longer than two years.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the economic sanctions that the United States, the British, and the Dutch imposed upon the Japanese denied the Japanese access to almost ninety percent of its oil supplies. The Japanese Economic Mobilization Bureau of the War Ministry advised Japanese leaders that Japan had strategic reserves for only about two years. The need for resources shaped Japanese war plans. If the

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<sup>49</sup>UK National Archives, "War Cabinet," CAB/65/24/124/4, 4 December 1941.

<sup>50</sup>Het Nationaal Archief No.1 F 13245/230/G. BZ, LA: Geheim Archief/DZ-D2. Afschrift, 5 December 1941.

<sup>51</sup>F. C. van Oosten, *The Battle of the Java Sea* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 12.

<sup>52</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 61.

Japanese wanted to secure energy sources for their economy and growing population, they had to secure the oil fields of the Netherlands East Indies.<sup>53</sup>

Japanese leaders were aware that aggression towards the Netherlands East Indies would provoke intervention by the United States. Flank protection for operations against the Indies archipelago necessitated a pre-emptive strike against the U.S. Pacific Fleet. The strategic aim of Japan was to establish a defensive perimeter around the area of Japanese conquests. The plans were comprised of three major phases. The first phase aimed at the securing of a sector that included Thailand, northern Malaya, and parts of Borneo, Sarawak, and the Philippines. During the second phase the Japanese aimed to conquer Malaya and Singapore, and the northern islands of the Dutch East Indies. The northern islands of the Dutch East Indies would be used as a springboard for operations against the ultimate objective—the island of Java.<sup>54</sup> This phase would be followed by a consolidation behind the defensive perimeter—the Malay Barrier (for an illustration of the Japanese war aims see figure 1.)

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 259.

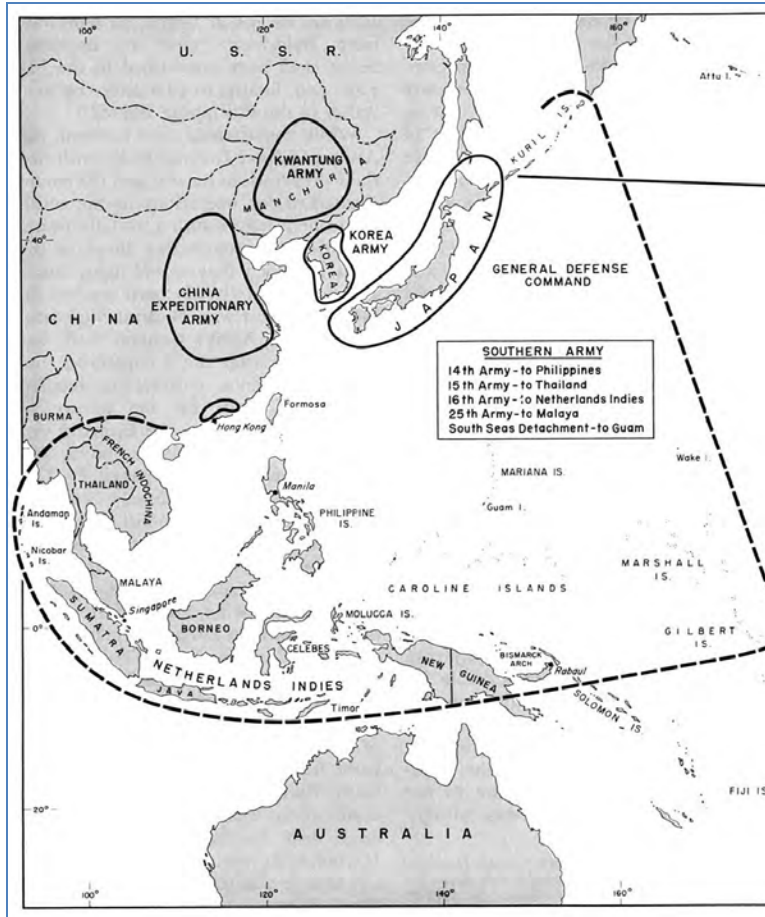


Figure 1. The Japanese Plans for War (December 1941)

Source: Louis Morton, *U.S. Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific: Strategy and Command The First Two Years* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History Publication, 1989), 106.

## SECTION 2: ROOTS OF FAILURE

Before this paper turns to the examination of the establishment of ABDACOM, it is necessary to explore Allied diplomacy and strategies in the lead up to the start of hostilities in the Far East. It was the Dutch conception that, during this period, Allied staff talks uncovered divergent strategic objectives of the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, and that

these divergent positions inhibited a common strategy and subsequent operational plans.<sup>55</sup> The United States was interested in denying the Malay Barrier to the Japanese from the East, to secure its sea lines of communications between the U.S. and Australia. The Americans had identified Australia as the main base for future Allied offensives against Japan. The primary British interest was oriented to the west of the Malay Barrier—the defense of Singapore. This so called Singapore Strategy signified the anchor of the defense of the British Empire in the Far East. Although the main Dutch interest lay in the center of the Malay Barrier—the defense of the East Indies archipelago—the Dutch committed themselves to the British strategic concept and thereby subordinated their own strategic objectives to the British in the hope of securing reciprocal support. This would prove to be a strategic illusion. These divergent strategic agenda's manifested themselves during several sets of bilateral and multilateral staff talks involving the Allied partners—collectively known as the Singapore conferences—in the last eighteen months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. These staff talks did not materialize into sizeable political agreements and led to very little military cooperation. Furthermore, this period was characterized by the old conundrum as articulated previously—the British would potentially agree to an alliance with the Dutch if the Americans made a commitment to the British first.<sup>56</sup>

The Singapore Strategy had been the cornerstone of British imperial defense policy in the Far East during the interwar period. It was central to the British imperial naval defense system east of the Suez.<sup>57</sup> It aimed to deter Japanese aggression by building a large naval base and basing

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<sup>55</sup>C. E. L. Helfrich, *Memoires Van C.E.L. Helfrich, Luitenant-Admiral B. D.* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1950), 144.

<sup>56</sup>Leutze, 192.

<sup>57</sup>Ian Hamill, *Strategic Illusion: Singapore Strategy and the Defense of Australia and New Zealand, 1919-42* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1982), 288

a strong fleet in Singapore. War plans for the Singapore Strategy evolved during the interwar period but its most salient features were characterized by the dispatch of capital ships from Europe to Singapore in the event of emergencies in the Far East. The British Government expected to defend Singapore until the arrival of a British battle fleet believed adequately strong enough to defeat a Japanese fleet.<sup>58</sup> British naval commanders maintained that the fleet would be in Singapore within seventy days of a political decision. In 1939 the British made a departure from their declared intentions and extended the transit time from seventy to ninety days.<sup>59</sup> This so called “Main Fleet to Singapore” strategy was based on a series of assumptions. The major flaw in British rationale was the assumption of enduring stability in Europe. Furthermore, the British policy makers assumed they could avert a war situation on two fronts and henceforth British rationale depended on the skill of British policymakers to appease Nazi Germany. The weakness of this approach became increasingly obvious with the passage of the time. The Singapore policy would inevitably collapse when the British Empire was challenged on both sides of the world by Nazi Germany and the Japanese Empire and revealed British inadequacy to maintain two fleets for subsequently the Far East and Europe.<sup>60</sup>

During the preamble to World War II Dutch pre-war neutrality was to be gradually abandoned over the course of a single year and would evolve into a more pragmatic approach. The neutrality policy adopted by successive Dutch governments precluded any formal defense agreements or alliances.<sup>61</sup> The Dutch position would change after the German invasion of May 1940. As stated this presented the Dutch government-in-exile with a strategic dilemma. It

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<sup>58</sup>John Robertson, *Australian War Strategy 1939-1945: A Documentary History*, (London: University of Queensland Press, 1985), 142.

<sup>59</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 100.

<sup>60</sup>Hamill, 3.

<sup>61</sup>Bussemaker, 118.

Formally became a belligerent and a British ally in the west but it maintained its neutral posture in the east. However, the threats posed by Japanese expansionism and failures to constrain these threats led to secret rapprochements of potential Allied partners for the Far East—most significantly the British. Dutch and British military officials in the Far East held talks in secrecy but this only led to information exchange and co-operation at the operational and tactical level. This further materialized into secret contacts between Dutch and British counter-intelligence, and British and Dutch army and navy representatives in the Far East.<sup>62</sup> The strategic posture of the Dutch evolved over the course of one year from a position of aloofness to a more pragmatic stance, and a more belligerent posture towards Japan. Four factors accounted for this strategic shift. First, the Japanese strategic intent to incorporate the Netherlands East Indies into an East Asian prosperity sphere convinced the Dutch of closer political and military cooperation with the United States and the British. Next, the United States imposed a weapons embargo on the Netherlands East Indies to influence Dutch foreign policy. The rearmament of the Indies was to a large extent depending on United States arms deliveries. The Americans considered the Dutch government-in-exile indecisive and aimed to secure a closer cooperation between the British and the Dutch by using the controlled release of armament as a mechanism to convince the Dutch to seek mutual support. Additionally, the Netherlands East Indies forces depended on supplies of munitions from Australia. Although the Australians did not impose import restrictions on the Dutch they expressed disbelief at the Dutch strategic posture of neutrality. Last, domestic considerations forced the Dutch into rapprochement with potential Allies. Strong native sentiment in the Netherlands East Indies called for more durable regional defense cooperation. The majority

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 121.



of the Indies Peoples Council favored military cooperation with the Americans and the British. Proponents within the Dutch government-in-exile in London supported this position.<sup>63</sup>

This military cooperation between the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands East Indies, and Australia was based on strategic illusions. The Dutch would subordinate their strategic objectives to the objectives of Allied partners with the hope of securing reciprocal support. During the Singapore staff talks the British were able to secure from the Dutch what they could not secure from the Americans, namely the recognition of the importance of Singapore in Allied defense strategy and that its defense had to take precedence over everything else in Southeast Asia.<sup>64</sup> It is useful to illustrate this point with a closer examination of the Singapore staff talks.

#### Singapore Staff Talks

The initial Singapore staff talks opened on 22 October and continued to 30 October 1940. The aim for the Americans, the British, the Dutch, and the Australian was to reach a common understanding of the situation in the Far East. The underpinnings of these staff talks were the Far East Appreciation as prepared by the British Imperial Staff. Australia, New Zealand, India, Great Britain and an American observer were the main participants of these conversations. The Dutch were invited but, formally adhering to its neutrality policy, declined the invitation. The British concluded in their British Far East Appreciation that the dominant factor with regard to the Allied defense remains the security of the British Naval Base at Singapore and its availability for use by the British main fleet.<sup>65</sup> On 26 November 1940, the conference was followed by the second Singapore conference between the British and the Dutch—the BD Conference. This conference

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<sup>63</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 127-128.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 121.

<sup>65</sup>Berg van den, 124.

indicated the beginning of the Dutch strategic shift. The BD Conference aimed at discussing British-Dutch military cooperation in the event of Japanese aggression in the Far East against British or Dutch territory and maintained American neutrality. During these talks the Dutch and the British agreed on information exchange and the mutual use of military airfields in the Far East.

During the Third Singapore Conference, held between 22 February and 25 February 1941, the Allied partners—again with the Americans as observers—discussed a common strategy. These talks resulted in British-Dutch plans for a war in the Far East against Japan on the basis of American neutrality. During these talks the British aimed to secure recognition by the other Allies of the centrality of Singapore to the Allied strategy. The Americans disagreed that the defense of Singapore had to take precedence over everything else in Southeast Asia and never moved from their position that the preservation of their fleet counted for more than the defense of a half-finished base.<sup>66</sup> During these conversations arrangements were made for a unified strategic command of naval and air forces operating in the Eastern Theatre. The Dutch, eager to show commitment and to secure security guarantees from the British, agreed to place Dutch naval and air forces under operational control of the British Commander in Chief, China Station, in support of the defense of Singapore. These capabilities included three bomber squadrons, one fighter squadron, one cruiser, two destroyers and six submarines. This constituted a significant portion of the Dutch East Indies naval and air force capacity and the dispatch of these capabilities effectively unraveled the Dutch offensive roedel operational concepts that were developed for the defense of the Indies archipelago during the interwar period.<sup>67</sup> The Dutch, striving to secure reciprocal support, accepted this risk.

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<sup>66</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 121.

<sup>67</sup>Berg van den, 110-115.

### American-British Conversations

From 29 January 1941 to 27 March 1941 the United States Staff Committee, representing the Chief of Naval Operations and the Chief of Staff of the Army, and a British delegation held The American-British conversations in Washington— known by the short title of the ABC Conferences. The aim of these conversations was to determine the best methods by which the armed forces of the United States and the British Commonwealth could defeat Germany and the powers Allied with it, should the United States be compelled to resort to war. Main topics were the allocation of principal areas of responsibility, the major lines of the military strategy to be pursued by nations, the determination of command arrangements, and the strength of the forces which each would be able to commit to the fight against the Axis Powers and Japan. The Allied partners agreed that Germany was the predominant member of the axis power and that therefore the Atlantic and the European theatre was considered to be the decisive theatre. Furthermore the Allies agreed that in the event of a war with Japan the Allied powers would deploy their forces in a manner to guard against eventual Japanese intervention, signaling a defensive posture in the Pacific Theatre. During preparations for the ABC Conference the Americans determined their strategic posture towards the British. They believed British postwar interests shaped Great Britain's priorities and that they too should safeguard future interests.<sup>68</sup> Although the Americans did not anticipate discussions on organizational arrangements pertaining to a unified command or a unified political body they were intent on establishing command arrangement principles during the conference—there would be entire equality of the two prospective associates in the determination of general strategic policies. This clearly signaled the power transition that had emerged in Southeast Asia— the Americans only wanted to discuss strategic matters with the

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<sup>68</sup>David E. Vernon, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in World War II: Organizational Development* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office), 176.

British on equal terms. Additionally, during Allied coalition operations American forces should have a guaranteed integrity of national forces under their own immediate commanders.<sup>69</sup> This would impede effective command relationships during coalition operations in the early stages of hostilities vis-a-vis the Japanese in East Asia.

In contrast with the British the Americans were little interested in considering a future collaborative machinery for the war effort. They were satisfied with a general outline of “continuously collaboration,” always with an eye to an assurance that future command arrangements would not allow the British to gain an inordinate voice in the affairs of the United States armed forces. Furthermore, initially the Americans favored separate areas of responsibility above unified commands in specific theaters.<sup>70</sup>

The Americans viewed the Far Eastern theater of operations as a special occasion. Defense of the territories of the Allies in this area—the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands East Indies, and Australia—was left to the respective national commanders, with the practice of mutual support. Command arrangements between these potential Allies for a command architecture that went beyond “appropriate mutual support” were left for future determination. The British, in turn, aimed at establishing the most direct relationship possible at all levels, between the heads of state, the high commands, and the planning staffs of the United States and the United Kingdom. The British wanted to maintain the direct, bilateral relationship at all costs. Interference from other potential coalition partners would have to be avoided at all costs.<sup>71</sup> This posture would inhibit an effective command structure during the establishment of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, a unified body—dominated by British and American

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

representatives—that would develop strategic directions for ABDACOM after the establishment of this unified command in early 1942.

During this conference the British brought up their desire for America's active participation in the defense of Singapore. Already in May 1939, during informal talks with the Americans over their Allied strategic intentions, the British had admitted the impossibility of sending even a single battleship to Singapore.<sup>72</sup> Although this was the major assumption of the Singapore Strategy, the British delegation admitted that, in case of Japanese attacks upon Singapore, the area would need larger forces than the British Admiralty was then planning to provide. The British proposed that the United States detached four cruisers from its Pacific fleet and station them at Singapore. The United States delegation opposed this suggestion.<sup>73</sup> The Americans recommended holding to the strategic plan of a defensive posture in the East and limiting aid to Singapore and the Netherlands East Indies. They asserted that United States naval forces could operate from their base at Pearl Harbor to accomplish the strategic objectives in the east while still free to detach vessels as needed to the Atlantic.<sup>74</sup> The American delegation concluded that “the ultimate faith of Singapore will depend upon the outcome of the struggle in the European theatre.”<sup>75</sup> This was fully in line with the United States War Plans in which Plan Dog called for concentrating on the Atlantic, not the Pacific.<sup>76</sup> Initially the British kept pushing hard for American commitments to the Far East but British Prime Minister Churchill intervened.

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<sup>72</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 101.

<sup>73</sup>Mark S. Watson, *United States Army in World War II: Chiefs of Staff Prewar Plans* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1991), 393.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup>Leutze, 130.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 191.

He ordered the British delegation to “get the United States into the war” and “if they don’t want to defend the Far East let them play a larger role in the Atlantic”<sup>77</sup> Although the major decision that the Atlantic would be the primary focus of the Allied endeavor, and operations in the Far East relegated to a secondary role the British pressure for American aid to protect Singapore was simply transferred to the subsequent American-Dutch-British (ADB) Conference.<sup>78</sup> In the month following the completion of the ABC Conference arrangements were made for a supplementary meeting of representatives of the American, Dutch, and British commanders in the Southwest Pacific area. These conversations were held in Singapore, from 21-27 April 1941, known by the short title of ADB Conference.

During the ADB Conference the Allied forces made initial arrangements for a unified strategic command of naval and air forces operating in the Far Eastern Theatre. These arrangements included the exercise of unified strategic direction over all the naval forces of the associated powers of the Eastern Theatre under the British Commander in Chief, China Station, Admiral Layton, with the exception of the forces operating under the Commander in Chief, United States Asiatic Fleet, Admiral Hart. The British again tried to emphasize the central role of Singapore in the strategic conceptions. During the ADB Conference the participants divergent strategic agenda’s ultimately became clear: The Americans referred to the Washington Conferences and stated that the European theatre was the vital area. Additionally, the Americans articulated that the security of the North American Atlantic Seaboard was vital. Singapore, it was believed, was very important but was in the United States view not absolutely vital, and its loss, while undesirable, could be accepted. This view was during the Washington conversations rejected by the British representatives but was clearly still on the American agenda. Furthermore,

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 1.

the Americans indicated that they did not intend to reinforce the Asiatic Fleet, signaling the need for the British to execute their own main fleet to Singapore concept. The Americans were prepared to provide sufficient capital ships for the Atlantic and Gibraltar as would permit the release from these areas of British capital ships for reinforcements of Singapore.

Following their new pragmatic discourse, the Dutch aimed to secure military cooperation as discussed during the initial Singapore talks. The Singapore talks contained military talks and the results needed ratification by the respective governments to gain formal political consensus and legitimacy.<sup>79</sup> The Americans were reluctant to enter any formal agreements. President Roosevelt was not about to make any commitment, even a secret one, while he was publicly pursuing a course of keeping the United States out of war. The roots of Roosevelt's problems pertaining to premature political commitments were threefold. First, Roosevelt had to contend with strong American isolationist sentiments. Second, as articulated during the ABC Conference, the United States primary strategic concern was Nazi Germany, not Japan. And finally, the Roosevelt administration itself was by no means united on courses of action.<sup>80</sup> The British, facing a strategic dilemma between defense of the empire and nation survival, and only willing to commit itself to defense cooperation with the Dutch after American security guarantees, were also reluctant to ratify the agreements. The Dutch were willing to ratify the agreements and the Ministers Council-in-exile carried a motion for ratification unanimously.

The reasons for the Dutch willingness to ratify were threefold. First, the Dutch aimed to signal their commitment and willingness for coalition building to potential Allied partners. Also, the Dutch government aimed to strengthen the position of the British Foreign office relative to the British War Cabinet. Dutch policymakers were aware of the discord between British policy

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<sup>79</sup>Vernon, 206.

<sup>80</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 119.

makers. Policymakers within the British War Cabinet, and most notably Prime Minister Winston Churchill, were proponents of a nation survival approach. The British possessions in the Far East should be sacrificed for efforts in the European Theater. Policymakers within the British Foreign Office, most notably Secretary of State Anthony Eden, were proponents of an empire survival strategy and supported ratification of the Singapore agreements.<sup>81</sup> Last, the Dutch Queen had clearly hinted her preference for military cooperation with the British and the Americans to the Dutch government-in-exile.

Following the Fourth and Fifth Singapore Conferences the British assembled an Allied Planning Committee in Singapore. Based on the recommendations of the Singapore Conferences the Associated Powers developed the Plans for the Employment of Naval and Air Forces of the Associated Powers in the Eastern Theater in the event of war with Japan, the so called PLENAPS.

#### The United States Rejects Allied War Plans

The United States, however, exhibited uneasiness about the British tendency to press the United States toward undesired commitments. As stated President Roosevelt felt reluctant to make any commitment to the British and the Dutch, and publicly held to a pledge to keep the United States out of the war. This complicated alliance making and political approval of the Singapore agreements. Additionally, after the ADB Conference the Americans rejected the recommendations of the ADB Conference from a military perspective. The United States Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall and Chief Naval Operations Staffs Admiral Stark refused the ADB Report. When they reviewed the report in Washington, Marshall and Stark found the agreements outlined in the ADB Report unsatisfactory because “in several major, and

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<sup>81</sup>A. E. Kersten, and A. F. Manning, *Documenten Betreffende De Buitenlandse Politiek Van Nederland 1919-1945: Periode C 1940-1945, Deel IV 8 December 1941 – 30 Juni 1942* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), 39.



numerous minor particulars, it was at variance with the agreements stated in the ABC Conferences.”<sup>82</sup> They had most serious objections against the fact that the British ADB planners had assumed a list of contingent circumstances in which the United States would go to war at the side of the British and the Dutch. These conditions included not only Japanese attacks on American territory but attacks on either the Netherlands East Indies or territory of the British Commonwealth.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, the Americans stated that the ADB agreements contained political matters beyond the scope of a military agreement. It would have committed the U.S. Asiatic Fleet to operations under British strategic direction, and it would have made inadequate provisions for the security of the Netherlands East Indies. According to the ADB agreements, the defense of the Indies archipelago entrusted solely to the U.S. and Dutch forces, while British naval forces operated on escort and patrol duties in support of the defense of Singapore, at great distances from the Indies archipelago.<sup>84</sup> In particular the British predisposition toward convoy protection gave the Americans the perfect excuse to reject the recommendations of the Singapore Conferences. Furthermore the Americans asserted that the recommendations of the Conferences did not provide a practical operating plan for the cooperative effort of the Associated Powers in the Far East Area.

The disagreements that surfaced during the staff talks signaled the divergent Allied national agendas. The disagreements meant that decisions on the proposals for an Allied command structure and military cooperation were postponed. Although the British suggested new conferences, the next high level discussions for the defense of the Malay barrier, would be occasioned by the arrival of the war with Japan itself. Thus it seemed generally accepted that the

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<sup>82</sup>Watson, 393-400.

<sup>83</sup>Vernon, 206.

<sup>84</sup>Watson, 398.

arrangements of the ABC conference between the American and the British would come into operation pertaining to general strategy, with little further consideration. There remained the assumption that machinery for coordination of the political and military direction of the war but that was as yet undefined.<sup>85</sup> The Associated Powers thus entered the war with a lack of common operating plans. The Allies had to rely on the so called British-Dutch PLENAPS after American rejections of the ADB recommendations. The British had drawn up these plans in default of an accepted plan that included the United States. It would not be until the ARCADIA conference of December 22, 1941 in Washington that the Americans and the British decided on a unified operational level command for the war against Japan in the Far East—The American-British-Dutch-Australian Command (ABDACOM).

### SECTION 3: ESTABLISHMENT OF A UNIFIED COMMAND: ABDACOM

#### The Early Contours of a Unified Command: The Duff Cooper Conference

Between 7 and 14 December 1941, war in the Far East erupted when the Imperial Japanese Army, Navy, and Air Force launched massive simultaneous attacks against the Associated Powers in Malaya, Siam, Hong Kong, Borneo, the Philippines, Wake, Guam, Midway, and Hawaii. The Japanese surprise attacks unsettled rather than solidified many of the Allied contingency plans.<sup>86</sup> As has become obvious, the Associated Powers entered the war with no coordinated planning and had to rely on the so called PLENAPS, which the British command had drawn up without consent of the United States, after the American rejection of the ADB recommendations. Allied pre-war operating plans were based on three assumptions that were invalidated by the Japanese bold tidal wave style attacks in the Far East. The first assumption was

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<sup>85</sup>Vernon, 206.

<sup>86</sup>Dwight David Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, ed. Louis Galambos (Amsterdam: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 85.

that the United States Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor would act as an Allied flank protection and prevent the Japanese from conducting their centrifugal attacks against the possessions of the Associated Powers to the south. Also, the Japanese were not capable of conducting simultaneous attacks at this scale.<sup>87</sup> Third was that the British Singapore strategy would keep the Japanese at bay in the south Chinese Sea. On 20 October the British Defense Committee had decided to dispatch the battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* and the battle cruiser *Repulse* from the Mediterranean to Singapore, aimed as a *fleet in being* to preclude the Japanese from offensive action against British interests in the Far East.<sup>88</sup>

But the devastating Japanese surprise attacks, that resulted in the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* off the coast of Malaya and the significance of the damage inflicted on the Pacific Fleet—reducing its posture to a defensive one—provided grim reports for the Allies in the first two weeks of the war.<sup>89</sup> This defensive posture prevented the United States from diverting Japanese forces away from the Malay Barrier. The grave consequences of the Japanese successes changed the situation in the Far East and the south west Pacific gave impetus to Allied efforts to establish a common operational approach and forced them to rethink their strategy in the Far East. The Allies now fully recognized the desirability of military collaboration and that it was

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<sup>87</sup>Louis Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1961), 131.

<sup>88</sup>A fleet in being is defined in modern parlance as “a fleet that avoids decisive action, but, because of its strength and location, causes or necessitates counter concentrations and so reduces the number of opposing units available for elsewhere. U.S. Department of Defense, JP 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010), 205.

<sup>89</sup>Morton, 143.

necessary to coordinate their strategies and to develop a program of action against the common enemy.<sup>90</sup>

A first conference of the British, Americans, Australians, and the Dutch, attempting to coordinate the Allied war efforts against Japan was held on 18 December 1941 in Singapore, and was chaired by the British Resident Cabinet Minister for Far Eastern Affairs, the Viscount Alfred Duff Cooper. During this conference the divergent national postures emerged again. The Americans pointed at the vital importance of the Philippines and the necessity for keeping open the sea lines of communication between the American west coast, Hawaii, and Australia. In the British view the vital importance of Singapore dominated.<sup>91</sup> For the Dutch the Netherlands East Indies were most important, owing to the German occupation of Dutch territory in Europe and the vital resources that had contributed to a wealthy Dutch economy for the last two hundred years. The Dutch, however, conveyed their adherence to the PLENAPS and reaffirmed their commitment to support the British in the defense of Singapore. At that time Dutch forces—in fulfillment of their obligations of pre-war Allied agreements—were already fighting against the Japanese invaders in British territorial waters in the South Chinese Sea and around Malaya as articulated in Section 1. In spite of these diverging strategic outlooks, the conference produced some general agreements.

First, the Allies agreed on the central position that Singapore took in the common defense.<sup>92</sup> They concurred that the loss of Singapore would be followed by that of the Netherlands East Indies, resulting in not only the isolation of Australia from the west but also separation of the British Far Eastern Fleet and the American Asiatic Fleet. Moreover, it would

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<sup>90</sup>Morton, 174.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 156.

<sup>92</sup>Kersten and Manning, 50.

also deliver to the Japanese vast oil supplies and practically all the rubber resources of the world. Furthermore, the Allies agreed that hardly less serious would be the loss of the Netherlands East Indies which would isolate Singapore and deprive the Allies of a naval base of vital importance. Last, the Allies agreed on the importance of the Philippines as an advanced and flanking base for offensive operations against the Japanese lines of communications.<sup>93</sup> Although the discussions of this conference did not lead to a coherent plan for unified action, the most salient features of cooperative Allied warfare were to keep the enemy as far as north in Malaya as possible, to hold the enemy in the Philippines, and to prevent the enemy from acquiring airfields which would threaten the arrival of reinforcements.<sup>94</sup> Based on these ends, a subcommittee comprised of British, American, Dutch, and Australian representatives, outlined immediate plans and developed recommendations for the respective governments of the Allied partners. These recommendations included key points as that governments should send reinforcements to the Malay Barrier, and that the Allied partners should maintain the strongest possible naval striking forces in key positions. The first key position, identified as the South Chinese Sea and the West Java Sea, was to be maintained by British and Dutch naval forces.<sup>95</sup> The second key position was to be maintained by the United States Task Force Five—the surface component of the United States Asiatic Fleet—in the Celebes Sea and Makassar Strait area. Maintaining both positions would prevent the Japanese from establishing airbases in the northern part of the Malay barrier.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Inventaris van het archief van het Gezantschap/Ambassade in Groot-Brittannie (en Ierland tot 1949), 1813-1954, nummer toegang 2.05.44: inv.nr.:1415.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

This conception was consistent with the Dutch operational approach for the defense of the Netherlands East Indies archipelago. The Singapore Conference was fruitful, though no detailed plans to halt the Japanese invasion were developed. However, from it came early discussions of an Allied unified command in the Far East and the South West Pacific area. On 22 December 1941—when the reports of the Duff Cooper conference reached the national capitals—Prime Minister Churchill and his Chiefs of Staff had arrived in Washington for the first of a series of staff talks, collectively known as the ARCADIA Conference. During this conference, the early contours of an Allied command would be further developed into the first unified command of World War II: ABDACOM.

#### A Unified Command for the Far East Theater

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the United States President Roosevelt agreed through an exchange of messages in the first days after the attack on Pearl Harbor that Churchill and the British Chiefs of Staff should come to Washington for a conference to reframe Allied strategy. The British party included the Chiefs of Staff Committee, comprised of Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff, Field Marshall Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, Chief of Air Staff.<sup>97</sup> General Marshall, Chief of Staff of the Army; Lieutenant General Henry H. Arnold, Deputy Chief of Staff for Air and Chief of the Army Air Forces; Admiral Stark, Chief Naval Operations; and Commander in Chief, United States Fleet, Admiral King represented the United States.<sup>98</sup>

During the first days of the ARCADIA conference the Allies reaffirmed the essential features of the grand strategy as agreed during the ABC Conferences. The consensus was that,

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<sup>97</sup>Eisenhower, 53.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

notwithstanding the entry of Japan into the war, Germany was the predominant member of the axis powers and its defeat was the key to victory.<sup>99</sup> Therefore the Atlantic and the European theatre were central. The Allies rationalized that once Germany was defeated the collapse of Italy and the defeat of Japan would follow.<sup>100</sup> The Allies would develop offensive action against Germany, and maintain only such positions in the Pacific and Far East as would safeguard vital interests and deny Japan access to raw materials vital to her continuous war effort. These vital interests were first of all, maintaining the security of Australia, New Zealand, and India; and secondly securing vital bases from which offensive action against Japan could proceed.<sup>101</sup> The immediate objectives defined by the Allies as pivotal for offensive action included: Hawaii and Alaska, Singapore, the Netherlands East Indies Barrier, the Philippines, Rangoon and the inland routes to China from Burma. But these general statements of strategy had little relevance to the immediate emergency in the Far East where the Japanese were advancing rapidly on every front.<sup>102</sup> Although the Allies had reaffirmed their grand strategy, they had still not agreed on effective machinery for coordination of the political and military direction of the war in general and the Far Eastern theater in particular. They realized that the immediate problem was that the Japanese had to be stopped before they broke through the Allied positions in Southeast Asia. The Americans and the British were aware that, unless they held the line of the Malay Barrier—Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies—they would not only lose vital resources, but losing this

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<sup>99</sup>Watson, 374.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>102</sup>Morton, 159.

important archipelago would also increase the difficulty of recapturing territory during the offensive phase of the war against Japan.<sup>103</sup>

On the 25 December 1941, during one of the twelve ARCARDIA meetings, General Marshall, expanding upon reports from the Duff Cooper Conference, and aware of the importance of holding the Malay Barrier, brought up the question of unified command in the Far East.<sup>104</sup> He asserted that, based on his experience in France during World War I “the most important consideration is the question of unified command”<sup>105</sup> Marshall continued that “matters under discussion were mere details which would continuously reoccur unless settled in a broader way—a unified command.”<sup>106</sup> He theorized that the Allies “could not manage by cooperation and that there must be one man in command of the entire theater—air, ground, and sea.”<sup>107</sup> Marshall’s assertions were grounded in the fact that the suggested theater of operations included five national commands: the British in Malaya and Burma, the Australians in Malaya, the Americans in the Philippines, and the Dutch in the Netherlands East Indies. Marshall envisaged difficulties in arriving at a single command, but stated that “they were much less than the hazards that must be faced if we do not achieve [unity of command].”<sup>108</sup> He continued that a plan for unified command would solve nine-tenths of Allied troubles.<sup>109</sup> Initially, the consensus of the meeting was not in Marshall’s favor and the subject was dropped after polite British comments. After consultation

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<sup>103</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 259.

<sup>104</sup>Morton, 160.

<sup>105</sup>Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, *World War II Inter Allied Conferences, Proceedings of the American-British Joint Chiefs of Staff Conferences, 25 December* (Washington DC: Joint History Office, 2003), 3

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*



with a persistent Marshall, President Roosevelt managed to convince the British Prime Minister Churchill of the importance of unified command. On 26 December the Allies decided to set up a unified command in the Far East.<sup>110</sup>

### The Birth of the Quadruplets

Four underlying conditions shaped British reluctance for a unified command in the Far East. First, Churchill and his advisers indicated that the vast distances in the designated command inhibited effective command and control. Second, the British were somewhat suspicious about an American proposal for the nomination of a British general officer as the supreme commander of this new command—Field Marshal Archibald Percival Wavell, Commander in Chief of the British forces in India. It was the British view that the Americans were never advocates of placing their forces under foreign command and this entertained doubt that in the event of Allied defeat in the Far East the blame would be laid at the British door.<sup>111</sup> The recently appointed commander of the American, British, Dutch, and Australian Command (ABDACOM) was under no illusion that he would have to bear the load of responsibility. Wavell reportedly said in a message to a friend that “he had heard of holding the baby but he had been handed not just the baby but quadruplets.”<sup>112</sup>

A third source of British reluctance was their resistance to an untested mode of command. The concept of unified command was still largely theoretical in December, 1941.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Morton, 160.

<sup>111</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 260.

<sup>112</sup>Loe de Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 785.

<sup>113</sup>Dwight David Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, ed. Louis Galambos, (Amsterdam: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), xx.

There were ideas about unified commands within the United States armed forces. Most, notably General Marshall and a few American Army officers had become advocates of unified command in field operations. But these officers had never had a chance to experiment with their ideas in practice.<sup>114</sup> The British, however, had more than two years of practical fighting experience against the Axis Powers and felt little need to try an untested mode of organization and were reluctant that a unified command would endanger British vital interests in the Far East. A fourth source of British resistance can be found in the fear that a unified command would. Marshall ended the discussions of safeguarding national residuary interests within a unified command with the statement that “the whole matter [of residuary interests] rests on the consideration as to whether a directive could be drawn which would leave the Supreme Commander with enough power to improve the situation and still not give him the power to destroy national interests or to exploit one theater without due consideration of the other.”<sup>115</sup>

At the end of the meeting pertaining to a unified command between the British and the Americans, Marshall directed General Eisenhower to draft a directive for the Supreme Commander of the new American, British, Dutch, and Australian Command in the Far East. Eisenhower realized that a formidable task to blend three disparate service elements of four nations into a single unified command demanded innovation and imagination. Furthermore, in writing the directive for the ABDACOM Supreme Commander, Eisenhower faced the challenges of getting senior officers of three services and multiple nations to serve under those of another as well as convincing nations to place their forces under foreign command. In an effort to persuade the several nations to approve the directive, Eisenhower included a number of specific restrictions—aimed at the safeguarding of national interests—on the authority of the Supreme

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., 30.

Commander.<sup>116</sup> The specific restrictions on the authority of the Supreme Commander included a restriction on his authority to relieve the commander of any of the armed forces of any of the ABDA governments; each national component would operate under its own commander, and could not be distributed in smaller units; restriction on interference in direct communication between national commanders and any of the ABDA governments; a restriction to prevent the commander of the armed forces of any of the ABDA governments from obeying orders from his own government in detaching troops, individuals, or material to any other theater; restriction to assume direct command of any portion or part of the forces assigned to the theater; and finally the obligation to exercise authority through the duly designated commanders of the ABDA. In other words, the mandate for the Supreme Commander was to coordinate operations in the ABDA area rather than to direct operations. Furthermore, the participating nations of ABDACOM maintained the right to redirect forces to other theaters as they saw fit. This assertion was reinforced by a statement in the draft directive to the Supreme Commander which maintains that “[the Supreme Commander’s] instructions and orders will be limited to those necessary for effective coordination of forces in the execution of your mission.”<sup>117</sup> It is evident that these restrictions—stemming from the necessity to safeguard national interests—inhibited the Supreme Commander from exercising effective command and control of the ABDA formations. In addition, it is evident that an attempt to safeguard residuary interests through a directive would inhibit a coherent strategy against Japan in the Far East. Eisenhower learned from this. When in May 1942, after another series of Allied defeats in the Far East and the disbandment of ABDACOM, Marshall asked Eisenhower to draw up a directive for the future American commander of the European Theater of Operations, Eisenhower insisted that the Supreme Commander should have absolute

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<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*, *xxi*.

<sup>117</sup>Vernon, 3.

control over the planning and execution of operations. He also refused to allow restrictions on the commander's authority similar to those he had included in his earlier proposal for the ABDA Supreme Commander.<sup>118</sup>

### The ABDACOM Directive

Before this paper explores Dutch concerns about its lack of representation in the body that would give orders to the ABDACOM Supreme Commander—the Combined Chiefs of Staff (CCOS) it is instructive to explore the most salient features of the ABDACOM. This directive clearly pronounced the ends, objectives, and area of operations for the unified command, and defined machinery for the higher war direction. The directive expressed that it had been drafted by agreement of the governments of Australia, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The area of operations comprised initially all land and sea areas including general regions of Burma, Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies, and the Philippines. The ABDA governments jointly designated the commander of the combined naval forces, and the combined air forces.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, the directive stated that the basic strategy for ABDA Command was not only to maintain as many key positions as possible, but to take the offensive at the earliest opportunity.<sup>120</sup>

This overall policy was broken down in four objectives. First was to hold the Malay Barrier (formed by the line Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Java, and North Australia) as the basic defensive position and to operate sea, land, and air forces in as great depth as possible forward of

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<sup>118</sup> Eisenhower, *xxi*

<sup>119</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Project Afscheid van Indie; Archiefbestanden Buitenland, nummer toegang 2.22.21, inventarisnummer 351.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*

the Barrier in order to oppose further Japanese southward advance.<sup>121</sup> The second objective was to hold Burma and Australia as essential support positions for the ABDACOM area of operations and Burma as essential to support operations in China. The third objective was to re-establish lines of communications through the Dutch East Indies with Luzon and to support the United States garrison in the Philippines. The last objective was to secure essential lines of communications throughout the ABDACOM area.<sup>122</sup>



Figure 2. The ABDACOM Area of Operations

Source: Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years*.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid.

In addition to the general directions to the ABDACOM Supreme Commander, Annex II of the directive defined procedures for dealing with all important military matters that were outside the jurisdiction of the ABDACOM Supreme Commander. This specified that he would be directly responsible to the ABDA governments through a composite body of United States Chiefs of Staff and representatives of the British Chiefs of Staff—later named the Combined Chiefs of Staff organization (CCOS). This group would develop and submit recommendations for decisions by the United States President and the British Prime Minister, regarding provisions of reinforcements, major changes in policy, and departures from the Supreme Commander.<sup>123</sup> Annex II defined several procedural matters for the agency. First, any proposals from the Supreme Commander would be transmitted to the Chiefs of Staff Committee both in Washington and in London. The Chiefs of Staff Committee in London would immediately telegraph to their representatives in Washington to indicate their opinions. On receipt of these opinions the agency comprised of United States and British representatives would inform the President and the Prime Minister of their recommendations.<sup>124</sup> After agreement between the President and the Prime Minister, orders would be dispatched to the ABDACOM Supreme Commander. Additionally, since London had machinery in place for consulting its Dominion governments, and since the Dutch government-in-exile was in London, the British Prime Minister would be responsible for obtaining their views and including these in the recommendations from London to Washington.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup>Kersten and Manning, 202.

<sup>124</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Project Afscheid van Indie; Archiefbestanden Buitenland, nummer toegang 2.22.21, inventarisnummer 351.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid.

### Dutch Concerns: The Rejection of Annex II

On 23 December 1941, President Roosevelt informed Loudon, the Dutch envoy to the United States in Washington, of ongoing discussions between the United States and the United Kingdom in accordance with the ARCADIA Conference. President Roosevelt asserted that the ARCADIA talks were only preliminary and its outcomes would be far from final.<sup>126</sup> He said that he envisaged two Allied bodies for the overall war direction. The first, a “War Council,” would be occupied with long term strategy in the war against Germany and Japan, and would decide upon political and military strategic objectives, and war production. A second body, an “Operations Council,” would decide upon mid and short term military planning, and would direct supplies, theater operations, and command and control architectures. Roosevelt indicated that each body would be composed of representatives from the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, and the Netherlands.<sup>127</sup> Roosevelt urged the Dutch envoy to convince the Dutch government-in-exile in London to raise the status of the Dutch representative from envoy to ambassador. Loudon informed Roosevelt that high profile representation in Washington was the Dutch aim indeed, but that Prime Minister Churchill opposed Dutch desires for more robust representation in Washington, owing to anticipated claims by other smaller nations.<sup>128</sup> It was an indicator that Churchill wanted to keep Allied strategic decision making an Anglo-American prerogative, and a marker that implicit in American-British assumptions was the belief that Britain could speak on behalf of the Dutch government-in-exile by virtue of liaison arrangements in London.<sup>129</sup> More indications of this prerogative would follow.

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<sup>126</sup>Kersten and Manning, 73.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid.

<sup>129</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 261.

On 30 December 1941, Loudon informed Mr. van Kleffens, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs in London, that President Roosevelt had informed him about the establishment of a unified command for the Far East—ABDACOM. Roosevelt articulated that the British Field Marshall Wavell had been appointed as Supreme Commander for this unified command and that ABDACOM headquarters would be established in the Netherlands East Indies, the largest and most central part of ABDACOM area of operations. Roosevelt continued that Wavell would receive his orders from an appropriate body in Washington, responsible to President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill. Roosevelt indicated that the British and United States Chiefs of Staff were drafting a directive with direction and guidance for the Supreme Commander to safeguard the residuary interests of the ABDACOM coalition members.<sup>130</sup> Although earlier consultations with President Roosevelt had given the Dutch the expectation that there would be machinery to effect unity among all the Allies, Roosevelt’s communication of the establishment of ABDACOM reinforced Dutch misgivings that they would be effectively excluded from representation and have no say in important decisions. Dutch reservations would be further amplified when, while the Dutch government-in-exile and the Governor General in the Netherlands East Indies were still reviewing the creation of a supreme authority in the Far East and the Pacific, and deliberating an official posture towards the terms of reference, a public announcement was made in the media on the establishment of ABDACOM. This press release signified that “as a result of American and British proposals and with the concurrence of the Netherlands government and of the Dominion governments concerned, a system of unified

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<sup>130</sup>Kersten and Manning, 116.



command had been established in the South-West Pacific area. Its headquarters would be established in the Netherlands East Indies.”<sup>131</sup>

The Dutch were much disturbed by the procedure the Americans and British proposed be adopted for decision making affecting its interests in the South Pacific. The Dutch were disappointed that they were not consulted in the formative stage of policy making through their accredited representative in Washington. They felt that the “D” of the ABDA acronym should be more equally represented in the strategic decision making body. The Dutch asserted that they had given provisional informal assent to a unified command promptly in the preceding days, because they assumed they would be involved in setting up the decision making body and would be equally represented in it. They also asserted that the machinery as articulated in Annex II not only failed to recognize the Dutch status as a sovereign nation—with a great stake and tremendous responsibilities in the ABDACOM area—but also degraded its position to that of a dominion status.

In a telegram of 2 January to the Dutch Minister of Colonial Affairs in London, Governor-Genereal of the Netherlands East Indies, Jonkheer Tjarda van Starckenborgh Stachouwer asserted that the proposed machinery for direction to the ABDACOM Supreme Commander was objectionable. The Governor-General enunciated that this construction not only subordinated the Netherlands to the British and Americans from a military perspective, but also subordinated the Netherlands to foreign political leaders from a political perspective. Van Starckenborgh identified this as a dangerous precedent, from both post-war considerations and international relations.<sup>132</sup> Van Starckenborgh expressed his concerns that the Netherlands would

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<sup>131</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Project Afscheid van Indie; Archiefbestanden Buitenland, nummer toegang 2.22.21, inventarisnummer 510.

<sup>132</sup>Kersten and Manning, 139.

not have a voice in the agency that would develop higher directions for the battle against the Japanese in the ABDACOM area—an area that was largely Dutch and in which the Dutch possessed decades of operational experience and local knowledge. Furthermore, the Dutch Governor pointed out that the Dutch Netherlands Indies navy and air force were already heavily engaged with the Japanese in the ABDACOM area, supporting the British and executing the contract that Allied forces entered into during pre-war staff talks and the Duff Cooper conference in Singapore. The Dutch demanded more equitable staffing of the different ABDA members. They expected the fullest consultation in regard to all operational plans and proposals, as far as they affected the ABDACOM area of operations. Additionally, the Dutch strongly protested not being adequately consulted by President Roosevelt or Prime Minister Churchill regarding unified command arrangements in the Southwest Pacific theatre and not being given appropriate time to develop a national position, and learning about the establishment of ABDACOM through a press release.<sup>133</sup>

After Dutch protests in London and Washington, both Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt apologized for not consulting the Dutch. Churchill said that he “most deeply regretted that the Dutch should have been embarrassed by the publication of the arrangements made here.” And moreover, Churchill continued that the Dutch had to realize that in a crisis of this kind events develop at a certain rate. The Prime Minister stated that he and President Roosevelt “appreciated the enormous contribution you are making to the common cause in the new war against Japan.” Churchill asserted that it was his fixed resolve to have the Dutch in the high command thoroughly woven into the new organization and to profit in every way from the commanding knowledge the Dutch possessed in the ABDACOM area. This fed Dutch

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<sup>133</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Project Afscheid van Indie; Archiefbestanden Buitenland, nummer toegang 2.22.21, inventarisnummer 510.

expectations that the Allied decision making body would be staffed in more balanced proportions and would end what they thought was their deliberate exclusion from decision making. This proved an illusion.

British and American natural preferences for a purely Anglo-American decision making body had in no doubt been balanced by other considerations. Implicit in Anglo-American assumptions was the belief that Britain could speak on behalf of the Dominions and the Dutch. Churchill wanted to maintain this situation.<sup>134</sup> He wanted to ensure that Britain would stay at the heart of the Allied decision-making process and realized this had to be done at the cost of excluding the smaller ABDACOM nations.<sup>135</sup> With the discussions of joint machinery for decision making the British envisioned a continuation of the already existing American-British agreements from the ABC Conferences. The British thought it most desirable to utilize this existing machinery and had suggested during the ARCADIA Conference that no special body should be set up for Allied decision making for two reasons.

First, it would clog up the machinery to have Dutch and Australian representatives on the body. Second, each representative would probably wish for time to consult his government before giving an opinion.<sup>136</sup> Although Roosevelt was convinced of the need for timely decisions he argued for incorporation of the Dutch in the decision making body. Churchill rejected this proposal and asserted that the incorporation of the smaller nations would not be a workable

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<sup>134</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 261.

<sup>135</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup>Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, *World War II Inter Allied Conferences, Proceedings of the American-British Joint Chiefs of Staff Conferences, 25 December* (Washington DC: Joint History Office, 2003), 70

scheme.<sup>137</sup> In a telegram to Australian Prime Minister Curtin, Churchill even introduced new vocabulary to international relations language, saying that “a *sub-joined* agreement” had been reached between him and Roosevelt. This clearly signaled the lack of consultation with the smaller nations in ABDACOM.

The Americans shared the British opinion that the emergency situation required immediate and assured attention by an organization that would not be hampered by the necessity for fine negotiations or numerous concurrences by distant governments. Harry Lloyd Hopkins, one of President Roosevelt’s chief diplomatic advisors, commented during one of the ARCADIA meetings that “an appropriate joint body [set forth in Annex II] has kicked up a hell of a row. It now develops that everybody and his grandmother wants to be on the joint body”<sup>138</sup> The British and the Americans agreed that the Dutch and the Dominions should be consulted only in London, where machinery for consultation already existed. Consequently, this would become the underpinning for Allied decision making as eventually incorporated in Annex II of the ABDACOM directive.

Eventually, ABDACOM became a springboard to a broader mechanism for the higher direction of the war. The Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff organization would become the central feature of Allied decision making, not only throughout the entire ABDACOM campaign, but for the entire war effort. In an attempt to meet Dutch and Australian demands for equal representation in Washington and to achieve that consultation on a political level Roosevelt and Churchill agreed that representatives of the Netherlands and Australia could be called into the combined Chiefs of Staff meetings when their interests were being discussed. According to Roosevelt it was necessary to “do something for the morale of these smaller nationals—

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<sup>137</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid.

something to save their face—to give them some prestige—something that the leaders of these governments can tell their people.”<sup>139</sup> Furthermore, on 27 January 1941 the British Prime Minister announced in the House of Commons that the political consultation would take the form of a Pacific War Council. This Pacific War Council, comprising the Prime Ministers or representatives from Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and the Netherlands, and assisted by the British Chiefs of Staff would official It should be noted that ABDACOM had been officially established on 15 January 1942—in the midst of battles throughout the entire Malay Barrier—and that thus for twelve days the Dutch were not represented in any discussions on directions to the ABDACOM Supreme Commander. In a telegram to the Australian Prime Minister, Churchill asserted that all political matters concerning New Zealand, Australia and the Netherlands East Indies should continue to be handled in London and that military matters should be resolved in Washington. Churchill continued that to have all of these countries represented on the Combined Chiefs of Staff would provide for an altogether unwieldy body.<sup>140</sup> Churchill voiced that he and President Roosevelt “were of the opinion that the present machinery was functioning efficiently because the major portion of the matters constituted American-British affairs. In cases in which the Dutch, Australian, or New Zealanders national interests are concerned the Combined Chiefs of Staff would invite their participation in discussion of such matters.”<sup>141</sup> It may be readily assumed that the British were not unaware of the political advantages this system would afford them in dealing with their own Dominions, and the various European governments-in-exile.

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<sup>139</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>140</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Project Afscheid van Indie; Archiefbestanden Buitenland, nummer toegang 2.22.21, inventarisnummer 351.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid.

## SECTION 4: OPERATIONS IN THE ABDACOM AREA

### Hollow Contracts: Allied Cooperation

The record seems to indicate that at the start of the war in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, the Allies were operating without a coherent strategy. Owing to the lack of results from the Singapore staff talks and the American rejection of the Allied plans—known colloquially as the PLENAP's—the Allies lacked a unified approach against the rapidly advancing Japanese forces. Immediately following the Japanese simultaneous attacks on Pearl Harbor and key areas in Southeast Asia, the Dutch were faithfully executing their share of the PLENAP agreements with the British, sending reinforcements in support of the defense of Singapore. According to these plans the Dutch would subordinate a significant portion of their air and naval forces to the British Commander in Chief Far East, Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton. As early as 8 December, the Dutch sent five of their submarines—out of the total fleet of thirteen available submarines—to the Gulf of Siam to operate under operational control of the British commander. This included the Dutch submarines O16, K17, K11, K12, and K13. Five other Dutch submarines—the K14, K15, K16, O19, and O20—stationed off Tarakan, were also ordered to the South Chinese Sea. These submarines would later operate along the coast of Serawak in support of the defense of British Borneo.<sup>142</sup> Additionally, the Dutch air force had sent four squadrons (totaling 44) of Glenn Martin bombers in support of the British, three squadrons to assist in the defense of Singapore and one to assist in the defense of British Borneo. These reinforcements would be followed by six cruisers and four destroyers. Furthermore, 16 Brewster Buffalo fighters were detached to the British in support of the defense of Singapore. Of the total Netherlands East Indies air force strength, 85 percent of its bombers, and 50 percent of its fighters were placed under British operational control

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<sup>142</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Inventaris van het archief van het Ministerie van Marine: Persoonlijk Archief van Luitenant-Admiraal C.E.L. Helfrich, 1940-1962 I, nummer toegang 2.12.44 inv.nr.: 38.

for the defense of British positions on Malaya and Singapore.<sup>143</sup> During the battle for the defense of Singapore and British Borneo, the Dutch would lose 33 percent of its total air force strength in support of its British Allies.<sup>144</sup> The Dutch had lost a significant part of their air force and navy to the common defense even before the Japanese had reached the Netherlands East Indies. Considering the significant loss of Dutch air force capabilities, added to the Dutch naval commitments in support of the British, it is evident that the Dutch faithfully executed their share of the Singapore agreements during the initial stages of the war and were expecting reciprocal support from their Allied partners for the defense of the Netherlands East Indies when the Japanese started their operations against the East Indies archipelago in the first weeks of January 1942.

After these opening stages of the war, the Allies were convinced of the need to correlate strategies, resulting in the Duff Cooper Conference in Singapore. During this conference the Allies reached agreements on common operating plans and mutual cooperation against the Japanese. But while the Dutch reinforcements in support of the defense of Singapore—in compliance with the pre-war PLENAP's—provided proof of the ready cooperation of the Dutch, when the time came for the implementation of the new Duff Cooper agreements, they remained hollow and empty contracts that were never executed. The first indicators that the Dutch had, in vain, pinned their faith on collective Allied resistance in the Far East—as recently agreed during the Duff Cooper Conferences—surfaced when the Dutch sought cooperation with the Americans, after the United States Asiatic Fleet entered Dutch territorial waters, following its withdrawal from the Philippines.

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<sup>143</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>144</sup>Ibid.

On 11 December 1941 Washington ordered Admiral Thomas C. Hart, Commander of the United States Asiatic Fleet, to withdraw his surface fleet from the Philippines. The Navy Department assumed that, if the Philippines fell, the Japanese would focus its operations on the Netherlands East Indies and the lines of communications between the United States and Australia.<sup>145</sup> The British, expecting reinforcements of Singapore, were disappointed by these moves to the Southeast. The Dutch were initially pleased by the American retirements into its territorial waters, but would soon have other complaints.<sup>146</sup> According to the Commander of the Netherlands East Indies fleet, Admiral Conrad Helfrich, the Americans were “moving around in Netherlands East Indies territorial waters without a plan and without coordination with the Dutch.”<sup>147</sup> Admiral Hart described in his memoirs these “aimless movements of American forces [in Dutch territorial waters]” as a result of “a constant changing of plans from Washington.”<sup>148</sup> Helfrich wanted to consult with the Americans and settle upon a common approach against the Japanese.

On 18 and 22 December, Helfrich, Rear Admiral William Glassford, Commander U.S. Task Force 5, and William Reynolds Purnell, Chief of Staff U.S. Asiatic Fleet, met for a conference in Batavia. The basis of discussion for this meeting was a telegraphic summary of the Singapore Conference dated 20 December 1941. As will be recalled, one of the conclusions of this so called Duff Cooper conference was that the Allies should maintain the strongest possible striking forces in the South Chinese Sea built on British and Dutch naval forces and maintain a American strike force, built on the U.S. Task Force 5 in the approaches to the Indies

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<sup>145</sup>Leutze, 237.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid.

<sup>147</sup>Ibid.

<sup>148</sup>Ibid.



archipelago—the Celebes Sea and the Makassar Strait area.<sup>149</sup> During the meeting Admiral Helfrich indicated his approval of the Singapore agreements. Admiral Glassford concurred with the telegram but outlined his instructions from Washington.<sup>150</sup> These instructions indicated that the U.S. Asiatic Fleet would remain under strategic direction from the Chief of Naval Operations. Glassford told Helfrich that the Asiatic Fleet would definitely not operate in the Java Sea and the South Chinese Sea. He said that U.S. naval forces were needed to protect convoys coming from the mainland United States toward Australia and would operate in the eastern part of the Indies archipelago.<sup>151</sup> Glassford indicated that he disagreed with these orders but that Washington had tied his hands.<sup>152</sup> According to the Duff Cooper agreements the Allied forces would operate under the Commander in Chief of the British Eastern Fleet, Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton. The Washington directions inhibited a coordinated effort against the Japanese along the Malay Barrier—the British and Dutch would operate in the western part of the barrier under British command whereas the Americans operated under strategic direction from Washington in the eastern part of the archipelago. The Dutch protested against this division of labor and indicated that unity of command and coordination of effort was the only way for an effective defense against the Japanese invaders. The Dutch deemed a strict division of operational areas as fundamentally wrong and contrary to naval conceptions. The Dutch maintained that concentration of all Allied naval forces against Japanese transport fleets throughout the Indies archipelago was the right approach. A division of labor would inhibit the establishment of an Allied striking force

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<sup>149</sup>Kersten and Manning, 51.

<sup>150</sup>Nationaal Archief Den Haag, Inventaris van het archief van het Ministerie van Marine: Persoonlijk Archief van Luitenant-Admiraal C.E.L. Helfrich, 1940-1962 I, nummer toegang 2.12.44 inv.nr.: 3.

<sup>151</sup>Ibid.

<sup>152</sup>Leutze, 238-239.

that was to operate against weak points in the Japanese defense—as indicated in the report of the Singapore Conference.<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, Admiral Helfrich pointed to the need to take offensive action against the Japanese to prevent the enemy from acquiring airfields in the northern part of the archipelago. In the interwar period, the Dutch had developed defense plans for war against Japan at the Naval War College in the Netherlands. The records seem to indicate that these plans—strategic defensive but tactical offensive—were based on specificity: the Dutch anticipated the enemy and the geographic conditions they had to operate in. Based on this specificity the Dutch had designed its fleet and tailored the defense plans to the geographic conditions of the vast archipelago. They concluded that the only way to preclude the Japanese from invading the East Indies was to prevent the Japanese from establishing itself in the outlying areas and from acquiring airfields in the northern parts of the archipelago. This was in line with the results of the Duff Cooper Conference. The report of this conference indicated that it was key “to prevent the enemy from acquiring territory and particularly aerodromes.”<sup>154</sup> This led to the Dutch conception that the Japanese had to be halted with an aggressive forward defense in the Celebes Sea and the South Chinese Sea. The Dutch had the impression that the American conception was too defensive. These defensive inclinations would grant the Japanese opportunities to operate with complete freedom of action in the Celebes Sea and establish itself in the northern parts of the archipelago. Admiral Helfrich indicated that, while the Dutch were bound to convoy duties in support of the defense of Singapore in the western part and the Asiatic Fleet would operate in the east, this practice prevented full use of concentration of Allied naval forces for strikes against Japanese amphibious forces which could advance through the center of

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<sup>153</sup>Helfrich, *Memoires Van C. E. L. Helfrich, Luitenant-Admiral B.D.*, 214.

<sup>154</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Inventaris van het archief van het Ministerie van Marine: Persoonlijk Archief van Luitenant-Admiraal C.E.L. Helfrich, 1940-1962 I, nummer toegang 2.12.44 inv.nr.: 3.

the archipelago rapidly and at small cost. He said that unified offensive action was of the essence in the critical phase where Japanese forces aimed to establish footholds in the northern part of the archipelago. He warned that it would soon be too late to stem the Japanese tidal waves and underscored the vital importance of timely and coordinated Allied offensive action in the north to prevent Japanese landings on Borneo and Celebes. The fact that Washington had directed the Asiatic Fleet to conduct convoy operations between the United States and Australia and American reluctance to operate in the northern part of the Indies waters raised concerns for the Dutch. They became alarmed that the defense of the Netherlands East Indies was of no vital importance to the Americans and the British and was merely a delaying action. In a telegram of 30 December 1941, the Dutch Governor General articulated his concerns about divergent Allied strategic conceptions to the Dutch Minister of Colonial Affairs in London.

In this telegram the Governor General conveyed that he was of the opinion that for a successful prosecution of the war it was most essential that the front in Southeast Asia should strongly be maintained. The fall of the strongholds in Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies, and Australia would not only cause a considerable protraction of the war but would also make the final outcome doubtful.<sup>155</sup> He continued that it was therefore essential that not only the closest military collaboration and coordination should exist between the Allies, but also adequate and prompt measures should be taken in order to secure the quickest possible reinforcements. He detailed that he had received the impression that the important position which the Netherlands East Indies took in the general strategic conception in the Pacific was not fully appreciated in Washington and that too much attention was being given to basing in Australia and the connecting part of the eastern part of the Netherlands Indies archipelago and the Philippines,

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<sup>155</sup>Ibid., 54.

whilst underrating the importance of Singapore.<sup>156</sup> The Governor based his conclusions on the fact that the U.S. Asiatic Fleet was instructed not to support in convoy operations for Singapore, to operate in the southern part of the Indies waters, and the fact that the United States air force elements were falling back from the Philippines on Darwin were the United States were establishing army and naval basis.<sup>157</sup> He concluded that he would deeply regret it if the United States authorities really contemplated transferring their basic and main effort to the east and the south of the Netherlands East Indies as this would result in no full use of the possibilities which the Dutch Indies offered and that Dutch territory might be abandoned before the absolute necessity thereto arose.<sup>158</sup> The Governor requested the Dutch government-in-exile to bring to the attention in Washington that Singapore was of extreme importance for the general direction of the war, that if the defense line was to be drawn too far to the east and the south, the Japanese would be enabled to take Dutch oil fields and could use the Indies archipelago as a springboard for operations against Australia, considered vital for the offensive stage of operations against Japan. a When sufficiently reinforced with Allied partners, the Dutch could take a very active part in the struggle against the imperial invaders.<sup>159</sup> Dutch concerns grew even stronger after the arrival of the commander of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet, Admiral Hart, in the Netherlands East Indies by submarine, after the withdrawal from the Philippines of the remainder of the Asiatic Fleet on 1 January 1942. Hart arrived in Surabaya, Java on 2 January with the submarine *Shark* after a 1,000-mile passage from Manila.

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<sup>156</sup>Ibid.

<sup>157</sup>Ibid.

<sup>158</sup>Ibid.

<sup>159</sup>Ibid.

Unbeknownst to Hart, during his transit from Manila to the East Indies, the Allies had decided upon the establishment of a unified Allied command, to be known as ABDACOM. According to a press release, Hart was appointed as the naval commander of the Allied command. To Hart it was apparent that the Dutch, already nettled over their exclusion from deliberations of a unified command in Washington, resented the fact that Americans and British were going to dominate the new command. The Dutch believed that it was essential that the Allied naval commander was familiar with the area of operations—an area that would be dominated by air and sea battle—particularly with the waters around the Netherlands East Indies. The Dutch Governor General and Admiral Helfrich asked Hart for his operational plans for the defense of the archipelago. Hart pointed out that he had “neither sought nor been informed of his appointment” and said he was “too old for the job.”<sup>160</sup> Helfrich was alarmed by Hart’s utterance that the Allies were fighting a losing battle in the East Indies and that withdrawal to Australia was inevitable.<sup>161</sup> Helfrich tried to convince Hart that offensive operations as far north as possible were the only feasible approach to stem the Japanese. Although Hart acknowledged that an offensive approach to prevent the Japanese from acquiring airfields in the northern part of the archipelago would be the best approach, he deemed it impossible without local air superiority and asserted that the Allied fleet was too small to match the Imperial Japanese Navy. Helfrich countered that a failure to prevent the Japanese from acquiring airfields would even decrease the negative force ratio between the Allied and Japanese air forces. Furthermore, he claimed that according to Dutch interwar calculations fast and local concentration of forces could be highly effective against weak points of the Japanese invasion fleets. Hart maintained that it was irresponsible to operate within the reach of Japanese air forces and maintained reluctant to operate offensively throughout the

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<sup>160</sup>Leutze, 256.

<sup>161</sup>Helfrich, *Memoires Van C.E.L. Helfrich, Luitenant-Admiral B.D.*, 247.

entire battle for the Malay Barrier. This was exemplary for the clash between two divergent naval conceptions owing to a lack of pre-war cooperation and exercises—the prototype of a naval officer of a great sea power and a proponent of the *Jeune Ecole*. During the period between the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the disbandment of ABDACOM the U.S. Asiatic Fleet would not operate north of the line of 6 degrees north latitude, with the exception of the action of the Asiatic fleet in combination with Dutch Glenn-Martin bombers and submarines against Japanese escorted transport fleets near Balikpapan on Borneo on 23 January 1942. During this offensive Allied action, the Asiatic Fleet sank four Japanese transport ships—the *Tatsukami Maru*, the *Kurutake Maru*, the *Tsuruga Maru*, and an unidentified transporter. For the Dutch this first American naval battle since 1898 acknowledged their prewar calculations and exercises and it displayed that a combination of reconnaissance planes, bombers, and submarines operating in wolf packs and rapid concentration of surface vessels could be highly effective against the weak spots of Japanese transport fleets.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Helfrich, *Memoires Van C.E.L. Helfrich, Luitenant-Admiral B.D.*, 279-299.

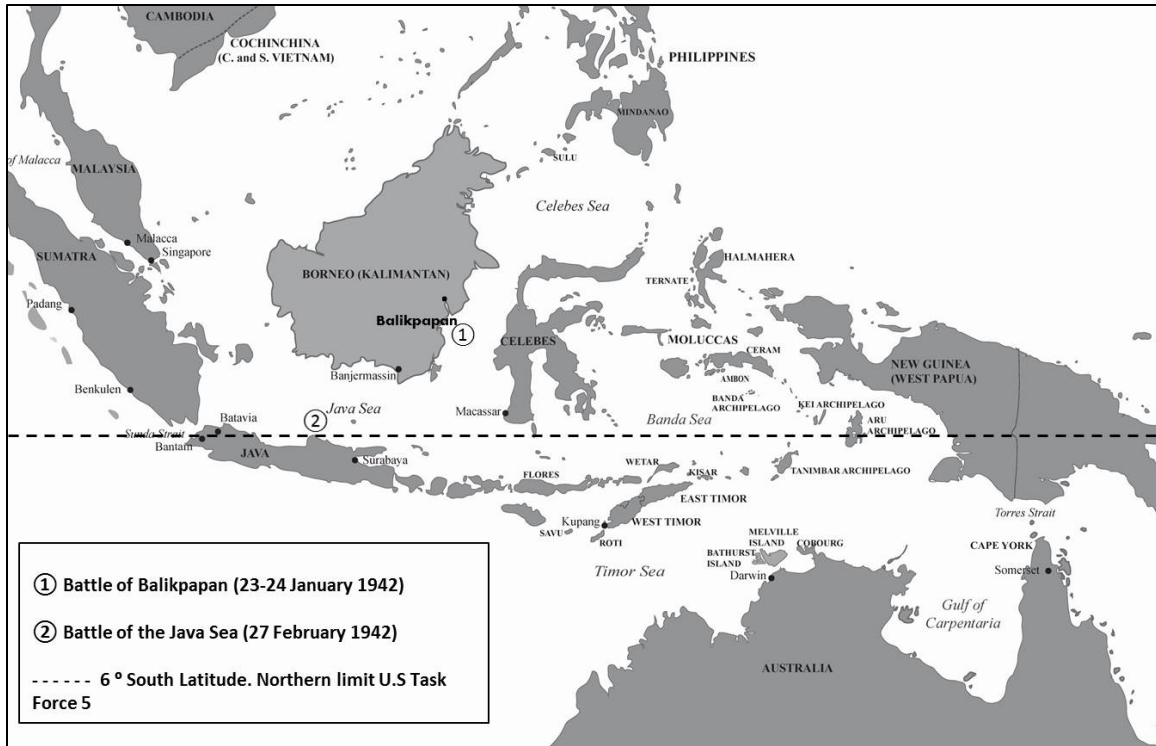


Figure 3. Map of the Netherlands East Indies 1942.

Source: Adapted from Dr. Christiaan G.F. de Jong, *Een Voetnoot bij de Koloniale Geschiedenis van Nederlands-Indie*, (Groningen: 2013).

While the future ABDACOM partners were operating without a coherent approach against the Japanese forces, and President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill with their respective Chiefs of Staffs were discussing the early contours of ABDACOM as the unified command for the conduct of the war in Southeast Asia and the Pacific at the ARCADIA conference of December 1941, the Japanese Imperial Army and Navy were continuing their drive into Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific, rapidly advancing along an extended front. After three weeks of war, the Japanese had reached their main objectives for the first phase of their campaign in Southeast Asia. By Christmas the American garrison in the Philippines was at the brink of defeat but significant elements of the American forces were able to continue to operate from the outlying areas. They could not prevent the Japanese from occupying Luzon, Davao, and

Jolo—vital for their airfields. The objectives of Japan’s second phase were aimed at securing the Bismarck Archipelago, the Malay Peninsula, the seizure of Singapore, and establishing necessary conditions for the third phase—the attack on the Netherlands East Indies main island of Java in order to secure the vital oil fields necessary for the Japanese war effort. By the end of 1941, the Japanese had secured the main islands of the central Pacific, had occupied the islands to the east of New Guinea, had occupied Thailand, and had overrun British positions in northern Malaya. This phase would be followed by a consolidation along the Malay Barrier, aimed at defeating the inevitable Allied counterattack. According to Japanese timetables, the final phase had to be concluded by the end of April, anticipating the need to defend against a possible attack from the Soviet Union.<sup>163</sup>

As mentioned, the final objective of the Japanese operations in the Netherlands East Indies was to seize the vital oil installations on the island of Java. Furthermore, the Japanese aimed at seizing the capital of Java—Batavia, present-day Jakarta. The Japanese operations were planned as a double operational envelopment—staged from the Philippines—of the east and west of the archipelago—through the Strait of Makassar, and Kari Mata Strait.<sup>164</sup> They identified two decisive conditions for the final assault through these straits. The first condition was that Singapore had been seized in order to enable operations against Southern Sumatra. The second condition was that the Japanese had secured airfields and naval bases in Celebes and Borneo in the northern part of the East Indies archipelago in order to achieve air superiority for the final assault.<sup>165</sup> By the time of these initial Japanese assaults on the Netherlands East Indies, the Dutch, in support of its British Allies for the defense of Singapore and British Borneo, would have

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<sup>163</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 272.

<sup>164</sup>*Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>165</sup>*Ibid.*



already lost a significant portion of its air force and its navy. Meanwhile, at Davao in the Southern Philippines the Japanese had organized into two task forces, established to form both parts of the double envelopment through the major straits in the northern part of the East Indies archipelago. It was at this juncture, that General Wavell, Supreme Commander ABDACOM, landed on Java for the first meeting with the rest of his ABDACOM staff.

#### Supreme Commander ABDACOM Establishes the Command on Java

General Wavell reached the Netherlands East Indies on 10 January. Wavell's first priority on arriving at Batavia was to organize his command, the subordinate commands, and the operational areas. As will be recalled, the Dutch feelings went beyond irritation after their exclusion from deliberations about the establishment of a unified command in Southeast Asia and at not being adequately represented in the higher war direction machinery in Washington. The British and Americans had presented the smaller ABDACOM nations with a *fait accompli* that allowed them little further option than to give their consent to these developments. Dutch agitations grew even stronger when it became clear that the United States and Great Britain had balanced command appointments in ABDACOM between themselves, with only the merest nod in the direction of the smaller nations.<sup>166</sup> Wavell's two most important subordinates were obviously his deputy commander and his chief of staff. Lieutenant General George H. Brett, United States Army Air Force, would act as the chief of staff, whereas the British Lieutenant General Sir Henry R. Pownall, British Commander in chief, Far East, was appointed as ABDACOM's chief of staff. Furthermore, ABDACOM comprised of four functional component commanders—air forces (ABDair), naval forces (ABDAfloat), and land forces (ABDAarm). Admiral Thomas C. Hart, United States Navy, assumed the position of commander ABDAfloat,

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<sup>166</sup>Ibid., 272.

Major General Lewis H. Brereton, United States Air Force took on the role of commander of ABDA air forces. The Dutch Lieutenant General Hein Ter Poorten took up the position of commander of all Allied land forces, although the physical separation of the various lands areas under ABDACOM responsibility dictated several national subcommands and inhibited an integrated land defense.<sup>167</sup> Admiral Helfrich resented being excluded from the command and argued that American command of the ABDACOM naval forces was unreasonable.

He took the position that the Asiatic Fleet and the British naval forces lacked familiarity with the waters surrounding the Netherlands East Indies in which they had to operate and that a Dutch commander, owing to years of experience with operating in the East Indies archipelago, would be the more obvious choice. Additionally, he emphasized that he regretted that “with this organization the years of experience and study of the typical strategy in this archipelago of the Dutch commanders were not being taken full advantage of.”<sup>168</sup> Moreover, he said that British-American domination of the new command would only be acceptable if these nations would send sizeable reinforcements to the archipelago. The Dutch concluded there was no consideration given to their interests in the command, even though they supplied the largest share of the fighting forces in the area. They argued that a vital principle was at stake as much in the question of a share in the political higher direction in Washington. Last, he considered it a matter of national prestige that the hosting nation was not appointed any major command position in a fight that would be dominated by air and sea battle on, within, predominantly, Dutch territories.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup>Helfrich, *Memoires Van C.E.L. Helfrich, Luitenant-Admiral B.D.*, 272.

<sup>168</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Inventaris van het archief van het Ministerie van Marine: Nederlandse Vertegenwoordiger bij de Gezamenlijke Stafchefs (Combined Chiefs of Staff) te Washington, 1942-1949, nummer toegang 2.12.36 inv.nr.54.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid.

The new command, experimental in nature, and established with the utmost dispatch, exhibited many shortcomings. A number of distinct organizational deficiencies inhibited effective command and control of the ABDACOM organization. First, ABDAair was divided into several subcommands, adding to the complexity of the organization. Second, as a reflection of British custom, the British insisted on putting all shore-based naval aviation under ABDAair. As a result, the Dutch had to place all their naval reconnaissance aviation—vital to their offensive wolf pack tactics—under ABDAair. The prevailing notion within the Dutch navy was that this type of branch parochialism led to the disintegration of Dutch naval strength. This interpretation was eloquently expressed by Admiral Helfrich who stated that he “had lost the eyes of his fleet,” giving a sense of the prevalent Dutch discourse.<sup>170</sup> Moreover, ABDAfloat and ABDAair were not co-located and cooperation was stifled by the absence of a central war room. This made communications extremely complicated and placed significant restraints on effective command and control and timely responses.<sup>171</sup> It was thus with a venue of organizational flaws that ABDACOM had to cope in its effort to stem the Japanese thrusts into the East Indies archipelago. Throughout the entire ABDACOM campaign Allied naval forces were plagued by a lack of reconnaissance and air cover, ultimately contributing to the final Allied defeat during the battle of the Java Sea on 27 February 1942.<sup>172</sup> Further complicating matters were discussions within the command attributable to divergent national agendas. Inherent in the new command arrangement were discussions on priorities for the defense of the Malay Barrier. The ABDACOM members demonstrated a continuation of the trends noted the previous months. There are several insights from the divergent national agendas of the Allied partners that warrant summarizing.

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<sup>170</sup>Helfrich, *Memoires Van C.E.L. Helfrich, Luitenant-Admiral B.D.*, 273.

<sup>171</sup>*Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>172</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 276.

First, the British had to decide where the defense of the Malay Barrier—with Singapore as a central fortress in the imperial defense for East Asia—now fitted into imperial defense and grand strategy. The prestige of the British Empire and the reputation of the British as an ally boiled down to four factors: expressing defiance to the Japanese; conveying resolution to the Asian population; impressing the Americans; reassuring the dominions. This was not a purely military decision.<sup>173</sup> On 20 January 1942, Churchill, aware of the reverses on the Malay Peninsula, offered the first suggestions that holding Burma should now be a higher priority than holding Singapore, but several factors dictated that the British would have to send reinforcements and fight it out in Singapore.<sup>174</sup> First, by losing Singapore, while the Americans were fighting it out in Bataan, the British would face a major political embarrassment.<sup>175</sup> Additionally, the Australians had warned the British that “after all the assurances they had been given [through the Singapore Strategy] the evacuation of Singapore would be regarded in Australia as an inexcusable betrayal.”<sup>176</sup> In a personal message to Wavell of 19 January, Churchill pointed out that although he “of course could not send [Wavell as an Allied commander] any instructions”, I want to make it absolutely clear that I expect every inch of ground to be defended, every scrap of material or defenses to be blown to pieces to prevent the capture by the enemy and no question of surrender to be entertained until after protracted fighting among the ruins of Singapore City.”<sup>177</sup> On 18 December 1941 Churchill ordered the British forces in Malaya that “nothing should

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<sup>173</sup>Farrell, 311.

<sup>174</sup>Gilbert, 48.

<sup>175</sup>Farrell, 384.

<sup>176</sup>Ibid., 312.

<sup>177</sup>Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: Road to Victory*, Vol. II, 1941-1945 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), 48.

compete with the defense of Singapore.”<sup>178</sup> Thus, if the British wanted to keep the partnership with its dominions and strengthen the alliance with the Americans, they had to fight it out in Singapore.<sup>179</sup> They extolled reinforcements for Singapore as the only decisive course and nourished British expectations of reinforcements from the other Allied partners, in a rather astounding misreading of the realities on the Malay Peninsula.

Furthermore, it is important to note that according to the ABDACOM directive, the ABDACOM Supreme Commander, General Wavell, was the “only man who could balance forces available, and becoming available, in the general interest.”<sup>180</sup> The records seem to indicate that this general interest was subordinate to British imperial interests. To the Americans, Australians, and the Dutch it seemed that General Wavell was devoting far too much attention, as well as a disproportionate share of Allied resources to the defense of Singapore, and Malaya, an attitude that seemed to them to reflect British rather than Allied interests.<sup>181</sup> Wavell frequent absence from ABDACOM headquarters to inspect the defense of Singapore and Rangoon reinforced this impression.<sup>182</sup> In his biography, Admiral Hart, commander of the U.S. Asiatic fleet, and commander of ABDACOM, noted that Wavell and his British chief of staff Sir Henry Pownall “made it clear that they were far more interested in Singapore than they were in the Netherlands East Indies.”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>178</sup>Ibid., 60

<sup>179</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>180</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Project Afscheid van Indie; Archiefbestanden Buitenland, nummer toegang 2.22.21, inventarisnummer 510.

<sup>181</sup>Morton, 170.

<sup>182</sup>Ibid., 131.

<sup>183</sup>Leutze, 266.

The second general observation was that the Dutch, lacking a homeland after the German invasion of the Netherlands, were fighting for their lives. Dutch interests in the defense of the Netherlands East Indies were a matter of survival. For the Dutch to give up the Netherlands East Indies without a determined fight was inconceivable on moral, political, psychological, and military grounds. This would have the worst possible effect on the local population.”<sup>184</sup> This would give the population the impression of abandonment and could have political repercussions. Loudon, The Dutch envoy to Washington, reported to the Dutch government-in-exile that a stiff defense in the East Indies was important for the moral of the population of the vast archipelago, but also for the Dutch population in the occupied territories in Europe. Additionally, post-war consideration guided Dutch rationale for the defense of the Netherlands East Indies. The Dutch saw an opportune danger in giving up the Netherlands East Indies without a fight. They theorized that liberation by the Allies did not necessarily imply that Dutch colonial rule would be restored. They feared that nationalistic groups in the Netherlands East Indies would encounter sympathy for their calls for self-determination and would gain its independence.<sup>185</sup> Last, many of the Dutch officers had spent the better part of their lives living in the Netherlands East Indies or were even native born. One example is that the commander of the naval forces, Admiral Conrad Helfrich was born in Semarang, on Java. These officers saw it as their moral duty to stand and fight.<sup>186</sup> It follows that the Dutch had no choice. They had to resist the Japanese as long as possible and would fight in the Netherlands East Indies to the last man.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>184</sup>Helfrich, *Memoires Van C.E.L. Helfrich, Luitenant-Admiral B.D.*, 84.

<sup>185</sup>Kersten and Manning, 94.

<sup>186</sup>Helfrich, *Memoires Van C.E.L. Helfrich, Luitenant-Admiral B.D.*, 84

<sup>187</sup>Kersten and Manning, 314.

A third issue determining friction within the coalition was the American peripheral interest in the defense of the Malay Barrier. After the attack on Pearl Harbor and the loss of a sizeable part of the Pacific Fleet, American strategic thinking for the Pacific had to be realistic. It had to be based on necessarily harsh abandonment of minor interests to buy time to secure major interests.<sup>188</sup> Additionally, the major objective of Allied strategy remained that Germany was the prime enemy and that its defeat was the key to victory. It was therefore agreed that only a minimum of force necessary for safeguarding interests in other theaters was used. The Americans rationalized that it would be necessary to maintain the security of Australia, and New Zealand, and to support China.<sup>189</sup> Australia would have to serve as a main base from which an offensive against Japan could eventually be developed.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, the United States Chiefs of Staff understood the importance of the lines of communication between Pearl Harbor and the west coast of the United States. They also realized the importance of Australia as a base of support for operations in the Philippines in the short term. As a general statement of strategy, the United States and the British Chiefs of Staff determined that the interest of the Americans lay in securing the lines of communications between the United States and Australia. Initially, Australia served as a base of support to the garrison in the Philippines and the routes through the eastern part of the Netherlands East Indies served as transit routes between Australia and the Manila.

At the same time, Australia was needed to build up forces for offensive operations against Japan. During the ARCADIA Conference, Allied planners in Washington framed the immediate objectives for Southeast Asia and the Pacific Theater. These included holding the Malay Barrier as the basic defensive position, and holding Burma and Australia as essential

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<sup>188</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*.

<sup>189</sup>Morton, 159.

<sup>190</sup>*Ibid.*

supporting positions for the long term war effort. Additionally Allied planners identified the importance of securing lines of communications with the Philippines, Australia, and Burma.<sup>191</sup> Therefore, the United States Asiatic Fleet was needed to protect convoys coming from the mainland United States toward Australia and from Australia toward the Philippines. Although naval and army planners thought the cause of the Philippines was lost, President Roosevelt felt strongly that the United States had a moral obligation to support MacArthur and his troops. On 11 December 1941 Washington ordered the U.S. Asiatic Fleet to withdraw its surface fleet—Task Force 5—to Darwin and the Netherlands East Indies as a result of Japanese air superiority. As a result, the Americans virtually abandoned the garrison in the Philippines, and American interests in the defense of the Malay Barrier became peripheral. The buildup of Australia as the main base for future operations, and securing the main approaches through the Torres Strait had now become the vital interest in the Pacific Theater. Consequently, Task Force 5 received guidance from Washington to operate exclusively in eastern part of the Netherlands East Indies archipelago, to secure American convoys to Australia.

A fourth factor affecting coalition cohesion was the Australian posture. The Australians watched the debacle in Malaya with growing fear. For Australia, based on British promises, the security of Australia was based on the integrity of the Singapore defense. They feared that, if the defense of the Malayan Barrier collapsed, they might be subjected to Japanese attacks. As a result the Australians not only sent major reinforcements to Singapore but also supported the defense of the Indies.<sup>192</sup> In sum, the scope of national interests in the defense of the ABDACOM area ranged from vital to peripheral. It follows that it was impossible to reconcile these divergent national

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<sup>191</sup>Ibid.

<sup>192</sup>Robertson, 209.



interests while defending against a superior enemy that exploited Allied inactivity in the early stages of the battle for the Netherlands East Indies.

The ABDACOM command arrangements and national agendas placed the British and the Americans in a position of being able to count on Dutch support without the Dutch being able to obtain any reciprocal support in facing up to the Japanese drives into the northern extremes of the Netherlands East Indies—Celebes, and Borneo.<sup>193</sup> A discussion of Wavell's initial guidance to the command is instructive. In his estimates Wavell proclaimed that the defense of Singapore was of vital importance for the Allied defense and he directed Dutch naval forces to "support British operations designed to get convoys through to Singapore."<sup>194</sup> In his cablegram of 15 January 1942 he set out his general appreciation of the situation in the Southwest Pacific to his superiors of the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington. Although the Supreme Commander asserted that establishment of Japanese air bases in South Borneo would bring Surabaya and other objectives in Java within the range of effective bomber attack, he continued that Sumatra and Java were facing no immediate threat. This underscored Dutch fears that their local knowledge and assessments were virtually ignored by the leadership within the command. Wavell assessed that the immediate Japanese intentions were a full scale effort against Singapore, advances into Borneo and Celebes to establish air bases within range of Java, and operations to interdict between Australia and the Netherlands East Indies.<sup>195</sup> Moreover, he reported that his resources were too limited to meet the threat over such wide areas and articulated his intent to avoid a dispersion forces. Wavell argued that the most important issue was the defense of Singapore. It would not be possible, he maintained, to defend everywhere. He therefore directed and stipulated

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<sup>193</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 274.

<sup>194</sup>Ibid.

<sup>195</sup>Robertson, 194-195.

pointedly that the utmost priority would have to be given to securing Singapore, followed by the disruption of further Japanese advances in Borneo and Celebes.<sup>196</sup>

The first four weeks of the ABDACOM period marked a distinctive period in the efforts to stem the immediate military crisis facing the new operational command. During the intervening weeks between the arrival of the U.S. Task Force 5 and the arrival of the Supreme Commander ABDACOM, the Japanese twin advances kept ABDACOM perpetually off-balance. The Dutch, still dissatisfied with the naval command arrangements, pointed out that the Japanese were already shaping their operations against Tarakan and that landings on Borneo and Celebes were imminent, making clear that future success depended on offensive operations as far north as possible to prevent Japanese efforts from acquiring a springboard for operations further south into the Dutch archipelago. Helfrich pointed at the Allied inclination to overlook Japanese fragilities and argued for the concentration of strike forces that could attack weak points in the Japanese invasion convoys.<sup>197</sup> Central to this point was the belief that ABDACOM naval forces were committed to overprotected convoys into Singapore and that instead these forces should form strike forces—together with pending reinforcements from the Australians, and the Americans—and would operate offensively against the Japanese twin thrusts.<sup>198</sup> But there was little hope for the Dutch to organize combined strike forces if large numbers of their fleet were diverted to convoy operations in support of the British. The Dutch convoy duties—as directed by Wavell—absorbed almost the entire Dutch fleet in the second half of January.<sup>199</sup> Whereas Hart clung to the

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<sup>196</sup>Ibid., 195.

<sup>197</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Inventaris van het archief van het Ministerie van Marine: Persoonlijk Archief van Luitenant-Admiraal C.E.L. Helfrich, 1940-1962 I, nummer toegang 2.12.44 inv.nr 3.

<sup>198</sup>Ibid.

<sup>199</sup>Helfrich, *Memoires Van C.E.L. Helfrich, Luitenant-Admiral B.D.*, 260.

belief that air cover was a condition for naval operations against the Japanese, the Dutch embraced the idea of seeking opportunities for rapid concentration followed by asymmetric attacks against Japanese weak points.<sup>200</sup> Helfrich's comments reflected Dutch beliefs that it would soon be too late to prevent the Japanese from acquiring airfields vital for their final assault on the main islands of the Dutch archipelago. He pointed out that it should be realized that the Dutch took a great risk in withdrawing its forces from the east side of the archipelago in support of the defense of Singapore and that consequences to the Dutch were only acceptable in case of unreserved cooperation. But Hart's gloomy reflections combined with Wavell's focus on Singapore indicated that there was no hope for the Dutch that they could prevent the Japanese forces from becoming established in the outlying areas of the East Indies archipelago. Helfrich pointed out that he found Hart "too defensive minded and risk averse."<sup>201</sup> To Helfrich the policy of making major efforts to only reinforce the western and eastern flank of the Malay Barrier was madness, since the Japanese for the most part were unopposed as they came through the center of this archipelago.<sup>202</sup> According to the Dutch admiral, after Wavell took command the arrangement of separate areas of responsibility in the waters around the Dutch archipelago was altered in principle, but nevertheless the U.S. Task Force 5 would remain operating eastward of this former operational boundary. In his memoirs he commented that "in December 1941 it was still possible to operate against the Japanese in the northern part of the archipelago, in January 1942 it had become difficult, and in February it had become impossible."<sup>203</sup> The Dutch requested their

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<sup>200</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Inventaris van het archief van het Ministerie van Marine: Persoonlijk Archief van Luitenant-Admiraal C.E.L. Helfrich, 1940-1962 I, nummer toegang 2.12.44 inv.nr 3.

<sup>201</sup>Helfrich, *Memoires Van C.E.L. Helfrich, Luitenant-Admiral B.D.*, 250.

<sup>202</sup>Willmott, *Empires in the Balance*, 274.

<sup>203</sup>Helfrich, *Memoires Van C.E.L. Helfrich, Luitenant-Admiral B.D.*

representative in Washington to bring their concerns to the attention of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, but lacked, as has become clear, weighty representation in this decision-making body.

ABDACOM could not catch up with the Japanese advances. At the beginning of February 1942, while most of the ABDACOM forces were still on convoy duties or operating far south in the Malay Barrier, the Japanese had moved to occupy more key terrain in the northern part of the Netherlands East Indies and on Malaya. As already noted, by the end of December 1941, the Japanese had compelled the United States Asiatic Fleet to abandon the Philippines and move south. Singapore dockyard was closed down on 30 January 1942, and on 31 January the British forces in Malaya commenced to retire towards Singapore Island.<sup>204</sup> By this time the Japanese had also established control of the sea and air routes to the Philippines. In Borneo, they had seized the rich oil fields of Tarakan and Balikpapan and important ports on east Borneo. In Celebes, they had captured Manado and Kendari, and had established the necessary prerequisites for the final assault on the Netherlands East Indies main islands. On 3 February, the Japanese bombed Surabaya, the Dutch naval base on Java. This first bombing of Java indicated that the Japanese had established themselves firmly in the outlying areas of the archipelago and were shaping conditions for further advances south. By 13 February, the Japanese had completed the occupation of British and Dutch Borneo, the Dutch island of Celebes, and the Dutch naval base at Ambon. On 15 February, Singapore and its naval base surrendered to the Japanese. This calamitous outcome of the battle on the Malay Peninsula would have dangerous strategic consequences for the Dutch.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup>United Kingdom H.M Government Admiralty, S.W.1, *Battle Of The Java Sea: Battle Summary No. 28* (London: Tactical, Torpedo and Staff Duties Division, Historical Section, 1942), 1.

<sup>205</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

### After the Fall of Singapore: From Defeat to Disaster

The fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942 was a humiliation for the British and had dangerous strategic consequences for the Dutch. The catastrophic fall of this lynchpin of British imperial defense forced the Allies to recalibrate their strategies to the new reality. The records indicate that, although Churchill had already shifted his strategic focus to the defense of British interests in Burma, Australian warnings and moral obligations compelled the British to send reinforcements to Singapore and fight it out there. With Singapore gone, this shift had become opportune. On 16 February, Supreme Commander ABDACOM sent a telegram to the British Prime Minister and Chief of the Imperial Staff Sir Alan Brooke with his assessment of the situation in the ABDACOM area, indicating that the “recent events at Singapore faced [them] with extremely grave and urgent problems of strategy and policy.” He concluded that “unless adequate naval and air reinforcements can be provided in time, which seems improbable, the Japanese invasion of Java seems likely to begin before the end of February. The immediate problem for decision is what further resources should be thrown into the defense of Java.” He summed up that “the loss of Java would not directly affect the issue of events in the Philippines but it would deprive [the Allies] of one line of counter offensive against Japan.” He continued that “Burma and Australia were absolutely vital for the war against Japan. The loss of Java, though a severe blow from every point of view, would not be fatal. Efforts should not therefore be made to reinforce Java which might compromise defense of Burma or Australia.”<sup>206</sup> On the same day, during a meeting of the British Defense Committee, Prime Minister Churchill decided “not to defend the Dutch East Indies” but to change focus to the defense of Burma, Ceylon, and Australia. After this meeting Churchill telegraphed to Roosevelt that the most vital point at that

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<sup>206</sup>Kersten and Manning, 308-309.

moment was Rangoon in Burma, to secure lines of communication with China.<sup>207</sup> The loss of Singapore and Japanese total command of the Strait of Malacca threatened the strategic connection between the British and the Americans. This defeat marginalized the British as a partner in the war against Japan. The only way the British could appease their strategic partner, and restore alliance cohesion was by trying to secure the lines of communication with China—the Burma Road— and defend the remnants of British Empire in India—hence, the importance of Burma.<sup>208</sup> It follows that Wavell’s views were a clear manifestation of this shift in British imperial policy. Burma had now become the overarching consideration of British policy for the Far East. After the fall of Singapore—even before the Japanese would launch their final assault on the Netherlands East Indies, their ultimate objective—the British aimed at a strategic shift from the Malay Barrier to Australia and Burma. President Roosevelt seemed to have similar thoughts.

In a cablegram of 17 February Roosevelt pointed out that “during the last few days”, he “had given a good deal of thought to the Far East.” It seemed to him “that we must at all costs maintain our two flanks—the right based on Australia and the left on Burma.” Roosevelt proposed a new method of strategic control by pointing out that that the right flank of Australia should become the area of American responsibility, whereas Burma should revert to the British.<sup>209</sup> It follows that, within a week after the fall of Singapore, the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington accepted the loss of the Malay Barrier as virtually certain. On 17 February, during a Combined Chiefs of Staff meeting, the British Sir John Dill pointed out that he supported Wavell’s recommendations. He asserted that no additional reinforcements should be sent into the

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<sup>207</sup>Gilbert, 60.

<sup>208</sup>Farrell, 420.

<sup>209</sup>Vernon, 298.

archipelago. Admiral Stark stated that the United States Chiefs of Staff supported this contention.<sup>210</sup> For the Americans, the interest in preventing a further Japanese expansion to the Southeast was apparent, but the collapse of Singapore and the loss of the oilfields of the Netherlands East Indies—one of the reasons for U.S. support to the defense of the Malay Barrier—had disappeared. For them, the reasons to send reinforcements became for this respect less compelling than two months ago.<sup>211</sup>

The U.S. Chiefs of Staff rationalized the new strategic objectives for the Pacific and the Far East as: maintaining a safe line of communications to Australia for future offensives against Japan; establishing bases in Australia, and Burma; supporting the battle in the Netherlands East Indies as long as possible, “so as to continue the use of the Dutch forces in the effort to inflict losses on the enemy and delay his conquest.”<sup>212</sup> The Americans reasoned that support to the Dutch was important, but was not immediately “vital to the outcome of the war.” By pointing out that it was necessary to determine what forces could be spared for the effort in Southeast Asia, without “seriously impairing performance of our mandatory tasks”, the American planners clearly articulated U.S. peripheral interest in the region.<sup>213</sup> What this all adds up to is that, after the fall of Singapore, Allied strategy for Southeast Asia and the Pacific depended on two cardinal points: Burma must not fall, and Australia must not fall. To those ends, the Dutch had to fight a delay action in the Netherlands East Indies archipelago.

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<sup>210</sup>Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, *World War II Inter Allied Conferences, Minutes of the Meetings of the Combined Chiefs of Staffs, Post-ARCADIA, 17 February* (Washington DC: Joint History Office, 2003), 43

<sup>211</sup>Eisenhower, 259.

<sup>212</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup>*Ibid.*

The Dutch, on the other hand, had different views. They refused to accept that their archipelago was doomed. They saw Wavell's recommendations as too gloomy and an abandonment of their interests. The Dutch insisted that the Netherlands East Indies should be defended to the end for political and moral reasons, and requested major reinforcements for the ABDACOM area.<sup>214</sup> On 17 February, the Pacific War Council met in London. Prime Minister Churchill opened the meeting and described the situation in the Far East as grim and pointed out that the Allies were now faced with the prospects of further reverses. He asserted that the Americans and the British were doing everything possible [to support the defense of the Malay Barrier] but that the vast distances of the archipelago and the serious shortage of tonnage prevented them from bringing in reinforcements to the Far East.<sup>215</sup> He continued that the Dutch should realize that British and American capacity was already fully engaged with reinforcing the Middle East, India and Burma. Subsequently, the Prime Minister turned to Wavell's telegram and articulated that it was time to consider whether reinforcements now on their way "should be put into Java or diverted to other threatened points, e.g. Rangoon, Ceylon, or Australia."<sup>216</sup> The Dutch Prime Minister Pieter Gerbrandy pointed out that he had been left in doubt with regard to Java. In his view, General Wavell had taken a too cautious approach and that great losses could be inflicted on the Japanese forces by bold action. He continued that reinforcements were needed. Furthermore, the Dutch Prime Minister asked Churchill what the British intentions were: to abandon Java or to offer the enemy a stubborn resistance.<sup>217</sup> He made it clear that the Dutch had of "their own free will thrown in their lot with the [Allies], immediately when the Japanese had

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<sup>214</sup>Morton, 174.

<sup>215</sup>Kersten and Manning, 314-315.

<sup>216</sup>Ibid.

<sup>217</sup>Ibid.



attacked the United States and the British Empire.” He maintained that the Dutch would fight for the Netherlands East Indies and pointed at the importance of the Indies archipelago, now that the first lines of defense—defined as the line between the Philippines, Malaya, and Singapore—was overrun or beleaguered. To abandon the second line of defense would be “unthinkable on moral, political, psychological, and military grounds.”<sup>218</sup>

Furthermore, the Dutch pointed out that from the outset of hostilities in the Far East they had used their force offensively to support the defense of Singapore and as a result their air forces and naval forces had been seriously depleted.<sup>219</sup> They requested the Americans and the British to send reinforcements into the ABDACOM area. At the end of the meeting, Churchill summed up the main conclusions. He stated that “it was a very hard choice to make” but that “any question of abandoning Java without a fight was unthinkable. Strenuous resistance would be maintained in Java by forces already available there in order to gain as much time as possible. Non Dutch troops on Java should continue fighting alongside the Dutch”. However, by continuing that “reinforcements now on their way should not proceed to the Netherlands East Indies but should be sent to support in the defense of Burma, and Australia,” the British Prime Minister virtually sealed the fate of ABDACOM.<sup>220</sup> After this meeting, the Australian representative, Sir Earle Page would report to the Australian Prime Minister that he admired Dutch “readiness to do what was best in the ultimate interest of the whole fight even though their own country was really being left to its own resources.”<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup>Ibid., 315.

<sup>219</sup>Ibid.

<sup>220</sup>Ibid., 316.

<sup>221</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Project Afscheid van Indie; Archiefbestanden Buitenland, nummer toegang 2.22.21, inventarisnummer 660.

Meanwhile Dutch concerns for the lack of forthcoming reinforcements grew stronger. On 22 February, Admiral Helfrich urgently requested the Combined Chiefs of Staff to reconsider the decision to divert reinforcements to Burma and Australia. Moreover, the Dutch Queen Wilhelmina sent President Roosevelt a personal telegram, requesting his immediate assistance “to defend against the immediate menace to [the Dutch] last military stronghold, which is a most valuable base for the resumption of the offensive against Japan.”<sup>222</sup> In answering, the American President assured Queen Wilhelmina that “they were doing everything they could but the problem was how to get reinforcements from Australia into the Dutch archipelago” and that the Dutch forces “were putting up a gallant fight in the Indies.”<sup>223</sup>

Meanwhile, On 23 February, the Combined Chiefs of Staffs discussed a telegram from Wavell and the British Chiefs of Staff pertaining to the dissolution of ABDACOM. According to Wavell, the deterioration of the situation consequent of the fall of Singapore and the Japanese threat to the main islands of the Netherlands East Indies raised questions of immediate and long term strategy. The fall of Singapore had broken the Malay Barrier into two geographically separated areas. This fragmentation led to discussions of a reframing of the ABDACOM area of operations. By 17 February, the British Chief of Staff followed the shifted strategic schema and had, now that the fall of Singapore had cut the Malay Barrier in half, requested the Combined Chiefs of Staff in Washington to revert Burma back to India Command.<sup>224</sup> The ABDACOM command included effectively only Dutch territory now. Wavell, saw “little further usefulness in maintaining his command.”<sup>225</sup> He suggested that the ABDACOM area as such should disappear.

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<sup>222</sup>Kersten and Manning, 349.

<sup>223</sup>Ibid., 376.

<sup>224</sup>Ibid.

<sup>225</sup>Willmot, *Empires in the Balance*, 338

Admiral Stark explained that the question was whether the Dutch were prepared to take over command of the ABDACOM area on departure of Wavell. He pointed out that certain British and Australian forces would remain in Java, and that the flow of supplies, already allocated to ABDACOM would most certainly continue. The Dutch representative, Major General Adriaan Dyxhoorn made it clear that the Dutch would be prepared to accept the command, but that reinforcements were desperately needed. Admiral Stark asked the Dutch General to consider the possibility of the removal of Northwest Australia from ABDACOM. General Marshall intervened by stating that this might have a very adverse effect on public opinion, as it might be construed as “abandoning the Dutch in difficult circumstances.”<sup>226</sup>

Although the Dutch strongly deprecated a perceived abandonment of ABDACOM and suggested that with adequate air support and reinforcements the position in Java could be held for at least several weeks, they saw little further option than to concur with the Combined Chiefs of Staff view.<sup>227</sup> As will be recalled, the Dutch never received a formal position within the Combined Chiefs of Staff organization and consequently lacked weighty representation in this decision making body. They were only consulted on important strategic issues pertaining to the Netherlands East Indies. They lacked the power to influence the course of events within coalition decision making. On 25 February, the Combined Chiefs of Staff decided that Wavell’s headquarters should be dissolved and that command of the ABDA area—less North Australia, which reverted to Australian command— should be transferred to the Dutch. By that time they instructed Wavell that “there should be no stoppage of all possible reinforcements in planes and

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<sup>226</sup>Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, *World War II Inter Allied Conferences, Minutes of the Meetings of the Combined Chiefs of Staffs, Post-ARCADIA, 17 February* (Washington DC: Joint History Office, 2003), 62.

<sup>227</sup>*Ibid.*, 61.

other material now allocated to the ABDACOM Theater.”<sup>228</sup> However, before Wavell left Java, he instructed the British Admiral Palliser to sail to Australia or Colombo with the remainder of the British fleet when further defense of Java had become impossible.<sup>229</sup>

On 25 February 1942, General Wavell handed over command of the former ABDACOM area to the Dutch. By that time, Admiral Helfrich had already relieved Admiral Hart of the command of ABDACOM, officially because of bad health issues but the records indicate that President Roosevelt thought Hart “too tired and unaggressive to command the Allied fleet.”<sup>230</sup> ABDACOM ceased to exist.<sup>231</sup> The Dutch assumed command of all the remaining Allied forces in the area. They faced a desperate situation. Possible reinforcements were reduced by American demands of protecting a series of strongpoints in the Pacific to enable security of the sea lines of communication between the United States and Australia. The only possible course for the Dutch and the remnants of the other Allied forces was to delay the enemy southward advance as long as possible to allow the buildup of bases in Burma and Australia. On 25 February 1942, the Japanese had successfully landed on the islands of Sumatra and Bali, west and east of Java. Additionally, Imperial Japanese naval forces moved south from Makassar Strait, threatening Java from the northeast. Another Japanese expeditionary force was assembling near Banka Island, threatening Java from the northwest.<sup>232</sup> Furthermore, the promised reinforcements seemed to be not

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<sup>228</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, De Inventaris van het archief van het Ministerie van Marine: Nederlandse Vertegenwoordiger bij de Gezamenlijke Stafchefs (Combined Chiefs of Staff) te Washington, 1942-1949, nummer toegang 2.12.36 inv.nr.: 54.

<sup>229</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Project Afscheid van Indie; Archiefbestanden Buitenland, nummer toegang 2.22.21, inventarisnummer 510.

<sup>230</sup>Leutze, 278.

<sup>231</sup>United Kingdom H.M Government Admiralty, S.W.1, *Battle Of The Java Sea: Battle Summary No. 28* (London: Tactical, Torpedo and Staff Duties Division, Historical Section, 1942), 68.

<sup>232</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

forthcoming. They desperately asked the Combined Chiefs of Staff for reinforcements. These reinforcements were not provided for two reasons. First, the Japanese thrusts interdicted the avenues of approach that were used for reinforcements from Australia. Moreover, the Allies had shifted their main focus to the twin bases of Australia and Burma.

Further Allied attempts to stem the southward Japanese progress culminated in the disastrous battle of the Java Sea, which took place on 27 February, 1942, between an Allied make-shift striking force of five cruisers and nine destroyers—commanded by the Dutch Admiral Doorman— and a Japanese force of seven cruisers and seventeen destroyers. In two days the Allied striking force—only hastily assembled 24 hours before the battle—was practically annihilated. The calamitous outcome of the battle of the Java Sea was caused by several factors including a lack of coordination and cooperation between the Allied air forces and the naval forces; a lack of joint doctrine, a lack of combined training, and a defective communications architecture—all resulting in delays in the reporting of vital information, and disagreements on tactics and procedures.<sup>233</sup> In the early morning of 1 March, the Japanese landed on the west and east Java. On 1 March Admiral Helfrich had a meeting with his British Chief of Staff, Admiral Palliser and the commander of U.S. Task Force 5, to discuss his intent to organize another strike force to attack the Japanese invaders. Helfrich’s subordinate commanders held divergent views. They wanted to preserve the force. It is instructive to discuss this bitter exchange between Helfrich and his subordinate commanders. It expresses the sentiments of the period. Both Palliser and Glassford contended that further resistance was useless. Admiral Helfrich told Palliser that [the Dutch] had done more with their forces to assist the defense of Singapore than the British fleet had ever done for the defense of the Netherlands East Indies proper. He continued by asking “when I ask you and your fleet for a sacrifice, as I have made when my submarines went into that

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<sup>233</sup>Van Oosten, 70-75.

hell on the east coast of Malaya and on the north coast of Borneo, and when my surface vessels protected your convoys, notwithstanding the Japanese advances in the eastern part of the archipelago, now you refuse?" The British fleet commander answered that "you are quite correct that you have done very much for us, for which I am extremely grateful, but it is in this case I feel responsible to my government as a British admiral."<sup>234</sup> At the end of this meeting Helfrich ordered the Allied naval forces to Australia. On 9 March 1942 the Dutch formally surrendered. It marked the end of the first Allied coalition of World War II.

### CONCLUSION

The Netherlands East Indies constituted a vast empire. Its archipelago stretched from the west coast of the Malay Peninsula and runs east above Australia to western New Guinea. The total amount of coastline of the archipelago equals the total circumference of the globe. To defend this vast archipelago the Dutch had a substantial military presence in the Netherlands East Indies. Based on specificity, they developed an offensive submarine warfare concept to defend the archipelago against the emerging Japanese threat. Free trade, neutrality, and a strong determination to defend the Dutch colonial empire characterized Dutch foreign policy during the interwar period. After the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, the Dutch government tried to discuss British support in the event of a Japanese attack on its colonial possessions. But contradicting national postures inhibited concrete agreements. The United States appealed to British and Dutch support, after it had established an oil embargo against Japan. In their desperate search for security guarantees, the Dutch took the same position against Japan. This signaled a more pragmatic Dutch approach to protect its interests in the Far East.

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<sup>234</sup>Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Inventaris van het archief van het Ministerie van Marine: Persoonlijk Archief van Luitenant-Admiraal C.E.L. Helfrich, 1940-1962 I, nummer toegang 2.12.44 inv.nr: 1.

It was the Dutch conception that, during the years leading up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, divergent agenda's inhibited a common strategy against Japan. These divergent agenda's manifested themselves during several sets of bilateral and multilateral talks involving the British, the Dutch, and the Americans. The two most important conferences occurred during the first months of 1941—collectively known as the American-British Conversations, or ABC-meetings. During these meetings the Allied partners agreed upon the “Germany-first strategy” but failed to agree upon arrangements for defense cooperation in the Pacific-Far East Theater. During the Singapore staff talks the Dutch subordinated their strategic objectives to the objectives of their Allied partners with the hope of securing reciprocal support. During these talks, the British were able to secure from the Dutch what they could not secure from the Americans—recognition of the central role of Singapore in the defense of the Malay Barrier, defined as the notional line between the Malay Peninsula and the Netherlands East Indies Archipelago. The Americans disagreed that the defense of Singapore had to take precedence over everything else in Southeast Asia.

During these Singapore Conferences the Dutch agreed to place naval and air forces under operational control of the commander of British Commander in Chief, China Station, in support of the defense of Singapore. The United States was reluctant to enter into any premature formal agreements. Owing to a strong isolationist sentiment, divergent views on grand strategy, and a lack of unity within his administration, Roosevelt was reluctant to make any defense commitment for the Pacific-Far East Theater. Based on the recommendations of the Singapore Conference—or ADB Conference—the British and the Dutch developed plans for the employment of their naval and air forces in the event of war with Japan—collectively known as the PLENAP's. The Americans rejected the ADB agreements. Admiral H.R. Stark, the Chief of Naval Operations and General Marshall disagreed with the plan's strategic concepts, political implications, and the possibility of employment of the Asiatic Fleet in an area strategically unimportant to them. They thought these agreements at variance with the outcomes of the ABC Conference and did not want

to subordinate their military commanders to British command. It followed that the Allied nations entered the war without a coherent strategy and unified command.

The Japanese simultaneous Japanese attacks against Hawaii, Malaya, Singapore, the Philippines, and Hong Kong invalidated Allied assumptions that the Japanese were not capable of conducting simultaneous attacks on a large scale. These attacks forced the Allies to rethink their strategy for the Far East and they develop a common operational approach. On 18 December the Allies held the Duff Cooper Conference. During this conference the divergent agenda's emerged again. The principal disagreements involved the importance of Singapore in the Allied defense plans. The British believed this to be paramount but the Americans indicated that the Philippines were vital and pointed at the necessity for keeping the sea lines of communications between the American West Coast and Australia open.

The Dutch, lacking a homeland, articulated their interests in the Netherlands East Indies and its vital resources. Furthermore, the Dutch fulfilled their obligations of the ADB Conference and augmented the British defenses of Singapore with significant naval and air forces. The Allies agreed that Singapore took a central position in the defense of the Malay Barrier. Moreover, they maintained that key positions as the Celebes Sea and the Makassar Strait should be hold by the U.S. Asiatic Fleet to prevent the Japanese from establishing footholds in the northern part of the East Indies archipelago. This operational approach was consistent with Dutch interwar defense concepts.

During the ARCADIA Conference the British and the Americans reaffirmed the salient principles of the Germany-first strategy and the defensive stance in the Pacific and Far East Theater. On 24 December 1941, General Marshall asserted that a unified command in the Southwest Pacific would solve nearly all of the problems associated with Allied operations in that area. The Americans and the British decided upon the establishment of a unified command for the Far East and the Southwest Pacific Theater—the American-British-Dutch-Australian Command



(ABDACOM). The ABDACOM area of operations included the general regions of Burma, the Netherlands East Indies, Malaya, Singapore, and the Philippines. The objective of ABDACOM was to hold the Malay Barrier as the basic defensive position and to hold Burma and Australia as essential support positions. To direct this experimental unified command structure and guide action in other theaters of war, the British and the Americans formed the Combined Chiefs of Staff Organization that equitably shared the amount of strategic control between the British and the Americans but that excluded the smaller ABDACOM nations, much to their displeasure. This exclusion was an indicator for the Dutch that the British wanted to keep Allied strategic decision making an Anglo-American prerogative. The Dutch, pointing at their contribution of the defense of Singapore and their vital interests in the region, demanded more equitable staffing of the Combined Chiefs of Staff organization and expected the fullest consultation in regard to operational matters.

After the establishment of ABDACOM on 15 January 1942, its members demonstrated a continuation of the trends of divergent political objectives and disparate ideas concerning the most important areas to defend noted the previous months. The Dutch interest in the defense of the East Indies was a matter of survival. Also post-war considerations played a role in their rationale to fight to the end. They pointed at the need to take offensive action against the Japanese transport fleets to prevent them from acquiring footholds in the archipelago. The Americans indicated that the U.S. Asiatic Fleet would remain under strategic direction from Washington and were needed to protect convoys coming from the mainland United States toward Australia and would operate only in the eastern part of the archipelago. The Netherlands East Indies was of peripheral interest to the Americans.

After the outbreak of hostilities in the Far East, the British already offered the first suggestions that holding Burma should have a higher priority than Singapore, but moral factors and pressure from Australia dictated that the British had to maintain their focus on this hinge of

imperial defense. The Dutch and Americans found Wavell preoccupied with protecting British interests at the expense of Allied concerns. After Singapore fell on 15 February 1942, the British focus shifted sharply to Burma. Wavell reported to the Combined Chiefs of Staff that the defense of the Netherlands East Indies was hopeless and recommended not to send reinforcements to Java. By deciding not to defend the Netherlands East Indies, Churchill sealed ABDACOM's fate. Roosevelt seemed to have similar thoughts. The U.S. Chiefs of Staff rationalized the new strategic objectives as maintaining safe lines of communications with Australia and Burma and to establish bases for future offensives against Japan. What this all adds up to is that, after the fall of Singapore, Allied strategy for Southeast Asia and the Pacific depended on these two cardinal points. The Dutch refused to accept these views and urgently requested reinforcements but these were reduced owing to Japanese operations and the Allied shift to Burma and Australia.

After Wavell's recommendations, the Combined Chiefs of Staff ordered that ABDACOM headquarters should be dissolved. On 25 February, 1942, Wavell handed over command to the Dutch. The Dutch, lacking a homeland, decided that their only possible course was to delay the enemy southward advance as long as possible to allow buildup of bases in Burma and Australia. Further attempts to stem the Japanese advance culminated in the disastrous battle of the Java Sea. During this battle several interoperability and command and control issues emerged owing to a lack of training, a lack of common doctrine, and divergent views on tactics and procedures. The Dutch surrender of 9 March 1942 marked the end of the first Allied coalition of World War II.

The evidence adduced in the course of the research for this monograph revealed the complete inadequacy of command by mutual cooperation, where decisive action under unified command was of the essence. Part of the problem can be attributed to the suddenness of the outbreak of war in the Far East and the Pacific Theater, invalid assumptions, and a superior enemy, but the difficulties intrinsic to the ABDACOM unified command stemmed from several

organizational failures. The pathway to failure stemmed from an Allied inability to reconcile political agendas and rationalize national objectives to coalition strategic ends, prior to the outbreak of hostilities in the Far East. As a result, the ABDACOM partners had to forge a unified command under fire and lacked the time to conduct combined exercises, develop common doctrine, and establish an effective unified command organization. Furthermore, divergent agenda's dictated that several restrictions were imposed upon the Supreme Commander of ABDACOM to protect the residuary interests of the ABDACOM nations, reducing his ability to exercise effective mission command, establish coalition objectives and guide action. United States Joint Doctrine Publication JP 3-16 *Multinational Operations* dictates that, to create mutual respect between coalition members, the commander must, in assigning missions, consider national honor and prestige and that all partners must be included in the planning process, and that their opinions must be sought in mission assignment.<sup>235</sup> Furthermore, this publication states that coalition partners should have an understanding of the doctrine, strategic goals, and values of each partner. Moreover, it indicates that coalitions take time to develop. Research revealed that, owing to divergent agenda's, the Allied partners of ABDACOM failed to establish these conditions of effective coalition operations. The organizational deficiencies that emerged during the Battle of the Java Sea were not the real causes for Allied defeat. Instead, they were only symptoms of deeper roots of failure—a collective failure by the Allied partners to reconcile their divergent agenda's and to design a coherent strategy against a determined enemy. ABDACOM was hastily assembled and lacked the time to establish a real unified command. The battle for the Malay Barrier was really lost at the political table. ABDACOM was too little, and too late.

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<sup>235</sup>Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint publication 3-16 (JP 3-16), *Multinational Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2007), ix,x.

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