

CHAPTER 3

THE LAST DAYS OF THE ROYAL NAVY: LESSONS FROM BRITAIN'S STRATEGIC RETREAT FROM THE PACIFIC

Nicholas Evan Sarantakes

The purposes of this chapter are to examine how the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland responded to the strategic rise of Imperial Japan during the first half of the twentieth century, and to ask whether the United States can learn lessons from the experience of its English-speaking cousin as it deals with similar transitions in Asia in the twenty-first century. Although history never repeats itself, it presents a database for scholars and practitioners seeking instructive case studies. In this particular case, there are some parallels between the British position in Asia and the Pacific then and the situation confronting the United States in the early decades of this new century. These parallels warrant a venture in applied history—which is what this chapter aspires to be.

What are the similarities between the Asia-Pacific then and now? First, Britain in the 1910s and 1920s found itself embroiled in greater and greater disputes with its ally, Imperial Japan. In a similar vein, the United States, though never formally allied with the People's Republic of China, did cooperate with the Asian nation during the second half of the Cold War and now finds itself increasingly distant from the Chinese. Second, the United Kingdom, like the United States now, found itself dealing with this shift during a period when its navy was shrinking in size. Finally, both nations had taken on security obligations they lacked the resources to honor. The British were obliged to protect their colonies in Burma, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the dominions of Australia and New Zealand. For its part, the United States has assumed responsibility for the defense of Taiwan and, to a lesser degree, South Korea.

The central argument set forth in this chapter is that despite British leaders' fairly reasoned and realistic assessment of international affairs in the Asia-Pacific

region, it was luck—or chance or contingency, to use the more academic terms—that was the key determinant of the success of British strategy in the years following World War I. While the British ultimately decided that the merits of alliance and friendship with the United States outweighed those with Imperial Japan, matters almost took a far different course. And even then, the cost to British interests was high: the conflict that followed destroyed the empire and accelerated the decline of Great Britain as a world power. As a result, the policies and strategies British statesmen pursued during this era offer good examples of what not to do.

The British responded to Japan in two very different ways that mark two distinct periods in Anglo-Japanese relations. First, the two countries were formal allies during the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1902 the United Kingdom signed a mutual security treaty with Japan. The two partners renewed their pact in 1905, on the verge of the Russo-Japanese War, and then again in 1911. The alliance was an important achievement in the history of Japanese foreign relations. Japan was the first Asian nation to sign a security agreement on the basis of equality with a European power. The alliance ameliorated some of the fears that had motivated the samurai who overthrew the Tokugawa shoguns and drove the modernization efforts of the Meiji era. Many Japanese leaders worried that Japan would suffer the same colonial degradation as India, Burma, the islands of the Dutch East Indies, Malaysia, Vietnam, and, most of all, China. A resolution issued by the Cabinet in 1908 attests to the importance accorded the alliance in Tokyo: “The Anglo-Japanese alliance is the marrow of Japan’s foreign policy.”¹

This partnership was also important to the British, providing regional security and stability on the cheap. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the British and Japanese faced common threats from the French and Russian empires. The alliance allowed the Royal Navy to withdraw from the region while the IJN (Imperial Japanese Navy) served as a proxy, protecting British interests. In 1911 the Committee of Imperial Defense asserted,

So long as the Japanese alliance remains operative not only is the risk of attack by Japan excluded from the category of reasonable possibilities to be provided against, but British navy requirements are held to be adequately met if the combined British and Japanese forces in the Pacific are superior to the forces in those waters maintained by any reasonably probable combination of naval Powers.

The alliance became even more important to the United Kingdom as Germany began to threaten British naval supremacy in Europe. The British could concentrate on the threat in their home waters, worrying less about issues on the periphery.²

World War I profoundly altered world affairs, testing the Anglo-Japanese partnership. The Japanese seemed ready for this challenge. In 1912, the Cabinet in Tokyo approved a resolution that declared, “The alliance is the crux of

the Japanese government's foreign policy and is an object which it will always unflinchingly uphold."³ Two years later, the British called on Japan to honor the alliance as they went to war with Germany. Japan did so, but a number of scholars argue that they did so in a grudging way that fostered more resentment than gratitude.⁴ Timothy D. Saxon's recent multilingual, multinational research challenges this view, showing that Winston Churchill and the Admiralty never shared the views of Sir Edward Grey and the Foreign Office. "I think you are chilling indeed to these people. I can't see any half way house between having them in and keeping them out," Churchill told the foreign minister. "We are all in this together." He also pushed the idea of soliciting Japanese naval assistance: "The Japanese [Government] should be sounded as to their readiness to send a battle-squadron to co-operate with the allied powers in the [Mediterranean] or elsewhere. The influence & value of this powerful aid could not be over-rated." The press of war also convinced many skeptics within the Royal Navy of their ally's value.⁵ In the end, though, the only two powers that emerged from the war stronger than they were when they entered were Japan and the United States.

Japan was at war with itself about how to respond to this changed international environment. Frederick R. Dickinson and J. Charles Schencking disagree on the nature of this internal conflict. Dickinson maintains that it was primarily a confrontation between political factions. Field Marshal Prince Yamagata Yoritomo, one of the last remaining samurai of Choshu who had helped overthrow the Tokugawa shoguns, led a group that wanted a Japan in which the nobility, the military, and senior bureaucrats made the decisions. To this end, he favored some type of orientation toward Germany, which was similar in its social structure. Foreign Minister Baron Katō Takaaki, the son of a former Tokugawa samurai, had a different vision. As the leader of a major political party, he wanted a Japan with a government responsive to the public, more along the lines of the U.K. government. For Dickinson, these disparate visions were the principal factor fueling Japanese foreign-policy debates.

Schencking, on the other hand, sees the conflict as an interservice confrontation between the army, with its strong continental focus, and the navy, which wanted institutional and budgetary resources that could only come at the expense of the army. Either way, the result was the same: Japan began pursuing foreign-policy objectives that conflicted with or even directly challenged established British economic interests.⁶

The end of World War I brought two overarching policies British diplomats had pursued over the past several decades into conflict with each other. The first was preserving the alliance with Japan in the Far East. The second was a policy the British had pursued since 1862, when they flirted briefly with intervention in the American Civil War: avoiding conflict with the Americans and perhaps reaching some type of accord, or even an alliance, with their English-speaking

cousins.⁷ The growth of Japanese and American power during the Great War, compounded by clashing interests in China in the interwar period, seemed to be bringing these two Pacific powers into direct conflict. Sooner or later, officials in Britain's Cabinet were going to have to decide between a nation that was their formal ally—a nation with which they shared a similar approach to world affairs, as well as a good working relationship—and a linguistic and culturally similar nation that wielded real economic power, but remained unpredictable and even, to some degree, hostile to the British Empire.⁸

The British government began debating the question of renewing the alliance with Japan. A Foreign Office memorandum on this topic accurately summarized the basic issue in Anglo-Japanese relations. "Generally speaking the interests of Great Britain and the United States of America in China are similar, whereas they are often in conflict with those of Japan, who in claiming a paramount position in the Far East and especially in China, antagonizes all other countries, including China."⁹

No two nations, even allies, have the exact same interests. London's problem was that Tokyo and Washington were pursuing interests at odds with each other. "Of paramount importance are our relations with the United States of America in the Far East, as elsewhere," the Foreign Office paper declared. "If we were able to count with certainty upon the active co-operation of the United States, the need for an alliance with Japan would not be apparent."¹⁰

Japan considered the United States the chief threat to its interests.

From despatches which have reached this Office from Tokio, it appears that in Japanese Military circles at any rate the renewal of the Alliance is desired by Japan in order to have the support of Great Britain in the event of war with the United States. The Japanese Government must know that there could be no possible question of this, but it will have to be made quite clear if the Alliance is renewed.¹¹

With those points made, there were clearly good political reasons to sustain the alliance. "In spite of many difficulties and dangers the alliance may be said on the whole to have worked well to the benefit of both parties." Japan had been a good ally up until now. "She kept her word to us faithfully." Anglo-Japanese partnership would protect the United Kingdom against some type of Russian-German rapprochement. Finally, it would give the British a certain amount of leverage over Japanese policy in China. "The existence of some form of agreement with Japan would on the other hand render it easier for His Majesty's Government to keep a watch on her movements in China, to demand of her in her dealings with us a greater measure of freedom and frankness than it would otherwise be possible to expect, and to exercise a moderating influence on her policy generally."¹²

One of the strongest proponents of this view was the foreign minister, Earl Curzon of Kedleston. He argued:

On the other hand, there was an Imperial aspect of the case, which Britain and the Dominions were bound to consider, in relation both to the peace of the Pacific and the future political stability of the Far East. The great majority of opinion certainly held to the view that even though the circumstances which called the agreement into being had ceased to exist, it had nevertheless justified itself, and exercised a tranquillising and pacifying influence in the Eastern world. Should the danger which it had been originally designed to meet, namely, that of an all-powerful Russia in the north and east of Asia, come again into being, and should this phenomenon be strengthened by a German alliance, it might well be that in some such agreement as that between Japan and Great Britain would be found the future salvation of the East.¹³

There were many who disagreed with this view. One of them was Winston S. Churchill. If the purpose of an alliance was for one ally to control the other, the “controlled” nation would be in position to make constant demands in return for proper behavior. The “controlling” nation would have little option but to comply. As Churchill put it, “Getting Japan to protect you against Japan is like drinking salt water to slake thirst.” Japan specialists, even those in the Foreign Office, also disagreed with Lord Curzon. Ernest Miles Hobart Hampden had held diplomatic posts in both Yokohama and Tokyo in the 1910s and argued,

For such an Entente there appears to exist a sufficient though hardly a super-abundant, community of interests, as well as a number of antagonisms calling for composition by agreement; but one ventures to think that no genuine alliance with Japan can in the future be founded upon a main desire on the British side to restrain the other party from a selfish policy in China and from undesirable attachments elsewhere.¹⁴

There were good military reasons to end the alliance. If the United Kingdom and Japan remained allies, argued Churchill, then “Every naval authority in the United States will press for a two-Power standard against Britain and Japan. It is this danger which I fear more than anything else. It is the most terrible danger, and it is the imminent danger from our point of view.” Such a development had to be avoided. According to Churchill, “This would be a disaster of the first order to the world, and we must do everything in our power to avoid it.”¹⁵

There were also good military reasons to keep the alliance. The agreement guaranteed the safety of British territory and interests in the Pacific region, including Australia, New Zealand, western Canada, Hong Kong, Burma, and ships of the British merchant marine operating in Pacific waters. The Royal Navy was also too weak to add the IJN to its list of possible future opponents. “Unless we have a very definite promise of American co-operation & support we cannot afford to leave Japan isolated & thus a potential enemy,” declared H. G. Parlett of the Foreign Office in his minutes. The Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty agreed. “Without considerable increase in Naval expenditure, however, they do not see their way to maintain Forces sufficient to support a strong policy involving a possible coercion of Japan,” reported one navy official.¹⁶

The British did explore the possibility of a tripartite treaty among Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom. In June 1921, Sir Auckland Geddes, the British ambassador in Washington, met with Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes. The British and American records of this meeting are quite similar. The main difference is a discrepancy over the date the conversation took place. Hughes also comes across as more evasive in the U.S. account than in the British account. He made it clear that the United States was concerned about a future in which Britain was associated with Japan; the American people would like to see the alliance terminated. Taking advantage of Hughes's disavowal of U.S. hostility toward Japan, Geddes proposed a three-way agreement. Hughes toyed with idea intellectually for a few minutes, but in both accounts he makes it clear there was no way that the Senate would ever consent to such a treaty.¹⁷

In 1921, the issue of naval disarmament became entangled in the complex issues associated with British relations with Japan vis-à-vis the United States. At the Washington Naval Arms Limitation Conference—a gathering hosted by the United States, largely in hopes of preventing an arms race among itself, Britain, and Japan—the British agreed to American proposals regulating the size and number of battleships. The agreement allowed the Royal Navy to maintain its dominant position on the high seas, while the British in return agreed to end their alliance with Japan. The Japanese understood the decision the British were making: naval arms control and avoiding conflict with the United States were more important in British eyes than the long-standing partnership with Japan. “We would only embarrass the British government if we insisted on the alliance being continued. It would be useless and senseless for us to try,” observed Shidehara Kijūrō, a member of the Japanese delegation, with palpable resignation. Reflected Itō Masanori, a reporter covering the conference for the *Jiji Shimpō* newspaper,

It was a forlorn funeral. It was as if only a few members of the wake followed the coffin, with three or four lanterns dimly lit, treading a narrow county lane on a lone winter night. A strong and healthy evergreen tree, which had symbolized peace in the orient for over twenty years, had been felled, crumbling without any resistance when swept by a cold blast of wind.¹⁸

The Washington Conference reestablished British naval power in the Pacific for awhile, and despite the end of the alliance, the United Kingdom and Imperial Japan maintained cordial relations for the rest of the decade. Even before the formal end of the alliance in 1923, however, Royal Navy planners started treating Japan as the prime enemy they were likely to face in the near future. There were few other contenders. The Imperial German Navy was resting in Scottish waters, at the bottom of Scapa Flow. The Hapsburg Empire was gone, as was its fleet in the Mediterranean. The French and Italian sea services were small and posed no threat worthy of the Royal Navy. The United Kingdom would never go to war

with the United States, so planning against the U.S. Navy was unnecessary. The only remaining possible naval threat was Japan.

Bureaucratic self-interest thus played a small role in ending the alliance, but what is more important is how plans shaped British strategy during the interwar period. With little strategic input from the Cabinet, the navy developed plans to maintain a large battle fleet, centered around battleships and cruisers, that would steam to Singapore in the event of war. To allow the city to hold out until the fleet arrived, the British would build a naval fortress able to withstand bombardment by Japan's Combined Fleet until His Majesty's ships arrived and vanquished their one-time protégés in a fleet action.¹⁹ According to War Memorandum (Eastern):

If Singapore were lost the Fleet would be immobilized for want of fuel and would be incapable of relieving the pressure on Hong Kong in time to save it for also falling into the hands of the Japanese. . . . With Singapore in our possession the situation could be retrieved even if Hong Kong had fallen. . . . *The safety of Singapore must be the keynote of British strategy.*²⁰

There were a number of problems with this strategy. The first and most obvious is that it was less a strategy than a battle plan. Would the fleet action actually defeat Japan, or would another effort like a blockade or a submarine attack on merchant shipping be necessary? What if Japan went to war with the United Kingdom as part of a coalition? What if the Royal Navy was otherwise engaged and was unable to send its battle fleet to the Far East?²¹

The navy and its strategy encountered many critics in London. One of the biggest was Churchill. As chancellor of the Exchequer during the 1920s, it was his job to deal limit government spending, keeping it in line with tax revenue. The Admiralty was the biggest-spending government department, and Churchill used his experience as a former first lord of the Admiralty to his advantage. He thought planning officers were exaggerating the Japanese threat. "It seems to me that the Admiralty imagine themselves confronted with the same sort of situation in regard to Japan as we faced against Germany in the ten years before the war. They have a wonderful staff of keen, able officers, whose minds are filled with war impressions," he observed. "What question is pending between England and Japan? To what diplomatic combination do either of us belong which could involve us against each other? There is absolutely no resemblance between our relations with Japan and those we had with Germany before the war."²²

In fact, Churchill dismissed the chances of war with the Japanese altogether. "I do not believe there is the slightest chance of it in our lifetime. The Japanese are our allies." Even if that were not the case—which by this time it was not—Churchill pointed out that Japan was no Germany. "Japan is at the other end of the world. She cannot menace our vital security in any way."²³ But he understood the bureaucratic reasons why the navy was putting forward these arguments.

The Admiralty seems to be misconceiving the problem which is before them. That problem is to keep a Navy in being which over a long period of profound peace will, taken as a whole, not be inferior to the Navy either of the United States or of Japan. But this does not imply the immediate development of the means on the part of the British Navy to dominate either of these two Powers in their own quarter of the globe.²⁴

These arguments were extremely effective. Admiral of the Fleet Earl Beatty, Churchill's former secretary, told his wife, "That extraordinary fellow Winston has gone mad. Economically mad."²⁵

Churchill might have made his criticisms for economic and political reasons, but he offered them at the level of foreign policy and grand strategy. The navy also had its own internal critics of its plans for the Far East. In 1924, Vice Admiral Herbert Richmond, commander in chief of the East Indies Squadron, criticized British plans for war with Japan at the strategic and operational level. "It is better frankly to acknowledge our inability," he proclaimed, "than to live in a fool's paradise." Richmond's comments were directed at his colleagues who had developed a strategy that ignored reality. This trend nonetheless became even more pronounced in the 1930s as it became more difficult for the British to meet their foreign-policy obligations. The political will to raise taxes was absent, and the economic strength required to maintain a stronger fleet was weak. "Is it not time that the National Government took the question of the defence of Singapore more seriously?" demanded Sir Maurice Hankey, secretary of the Committee for Imperial Defence, of Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald.²⁶

Another problem was that the fortress at Singapore turned out to be a hollow shell. The armed services were confused about how best to protect the facility. The Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy engaged in a bitter feud about which would be best, fighter aircraft or naval guns, in holding off the Combined Fleet. The British also lacked the political resolve to build the base. Funding was never adequate. At the end of the 1920s, in fact, the dominions and colonies had contributed more to its construction than had the United Kingdom. The Labour government that came to power in London in 1929 decided to cancel the construction of this naval base. As a practical matter, this decision had little long-term impact. Contracts with construction firms for the dockyards had to be honored, and planning work went forward.

Other features like defensive fortifications, however, were not built. With the "ten-year rule" in place—in essence a declaration that great-power war was so unthinkable over the coming decade that the United Kingdom could afford a strategic pause—there seemed little need to pursue such efforts in strenuous fashion. Real work on the base started only after the Manchurian incident of 1931 and the Shanghai incident of 1932. The British Chiefs of Staff Committee assigned a subcommittee of deputies to study the situation in the Far East. The deputies' conclusions were rather pessimistic. They reported that "our present political difficulties in dealing with the Sino-Japanese problem at the

present junction arise very largely from the insecurity of our naval bases at Hong Kong and Singapore.” The main problem was that the Great Depression had made it impossible for the United Kingdom to maintain enough force strength to defend the base.²⁷

The instability following the end of the Anglo-Japanese alliance created other problems for the British. In 1933, the naval attaché at the British Embassy in Tokyo declared, “Our Intelligence Service has found it increasingly difficult to get any information concerning their Armed services. Our Confidential Book on Japan is some thirty years out of date. We know little about their warships—they could build a new battleship or aircraft carrier without our knowing.”²⁸

In Hankey’s view, the British government was beginning to reap what it had sowed.

The real fact to be faced is that over a period of years all the Defence services have been starved; that they have had to sacrifice bit by bit their ability to fulfil their defensive obligations. They can stage Navy Weeks, Tattoos and Air Displays, but cannot sustain a major war. We have but a façade of Imperial Defense. The whole structure is unsound, and repairs on whatever scale we can afford must include the foundations of the Navy, on which the whole Empire depends.²⁹

It was quite common in the 1930s for members of the Cabinet to bemoan the loss of the alliance. Sir Warren Fisher, the head of the Civil Service, offered the most realistic view of Anglo-American relations: “We cannot overstate the importance we attach to getting back, not to alliance (since that would not be practical politics) but at least to our terms of cordiality and mutual respect with Japan.” His reasons were simple. “The very last thing in the world we can count on is American support.”³⁰

Foreign Minister Sir John Simon took a different view of the matter. “We are incapable of checking Japan in any way,” he observed, “if she really means business and has sized us up, as she certainly has done. Therefore we must eventually be done for in the Far East, unless the United States are eventually prepared to use force.” But Simon was skeptical in this regard. “The Japanese are more afraid of the U.S. than of us, and for obvious reasons. At present, however, they share our low view of American fighting spirit. By ourselves we must eventually swallow any & every humiliation in the Far East. If there is some limit to American submissiveness, this is not necessarily so.”³¹

Events throughout the 1930s would only prove Sir Warren and Sir John correct in their views of the United States and of British power in the Pacific. The Royal Navy was losing its advantages in both quality and quantity.³²

In 1935, domestic electoral politics derailed efforts undertaken in Parliament to authorize rearmament. Then the abdication crisis surrounding King Edward VIII drowned it out altogether in 1936. This incident arose when the king informed Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin that he intended to marry

Wallis Simpson, an American divorcee, after her second marriage ended. Baldwin and the Cabinet refused to assent to the match, as British law and constitutional procedures required. They told Edward either to resign the throne or to give up Simpson. The king decided to abdicate.

Winston Churchill tried to develop a scenario that would give the monarch time to reconsider his decision in the hope that he would give up the American. He was deeply troubled at the constitutional ramifications of a Cabinet forcing a monarch off the throne. This issue might have been nothing but froth on the waves of substance were it not for the fact that many thought the unpredictable Churchill was trying to use the crisis as a way of bringing down Baldwin's Cabinet, perhaps creating a King's Party in opposition to the prime minister that would have eliminated the political neutrality of the monarchy. One of Churchill's publishing associates demanded to know of him: "How can you suggest that the present state of things should be prolonged for five months—five months of raging & tearing controversy, quite possibly a King's party being formed against the Government, the Crown a centre of schism tearing Country and Commonwealth to pieces & all this at this moment in world affairs?"³³

In 1937, with the start of the Sino-Japanese War, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain admitted that his government "could not put forceful pressure on the Japanese without [the] co-operation of the United States." He had his doubts about the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. "The power that [has] the greatest strength [is] America, but he would be a rash man who based his calculations on help from that quarter." With isolationist sentiment quite strong, the options of American officials were limited. Although bitter, Chamberlain's famous observation had a good deal of substance: "It is always best and safest to count on nothing from the Americans but words."³⁴

British colonies in Asia and the Pacific were vulnerable—a fact of which British officials were well aware. Admiral Ernle Chatfield, the first sea lord, bluntly informed Sir Thomas Inskip, the minister for coordination of defence: "Imperially we are exceedingly weak. If at the present time, and for many years to come, we had to send a Fleet to the Far East, even in conjunction with the United States, we should be left so weak in Europe that we should be liable to blackmail or worse."³⁵ Chatfield's view was not an isolated one on the Chiefs of Staff Committee. The Joint Planning Committee warned that a war with Japan would never be a one-on-one contest. Many people in different regions harbored grievances against the British and could be counted on to take advantage of British problems. "This country is never likely to be faced by a situation in which our plans for a war in the Far East can be framed without reference to consequent risks in other areas."³⁶

As the 1930s progressed, then, the two major threats to British interests were Japan and Germany. In 1935, the Defence Requirements Committee, a body chaired by Hankey which included the chiefs of staff and a representative of the Treasury, reported,

We consider it to be a cardinal requirement of our national and Imperial security that our Foreign Policy should be so conducted as to avoid the possible development of a situation in which we might be confronted simultaneously with the hostility, open or veiled, of Japan in the Far East, Germany in the West and any power on the main line of communication between the two.

In that last category were individual nations in the Middle East intent on eliminating British dominance, as well as the Indian National Congress, which was pursuing independence for India. These parties would not make common cause with the Germans or the Japanese; they would simply try to manipulate the larger confrontation to their advantage.³⁷

The naval predicament was particularly acute. In a letter to Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, the commander in chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, Chatfield discussed the problems the Royal Navy faced:

The whole situation as regards the Fleet going East is at present very uncertain; naturally I am averse to sending it if it can be avoided but I am making all preparations as far as I can. Neither am I forgetting the difficult questions of maintenance, ammunition etc. Obviously the fleet that you will have to take out is not very satisfactory, but if it did go out I think we should be certain to have the American Fleet as well and that will make a great difference.

While the Americans were sympathetic and might make good allies, this development was uncertain at best: "All talk, however, of any action by the US is taboo and highly secret, but we won't mention it to anybody else. Anyhow one can never be sure what they will do so we cannot rely on them absolutely."³⁸

Starting in the late 1930s, American officials came to see the importance of helping the United Kingdom defend its colonial possessions in the region. By 1941, this conviction was firmly in place within the executive branch of the U.S. government, as well as the armed services. The problem was that such a view would hardly play well in public with the children of the American Revolution. Whether the United States could have gone to war in 1941 or 1942 primarily to protect British colonies is a question that is unanswerable.³⁹

The person who had to handle the Japan issue was Winston Churchill. Churchill had always been fairly consistent in his views toward Japan. While he did not want to preserve the Anglo-Japanese alliance if it threatened to pull the United Kingdom into a war with the United States, he had recommended continuing it in some modified form. He also had no problem with Japanese military action in China and Manchuria. Appearing at the Conservative Association at Oxford University in 1934, he was asked whether "Japanese foreign policy threatens the security of our Empire." Churchill explained, according to notes taken by one of the students, "Japan doing in China what England did years ago in India. Manchuko a good thing."

As first lord of the Admiralty during the early days of World War II, Churchill continued to deprecate the likelihood of war between Japan and the United Kingdom. He refused to believe that Japan would embark on such a “mad enterprise.” Yes, Britain was relatively weak in the Pacific vis-à-vis Japan, but the distance between Singapore and Japan was equal to that between Southampton and New York. He told the War Cabinet, “Although it is not at present within our power to place a superior battle fleet in the Home waters of Japan, it would be possible, if it were necessary, to place a squadron of battleships in the Far East sufficient to act as a major deterrent on Japanese action so far from home.” If the Japanese started a war with Britain, about all they could do was “insult Australian or New Zealand shores.”

There was a good deal of truth to these views, but they overlooked the danger to British territories closer to Japan, namely Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Burma. More to the point, Churchill doubted the Americans would just sit and watch the Japanese advance. “It seems very unlikely that the United States would impassively watch the acquisition by Japan of Naval bases west and southwest of the Philippines. Such an act of Japanese aggression would seriously compromise the whole American position in the Pacific.” In his public statements, however, he was careful about what he said about Japan: “We have no quarrel with the Italian or Japanese people.”⁴⁰

President Franklin D. Roosevelt helped when he told Churchill he would issue a warning to Japan that Washington would regard an attack on British territory as an action hostile to the interests of the United States. “This is an immense relief, as I had long dreaded being at war with Japan without or before [the] United States. Now I think it is all right,” he informed one of his generals on December 7, 1941. Yet that same day, the U.S. ambassador to the Court of St. James, John G. Winant, reminded him that only Congress could declare war.⁴¹

Japan solved this issue by attacking U.S. and British bases. In 1936, the authors of “The Defense Policy of the Japanese Empire” had added the United Kingdom to Japan’s list of future potential enemies. There was a good deal of debate in Tokyo in 1940–41 about the strategic connection between the United States and Great Britain. Shigemitsu Mamoru, the ambassador in London, argued, “The policies of Britain and the US are not joint but parallel. So far these parallel policies have not necessarily been in accord in aim or conduct.” Planning officers in the IJN pushed the view, which eventually won out, that the United States would come to the aid of the British if the Japanese attacked Malaysia or Hong Kong.⁴² Perhaps this would have occurred, but it is at least debatable.

What is clear is that, unlike his predecessors, Prime Minister Winston Churchill got lucky. After the British ended the Anglo-Japanese alliance, they never had the resources in the Pacific to deal with their former ally as a potential

foe, and they never managed to acquire the United States as a partner until the actual outbreak of war in the region. This luck also had its limits. The Japanese victories of 1941 and 1942 brought down the British Empire, while the ultimate victory of the Allies in 1945 did little to repair the damage.

What does this account tell us? For one thing, no two historical situations are ever the same. History does not repeat itself exactly, but this work of applied history shows that there are some broad lessons to be learned from the British experience. Specifically,

- *Know yourself, know your enemy, know your allies.* None of the decisions made by British leaders were stupid or unwise. Many of them made sense at the time. Yet these leaders all failed to respond to the major shift in the balance of power that took place in Asia after World War I. Japan had grown stronger, the United Kingdom weaker. The United States had grown stronger too, but it was, as Britons noted, an uncertain ally.
- *A strategy should be a strategy.* The plans the Royal Navy developed in the interwar period were operational plans premised on moving the fleet from one point to another and doing battle. There was never any serious examination of how to defeat Japan. Nor were these plans tied to policy. Churchill was right that no dispute between Japan and the United Kingdom was pressing enough to warrant conflict.
- *Avoid making enemies needlessly.* The Royal Navy developed battle plans against the IJN in large part because it was the only available opponent. The Foreign Office tended to avoid policies that conflicted with those of Japan, but British leaders were ultimately unable or unwilling to give up British interests in China. This finally brought about conflict between the two island nations. In both cases, the British helped turn the Japanese into their enemy.
- *Avoid denial.* Groupthink can be deadly. Astute leaders appraise the international and strategic situations honestly and develop plans to deploy available resources. Misperceptions about the world can be extremely difficult to recover from, and policies and strategies based on them will be counterproductive. Such was the case for the British at both levels.
- *Dissenters are good.* Richmond pointed out flaws in British strategic planning. Having internal critics is a good way of avoiding a pack mentality—if these critics' complaints and objections are listened to and responded to in honest fashion. The problem for Great Britain was that dissenting views never got full consideration from planners in the Admiralty.
- *Alliances are a means to an end rather than a goal in and of themselves.* Most coalitions are developed to respond to specific needs and interests. These partnerships can survive and even endure, but they must be adjusted as international affairs change. It is ironic that the British got this right but were unable to replace their alliance with Japan with an alliance with the United States, and eventually had to depend on luck to bring about an Anglo-American pact.
- *Luck cuts both ways.* Japan was a wonderful enemy for the British in the sense that it unified the United Kingdom and the United States, resolving the British strategic dilemma. In this case, contingency worked in favor of the British, but at the cost of their empire, which was not so lucky after all.

Finally, it is worth noting that the inability of the British to avoid war with Japan in no way guarantees that the United States will face a conflict in the Asia-Pacific. There is a saying that an intelligent man learns from his mistakes and a wise man learns from those of others. Let us hope that today's American officials are wise men—and that they learn from past mistakes on the part of their British cousins.