The loss of Singapore – the failure of the Singapore Strategy

The loss of strategically vital Singapore in 1942 was one of the greatest British military disasters. The garrison of Singapore was lost by a superior British Empire force to a numerically smaller invading Japanese force. The defence of Singapore was a badly flawed strategy to defend the Far Eastern British Empire along with the dominions of India, Australia and New Zealand, known as the Singapore System. The System, championed by Winston Churchill, based on good luck and the outdated assumption British superiority was over optimistic; that by not stationing a fleet at a fully redeveloped Singapore naval base, a Task Force sent from Europe would arrive in time to rescue the besieged outpost. The ill-fated Force Z was sent to do the job in February 1942. The System was a clash between political expediency and military necessity, namely cost versus capability and this created the illusion that Britain could fight a war in Europe and the Pacific simultaneously[1]; but it could not.

British naval strength was restricted after the Washington Conferences of 1922 and resources were further stretched at the outbreak of war, particularly after the fall of France with the loss of the French navy in the Mediterranean. The Royal navy was under pressure in the Far East. Force Z wasn't just the loss of two battleships, the Prince of Wales and Repulse, it was more fundamental than that; it was proof that the Royal Navy could not defend British global interests between India and Australia. The loss of Force Z was also another turning point; this action signalled the end of capital ships as the primary fighting unit. The potential of the aeroplane and the submarine was going to be fulfilled. Subsequently, the fall of Singapore could be seen as the beginning of the end for the British Empire, but it was a failure of British foreign and domestic policy through the 1920s and 1930s and military tactics in 1942.

Churchill was always controversial, as a politician, was often at odds with those around him and not heeding the advice of experts; Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff during World War 2, said Churchill believed he was a military genius[2] but had a "fertile imagination". He had a reputation for being impulsive and impatient, a risk taker, recognised for being ambitious and desperately wanting to be at the centre of British government. Sacked from the Cabinet in 1916 after the Dardanelles disaster, by the 1920s he was Chancellor of the Exchequer and his defence cuts were responsible for the ultimate loss of Singapore.



There wasn't a Royal Commission on the fall of Singapore, however historians have conducted their review but there are differing views on whether Churchill was a saint or sinner. It is generally agreed by historians such as David McIntyre (1979)[3], Ian Hamill (1980)[4], Malcolm Murfett (1993)[5] and Cristopher Bell (2014)[6] that Churchill was the sinner responsible for the damaging cuts to the Navy. They recognised Churchill's balancing act as Chancellor was prioritising social reforms, reducing naval spend and avoiding a politically unpopular increase in Income Tax to pay for the development not only of Singapore but also Malta[7]. John Maurer argues that Churchill was the saint; a great strategist and his disagreements with the Admiralty were justified. Maurer thinks Churchill "possessed a sound appreciation of the course a major war in the Pacific might take"[8] and maintained this "proved a remarkably accurate

[1] Herbert Richmond, Singapore, The Fortnightly March 1942, page 243; in David McIntyre, The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, The Macmillan Press, 1979, page 214
[2] Roberts, Andrew, Masters and Commanders, Penguin Books, 2008, Page 40;
[3] David McIntyre, The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, The MacMillan Press, 1979
[4] Ian Hamill, Winston Churchill and the Singapore Naval Base 1924 – 1929 "A gigantic excuse for building up armaments", Cambridge University Press, 1980
[5] Malcolm Murfett, Living in the Past: a critical re-examination of the Singapore Naval Strategy 1918-1941, Maney Publishing, 1993
[6] Christopher Bell, Churchill and Sea Power, Oxford University Press, 2014, chapter 8, "Courting Disaster: The deterrence of Japan and the dispatch of Force Z"
[7] David Austin, Malta and British Strategy 1925-43, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004, page 172
[8] John Maurer, "Winston has gone mad": Churchill, the British Admiralty and the rise of Japanese Naval Power, Journal of Strategic Studies, December 2012, page 790

forecast" [9]. Maurer also praised of Churchill's First World War record[10] which is at odds with his career ending role in the Dardanelles campaign[11].

The development of the naval base at Singapore was a political football. When it was eventually completed, the development was a compromise[12] and there is an argument that the defence of Singapore was made "on the cheap". The "System" for the defence of Singapore was always optimistic. The "Singapore System" assumed confidence that Singapore if attacked by the Japanese could hold out for six weeks without a fleet in Being, until a Royal Navy Task Force could relieve the defenders. During the 1930s, due to the defence cuts of Churchill this period was extended to six months; which was always going to be a non-starter. This can be seen as a politician's influence, for political expediency, an attempt to minimise multiple political and military priorities. So, it is questionable how serious the British government was about saving Singapore; it didn't fit with the "Germany first" priority agreed with the USA before 1942. One of, if not the highest priority of Churchill's was to draw USA into the war. As early as 1940, Churchill recognised the strategic importance of Singapore; in contradiction to his defence cuts. In one of his first communications with Roosevelt, Churchill had offered Singapore to the US for any action to keep Japan in check and a request for non-belligerency in the Pacific. It wasn't taken up and Singapore fell at about the same time as Pearl Harbor. The attack immediately turned the USA from a neutral country into a full-on combatant.

The Admiralty believed through the 1920s and 30s that Japan was a serious threat in the Far East and Britain had to show a position of strength as a deterrent. Churchill disagreed with the experts, with his counter argument that Japan would never go to war with the British Empire, for "at least a generation"[13] and rejected the Admiralty's requests for a "balanced fleet" in the Far East. Churchill had changed his opinion by the 1940's when he believed that Force Z should be enough of a deterrent to Japan, but this proved to be wrong and Singapore was lost.

There was no single reason, or event, responsible for the failure; it was a sequence of decisions from the 1920s through to 1942. Winston Churchill is widely held as responsible but others also have to be held accountable; it was a long-term collective responsibility. Additionally, the One Power Rule along with the Ten Year Rule when adopted as government policy, had the effects of allowing politicians to legitimise cuts and delay defence spending. Singapore development became a "shuttlecock in British politics", the project was actually cancelled by the Labour government in 1924[14]. Eventually the Admiralty accepted, to save the Treasury money, the reduced "Red Scheme" specification, only to peacetime capabilities, not the wartime standards they originally wanted; subsequently, when eventually completed, the Singapore development was a compromise.[15] The Singapore strategy was pushed down the political agenda by the end of 1925, when the CID decided that the strategy did not even have to be reviewed annually, Churchill had successfully forced his personal opinion and hoped that the strategy would never be needed.[16]

Churchill's understanding of Foreign Policy was questionable and appeared to be based on his own opinions to suit his political agenda. Not listening to the Admiralty, he underestimated the Japanese fighting capabilities and speed at which they could strike[17]. It is debatable how honest the government's commitment was to the defence of Australia[18] and what losses in the Far East [19] Churchill was prepared to take to get the US into the war. Many of these issues were to the detriment of the Royal Navy but Churchill's behaviour and objectives were beyond their control. He certainly knew the risks of the Singapore strategy but was the architect of the loss of Singapore.

As early as 1919, Admiral Jellico identified Japan as the main threat to Britain in the Far East and recommended that a major naval base should be built at Singapore with a large fleet stationed there.[20] The question after this was how, or if, this could be achieved and afforded. By 1921, the Admiralty were still making their case to the Overseas

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[9] IBID page 790
[10] John Maurer, "Winston has gone mad": Churchill, the British Admiralty and the rise of Japanese Naval Power, Journal of Strategic Studies, December 2012, page 782
[11] Bell, Christopher, Churchill and sea power. Oxford University Press USA, 2014, pages 73 to 74
[12] Malcolm Murfett, Living in the Past: a critical re-examination of the Singapore Naval Strategy 1918-1941, Maney Publishing, 1993, page 81
[13] Keyes and Churchill re Japan 1925
[14] Ian Hamill, Winston Churchill and the Singapore Naval Base 1924 – 1929 "A gigantic excuse for building up armaments", Cambridge University Press, 1980, page278
[15] Malcolm Murfett, Living in the Past: a critical re-examination of the Singapore Naval Strategy 1918-1941, Maney Publishing, 1993, page 81
[16] Ian Hamill, Winston Churchill and the Singapore Naval Base 1924 – 1929 "A gigantic excuse for building up armaments", Cambridge University Press, 1980, page285
[17] Malcolm Murfett, Living in the Past: a critical re-examination of the Singapore Naval Strategy 1918-1941, Maney Publishing, 1993, page 94
[18] Bell, Christopher, Churchill and sea power. Oxford University Press USA, 2014, page 231
[19] IBID, page 236
[20] Paul Haggie, Britannia at Bay (New York, Oxford University Press, 1981),1

Defence Committee that Singapore should be developed, in preparation for a war with Japan, because Britain did not have a naval base in the Far East, because Hong Kong was not suitable. It recommended that immediately, the base defences should be strengthened along with new facilities for fuel storage. It also proposed improved docks and repair facilities should also be developed later. These were Naval measures, land-based requirements weren't considered[21]. The Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) and the Cabinet approved the plans.[22]

However, the Admiralty's requests were frustrated during the 1920's. After the Washington Naval Conference of 1922, which restricted Battleship numbers, but not Cruisers, Japan broke the spirit of the conference very quickly by building cruisers with 8" guns; making British cruisers immediately obsolete. In response, the Admiralty planners calculated that a force of seventy cruisers was required and should be part of a "balanced Fleet" based in Singapore.[23] Churchill thinks Admiralty requests are too high because they are based on fighting a war with Japan. He refuses to see the threat, undermining the Admiralty by saying "not the slightest chance of war with Japan in our lifetime"[24]; putting more pressure on with "Japan is on the other end of the world. She cannot menace our vital security"[25]. In 1924 Churchill is publicly in favour of Singapore Naval base development "A gateway which enables us to keep in touch with Australia and the South pacific"[26] confirming that they should not be cut off from the British Empire.

The Foreign Office supported Churchill's views in a letter of 5th February 1925, that war in the Pacific is unlikely. They are confident, that because of the Washington treaty there will not be a war for at least ten years and the situation will stay in its current equilibrium unless another power such as Russia or China enters the region. However, they recognise that Japan could be opportunistic if Britain if was at war in Europe and could not provide naval cover in the Far East.[27]

In March 1925, there are three important letters where Churchill can be further seen as the sinner; between Vice Admiral Roger Keyes, Deputy chief of the Naval Staff and Churchill. On 21st March 1925 Keyes gives an early warning to Churchill that the Navy still consider Japan to be a menace and are making a "ruthless preparation for war". He appreciates that the public does not favour increased military spending but pleads that "something must be done to check the Japanese Naval Expansion or keep pace with it"

In reply on 22nd March, Churchill disagrees with Keyes. He makes his claims there is no danger for "at least a generation" he backs this up with his view that Japan could not weaken the whole British Empire from Asia whereas Germany could in Europe. There is some contradiction to this as he is confident that if attacked "out of the blue" Britain would still defeat Japan. He is also balancing his economic and political agendas and public opinion to prevent a Socialist government coming to power; which would probably cancel the project. Finally, he says he thinks the Admiralty exaggerates the dangers and he puts Keyes in his place when insists they drop the idea of a war with Japan, abandon the plan of putting a fleet in the Pacific, reduce the expense and maintenance of the fleet by every possible means, accept far more reasonable and moderate standards for replacement and make every vessel last as long as possible

Keyes reply on 24th March 1925 reinforces that Britain is restricted by the "One Power rule" and agrees that there is no immediate prospect of war with Japan, but that a visible deterrent is required as a show of strength. He concedes there is no need to station a fleet in the Pacific, but one should be available when necessary, capable of defeating the Japanese fleet[28] but there is no mention of a period of relief.

A compromise is reached, but it is a very watered-down solution for the Admiralty; no fleet stationed at a second-rate Singapore naval base. Additionally, over time the agreed period of relief extended from 6 weeks to 6 months[29]

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[21] Notes on Singapore by Naval members of the Overseas Defence Committee – 5th May 1921

[22] 140th meeting of the CID, 10th June 1921, CAB 2/3; as referenced in, Ian Hamill, Winston Churchill and the Singapore Naval Base 1924 – 1929 "A gigantic excuse for building up armaments" Cambridge University Press, 1980

[23] John Maurer, "Winston has gone mad": Churchill, the British Admiralty and the rise of Japanese Naval Power, Journal of Strategic Studies, December 2012, page 781

[24] Ian Hamill, Winston Churchill and the Singapore Naval Base 1924 – 1929 "A gigantic excuse for building up armaments", Cambridge University Press, 1980, pages 278 to 279

[25] John Maurer, "Winston has gone mad": Churchill, the British Admiralty and the rise of Japanese Naval Power, Journal of Strategic Studies, December 2012, page 783

[26] Ian Hamill, Winston Churchill and the Singapore Naval Base 1924 – 1929 "A gigantic excuse for building up armaments", Cambridge University Press, 1980, page 279

[27] Improbability of War in the Pacific FO371/10958 5th February 1925

[28] Keyes and Churchill re Japan 1925

[29] Malcolm Murfett, Living in the Past: a critical re-examination of the Singapore Naval Strategy 1918-1941, Maney Publishing, 1993, page 76

and the composition of the Task Force could vary according to the European conflict[30], in other words – what could be spared. By 1927, relationships must have been very strained, the Admiralty thought Churchill, compared to when he was First Lord of the Admiralty, had changed his priorities; they thought Churchill: "To behave like a bully", "Absolutely unreliable" and "Quite unscrupulous"[31]. This is consistent with Churchill's behaviour at the Admiralty during the Dardanelles campaign[32].

Through the 1930's the Admiralty continue to make their case for funding but are resisted by Churchill. With Nazi Germany on the rise in 1935, on 20th March, the Director of Naval Plans states that if Britain is at war with Germany, Japan would be opportunistic with aspirations for dominance of the Far East. USA is the other major power in the region and likely to support Britain. Indications were that Japan and Germany were attempting an understanding as they shared similar attitudes towards US and the British Empire.[33] Subsequently, a deterrent was needed and this included the need to strengthen Singapore defences[34].

On the 26th March 1935, in a minute the Director of Naval Intelligence recognises that Britain can't fight Japan in the Far East if also at war with Germany in Europe but he agrees that the understanding between Germany and Japan was real. A war between Britain and Germany would be beneficial to Japan but to win a war with Japan, Britain would need a naval force bigger than Japan's, but that could also lead to exposure at home and public opinion would be against this[35]. It was not until the early 40's that the threat appears to be being taken seriously, confirmed in the general reports of the CoS[36] and war planning[37] but ultimately the naval cuts meant the deterrent from Singapore was too little, too late; a fleet couldn't be spared because Germany was not defeated.

The risky strategy imposed on the Admiralty was to hope for the best but prepare for the best and trust that nothing would happen or go wrong. It failed. Whether saint or sinner, others were involved with Churchill in what were or should have been Cabinet decisions; such as Eden favouring a direct approach of a British and US "Demonstration"[38] and Chamberlain's failed appeasement policy; the risks must have been collectively ignored. There were Victorian attitudes of British superiority and possible racism[39] when Churchill talks about defending against a yellow race[40], all these assumptions would put the Royal Navy at some risk.

However, with hindsight Admiralty thinking should have moved on by 1942 away from Battleships as the primary weapon. The surface fleet strategy since the end of World War One was outdated, without enough recognition of aircraft or aircraft carriers and submarines. Singapore was not retaken after a heroic rescue by a siege-lifting fleet; Japan surrenders after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is debateable what might have been different if Singapore had been properly developed. Would a Fleet in Being along with cooperation from the US have been a deterrent to Japan expansionism? Would Japan have attacked Pearl Harbor and entered into a war with the USA that they knew they could not win? Force Z was the end of the battleship era, besides being inadequate as a deterrent at Singapore, it was not just sunk by aircraft in minutes; they were superior aircraft to anything available to either the Royal Navy or RAF. The Japanese used twin engine Mitsubishis, operating 400 miles from base, flying at 150 knots and dropping 24 inch torpedoes from 100 feet[41] . It is also debatable how effective a Fleet in Being would have been anyway, with such superior Japanese aircraft Singapore could have been a British Pearl Harbor.

[30] IBID, page 77
[31] Pound to Keyes 10th August 1927, as referenced in John Maurer, "Winston has gone mad": Churchill, the British Admiralty and the rise of Japanese Naval Power, Journal of Strategic Studies, December 2012, page 783
[32] Christopher Bell, 2017, Churchill and the Dardanelles, P14.
[33] See Daniel Hedinger, The Imperial Nexus, Journal of global history, 2017
[34] Attitude of Japan and its effect on British strategy ADM/1/27413 20th March 1935 (Director of Plans)
[35] Minute re Japan and Germany, ADM/1/27413, 26th March (Director of Naval Intelligence)
[36] Far Eastern Policy – COS to the War Cabinet - 27th July 1940
[37] The Far East – Appreciation by the COS to the War Cabinet – 5th August 1940
[38] Christopher Bell, Churchill and Sea Power, Oxford University Press, 2014, chapter 8, "Courting Disaster: The deterrence of Japan and the dispatch of Force, page 242
[39] David McIntyre, The rise and fall of the Singapore naval base, The MacMillan Press, 1979, page 222
[40] Christopher Bell, Churchill and Sea Power, Oxford University Press, 2014, chapter 8, "Courting Disaster: The deterrence of Japan and the dispatch of Force Z" page 233
[41] Paul Haggie, Britannia at Bay (New York, Oxford University Press, 1981),208