

The Sullied Strategy: The Singapore Strategy's Unfair Reputation

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Abstract

This article will examine Britain's military strategy in Malaysia and Singapore prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. By tackling the successive debates one at a time: the landward threat, the naval component and the air threat, this article makes the case that despite the failures of 1941, the Imperial military strategy centred on Malaya and Singapore, known as the Singapore Strategy, was not flawed as some historians have argued previously. Whilst some argued a de-militarisation method was preferable, the strategic importance of Malaya, coupled with a full investment into the Singapore Strategy, which did not occur, would have been far more beneficial to the Allied effort.

Keywords: Military Strategy, The Second World War, Winston Churchill, The Far East, The Singapore Strategy.

Introduction

Britain's war with Japan is a generally unknown period of history for the wider British public. The 2020 Victory over Japan Day (VJ Day) celebrations marked the 75th anniversary of the Allied victory in the Asia-Pacific theatre and they provide even more incentive to delve into the past. Yet, despite the commemorative day, the struggle against Japan is not present in the UK's national conscience to the same extent as the war in Europe. There are a variety of reasons for this, ranging from geographical proximity and scale of effort, to less defined sentiments of shame for the heavy losses occurred in the early stages of the conflict with Japan¹. Such losses, following the declaration of war against the Allies in 1941, included Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, the Philippines, various islands in the Pacific, and Indonesia, then known as the Dutch East Indies. The size and speed of the losses of these possessions have led to near-universal repudiation of the so-called Singapore Strategy Britain relied on in those early days.

¹ See "The Forgotten Army," *The Royal British Legion*, undated. www.britishlegion.org.uk/get-involved/remembrance/remembrance-events/vj-day/remembering-the-forgotten/why-is-the-fourteenth-army-known-as-the-forgotten-army [Accessed 29 September 2020].

Although there is consensus among historians that Britain's war in Europe significantly hindered Britain's ability to defend her Far Eastern colonies from Japan, the debate within academic circles as to the main reason for the fall of Singapore and Malaya remains ongoing². Many historians, and indeed contemporary commentators of the period, looked back to the interwar strategy and argued that the Singapore Strategy was flawed from the outset³. This strategy was not a singular entity as such, but rather a series of war plans drawn up between 1919 and 1941.⁴ These plans evolved over the years but were primarily focused on the defence of British Far Eastern colonies east of the Suez Canal, though this did not mean that these plans were purely defensive in nature⁵. A crucial part of the strategy was, as the name suggests, the defence of Singapore. The city's large naval base at the tip of the Malay peninsula was supposed to hold out with impregnable defensive fire until a substantial fleet could arrive to secure supremacy of the seas around Malaya and Singapore⁶. The Singapore strategy was conceived with the growing naval threat of Japan in mind⁷.

The critiques levelled against the Singapore strategy have been multifaceted. They have ranged from suggestions that it was too defensively focused; that it encouraged complacency and passiveness in forces present—a sort of 'Maginot Line' of the East; that it was overly focused on the naval paradigm and not enough on threats from overland; that it was the wrong strategy in the age of airpower; and finally that any strategy that hoped to hold Singapore and Malaya was doomed to fail due to Britain's military and economic weakness, meaning a de-militarised strategy would have been more realistic and appropriate⁸.

With this in mind, this article will make the case that what is outlined above is incorrect. The Singapore Strategy was not an ill-conceived framework nor was it detrimental to the Imperial defence of Malaya and Singapore. This article will assert that the Strategy did consider the weakened military, specifically the naval, position that Britain and its Empire found itself in during the interwar period. It was a perceptive military strategy that attempted to offset the initial advantages an attacker,

² Bernard Fook Weng Loo, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 79, no. 1 (2006): 129.

³ Peter Elphick, *The Pregnable Fortress: A study in Deception, Discord, and Desertion* (London: Coronet Books, 1995), 41.

⁴ Christopher M. Bell, *The Royal Navy, Sea Power, and Strategy Between the Wars* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Ong Chit Chung, *Operation Matador: Britain's War Plans against the Japanese 1919–1941* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997), 26.

⁷ W. David McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919–1942* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), 19.

⁸ William R. Rock, Review, "Far Eastern influences upon British strategy towards the Great Powers," by R. John Pritchard," *Albion* 21, no. 4 (July 2014): 677.

namely Japan, might possess by using the tactical advantages of fighting on the defence. The cause for its failure should instead be seen as the consequence of the utter neglect of the region's defence in the months before the Japanese attack by Britain's wartime leader, Winston Churchill.

The first part of this essay will focus on discussing whether the Singapore strategy overemphasised the naval threat to the detriment of defending from landward threats. Following from this, it will next assess the validity of the claim that the strategy failed due to the investment in land-based fortifications and the consequent lack of invest in airpower. The final part of this essay will seek to address the argument made that the best strategy would have been to de-militarise the Far East because no military-based strategy in the Far East could have succeeded given Britain's global commitments and prioritisation of other theatres. Whilst the de-militarisation strategy had merit, it was not necessarily a superior one to the Singapore Strategy chosen. Indeed, if the Singapore Strategy had been fully invested in, rather than the 'middle-of-the-road' decision by UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill, it would have had a far greater chance of success.

The Singapore Strategy and its Failings

Before progressing, it is crucial to briefly explain the tenets of the Singapore Strategy. The Singapore Strategy purpose was to defend the Malayan peninsula from outside aggression, namely Japan. Through the construction of air bases in the North of Malaya and the maintenance of the coastal fortifications in Singapore, it would form an impregnable fortress against any aggression into resource rich South East Asia. It was formed on the premise that Britain's naval might was no longer undisputed, a situation resulting from Britain's domestic policies regarding disarmament and international treaties, such as the Washington Naval Treaty of 1921–22, which limited naval construction⁹. The Strategy therefore was to play for time, allowing for a relieving fleet to be sent from another theatre. The strategy envisioned employing a variety of land forces and aerial power to prevent any hostile invasion of the Malayan peninsula. Air bases were constructed from 1936 onwards in the eastern and northern parts of Malaya,¹⁰ while the ground-based anti-naval defenses of Singapore itself were maintained. In this regard the Singapore strategy was both strategically perceptive in recognising the disadvantages that Britain may face and sought to maximise the tactical advantages of the defensive to offset advantages a potential aggressor, namely Japan, might have in the region through fortifications.

⁹ Andrew Webster, "Piecing Together the Interwar Disarmament Puzzle: Trends and Possibilities," *International Journal* 59, no. 1 (2003): 192.

¹⁰ Chung, *Operation Matador*, 67.

The Landward Threat

Despite these positives, the Singapore strategy has been criticised by a plethora of historians. One such criticism of the Singapore strategy has been that the northern jungles of Malaya were a blind spot of the entire endeavour, leaving Singapore open to attack. The point made is that northern Malaya in general remained relatively ignored by military commanders and planners in the Far East as a potential route for an invading army to use. This view has been advocated by historians such as Peter Elphick and Louis Allen¹¹. Elphick makes the case that there was extensive military oversight within Far Eastern Command when it came to the planning of the defence of Malaya and Singapore. He outlines that: because the view prevalent in military circles in the early 1930s was that the Malayan Jungle constituted an “impenetrable” barrier to an attack on Singapore from the rear. It was generally accepted in Britain and Malaya that any assault by Japan on the fortress would be made from the sea and that the Singapore guns would take care of the attacks once they came within range. As a result of this misconception little military cognizance was taken of the need to defend the mainland of Malaya in addition to Singapore itself.¹² And so, the Japanese bypassed the crux of the defence by penetrating through the jungles of Malaya. The main basis of this argument is that commanders and planners dismissed difficult terrain as a possible route of attack because it was unviable for an attacking army to travel through.

Detractors of the Singapore strategy, such as Ian Morrison, have been eager to point to the supposed similarities between the Singapore strategy and France’s interwar defensive strategy based on the Maginot line. Morrison remarked that, ‘People had sheltered, not behind the naval base, but behind the defensive concept of which the naval base was the chief visible expression. Other people had done the same thing behind the Maginot Line’.¹³ This line of thought follows that both were a series of defensive strategies relying on fixed fortifications that assumed that terrain on its flanks were impenetrable to the attacking force. In fact, it would be these exact ‘impenetrable’ areas of terrain that would see Japanese troops and German Panzers come pouring through.

The cause of this blinkered thinking was the threat from the Imperial Japanese Navy to Singapore. The naval artillery of Singapore has become, for critics, the embodiment of this over-emphasis on the naval threat in defence planning to the exclusion of other concerns. Supposedly, when the Japanese invaded from Thailand through Malaya, the naval guns were pointing the wrong way and could not transverse to fire inland. Moreover,

¹¹ Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War* (London: JM Dent and Sons Ltd, 1984).

¹² Elphick, *The Pregnable Fortress*, 41.

¹³ Ian Morrison, *Malayan Postscript* (London: Faber and Faber, 1942), 143.

said guns were insufficiently equipped with high-explosive rounds, the ammunition suitable for firing at soft inland targets¹⁴. They therefore could not provide fire support for troops inland and served little purpose in the actual defence. These are the factors that form the basis of Louis Allen's criticism that the Singapore naval base was 'useless' and justifies his viewpoint by explaining that the 'the attempt to protect it from a vast seaborne attack was a waste of money, energy, and equipment'¹⁵.

Whilst these criticisms of the Singapore strategy at first appear convincing, given that both British Malaya and Singapore fell; the reality in actuality is very different. *First*, the belief that military commanders and planners in the Far East were oblivious to the jungle as a main route that an attacking force would use runs directly contrary to the reports of the military staff in the Far East right throughout the interwar period. Ong Chit Chung in fact contradicts Elphick's claim that the land threat was not recognised 'until 1936'¹⁶ and further notes that:

Major General Sir Dudely Ridout, [General Officer Commanding] Malaya expressed in 1918 his grave concern about Japanese control of land in the vicinity of Singapore. Ridout was anxious about the landward defence of Singapore. Japanese acquisition of land in Malaya, especially Johore, was closely monitored. It became one of the perennial issues on the meetings of the Overseas Defence Committee and the Committee of Imperial Defence.... Thus, as early as 1918, before the conception of the Singapore naval base, the authorities were concerned about the landward defence of Singapore¹⁷.

Thus, the military staff were very much aware of the land threat and possibility of an invasion through the jungle. By 1941, they had predicted that this would be Japan's most likely route of advance, illustrated by the fact that they had formulated Operation Matador. This plan was devised by Far Eastern Command to pre-emptively seize the airfields and landing grounds in the Siamese Kingdom (Thailand) before the Japanese could gain access to them, thus proving that the British were much aware of the threat¹⁸.

Additionally, it is perhaps unfair to criticise the coastal batteries of Singapore as being a waste of resources and wholly useless. It is important to clarify that, as Chung explains; 'except for two 15-inch guns, they (the coastal guns) all had all-round traverse and could aim at landward targets'¹⁹. The more accurate criticism, outlined by Bill Clements, was that

¹⁴ Bill Clements, *The Fatal Fortress: The Guns and Fortifications of Singapore, 1819–1956* (London: Pen and Sword Books, 2017), 137.

¹⁵ Louis Allen, *Singapore 1941–1942: Revised Edition* (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd, Abingdon: Frank Cass, [1997] 2005), 228.

¹⁶ Elphick, *The Pregnable Fortress*, 41.

¹⁷ Chung, *Operation Matador*, 27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 124

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

the Singapore coastal artillery had 'a problem of ammunition...there were only fifty high-explosive shells available for each 6 inch gun, twenty five of these rounds for each 9.2 inch, and none at all for the 15 inch gun'. Furthermore, the armour piercing shells, which they were largely equipped with, were of 'little use against enemy personnel and artillery' and were designed to penetrate the armour of enemy capital ships²⁰. Thus, it is not that they were pointed in the wrong direction, it is that they were not supplied with enough ammunition for the assumed decisive battle the fortress was designed to fight.

However, the coastal artillery, even without high explosive shells, served their primary purpose: deterring an amphibious invasion of Singapore itself. Chung disputes the validity of Allen's view when he makes the case that:

it is plain that the guns of Singapore were not pointing the wrong way. They were installed, in the first instance, primarily for the defence of the Singapore base against naval attacks. That there was no direct naval attack proved that these guns were completely successful in their main mission and earned their keep²¹.

Although it is true that the 15 inch guns were not stocked with high explosive rounds, it should also be recognised, as Chung astutely states; 'in the age of mechanized warfare all the guns and fortifications in the world would not have ensured the landward defence of Singapore'²².

In all, it is unjustified to criticise the Singapore strategy as being flawed given that the landward threat was recognised before its development and taken into consideration by the Committee of Imperial Defence in the Far East. Additionally, it is unfair to view the investment in the coastal batteries of Singapore as a waste of resources in the interwar period given that they served their deterrent purpose. The possibility of an amphibious invasion of Singapore was deterred through the comprehensive coastal batteries of Singapore and a lack of high explosive shells for the coastal artillery did not detract from their value as a means to deter and destroy any naval and landing forces trying to amphibiously assault Singapore. To assess the guns in any other way would be to unfairly analyse them for a duty they were not supplied to perform.

The Air Component

Moving away from the land-centric views, Ian Hamill has criticised the decision to invest in coastal guns over airpower in the interwar 'guns versus air' debate. He argues that inter-service rivalry, which was largely the Army and Royal Navy pitted against the Royal Air Force,

²⁰ Clements, *The Fatal Fortress*, 137.

²¹ Chung, *Operation Matador*, 26.

²² *Ibid.*

prevented a sound strategy from being achieved²³. Given the way historical events unfolded and the desperate need for airpower to support British, Indian, and Dominion troops, Hamill's argument appears logical. That is because, to an extent, Hamill is correct in that British airpower was desperately needed during the Malayan and Singapore campaigns of 1941.

Captain A.N. Grey, a participant involved with preparing the defences of Malaya, recalls that 'We had only a few fighters—some 36 American "Brewster". These were not good aircraft and had already been rejected by the United States Navy'²⁴. Air Chief Marshall Brooke-Popham recalled, however, that, as of 7 December 1941, there were 60 Brewster Buffalo fighters in theatre, alongside 158 frontline aircraft with 88 in reserve.²⁵ Whether it was 37 or 60 Buffalos it mattered little as the aircraft was woefully inadequate and ill-suited for the mission. The 158 aircraft deployed were still far below the minimum 566 aircraft required for an adequate defense force, as recommended by the Malayan tactical appreciation of October 1940²⁶. This lack of numerical superiority is even more pronounced when considering that the Japanese would field 1,181 aircraft in the attack²⁷.

To compound this issue, the antiquated Brewster F2A Buffalos were markedly outmatched by the modern and extremely agile Japanese A6M Zero naval fighters. Out of the 1,181 Japanese aircraft in use, 338 were naval aircraft, of which it would be reasonable to expect the large proportion of these would be Zeroes²⁸. A Buffalo could reach 13,000 feet in 6.1 minutes compared to their Zero adversaries which could reach 13,000 feet in just 4.2 minutes and was 45 mph faster than the Buffalo at 10,000 feet²⁹. In both numbers and quality, the Allied contingent was outmatched. As a result, when battle was joined, Japanese airpower prevented Allied naval bombers from interdicting Japanese troop transports in any significant way, giving the Japanese further advantages in the advance on Singapore.

However, this does not fundamentally mean that the decision to invest in coastal defences was the wrong choice. A direct Japanese amphibious assault on Singapore could not be guaranteed to be stopped by airpower alone. The Royal Navy proved it was possible for a side

²³ Ian Hamill, *The Strategic Illusion: The Singapore Strategy and the Defence of Australia and New Zealand* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981), 119–122.

²⁴ Andrew Nichol Grey, *An Account on the Fall of Singapore* (London: Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, n.d.), 8–9.

²⁵ Robert Brooke-Popham, "Operations in the Far East from 17th October, 1940, to 27th December, 1941"., *Supplement to the London Gazette* (London: 22 January 1948), 573–5.

²⁶ Chung, *Operation Matador*, 166.

²⁷ Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall?: Churchill and the Impregnable Fortress* (London: Routledge, November 2003), 196.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

to conduct naval operations even when the enemy possessed superiority in the air when it evacuated Allied troops off Crete, although this came at considerable cost to itself³⁰. And as already noted, the coastal batteries of Singapore were a useful deterrent. What thus suggests is that if Britain had slightly more planes to the Far East in 1940 or 1941, the chances of Malaysia and/or Singapore holding would have increased, particularly given that Japanese air dominance was a crucial to Japanese success on the peninsula in 1941-2.³¹

Ultimately it was Churchill's decision that meant that the Malayan peninsula would not receive more fighters and naval bombers in 1941. In November 1940, a revised appreciation concerning the defence of British colonies in the Far East, asked for 126 of aircraft reinforcements to be sent to Malaya over the next six months³². Churchill, despite the Chief of Staff's support for the proposal, refused to send the requested reinforcements³³. Nor was it the case that Britain did not have these aircraft to spare. Russell Grenfell calculates that if the aircraft sent to the Soviets during 1941 and those sent to Greece in 1940 were sent to the Far East instead then 'the [Air Officer Commanding] Malaya could by the autumn have had a total of 802 modern aircraft instead of the 141 old crocks'³⁴. Moreover, as Chung notes, Churchill need not have sent vast numbers of planes to the detriment of other theatres because planes that were sent there before the Japanese invasion would have been maximised to their greatest potential. 'Once the RAF was strengthened...the British should be able to prevent the Japanese from establishing air bases within range of Singapore'³⁵. This is corroborated by C.A Vlieland, when he speculates that:

in the North West Malaya, where the whole issue of the campaign was really decided, there were completely open areas which the invader had to transverse. There tanks, field guns and aircraft could have been used with deadly effect. If the defending forces had been supplied with such weapons on even a modest scale...I believe the whole Japanese adventure could have been nipped in the bud³⁶.

Vlieland, who was appointed Secretary of Defence of Malaya in December 1938, reveals that the defending forces were insufficiently equipped to fight the Japanese. Nor can the case be made that a Japanese attack was unforeseeable to Churchill's war cabinet in 1941. The Japanese invasion of French Indochina in September 1940 should have

³⁰ Antony Beevor, *The Second World War* (London: Hachette UK, 2012), 171.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 265.

³² Chung, *Operation Matador*, 130.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Russell Grenfell, *The Main Fleet to Singapore* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1951), 86.

³⁵ Chung, *Operation Matador*, 99.

³⁶ Charles Archibald Vlieland, *Disaster in the Far East 1941-1942* (London: Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, 1965), 16.

served as forewarning to Churchill that Japan had intentions to expand into the South East Asian region. Had these signs been heeded by Britain's wartime leader and action taken, like sending adequate air and naval reinforcements to the Malayan Peninsula, then the defence of Singapore could have been successful.

The Sea Component

The British submarines were a crucial part of the Singapore strategy³⁷. They had significant military potential for both defensive and offensive operations. During the interwar period the 4th Submarine Flotilla, stationed in the Far East between 1918 and 1939, was the largest submarine group the Royal Navy had and were considered the best submarines the Royal Navy possessed³⁸. James Goldrick makes the case that these submarines could have enabled a successful defence of the peninsula as he states that the 'submarines were...the most practicable and cost-effective solution to the problem of delaying a Japanese onslaught in the Far East long enough to allow the Main Fleet to arrive and begin operations. Had they been given the chance; British submarines may well have made a difference'³⁹.

Goldrick speculates that, had the 4th Submarine Flotilla not been withdrawn from their Far Eastern station as they were in 1940 and sent to the Mediterranean, British submarines 'might not have been able to stop a seaborne invasion by the Japanese, but they would not have allowed it to be a bloodless one'. Churchill should not be solely blamed here for the decision to send submarines from the Far East to the Mediterranean. This was initially taken when Neville Chamberlain was Prime Minister. Nonetheless the decision to keep them in the Mediterranean during 1940-1 was under Churchill's leadership. Goldrick makes the case that there should have been greater military analyses by Churchill's Chief of Staff and the decision should have been reached that the long-range submarines designed for the Far East – the O-, P-, and R-class submarines – would be sent back to the Far East given that they were too large for the shallow and confined Mediterranean waters⁴⁰.

Goldrick's case is validated further when one assesses the Imperial Japanese Navy's (IJN) ability to defend convoys and ships against submarine attacks. It becomes clear that it was an area that they significantly overlooked. This stemmed from the fact the IJN had a top-heavy fleet that was doctrinally driven by a desire for *Kantai Kessen* (naval fleet decisive

³⁷ James Goldrick, "Buying Time: British Submarine Capability in the Far East, 1919-1940," *Global War Studies* 11, No. 5 (November 2014): 33.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

battle) through powerful surface fleets centred around dynamic battleships⁴¹. Much of this can be explained by the conclusions that interwar Japanese naval officers and theorists like Sato Tetsutaro drew from the battle of Tsushima⁴². Yet, this over-emphasis on a fleet-on-fleet paradigm meant that the IJN's Anti-Submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities and doctrine in general remained largely neglected in pre-war Japanese naval construction and planning. This is best exemplified by the fact that most Japanese destroyers during the war were not equipped with sonar or radar, essential for detecting submarines⁴³. Japanese destroyers, although excellent as fleet destroyers, were not designed to act as escort vessels, with exception of the destroyer-escorts of the Matsu-class, of which only 24 were completed, the first being commissioned in 1944 – too late to affect the outcome of the war at sea⁴⁴.

The failure of the IJN to insufficiently integrate the concept of ASW into their doctrine meant that had British submarines been stationed in the Far East, as they were in 1939 under the requirements of the Singapore Strategy, they would have made a Japanese attack on Singapore and Malaya, certainly much more costly, and potentially unsuccessful. Consequently, in combination with a more potent RAF in Malaya, a successful defence of the Malayan peninsula could have feasibly been achieved.

Ian Hamill, as an exemplar of the standard thesis, attributes the cause of failure of the Singapore Strategy to supposed poor strategic decisions and its inclusion of defences against naval invasions at the expense of other scenarios, such as a landward or aerial attack. Instead, we can now see that during the later years of the interwar period, the Strategy had sought to incorporate airpower into the defence of Singapore and the defence of Malaya as a whole, as seen by the construction of the air bases in Malaya.⁴⁵ The defence planners behind the Strategy knew that for it to be carried out successfully they needed more aircraft as seen by Brooke Popham's consistent requests for aircraft and the Malayan tactical appreciation of October 1940⁴⁶. In this way, the fall of Malaya and Singapore cannot be blamed on the Singapore Strategy being conceptually flawed in not accommodating or investing in airpower, rather it was that the Strategy was not given the necessary and moderate resources it demanded in order for it to be executed successfully.

⁴¹ David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887–1941* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 495.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴³ Mark Stille, *Imperial Japanese Navy Destroyers, 1919–1945* (1): Minekaze to Shiratsuyu Classes (Oxford: Osprey, 2013), 7.

⁴⁴ John Ellis, *The World War II Databook* (London: Aurum Press, 1993), 299.

⁴⁵ Chung, *Operation Matador*, 67.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

To De-Militarise or not to De-Militarise?

Finally, as an alternative to those who wanted to fight, other scholars criticise the Singapore Strategy for being a waste in resources. They instead argue that the defence of Britain's Far Eastern Empire, in the context of the Second World War, was a lost cause⁴⁷. They instead propose that the full demilitarisation of the South-East Asian sphere by Britain should have been taken before 1941. Indeed, this de-militarised strategy is based on the premise that there was no possibility of Britain and its Imperial subjects, with the war against Germany and Italy raging, holding off Japan from conquering South-East Asia. With that in mind, the de-militarised strategy seems to be justified with the gift of hindsight; although its conclusion is problematic once engaged with more closely.

William R. Rock is the most well-known proponent on this strategy. He comes to this conclusion when he speculates that:

In all her vital interest in Europe, one may wonder whether it would have been both realistic and honorable for Britain to de-emphasize the Far East in her strategic planning.... The preparedness of the British Army for a continental commitment of British defended ports in the Mediterranean and Middle East, and of measures for the air defence of Britain were all adversely affected by Britain's concern to meet the threat of war with Japan⁴⁸.

Rock believes that with the retreat of British, Indian, and Australian forces from Malaya towards Singapore in January 1942, the decision by Churchill to reinforce Singapore with significantly more troops was a bizarre and faulty decision⁴⁹. These reinforcements came too late and would have certainly been much more useful much earlier in the battles over Malaya before the fall of Singapore and in Burma afterwards. The de-militarisation strategy on the Malayan peninsula can be justified by the time of the battle of Singapore, given that a close defence of Singapore would be very difficult to carry out for the Imperial forces because of Japanese sea and air superiority. Antony Beevor is correct when he comments that:

Singapore could never have been an impregnable fortress with Japanese control of the surrounding air and seas. As well as the troops there were over a million civilians on the island, so they would have been starved out in any case⁵⁰.

Moreover, it is difficult to lay the blame for this decision on General Archibald Wavell, Supreme Commander of American-British-Dutch-Australian command. As Royal Navy Captain Andrew Nichol Grey, a staff officer to Brook-Popham, recalls, the 16th Infantry Division, against the

⁴⁷ Rock, Review, "Far Eastern Influences upon British Strategy Towards the Great Powers," 677.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall?*, 185.

⁵⁰ Beevor, *The Second World War*, 253.

wishes of General Wavell, 'had been ordered by London to reinforce Singapore. The C-in-C had asked that it be diverted to Burma. The War Cabinet had disapproved his proposal'⁵¹. The soldiers were imposed on Wavell's command against his recommendations.

The Middle-of-the-Road Failure

The de-militarised strategy was undoubtedly better than Churchill's strategy. This does not mean, however, that the Singapore Strategy was necessarily a worse form of strategy than the de-militarised strategy. It is important to distinguish here that whilst Singapore could not have been held in 1942 under siege, it was possible for the British and its allies to defend the Malayan peninsula successfully. Had the British military command in the Far East received the necessary air defence units, it would have tilted the odds further in their favour. Furthermore, another contribution that could have greatly assisted in the successful defence of the Malayan peninsula were submarines. This was an asset that would have been crucial in stalling the Japanese and inflicting significant casualties on the attacking forces at sea, particularly troop transports, in defensive operations.

Given how resource rich Malaya was and the crucial geographical position in South East Asia, Singapore could have been kept in Allied hands had Malaya been defended successfully from the Japanese 25th Army. The best strategy to keep Malaya in British control was the Singapore strategy. But it was never resourced properly. Perhaps, because those resources were not forthcoming, the demilitarised strategy was preferable. But Singapore's defence was always assumed to properly resourced. Arguably, this debate is meaningless given that neither strategy was chosen by Churchill and a much worse middle-of-the-road strategy formed, but discussion of what might have been had different strategies been employed is important to help understand the cause behind the fall of Malaya and Singapore and inform better strategic decision-making into the future.

Conclusion

In summary, though there have been several criticisms levelled against the Singapore Strategy itself, they are not justified. This becomes evident when it is recognised that: the decision to invest in coastal guns in Singapore was the correct one and did not exclude airpower from the Strategy given that efforts were made to incorporate airpower into the strategy and finally that the Singapore strategy did not over-focus on the naval threat and was created with an appreciation of the land threat from a force attacking through northern Malaya. Additionally, given that there

⁵¹ Grey, *An Account of the Fall of Singapore*, 14.

were feasible ways by which an effective defence of the peninsula could have been mounted, the main premise of the alternative de-militarised strategy becomes discredited.

Instead, it should be seen that Churchill's delusion that a close defence of Singapore was viable was the fundamental reason that he decided to send more troops at the last minute to Singapore⁵². Churchill's ad-hoc strategy towards the Far East was to neglect the defences of the Far East and then to reactively and frantically send reinforcements to Singapore by which point it was too late. Thus, the Churchillian strategy regarding the Far East combined the worst attributes of both the de-militarised strategy and the Singapore Strategy. By failing to properly invest in the capabilities of the defending forces, mainly with the air and sea forces, he had handed the Japanese crucial victories early on in the Malayan campaign and significantly undermined the ability for Imperial forces to be able to defend the Peninsula. Yet his decision to a last-minute reinforcement of Singapore meant that a considerable amount of troops, up to 130,000 soldiers, were lost when Singapore fell, not to mention the damage to Britain's prestige as a result of the soldiers lost, which could have been avoided had a de-militarised strategy been pursued from the outset⁵³. Thus, undoubtedly, the de-militarised strategy was better than the Churchillian delusion that was followed. However, these failures do not take away from the fundamental flaws of the de-militarised strategy.

In these different ways, the Singapore Strategy was the optimal military strategy that the British could have used in 1941 against the Japanese and it would have been effective had Churchill enabled it to be. Indeed, what becomes apparent is that the Singapore Strategy could not be successfully implemented because it was fatally undermined by Churchill's wider war strategy, which deliberately denied the region of its necessary reinforcements vis-à-vis Churchill's decision not to send sufficient air reinforcements before the invasion.

⁵² Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall?*, 185.

⁵³ Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1968), 382.