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The rising challenge in the Asia-Pacific, Britain and Imperial defence in the age of the Ten-Year Rule (1919-1932)

di DAVIDE BORSANI

Abstract: *In Gran Bretagna, le necessità di austerità economica conseguenti alla Prima Guerra Mondiale generarono una politica, la cosiddetta Ten-Year Rule, che mise la difesa imperiale in una “gabbia” finanziaria per tredici anni, dal 1919 al 1932. Da un lato, il governo britannico riteneva che le azioni aggressive del Giappone nell’area dell’Asia-Pacifico contro i territori dell’Impero non fossero una contingenza da prendere seriamente in considerazione nel breve-medio termine. Dall’altro lato, principalmente per iniziativa dell’Ammiraglio, il governo riconosceva che l’egemonia navale nel teatro andasse preservata a lungo termine e, pertanto, le ambizioni giapponesi potevano rappresentare in futuro una sfida potenziale per la sicurezza dell’Impero, soprattutto agli occhi di Australia e Nuova Zelanda. Con tali premesse si tennero la Conferenza Navale a Washington e le Conferenze Imperiali a Londra negli anni ‘20. Il governo britannico informò i Dominion della sua intenzione di costruire una nuova base navale a Singapore, cercando modalità per condividere l’onere. Emerse la divergenza di opinioni tra i Dominion, compresa la questione del rinnovo dell’alleanza anglo-giapponese. L’espansionismo giapponese all’inizio degli anni ‘30 cambiò la situazione, minacciando la posizione navale britannica nell’Asia-Pacifico e spingendo l’Ammiraglio a chiedere la sospensione della Ten-Year Rule. Alla fine, la “Rule” fu abbandonata dal governo britannico nel 1932, mentre la base di Singapore fu completata nel 1938.*

Generations of scholars have scrutinised the balance of power and the changing British role in the Asia-Pacific region during the 1920s and the 1930s. What this essay is proposing to do is not to survey the existing literature. On the contrary, it will put the events into perspective by stressing some points that seem of particular interest not only for the interwar years but also for the current strategic environment, which is characterised by a significant great

power competition, including in the Asia-Pacific region between the United States and China¹. Nevertheless, the goal is not to draw clear-cut “lessons learned”, but to stress that, as a prominent columnist of the British newspaper “The Financial Times”, Gideon Rachman, recently maintained, there are «distinct echoes of the 1930s» in today’s «geopolitical struggle» in Europe and Asia². This essay tries to emphasize part of them without entering into details of current affairs.

Thus, this study will investigate how the supremacy of the then-naval “superpower” – Great Britain – was challenged inside and outside its borders, particularly in Far Eastern waters by the Japanese, and how it tried to keep its role through a wide range of means, even by resorting to its closest allies – at the time, the Dominions. Indeed, the need to enhance the Imperial alliance by resorting to multilateral cooperation seemed crucial for British foreign policy.

The challenges to British naval power

In 1919, as a world power with global interests, the stability and prosperity of Britain depended on the sustainability of its Imperial maritime routes and, as a consequence, on overseas trade. From a military perspective, the Royal Navy had been the tool to preserve the hegemony over the seas for more than a century against other European powers. Indeed, it had an uncontested position of supremacy in controlling the high seas and denying them to any would-be naval competitor. Thanks to such superiority, London could keep the communication routes open with its overseas territories in times of peace and war. This constituted a vital interest for the Motherland and its colonies, especially if one considers that

¹ In U.S. strategic language, the concept of “Asia-Pacific region” evolved into “Indo-Pacific region” during Donald J. Trump’s presidency (2017-2021). See the *U.S. National Security Strategies* published by the Obama and Trump administrations in 2010, 2015 and 2017. They are now available at the following webpages: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/> and <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

² G. Rachman, *China, Japan and the Ukraine war*, “The Financial Times”, 27 March 2023.

the survival of the Empire largely depended on the economic flows between the imperial centre of London and its overseas periphery³.

On the one hand, the German defeat in the First World War and the following scuttling of the *Kaiserliche Marine* at Scapa Flow in June 1919 showed that the Royal Navy had no prominent naval rival in Europe anymore. On the other hand, Japanese and American huge naval investments during the Great War compromised British plans. In 1916 the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, pursued a naval rearmament project aimed at making the U.S. Navy a naval force «second to none»⁴. With the Naval Act approved by the U.S. Congress in the summer of 1916, the U.S. Navy was promised more than one hundred new ships, including ten battleships, six battlecruisers and thirty submarines. When the President's Special Representative, Edward House, pointed out that this could lead to a naval competition with Great Britain, Wilson replied that the goal for the United States was to «build a Navy bigger than hers and do what we please» over the seas⁵.

For its part, during the First World War, the Imperial Japanese Navy seized the German outposts in the Pacific waters (the Marshall Islands, the Mariana Islands and the Caroline Islands) and on the Chinese coast (Tsingtao, in the Shantung peninsula). Then, it aimed at taking advantage of the relative quietness in the Asian theatre – at least, when compared to what was happening at the same time on the land in Europe and in the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Between 1917 and 1918, indeed, Tokyo approved a shipbuilding program aiming to compete primarily with the U.S. Naval Act of 1916⁶. The Imperial Japanese Navy would have

³ For a brief introduction on the Royal Navy's role, see C. Loyd, *A Short History of the Royal Navy (1805 to 1918)*, London-New York, 2016 (or. ed. 1942); D. O. Spence, *A History of the Royal Navy: Empire and Imperialism*, London-New York, 2015; J. Leyland, *The Royal Navy. Its Influence in English History and in the Growth of Empire*, New York, 2011 (or. ed. 1914); E. Grove, *The Royal Navy Since 1815. A New Short History*, New York, 2005.

⁴ G. Davis, *A Navy Second to None. The Development of Modern American Naval Policy*, New York, 1940.

⁵ Quoted in P.P. O'Brien, *British and American Naval Power: Politics and Policy, 1900-1936*, Westport, 1998, p. 117.

⁶ L.A. Rose, *Power at Sea. The Breaking Storm, 1919-1945*, Columbia-London, 2007, pp. 16-17.

increased its size by over sixty ships, casting the shadow of an arms race in the Pacific. So, the challenge the American and Japanese directly posed to the British was even more complicated by their latent rivalry⁷.

To complicate further an already complex strategic environment, at the time the U.S. and Japan were not only competitors for Britain. Washington was also a high-level political partner, sharing some vital interests in the Far East, including the Open Door Policy in China. Meanwhile, Tokyo was a consistent ally since 1902, being crucial in preserving the regional balance and relieving the military burden on British shoulders. However, the Anglo-Japanese alliance was ending in 1921 unless further extended⁸. Tokyo would have desired to continue the alliance to avoid a significant increase in geopolitical and naval tensions in the region. After all, the Japanese were focusing mainly on the competition with the other side of the Pacific and were available to update the treaty to satisfy the British, who tried in their turn to avoid that the United States would perceive it as a direct threat to its maritime security. In other words, Britain found itself between the hammer and the anvil of a new naval triangle at the end of the Great War⁹.

As well, the post-war national economic policy challenged British supremacy over the seas. In August 1919, the government led by the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, approved the so-called Ten-Year Rule. As a measure to decrease military spending, it postulated the unlikelihood of a war between great powers over the following ten years¹⁰. It also intended to free up resources to be spent on civilian rebuilding rather than armaments. The British Cabinet stated that «the British Empire will not be engaged in any great war during the next ten years, and that no Expeditionary

⁷ H.P. Willmott, *The Last Century of Sea Power*, vol. II: *From Washington to Tokyo, 1922-1945*, Bloomington, 2010.

⁸ I. Nish, *Echoes of Alliance, 1920-30*, in Y. Kibata-I. Nish (eds), *The History of Anglo-Japanese Relations*, vol. 1, *The Political-Diplomatic Dimension, 1600-1930*, London, 2000, pp. 255-278.

⁹ J. Bailey, *Great Power Strategy in Asia. Empire, Culture and Trade, 1905-2005*, London-New York, 2007.

¹⁰ C.J. Bartlett, *British Foreign Policy in the Twentieth Century*, New York, 1989, p. 33.

Force is required for this purpose»¹¹. Hence, the Ten Year-Rule was formulated without taking into proper consideration any significant change in international politics arising over the next decade¹².

The Royal Navy requested the Rule to be complementary to maintaining the role of naval supremacy or, at least, equal to the next strongest naval power. Indeed, the Two-Power Standard policy adopted in 1889 had already collapsed during the previous decade under the blows of Germany (and the United States). During the immediate post-war period, it was clearly unsustainable, and had to be replaced by the less-financially committing One-Power Standard. It meant the U.S. Navy had become the naval benchmark in the Admiralty's eyes¹³. Nevertheless, between 1919 and 1923, the Treasury cut two-thirds of the funds allocated to the Royal Navy, downsizing further its ambitions. Even the Army and the newly founded Royal Air Force (RAF) were hit, sharing together the same budget as the Navy. In the Treasury's view, which was paramount at the time, the Armed Forces had to be kept at minimum strength to save taxes. As a consequence, if Britain wanted to keep its role as a naval "superpower", it could not rely on armaments but on diplomacy and international cooperation. In 1928, the Ten-Year Rule became self-perpetuating¹⁴.

Moreover, if one looks at the evolution of military technology, new dynamics were set in motion. The First World War challenged the traditional importance of naval power, giving birth to the modern concept of air power. This had consequences in political, military and industrial fields. In Britain, the RAF was founded in 1918 in response to specific needs that emerged since 1915 to guarantee the defence of the Motherland from German air raids and to reply similarly by hitting the enemy with offensive operations independent of the action of the naval or land forces. The RAF's need to establish itself as an independent force and limited

¹¹ Quoted in A. Clayton, *The British Empire as a Superpower, 1919-39*, Houndmills-London, 1986, p. 18.

¹² C.J. Bartlett, *British Foreign Policy in the Twentieth Century*, New York, 1989, p. 33.

¹³ See: P. O'Brien, *British and American Naval Power: Politics and Policy, 1900-1936*, Praeger, Westport, 1998; D. J. Lisio, *British Naval Supremacy and Anglo-American Antagonisms, 1914-1930*, New York, 2014.

¹⁴ P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, New York, 1976, pp. 273-274.

economic resources in the age of the Ten-Year Rule increased tensions with the Admiralty¹⁵. Actually, an overall underestimation of the air power at the highest level impaired the strategic planning of Imperial defence, mainly in the Far East, as the build-up of the Singapore naval base will show.

The Britannic Alliance and naval defence in the Far East

In the diplomatic landscape, Britain was not alone. Alliances were key, mainly if they were founded on common values and shared interests. The First World War accelerated the process of reform for the British Empire, intensifying its new phase that was the “third”¹⁶. After the “first” Atlantic Empire and the “second” focused on Asia and India, the «British world system» began rebuilding its pivot at the end of the XIXth century, resting on a bloc formed by the “white” Dominions or, in other words, the relationship between Britain and the main self-governing colonies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa¹⁷. Meanwhile, India had to maintain its key role due to its strategic weight of «English barracks in the Oriental seas from which we may draw any number of troops without paying for them», as Lord Salisbury remarked in 1882¹⁸.

In this reforming process, fulfilled with the Statute of Westminster in 1931, the Great War was a fundamental step. It laid the foundations for the creation of the British Commonwealth of Nations, or, according to the expression adopted in that year, the “Imperial Commonwealth of autonomous nations”. Indeed, the Imperial War Conference in 1917 created a new association of nations inside the British Empire. This association was based on

¹⁵ M. Cooper, *The Birth of Independent Air Power. British Air Policy in the First World War*, London, 1986.

¹⁶ A. Zimmern, *The Third British Empire. Being a course of lectures delivered at Columbia University, New York*, London, 1926.

¹⁷ J. Darwin, *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge, 2009.

¹⁸ Quoted in L. Knight, *Britain in India, 1858-1947*, London-New York-New Delhi, 2012, p. 19.

cooperation among formal peers in foreign and defence affairs¹⁹. In fact, it was much more than an association. It was an unwritten alliance, or, as the British journalist Richard Jebb already put it in 1913, a «Britannic Alliance»²⁰. Despite the lack of a codified *casus foederis*, the coordination between Britain and the Dominions resembled a modern political-military alliance with common plans, integrated forces, shared institutions and diplomatic consultation. The Imperial Conferences held on a regular basis and the Committee of Imperial Defence were the supreme bodies of this *de facto* alliance²¹.

The rise of the United States as a great power represented a significant challenge not only in naval terms for Britain but also for Imperial unity and solidarity. Despite some divergences with the Wilson Administration, including the diplomatic «naval battle» at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919²², Lloyd George ruled out a military conflict with the Americans since it was the worst outcome of all in terms of security and economy. Even a naval race in response to the Naval Act of 1916 was considered financially untenable, so the U.S. friendship was considered a geopolitical requirement in British international posture. Canada sponsored this line since it was very sensitive to U.S. strategic interests. And the reason is quite understandable if one looks at the map. Not by chance, the Canadians played the role of facilitators in promoting the dialogue between London and Washington over the years²³.

On the other hand, the Japanese rise was a topic discussed at the Imperial Conferences since the formation of the Anglo-Japanese alliance. In 1902, the treaty dissatisfied New Zealand and

¹⁹ See D. Borsani, *Imperial Commonwealth, il "grande esperimento" del 1917 e la terza fase dell'Impero britannico*, "Eunomia", no. 2 (2017), pp. 275-304.

²⁰ R. Jebb, *The Britannic Question. A Survey of Alternatives*, London, 1913, p. 173.

²¹ See also J. Darwin, *A Third British Empire? The Dominion Idea in Imperial Politics*, in J.M. Brown-Wm.R. Louis (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. IV: *The Twentieth Century*, Oxford-New York, 1999, pp. 64-87.

²² M. MacMillan, *Isosceles Triangle: Britain, the Dominions and the United States at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919*, in J. Hollowell (ed), *Twentieth-Century Anglo-American Relations*, Basingstoke-New York, 2001, pp. 1-24.

²³ D. Mackenzie, *Canada, the North Atlantic Triangle, and the Empire*, in J. M. Brown-Wm. R. Louis (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. IV, *The Twentieth Century*, Oxford-New York, 1999, pp. 574-596.

Australia. In their eyes, Japan was not ally, but an aggressive power threatening regional stability. Over the years, both Dominions changed their mind, perceiving the alliance as an ultimate guarantee of Japanese friendship. However, they remained quite anxious about Japanese ambitions in the Pacific²⁴.

While civilian estimates in London regarded conflict with Tokyo as a remote possibility that would happen only as a reaction to a threat, the goal of securing the Asia-Pacific maritime routes went to the top of the Royal Navy's priorities. The "War Memorandum (Eastern)" was the guiding strategic document. It was regularly updated throughout the interwar years. More broadly, it planned a three-phase war against Japan. The first phase considered that the main fleet would be dispatched eastwards while a small force was retained in home waters. In the meantime, the main naval base in the Far East had to withstand an attack for a month and a half (at least). The second phase envisaged that the naval forces would arrive in the Pacific from Mediterranean, Asian and South American waters. After assembling, they would move northwards. The liberation of the highly exposed colony of Hong Kong was a priority to restore British prestige and naval capability in the area. The third phase planned that perhaps a great naval battle against the Japanese could happen. However, the main task of the fleet was to pressure and block the enemy's mainland. No invasion would take place. The operations would last no less than three months. According to this plan, the Navy held a number of exercises in the Mediterranean to simulate the situation if Japan attacked the Strait of Malacca²⁵.

What about the above-mentioned main naval base in the Far East to offer critical facilities to dock, refuel and repair warships of the British fleet? After the Great War, there was still no major dockyard east of Suez, as Admiral Lord Jellicoe warned following his World Cruise in 1919²⁶. Singapore seemed to be a well-protected

²⁴ Wm. Roger Louis, *British Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939*, Oxford, 1971, pp. 50-78.

²⁵ A. Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939. Planning for War against Japan*, London-New York, 2004, pp. 48-73.

²⁶ The four-volume report by Admiral Lord Jellicoe is available at the following webpage: <https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/reports-adml-jellicoe> (accessed April 2023).

sanctuary considering its geographical position quite far from any Japanese possession. It would have made an attack on British interests unlikely before the fleet arrived. Moreover, it would have given the Royal Navy the high-level mobility to conduct operations in the area as a sort of Far Eastern equivalent to Scapa Flow. Indeed, it was a strategic point in proximity to the Pacific Dominions, India and Hong Kong, at a crossroads between the main trade routes²⁷.

Against this background, the Imperial Conference met in 1921 with two prominent strategic issues on the agenda. First, the relationship with the Japanese. Second, the strengthening of naval defences in the Pacific. On its side, Tokyo was in favour of renewing the alliance with London, and the British government seriously considered proceeding. Japan had remained loyal to Britain during the war despite a number of imperialist temptations, and the alliance could continue, at least to grant a watch upon Japanese ambitions that otherwise would lack. However, the British government saw it not as a bilateral question but as a multilateral issue concerning the Britannic Alliance. Canada opposed the renewal, mostly to satisfy its powerful neighbour, the United States, which was against an alliance between its two naval competitors. The Canadian stance was an alarm bell to signal that the centre of gravity in the English-speaking world began shifting towards the U.S.²⁸

The Imperial debate was particularly heated. Australia and New Zealand were furious. On the one hand, there was unanimity on the priority of preserving the security of the maritime lines of communication with the Motherland. But, on the other hand, the continuance of the Anglo-Japanese alliance was a subject of tensions²⁹. Australia and New Zealand accused the Canadians of sacrificing Imperial unity and security to please the ambiguous and inconsistent Americans. Even the Royal Navy was against the renewal, asking for a firm policy against Japan. The

²⁷ See M. H. Murfett *et al.*, *Between Two Oceans. A Military History of Singapore from 1275 to 1971*, Singapore, 2011, ch. 6.

²⁸ J.B. Brebner, *Canada, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the Washington Conference*, "Political Science Quarterly", vol. 50, no. 1 (1935), pp. 45-58.

²⁹ J.C. Vinson, *The Imperial Conference of 1921 and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance*, "Pacific Historical Review", vol. 31, no. 3 (1962), pp. 257-266.

British government found a compromise after parallel talks with Washington and Tokyo. The bilateral alliance would have been dissolved and replaced by a multilateral agreement to guarantee the stability of the Asia-Pacific. This eventually happened with the Four-Power Treaty signed in Washington in 1921 by the United States, Britain, Japan and France. Nevertheless, this agreement had no triggering clauses, only a consultation mechanism if crises arose. Not by chance, it proved to be highly ineffective during the 1930s³⁰.

At the Imperial Conference, a further point was raised. Under the Admiralty's advice, the British informed the Dominions of the intention to build a major naval base in Singapore, looking for ways to share the burden. The post-war economic measures, including the Ten-Year Rule, made it impossible for Britain to do it alone. South Africa and, again, Canada showed little interest in the project, but they did not oppose it. The same went for India, which admitted to being too poor to help financially. However, Australia and New Zealand supported the initiative, adding that they had to be consulted in planning the Imperial naval strategy in the Far East. Over the years, this proved unacceptable for the Admiralty. As well, the British government rarely notified policy changes to their Dominion counterparts in advance. Hence, it seemed that Britain asked its allies to pay for the Imperial defence and the Singapore base without giving them a real say in the naval strategy³¹. The Singapore story will be examined more comprehensively in the fourth paragraph.

The naval triangle after the Washington Conference

The Washington Naval Conference held between 1921 and 1922 was crucial for the Asia-Pacific and the British Empire. The Washington Naval Treaty, which was signed after many weeks of

³⁰ For a more thoroughly analysis on the Four-Power Treaty, see D. Borsani, *Le Grandi Potenze alla Conferenza di Washington*, in A. Vagnini (a cura di), *Politica estera e questioni navali. L'Italia e la Conferenza di Washington*, Rome, 2020, pp. 19-110.

³¹ W.D. McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942*, London, 1979, pp. 19-38.

negotiations, fixed the ratio 5:5:3:1.67:1.67 for the battleships of the United States, Britain, Japan, France, and Italy. It was slightly higher in favour of France and Italy for aircraft carriers while still leaving each country free to build auxiliary ships and submarines. The above-mentioned Four-Power Treaty, valid for ten years, recognized the signatories' respective rights about their insular possessions in the Asia-Pacific region, proposing the convening of an extraordinary conference in the case any dispute involving their rights could not be satisfactorily resolved by ordinary diplomacy³². Furthermore, this Treaty suggested holding consultations if any other power would appear as a competitor in the area, whose aggressive actions could threaten the status quo. It was an implicit reference to Germany and the Soviet Union, which were still at the margins of international diplomacy³³.

In the difficult economic context of Great Britain, the agreements on the limitation of naval armaments and the maintenance of the status quo in the Far East helped reduce the burden on the shoulders of British taxpayers. From this point of view, the goal that London had set to save money on a possible naval race against Washington and Tokyo was achieved. But what was the price? The Conference marked the symbolic beginning of the decline of British power. Although the fall had already started at an industrial level between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the Washington Naval Treaty can be historically considered the moment in which the British power definitively lost, at least from a diplomatic perspective, its role as the global maritime hegemon. After all, this was also the cause and the consequence of maritime power becoming regionalised after the Great War³⁴. It was regional supremacy rather than global hegemony that increasingly interested naval strategists. Thus, the Washington Naval Treaty had the goal of guaranteeing a situation of a balance of

³² E. Goldstein-J. Maurer (eds), *The Washington Conference, 1921-22. Naval Rivalry, East Asian Stability and the Road to Pearl Harbor*, London-Portland, 1994.

³³ E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, London, 1995, p. 36.

³⁴ J.R. Ferris, *The Symbol and the Substance of Seapower: Great Britain, the United States, and the One-Power Standard, 1919-1921*, in B. J. C. McKercher (ed), *Anglo-American Relations in the 1920s. The Struggle for Supremacy*, London, 1991, pp. 55-80.

power over the high seas while taking into consideration distant regions and rising powers. So, the Royal Navy had to recalibrate its global presence in relation to competitors and new strategic requirements³⁵.

The geopolitical implications of the Treaty were huge. If one considers that the U.S. Navy was divided between two coasts and the Royal Navy had to preserve many Imperial routes ranging from the Caribbeans to the Pacific, supremacy in Far Eastern waters was indirectly recognised to Japan. According to U.S. Admiral Harry Shepard Knapp, who attended the Paris Peace Conference as a naval expert, the outcome of the Washington Conference allowed the Imperial Japanese Navy to dominate the Pacific, delivering a tremendous blow to the naval power of the United States³⁶. Moreover, the recognition of the status quo in the Asia-Pacific, which bound the contracting parties not to increase the number of bases and fortifications in an area of vital Japanese interest, plus the simultaneous naval presence of Washington and London in other regional theatres, guaranteed the Japanese a high level of security behind which they could develop their military resources and assert their voice on Far Eastern issues. Japan was also recognised by its diplomatic counterparts as a crucial interlocutor, as it had desired since the end of the XIXth century. In other words, thanks to the Washington Naval Conference, Tokyo obtained a “place in the sun” in the region and a stable seat at the table of the great powers³⁷.

With the benefit of hindsight, even the military balance in the case of war looked gloomy for the British. According to the Treaty tonnage ratios, if a conflict would occur against Japan only, the Royal Navy could send a superior force in the Far East with a sufficient margin. Nevertheless, problems would arise if Japan was an ally of any European power. At this point, London must involve France as an ally in the conflict, making Britain dependent on another country for its security. If Japan had been allied with two European powers,

³⁵ F. Sanfelice di Monteforte, *Guerra e mare. Conflitti, politica e diritto marittimo*, Milan, 2015, p. 131.

³⁶ J.B. Duroselle, *Da Wilson a Roosevelt. La politica estera degli Stati Uniti dal 1913 al 1945*, Bologna, 1963, p. 257.

³⁷ I. Nish, *Japan and Sea Power*, in N. A. M. Rodger (ed), *Naval Power in the Twentieth Century*, Basingstoke-London, 1996, pp. 77-87.

the Anglo-French alliance would not be enough, and the Royal Navy would have been exposed to multiple attacks with a view to total defeat. In this scenario, the decisive factor was the United States, but many British military planners were quite doubtful it could be relied upon entirely considering the competition between the U.S. Navy and the Royal Navy. So, the new maritime order sanctioned by the Washington Naval Treaty seemed sustainable for the British until a significant European threat arose³⁸.

The build-up of the Singapore naval base

The Washington Naval Treaty did not allow the British to build a fortress in Hong Kong, but it permitted the construction of the Singapore base. Works on it were eventually approved at the Imperial Conference in 1923 without codifying any shared obligations among the allies. Like Britain, the Dominions had to face economic constraints, and military spending was not high on their list of priorities. Nevertheless, once again, each Dominion agreed on the principle of defending the Asia-Pacific maritime routes and Singapore's relevance in the Imperial strategy. Actually, over the years, New Zealand was the only Dominion to make financial gifts, while Australia contributed by ordering some vessels to British shipbuilding. Their contributions were not a game changer in the longer term. Financially, in 1930, more than 70% of the construction was paid for by other colonies, such as Hong Kong or the Straits Settlements. Further contributions outside the Britannic Alliance came five years later to honour the Silver Jubilee of King George the Fifth³⁹.

It seems fair to state that donors handed their gifts out to make it politically impossible for London to halt the Singapore project. Indeed, the cancellation was a political issue seriously taken into consideration in the Motherland. The construction of the new naval base was highly debated in the British Parliament and the newspapers. There were two lines. On the one hand, those against the project stressed that the base

³⁸ See J.K. MacDonald, *The Washington Conference and the Naval Balance of Power, 1921-22*, in J.B. Hattendorf-R.S. Jordan (eds), *Maritime Strategy and the Balance of Power. Britain and America in the Twentieth Century*, New York, 1989, pp. 189-213.

³⁹ McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall*, cit.

was too expensive, and the British taxpayer could not afford such a burden in the age of economic austerity. In their view, mainly supported by the Labour party and leftist press, there were other priorities, such as education, housing and childcare. Others against the project highlighted the need for tax relief, which was impossible if military spending increased. Considering that there were no poll institutes at the time, the public feeling seemed to lean towards this first group according to Peter Guy Silverman's study. On the other hand, one of the most recurring arguments in supporting the construction was that Britain had a moral obligation to defend its overseas allies and possessions. According to this line, the colonies and the Dominions, including Australia and New Zealand, sacrificed the lives of their citizens to protect the Empire during the First World War. Now, it was Britain's turn to reciprocate by investing in the Singapore base. The strategic rationale rarely came up in the press, while it was discussed in the Parliament in the presence of military officers⁴⁰.

Cancellation of the Singapore project was a real possibility in the first half of the 1920s. In 1924, the Labour government halted it, at least for a while, to save money and to propose Britain as a leader in international disarmament under the aegis of the League of Nations. The following year, while resuming the project, the Conservative government agreed to downsize it and showed scepticism about deploying the main fleet to Singapore to fight an unlikely battle in Pacific waters. Eventually, the cancellation quickly became more costly than simply postponing contracts and deadlines. In 1929, the Labour government led by Ramsay MacDonald tried to slow down construction as much as possible, but a new halt proved too expensive despite the economic depression and its policy of favouring disarmament⁴¹.

Meanwhile, planning the defence of the new base proved to be contentious among the military. The Navy believed the danger to Singapore would come from a sea attack. Therefore, artillery guns would have provided the main deterrent. On the contrary, the Air Force already began its campaign to support the centrality

⁴⁰ P.G. Silverman, *British Naval Strategy In The Far East, 1919-1942: A Study Of Priorities In The Question Of Imperial Defence*, Ph.D. Dissertation Thesis, Unpublished, 1976, pp. 102-103.

⁴¹ I. Hamill, *The Strategic Illusion. The Singapore Strategy and the Defence of Australia and New Zealand, 1919-1942*, Singapore, 1981.

of the bomber, particularly when compared to a traditional battleship. Also, air power seemed cheaper than any land or naval deployment. The RAF argued that its means were much more inexpensive in carrying out several tasks historically under the responsibility of the Navy, such as coastal defence or the protection of shipping in some areas⁴².

It is important to contextualise this debate. At the time, the Royal Air Force tried to develop its own identity primarily thanks to the charismatic figure of Sir Hugh Trenchard, Chief of the Air Staff from March 1919 to January 1930. The core of his strategic vision was that aerial bombardment was a quick and cheap way to achieve victory, hitting the enemy's morale where it was most vulnerable. In the years of the Ten-Year Rule, it seemed quite appealing to the government. However, given his recent experience in the Great War, Trenchard was also aware that in a war between industrialised countries, the aerial bombardment could have counterproductive effects, reinforcing the enemy's morale. In his opinion, the keys to victory were the surprise caused by an air attack, the psychological unpreparedness of those who suffered it and the effectiveness of the weapons employed. These factors, along with the economic savings guaranteed by the use of air power, were the founding elements of the Air Command theory as well as the use of the bombing planes in the colonies⁴³.

In the Far East, the RAF maintained that the defence of Singapore had to be provided by reconnaissance aircraft and the deployment of bombers to prevent any attack from the north through an enemy's landing. Control of the air, swift awareness and shelling effectiveness were key. The Admiralty, while not opposing the development of naval aviation, was jealous of its primacy facing the RAF's attempts to gain strategic relevance. Thus, in the Singapore affair, it stressed that the Air Force overestimated its capabilities, and the first line of defence of the Empire had to remain the navy. From its perspective, a land attack from the north was quite impossible. The focus must be the sea. In the end, the Admiralty won the argument since its traditional influence

⁴² E.O. Goldman, *Sunken Treaties. Naval Arms Control Between the Wars*, University Park, 1994, p. 105.

⁴³ I.M. Philpott, *The Royal Air Force, An Encyclopedia of the Interwar Years*, vol. 1, *The Trenchard Years, 1918-1929*, Barnsley, 2005.

in British culture and planning was strong at the time. Hence, Singapore would have been defended by a significant deployment of heavy guns in coastal defence manned by the Army, while the Navy would have concentrated on a decisive battle at sea. Only in the early 1930s did three Air Force stations go under construction. However, the few (and obsolete) squadrons deployed there had the only task to hinder an attack until the fleet arrived, according to the “War Memorandum (Eastern)”. Considering what happened during the Second World War and the sudden Japanese conquest of Malaysia from the north, including the Singapore base, this controversy was the most damaging debate in the whole story in the long term⁴⁴.

The wake-up call

While both British political parties accepted the construction of the base at the beginning of the 1930s, Britain was unprepared to face the threats coming together from Europe and the Far East. The Ten-Year Rule, economic depression, policies of disarmament, international naval competition, interservice rivalries, and scarce public support for military spending dramatically weakened Imperial defences. The lack of shipbuilding labour and the shrinking of the arms industry due to financial limitations added further complications. In 1914, eleven firms could produce heavy armaments. Now, only one survived, and the mobilisation of the industry was not on the table. The strength of the Royal Navy was between a third and a quarter compared to the ships in service in 1919. Public opinion was not aware of how weakened the Armed Forces had been. So, Britain had no leverage to deter a change in the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific. Moreover, the Great Depression of 1929 pushed the United States to pursue an inward-looking stance, making Britain more isolated in confronting Japan⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall*, cit., pp. 65-85.

⁴⁵ P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall*, cit., pp. 267-298; C. M. Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy Between the Wars*, London, 2000; McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall*, cit.; C. J. Kitching, *Britain and the Problem of International Disarmament, 1919-1934*, London, 1999.

Therefore, the door for the new wave of Japanese imperialism was open. Firstly, Tokyo started claiming full parity in naval forces with the British and the Americans at the London Conference held in 1930. Then, it invaded Manchuria the following year. Neither Britain nor the U.S. showed any willingness to interfere directly. On the contrary, the Foreign Office silently acknowledged that Japan's actions could be justified because of its economic and demographic growth, and tried to avoid antagonising it openly⁴⁶. Finally, the wake-up call rang for Britain at the beginning of 1932 when Japan attacked Shanghai, impairing British interests and individuals. Ironically, it happened when the international community met in Geneva to open the World Conference on Disarmament⁴⁷.

Figure 1 – *British military expenditure during the 1930s. Amounts are in millions of Pounds. The source is the Annual Abstract of Statistics published by the Central Statistical Office of the United Kingdom.*

Fiscal Year	Defence exp.	Navy	Air	Army
1931-32	107.3	51.1	17.7	38.5
1932-33	103	50	17.1	35.9
1933-34	107.9	53.5	16.8	37.6
1934-35	113.9	56.6	17.6	39.7
1935-36	136.9	64.8	27.5	44.6
1936-37	186	81.1	50.1	54.8
1937-38	197.3	78	56.3	63
1938-39	254.4	95.9	72.8	85.7

The Cabinet decided that the Ten-Year Rule did not reflect the world conditions anymore, and Britain could no longer ignore the «Writing on the Wall»⁴⁸. As a consequence, the Ten-Year Rule was abolished, and works on the Singapore naval base were accelerated

⁴⁶ Roger Louis, *British Strategy*, cit., pp. 171-205.

⁴⁷ C.J. Kitching, *Britain and the Geneva Disarmament Conference. A Study in International History*, London, 2003, p. 51 and the following pages.

⁴⁸ This is the expression used by a report of the Committee of Imperial Defence in February 1932. See McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall*, cit., p. 106.

as the main priority in defence planning⁴⁹. Nevertheless, only after the failure of the Geneva Disarmament Conference in November 1934, as shown in the figure above, the British rearmament programme started with a significant focus on bolstering air power to defend the Motherland and deter a possible bombing campaign by Nazi Germany⁵⁰. In absolute terms, however, the Royal Navy still was the main beneficiary of military spending. Once the Washington Naval Treaty formally came to an end in 1936 after Japanese denunciation, full naval rearmament began, including the construction of battleships and aircraft carriers⁵¹. Meanwhile, events in Europe had already undermined the main assumptions of the British naval strategy. London found itself in the uncomfortable situation of choosing between Europe or Asia-Pacific as the main priority in defence planning without consulting the Dominions, and the Australians protested⁵².

The Singapore base was finally opened in 1938. At the end of the day, London paid the largest sum for its construction as a consequence of its Imperial leadership, responsibilities and needs. In 1928 the estimated cost was 13 million pounds, but ten years later the total expenditure increased four times⁵³. According to estimates, contributions from the Empire amounted to around 25% of the total spending⁵⁴. At the base inauguration ceremony, the presence of three American ships was not unnoticed. In hindsight, this turned out to be another “Writing on the Wall” for the British. A few years later, indeed, the United States eventually replaced Britain as the leading naval power in the Asia-Pacific, in the English-speaking world, and even beyond⁵⁵.

⁴⁹ P. Haggie, *Britannia at Bay. The Defence of the British Empire against Japan 1931-1941*, Oxford, 1981.

⁵⁰ C.M. Bell, *Churchill & Sea Power*, Oxford, 2013, p. 143.

⁵¹ R.P. Shay Jr., *British Rearmament in the Thirties. Politics and Profits*, Princeton, 1977; S. Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars*, vol. II, *The Period of Reluctant Rearmament, 1930-1939*, Annapolis, 1976.

⁵² Hamill, *The Strategic Illusion*, cit., pp. 234-310.

⁵³ D. Owen Spence, *A History of the Royal Navy. Empire and Imperialism*, London-New York, 2015, p. 137.

⁵⁴ The percentage is the result of author's calculations based on different data and bibliographical sources, including McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall*, cit. and Roger Louis, *British Strategy*, cit.

⁵⁵ See D.C. Watt, *Succeeding John Bull. America in Britain's Place*, New York, 1984.

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