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Static and Dynamic Strategy Making: Egypt, Singapore, Dill and Brooke

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ABSTRACT
In 1941 Britain faced the strategic dilemma of how to apportion forces between the defence of the British Isles, the Mediterranean and its interests in Australasia. Determining the priorities between these theatres and the required balance of forces was the cause of disagreement between Churchill and his successive Chiefs of the Imperial General Staff, Sir John Dill and Sir Alan Brooke. Ultimately, Brooke was successful in maintaining the trust of Churchill, and retained his job; while Dill was unsuccessful and was sacked. This paper examines the different analytical processes, static and dynamic, that Dill and Brooke employed to determine strategy.

Introduction: ways, means and ends

During the 1920s and 1930s Britain wrestled with the problem of how best to defend the home islands as well as its commercial and imperial interests across the globe, and all this at a time of economic depression and severe limitations in defence expenditure. This problem was initially managed through the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty which limited the naval ambitions of France, Japan and Italy compared to a superior naval parity agreed between Britain and the United States of America (USA). However, in 1923, the USA insisted on the abrogation of the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance. More than ten years of stability followed until, in the 1930s, Nazi Germany began to re-arm while at the same time Japan pursued an expansionist policy under a series of governments dominated by the military.[1]

By mid-1940, with the fall of France, Britain found itself on the horns of a strategic dilemma as it faced Germany and Italy alone, with the Soviet Union in a pact with

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[1]See Stephen Roskill, *Naval Policy Between the Wars, Vols I & II,* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2016; Andrew Boyd, *The Royal Navy in Eastern Waters,* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2017).

Germany and the USA remaining a neutral. Before the USA joined the war, the Mediterranean was the only theatre where Britain and the Axis Powers were directly engaged on land. Up to that point, Britain's strategic problem was essentially how to allocate resources between the defence of the United Kingdom and the Mediterranean while still providing some sort of defence, assumed to be of a deterrent nature, for its Empire in the East. This delicate calculation was dramatically upset when in December 1941 Japan moved against British interests in South East Asia and threatened India, Australia and New Zealand.

Japan's moves greatly increased Britain's strategic concerns of how best to apportion its limited military forces between the needs of homeland defence and its overseas commitments. The consensus between Whitehall and the military was that Britain lacked the capability to simultaneously conduct operations to defend Egypt and defend its Imperial possessions in South East Asia and Australasia. The question of which overseas theatre to resource and which to hold at risk caused much angst and soul searching among politicians and commanders; for Churchill it was a 'tragic issue, like trying to choose whether your son or your daughter should be killed.'[2]

This paper reviews the different approaches adopted by Sir John Dill and Sir Alan Brooke, the successive Chiefs of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) during this period. We consider military strategy in terms of how the contextual ways, means and ends form a relationship between different theatres of conflict and the prioritisation of resources between them. While previous researchers have examined how strategic disagreements between Dill and Churchill led to a premature ending of Dill's tenure as CIGS, they did not consider the analysis that led to these disagreements.[3] To set the context for their thinking, we first review British strategic thinking from the outbreak of war to Dill's appointment as CIGS in May 1940.

Muddling Through: British Strategic Thinking 1939-1940

From the outset of the war, Britain's strategic direction was subject to disruptions and revisions. The immediate cause of this turbulence can be appreciated by considering how the ways, means and ends open to Britain were viewed at the time.

Defining the ends at the beginning of the war was complicated by Prime Minister Chamberlain's unwillingness to state any clear idea of what an acceptable outcome of

[2]W. S. Churchill, *The History of the Second World War*, *Volume III, The Grand Alliance,* (London: Cassell, 1948-54), p. 372.

[3]Alex Danchev, *'Dilly-Dally', or having the last word: Field Marshall Sir John Dill and Prime Minister Winston Churchill*, Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 22 (1987), pp. 21-44; Jeffery, Keith (1982) *The Eastern arc of empire: A strategic view 1850–1950*, The Journal of Strategic Studies, 5:4, pp. 531-545.

the war would look like for Britain. Chamberlain avoided discussion of grand strategy and long-term war policy as the price of maintaining consensus within the War Cabinet. In this approach he was aided by Churchill, probably out of fear that his views on strategy would not be accepted by the cabinet as a whole.[4] Similarly, once Prime Minister, Churchill did not state any explicit war aims but instead talked vaguely about *principles* for the conduct of the war, which included war aims, but did not articulate either these principles or aims.[5]

An immediate consequence of a lack of clear thinking on ends, other than vague statements about the defeat of Germany, was that the military advice received by the cabinet, principally through the Chiefs of Staff (CoS), tended to be disjointed and could not be strategically framed in the absence of any overall policy set by the Cabinet.

From a strictly military point of view, the ways by which Germany should be defeated revolved around two main problems: when to start offensive operations, and where to conduct those operations.

The question of when was dictated by the decision to wage a long war versus a short war. The prevailing view in 1939 was that although Germany held the immediate advantage through arming and mobilising first, the latent power of Britain and France's combined financial and industrial capability would be converted into sufficient military power to achieve success.[6]

A complicating factor was that defence policy in the interwar years relied on a series of treaties, particularly naval ones, and had also evolved to take advantage of the flexibility and reach of maritime and air power to secure Britain's wider global interests. This was especially true in South East Asia, where the Navy's dominance, was enabled through a permanent base at Singapore, and which protected British Malaya and the approaches to India and Australasia.[7] The planning assumption that had

[4]John Kiszely, *Anatomy of a Campaign: The British Fiasco in Norway, 1940*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 43.
[5]Churchill referred to guiding principles which included war aims in speech in September 1941, see Wm. Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941-1945,* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), pp. 129-32.
[6]This argument was widely aired and agreed upon across British society as a whole, see *War and Postwar Economics*, The Economist, 2 September 1939, pp. 434-436.
[7] Malcolm Murfett, *Living in the Past": A Critical Re-examination of the Singapore Naval Strategy, 1918-1941*, War & Society, 11 (May 1993), pp. 73-10.

held since the 1920s and Japan's invasion of China in 1937 was that the dispatch of a British fleet to Singapore would be sufficient to prevent any aggression.[8]

This created a tension in British strategy, even if it was not aired in these terms at the time: how to reconcile the preference for a long war with Germany against the need to prepare for possible future Japanese aggression. Planning assumptions in 1939 considered three years to be the time required to fully equip and train an army of around 50 divisions, which would be capable of launching a joint offensive with France and defeat a Germany by then weakened by an effective economic blockade.[9] It is debatable whether Japan would have risked invading Malaya if Britain and France were on the cusp of the offensive against Germany in December 1941.[10]

Once the BEF deployed to France, it is widely held that the strategic arguments concerning what type of war to fight and where to fight it had been resolved as a long war and with the land fighting to be conducted in Flanders.[11] However, no sooner than the BEF had taken up its positions in France, political and military leaders began to agitate against this perceived passive approach to the war.[12] It was not a reappraisal of long-term global issues, such as those described above, that cast doubt in the belief in a long war approach, but uncertainties as to the true condition of Germany's capability, which in the absence of analysis, allowed legend to lead strategic thinking.

As to where to fight, debates on the need for an alternative or second front were based on echoes of the Westerners versus Easterners arguments of the Great War, rather than the fundamentals of the contemporary situation. The Allies' lack of understanding of their own military and economic position was matched only by their inability to assess Germany's strengths and weaknesses.

The verdict that 'the War Cabinet appeared to have a very limited understanding of strategy or to have an overall guiding policy for the conduct of the war' is unsurprising given that ministers and their senior advisors lacked a suitable framework to even

[8]Peter Lowe, *Great Britain and the Coming of the Pacific War, 1939-1941*, Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Vol. 24 (1974), pp. 43-62.
[9]Talbot Charles Imlay, *A Reassessment of Anglo-French Strategy during the Phony War, 1939-1940*. The English Historical Review Vol. 119, No. 481 (Apr., 2004), pp. 333-372 - for a review of the strategic disputes between Britain and France during this period.
[10]Lowe, *Coming of the Pacific War*, pp. 43-62.
[11]Imlay, p336. See also Adrian, W. Preston, *General Staffs and Diplomacy before the Second World War,* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), pp. 41–64.
[12]Imlay, pp. 333-372.

begin to consider the problem.[13] There was no single organisation within Whitehall capable of conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the permutations of ways, means and ends. Given the high degree of uncertainty as to Germany's true strengths and weaknesses at the time, it follows that confidence in any such assessment would also have been low. Politicians struggled with how to interpret, and where necessary challenge, military advice. Similarly, civil servants and military leaders were unpractised in how to assess proposed military courses of action in terms of their political benefits.

Assessment was conducted on many issues relating to these strategic questions but by different bodies, and at different times. As such, the conclusions were often disjointed and sometimes relied on contradictory assumptions, which made it impossible to aggregate the different pieces into a strategic whole.

These uncertainties in British thinking were amplified by disagreements between the Allies. Both the questions of when and where the war should be fought were debated with France almost continually from the deployment of the BEF until the fall of France.[14]

These decisions were made on preconceptions of strategic ideas more often coloured by memories of 1914 than by an understanding of the contemporary landscape. One consequence of this was that Britain and France often drew very different conclusions when presented with similar evidence on an issue. As an example, Britain was opposed to conducting any military operations in the Balkans on the grounds that it might cause Italy's entry into the war on the side of Germany; at the same time there was a strong opinion within the French military that action in the Balkans would deter Italy from involvement in the war.[15]

Britain was relieved from the conundrums of where and when to fight following Germany's invasion of Norway and France in 1940. Reacting to these events as the main form of resolving strategic decisions was soon to be repeated.

Dill: A Question of Priorities

A significant share of the blame for Britain's inability to clearly formulate strategy in the first year of the war undoubtedly lay with the Chiefs of Staff Committee. This body, consisting of the de facto heads of the Royal Navy, the Army and the Royal Air Force, had the role of providing military advice to the War Cabinet. At the start of

[13] John Kiszely, *Anatomy of a Campaign: The British Fiasco in Norway, 1940*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p 39.

[14] See Imlay, pp. 333-372 for a review of the strategic disputes between Britain and France during this period.

[15] Imlay, pp. 333-372

the war this advice was delivered through the Military Co-ordination Committee which was established in October 1939 to review and report to the War Cabinet on the strategic situation and the progress of operations.[16]

The invasion of France in May 1940 swept away Chamberlain's government which was replaced by a coalition headed by Churchill. One of Churchill's first acts as Prime Minister was to disband the Military Co-ordination Committee and replace it with a Defence Committee with two functions: operations and supply. The Defence Committee retained the Chiefs of Staff but removed the service minsters; in their place Churchill combined the role of Prime Minster with that of Minister of Defence.[17] From this point the development of strategy became increasingly influenced by the personal relationship between the Chiefs of Staff and Churchill.

The need for his Chiefs of Staff to be an acceptable personal fit to Churchill's thinking was demonstrated by the dismissal of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Sir Edmund Ironside. He was replaced by his deputy, the Vice Chief of the Imperial General Staff (VCIGS) Sir John Dill, on 27 May 1940.

A former Commandant of the Staff College and instructor at the Imperial Defence College, Dill was regarded by his peers as one of the leading strategic thinkers in the military.[18] Following his appointment as CIGS, Dill quickly established himself as the font of strategy among his fellow Chiefs of Staff, his 'authority derived from a study and experience of the central direction of war unmatched at that juncture by any other serving officer.'[19] As yet there is no biography of Dill to explain how exactly he developed this authority or his expertise in strategic thinking; although a brief examination of his military career prior to appointment as CIGS offers some clues. [20]

[16]The Military Co-ordination Committee did not enjoy a good reputation and was "otherwise known as the Crazy Gang", see Danchev, pp. 202-230.

[17]John Gooch, *The Chiefs of Staff and The Higher Organization for Defence in Britain, 1904-1984*. Naval War College Review, JANUARY - FEBRUARY 1986, Vol. 39, No. 1 (JANUARY - FEBRUARY 1986), pp. 53-65.

[18]Basil Liddell-Hart, BLH papers, King's College London. Quoted in Danchev, pp 21-44.

[19]Danchev, pp. 21-44.

[20]Historical research into Dill's life and personality is unusually sparse for a man who was to have such influence on strategic thinking during the war. The only biographical reference is Danchev, pp 28-39. Otherwise, pieces of Dill's life require reconstruction from official documents and the lives of others, notably Churchill's mainly autobiographical *History of the Second World War* and Brooke's *War Diaries*. All of these sources have been heavily drawn on for this work, along with unpublished thoughts regarding the different influences on Dill's thinking and how his mindset developed

First and foremost we can consider the influence of the Army Staff College on Dill's development. A student on the 1913 course, Dill's cohort were informed by the Commandant, Sir William Robertson, that they were very lucky to have a definite war to train for.[21] The theoretical basis that Camberley taught him was immediately reinforced with practical experience of staff work during the Great War, as Dill rose through a succession of staff appointments at the brigade, division and corps levels, finishing as a (brevet) Brigadier of BEF Operations at GHQ. The First World War influenced a generation of soldiers and helped the brightest among them work out how to fight a war, or at the very least, how *not* to fight a war.[22]

As well as academic exertions at Staff College, Dill's time as Director Military Operations and Intelligence (DMO&I) at the War Office was important to developing his practical understanding of the application of high-level strategy and logistics. In particular, as DMO&I Dill had to deal daily with multiple theatres and global problems. This gave Dill a full appreciation of the essentials of military strategy: how different theatres of operations are related and how they interact with each other. Dill's ability to master these essentials was noticeably superior to that of his peers - following a conference to brief Commanders-in-Chief on the world situation in 1941, Brooke noted that 'I knew of no man who could marshal strategic events and situations better than he could.'[23]

When Dill joined the Chiefs of Staff Committee, he had spent the majority of his military career either training and instructing on high-level thinking or in roles that required him to apply that thinking. But unparalleled knowledge and experience alone were not sufficient to maintain Churchill's approval. Dill lasted barely 18 months as CIGS before the Prime Minister replaced him with Brooke. The heart of the dispute between them was the question of strategic priorities.

This fatal disagreement on strategic priorities first appears to have arisen due to a telegram from the Prime Minister of Australia, Menzies, on 24 April 1941.[24] Menzies

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that have been provided by Dr E D G Smalley from his research into the history of the BEF between 1939-40.

[21]*Field Marshall Sir John Dill: The Early Years,* Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research, Vol. 67, No. 269 Spring 1989, pp 28-39.

[22]E. D. G. Smalley, (private communication to author August 2019).

[23]Alex Danchev & Daniel Todman (Eds), *War Diaries 1939-1945: Field Marshall Lord Alanbrooke*, (London, Phoenix, 2002), pp 196-197. Note added after the war to the entry for 6 Nov 1941.

[24]The UK National Archive (hereinafter TNA) CAB 79-11-12, Telegram 242, in Annex to JP (41) 335, 28 April 1941.

requested a 'candid and outspoken' appreciation of what assistance Australia could expect from the UK in the event of Japanese aggression in the South Pacific and a German expulsion of Allied forces from the Mediterranean and Iran; the Chiefs of Staff were requested to prepare an appreciation of the global situation.[25] Prior to this, the strategic priorities agreed to by the Chiefs of Staff were the defence of the UK, followed by the protection of Egypt from attack through Libya.[26]

Churchill had previously stated that Britain would prioritise assistance to Australia over the Mediterranean. But in Canberra, concerns were growing that reverses in North Africa and Greece in 1941, and the US recognition of Germany as a bigger threat than Japan, had reduced the priority that the defence of Australia had in the minds of both Britain and the USA.[27]

On 6 May 1941 Dill sent a paper to Churchill, his fellow Chiefs of Staff and General Ismay titled *The Relation of the Middle East to the Security of the United Kingdom.*[28] Dill argued that the order of priorities was the defence of the British Isles, followed by Singapore, and then Egypt. In his reply a week later Churchill did not agree, placing Egypt before Singapore. This then was the 'nub of the strategic issue between them.'[29]

Understanding how Dill derived his priorities is complicated as he did not, unlike his successor Brooke, keep a diary complete with retrospective comments, to justify his thinking to posterity. Instead we are left trying to hear his inner thoughts at a distance of almost 80 years, through the staff reports and appreciations that he endorsed and approved. From these sources, the kernel of Dill's strategic reckoning appears to have been armoured strength: and, specifically, Britain's number of tanks relative to Germany.

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[25]As well as to inform Australia, an appreciation of the situation of the Middle East was required to brief the UK Military Mission in Washington (TNA CAB 79-11-10, TNA COS (41) 150th Meeting 28 April 1941).

[26]TNA COS (40) 1004, 2 December 1940, TNA CAB 80/24.

[27]Dominion Office Cable No. 510, 23 Dec 1941, quoted in Telegram 242. The idea that Egypt had strategic priority over Singapore appears to have been shared by Churchill as well as senior British officers from late 1940. A telegram dated 30 November 1940 from the Air Attaché in Washington to CAS, Portal, stated that the strategic priorities for patrols were the Eastern Atlantic, the Mediterranean and then Singapore (Telegram No. Briny 1693, 29/11/40, CAB 80/24). This may explain the relative neglect of Malaya's defences that soon would become a national scandal.

[28]TNA CAB 65/22 reproduced in Churchill, *The History of the Second World War, Volume III,* p. 373, followed by Churchill's reply on 13 May.

[29]Danchev, pp. 21-44.

Despite the German invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, Dill was concerned that the security of Britain remained at risk and that German air and land forces could concentrate for invasion within six to eight weeks after their release from the Balkans.[30] This view was not shared by his fellow Chiefs of Staff: Portal had disagreed previously when Dill raised the point that the flexibility of air power could enable the Germans to concentrate quickly for an invasion of the UK, arguing that maintaining Allied Air Forces in the Middle East would also compel Germany to retain a considerable portion of their air forces in the Mediterranean.[31]

While the sudden collapse of the French and the retreat of the BEF clearly came as a shock to Dill and reduced his confidence that the Army could resist an invasion attempt, it is also possible that Dill's pessimism was influenced by memories of the behaviour of Germany in March 1918 when it launched Operation Michael. This was to be Germany's last major offensive on the Western Front in an attempt to defeat the Allies before Germany was overmatched by reinforcements from America. Dill's appreciation commented that 'As US aid grows the enemy must be closely watching for an opportunity to launch the campaign which might win him the war.'[32]

For Dill, Germany's ability to bring superior armoured forces to bear supported by a powerful air force, which had been demonstrated in the contrasting terrains of France, the Balkans and Libya, was something to be wary of in strategic planning. Dill calculated, probably based on assessments from the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), that Germany could threaten the UK with six armoured divisions, comprising 2,400 tanks. This assessment of the likely numbers of German armoured strength was reasonably accurate: a few weeks later on 22 June 1941, around 3,350-3,795 tanks deployed for the initial phases of Operation Barbarossa. Dill's appreciation was reasonably correct in terms of quantity of armour available to Germany, but ignored likely German intentions and the fact that these tanks were located in Poland and east Prussia at the time.

The June 1941 forecast for armour available in the UK was 1,250 tanks. Of these, 150 were light tanks and 490 were not in front-line units but in tank schools and training establishments.[33] This was the equivalent of three fully effective armoured divisions for the defence of the home base versus six German armoured divisions.

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[30]TNA CAB 65/22.

[31]TNA CAB 79-11-10, TNA COS (41) 150th Meeting, 28 April 1941.

[32]TNA CAB 65/22.

[33]Of these 490 tanks, 360 could be made fit for action given three weeks' notice. At the time, the C-in-C Home Forces – Dill's protégé and successor as CIGS, Alan Brooke, – believed that 2,600 tanks were required to defend the UK. These were to be organised into six armoured divisions and four independent tank brigades. In

By considering only the number of tanks Dill, and the Joint Planners, implicitly assumed that all German tanks committed to an invasion of Britain were instantly available on the beachheads without considering British air and maritime interdiction. Dill made the point that 'air attack cannot be relied on to break up disembarkation anymore than it did our embarkation at Dunkirk.'[34] However, this ignores a key fact: that only personnel were evacuated from Dunkirk, not armour nor heavy equipment. In the absence of the capture of a port facility by infantry alone, the Germans would have had to delay an invasion until they had developed and manufactured specialised landing craft to deploy armour onto the invasion beaches.

Dill and the planners suggested that the Germans may be 'willing to absorb heavy losses' however, there was no calculation of likely German casualties in men and tanks during disembarkation and how that might alter the ratio of armour deployed in favour of the defenders.[35]

In the end, the discussion of tank numbers on which Dill's strategy was based was highly abstract and made no attempt to sort through the possible vignettes that might reasonably occur during an invasion scenario such as initial landings, breakout from the beaches, armoured counter-attacks and the effect of terrain, and how these might compensate for actual tank numbers, as the relative advantage passes between attacker and defender throughout each stage.[36]

While it could be argued that the possible number of invasion scenarios made such detailed assessment impossible at the strategic level, it should have been possible to incorporate at least the high-level concept of the operations planned to meet the invader. Brooke, who as C-in-C Home Forces was responsible for providing Dill with estimates of the required British armour strength needed to defeat an invasion, and

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comparison, the size of a typical German armoured division before Barbarossa was around 400 tanks. (This provides a useful example of the influence of the thinking of subordinates on decision-makers, a practice that has received less attention from researchers than it merits.)

[34]TNA CAB 65/22.

[35]TNA CAB 65/22.

[36]A limited appreciation on a possible invasion scenario that described a German invasion and build-up of armour up to three days after the invasion was developed by the Interservice Committee on Invasion, supported by the Joint Planning Staff and Joint Intelligence Staff (TNA COS (41) 283(0), *Invasion 1942: Form and Scale of Attack*, TNA CAB 80/60). Its findings do not appear to have been considered by Dill when forming his arguments.

should therefore have also been capable of articulating how he planned to use that armour.[37]

Strangely – given Dill's recognised ability for understanding how actions in one theatre affected another – Dill made no serious attempt to link the use of armour between different theatres as a guide to strategic thinking. At the time, 50 tanks a week were being dispatched to the Middle East just to sustain the current force levels in theatre. This was the equivalent to equipping an armoured division every two months. Indeed, Churchill noted that production of tanks and training was increasing so that by October 1941, there were five armoured divisions and four independent tank brigades in the UK.[38]

While Dill used tank numbers to frame his thinking concerning the defence of the British Isles, he did not extend this argument to justify why the security of 'Singapore comes before that of Egypt.'[39] Nor did he articulate exactly what British interests in the Middle East were. As crucial as control of the Suez Canal was, it was arguably less important to Britain's war making capability than the oilfields of Iraq and Iran.

Germany's invasion of Russia in June 1941 provided a temporary resolution of the strategic debate of the military means required to defend the UK from German invasion. There was agreement among the CoS and Churchill that Germany lacked the capability to mount simultaneous invasions of both Russia and the UK; however, concerns remained that the Germans could transfer some 20-30 divisions from the Eastern front to invade the UK in 1942.[40]

So while there was agreement between Churchill and Dill that the defence of the home base was the main priority, this did not solve the question of the priority of Singapore over Egypt, nor the ways and means required to achieve their defence.

[37]At the time, the operational details of Britain's counter invasion planning were still being developed and practised. Exercise Bumper was designed to give commanders experience in handling armoured formations and to test the invasion defences, but was not held until late September 1941. See Danchev & Todman, *War Diaries,* pp 186-187.

[38]Churchill, Vol III, p. 452.

[39]TNA CAB 65/22.

[40]See Churchill *Second World War*, Vol III p. 446. At the same time, the US was also concerned about Britain's ability to defeat an invasion; see Churchill, *Second World War,* p. 378.

Singapore: 'Cardinal to our strategy'

Britain's policy in the Far East in 1939 was the use of diplomatic means to maintain Japanese neutrality and so provide security for its territories and interests in the region. The means to achieve this strategic end and bring about rapprochement with Japan included attempts to offer facilities in Hong Kong for a peace conference between China and Japan.[41]

These attempts proved fruitless, in part due to Britain's policy of pressing for an honourable peace with China, which was incompatible with Japanese designs on Manchuria and China itself. Other than providing moral support, Britain contributed little material assistance to China, unlike America, Russia and initially Germany. This inherent tension in trying to reconcile Britain's policies towards both China and Japan polarised opinion between the Foreign Office and the Chiefs of Staff when Japan demanded that Britain should close the Burma road to Chinese military supplies. The Foreign Office were in favour of resisting closure of the road; however, fears of conflict with Japan caused Dill to press for its closure.[42]

The Burma Road incident led to the Joint Planners' production of an appreciation of likely hostile Japanese courses of action in July 1940.[43] This was the first strategic appreciation of the security of British interests in South East Asia that had been conducted since the outbreak of war between Japan and China in 1937. Its conclusions were not comforting. It considered that naval commitments in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean precluded deploying a fleet to the region; instead air and land forces should be increased to defend Malaya (but not British Borneo), rather than being limited to just the protection of Singapore alone.[44] The report also recommended the close co-ordination of strategy with the Dutch but that Britain should only go to the

[41]Lowe, pp. 43-62.

[42]Chiefs of Staff Committee, Conclusions 1 July 1940, TNA COS (40) 202, TNA CAB 79/5.

[43]'*The Situation in the Far East in the Event of Japanese Intervene Against Us*', report of the chiefs of staff committee, 31 July 1940, TNA COS 592 and TNA WP (40) 302, TNA CAB 80/15 (TNA COS 500 J.P).

[44]The Joint Planners considered that, in the absence of a fleet, air power would be the primary means of defence; however, they recognised that sufficient aircraft would not be available for 'some time to come' and that the substantial numbers of land forces necessary to compensate for the deficiency in airpower would not be available from British or Indian forces, i.e. Britain currently lacked the required means if military ways were to be used to secure Singapore. The necessity for defending Malaya rather than Singapore Island was based on an assumption by the Joint Planners that the population depended on the supply of rice from stores on the north of the Island, not a realistic review of options for the defence of Singapore itself.

defence of the Netherlands East Indies if the Dutch themselves resisted a Japanese invasion.[45] It was recognised that this implied any increase in maritime commitments to the region would require the active support of the United States.

The planners recommended that the British priorities for defence were the sea lines of communication, Australia & New Zealand, Malaya, Burma and the Netherlands East Indies.[46] The regional strategic priority of Singapore and Malaya was therefore ranked only third out of five vital British interests in the Far East.

For the first strategic priority, the Joint Planners noted in passing that the sea lines of the Indian Ocean connected Britain and the Middle East to Australasia but did not expand on the implications for the defence of the UK or operations in the Middle East. The only help the planners provided in integrating the different theatres was to suggest that early defeat of the Italians in the Mediterranean might enable additional maritime forces to be deployed to the Far East. Other than this, it was left to the Chiefs of Staff and the War Cabinet to join the dots and themselves assess the likely relationship of events in the Far East to events in the Mediterranean.

The strategic thinking of the Joint Planners in the Summer of 1940 strongly hinted at, but did not explicitly state, that the defence of Malaya and Singapore was a sufficient strategic way of achieving the strategic ends of securing the vital sea lines of communication with Australasia. Equally, the planners' appreciation did not convey that the defence of Singapore was a necessary condition for achieving this end. On the basis of purely one assessment, it is difficult to understand why in 1940-41 Dill considered the defence of Singapore to be of greater importance than that of Egypt. Dill is likely to have been influenced in his thinking by pre-war planning; in particular, the 1935 and 1937 Imperial Defence Reviews which concluded that security in the Far East "hinged" on the retention of Singapore as a base for the Royal Navy.[47] This conclusion tacitly rested on control of the air over Singapore and assumed that the UK would be fighting without US support. Both of these assumptions were in need of review by the summer of 1940 and certainly by 1941. Although, and in comparison, retention of access to the Persian oil fields was vital to continuing the war, and this required the defence of Egypt.

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[45]'*The Situation in the Far East in the Event of Japanese Intervene Against Us*', report of the chiefs of staff committee, 31 July 1940, C.O.S. 592 and W.P. (40) 302, CAB 80/15 (C.O.S. 500 J.P).

[46]Specifically identified as the Indian Ocean up to the west coast of Australia, South China Sea to the north coast of Australia, and trans-Pacific routes south and south east of Australia.

[47]TNA CAB 53/24 & CAB 53/30,

Regardless of its merits, by July 1940 a tentative strategy had evolved with the policy end of Japan committing to neutrality during a European war and refraining from attacking British, European and American territories in the region. The strategy to achieve this end was based on a combination of diplomatic and economic ways. The diplomatic ways were to co-ordinate diplomatic activity with the USA to achieve a cessation of the Sino-Japanese war and a recognition of China's independence in return for British economic assistance to Japan along with guarantees to supply Japan with oil and other materials.

Coherent and logical as this strategic approach was, it relied on a successful negotiated end to the Sino-Japanese War, something over which Britain could only exert limited influence. More importantly, it did not take sufficient account of Japan's willingness to gamble on achieving rapid military success before the full strength of Britain and the USA could be brought to bear.[48] A change in government in Japan in August 1940 brought a rapid decline in Anglo-Japanese relations and the detention of British nationals in Japan.

A combined British, Dutch and US tactical appreciation of the defence situation of Malaya was produced on 16 October 1940.[49] A key finding of this report was that Britain's ability to hold Malaya in the face of a determined attack was 'very problematical'; moreover, that the defence of Singapore for any more than a short period after a successful Japanese invasion of the mainland was 'very improbable'. The island of Singapore was, therefore, a very shaky foundation upon which to base a regional security strategy.

A summary of Anglo-American technical conversations was prepared for the War Cabinet on 15 December 1940.[50] This set out three British strategic priorities. The first two were the defeat of Germany and Italy, before dealing with Japan. The third priority stated that the security of the Far Eastern position, including the defence of Australia and New Zealand, is essential and the 'retention of Singapore as key to the

[48]The possibility that Japan might consider risking occupation of the Netherlands East Indies along with American and British territory to gain control of rubber and oil supplies to resist economic pressure from Britain was considered by the Joint Planners (TNA CAB 80/15, TNA COS(40) 594, 1 August 1940). However, the Joint Planners did not calculate if Japanese gains from military actions would be sufficient to meet their future needs. Such an appreciation was only conducted after the loss of Malaya which, concluded that Japan's gain in access to oil and rubber more than offset the loss of supply by America, the Netherlands East Indies, and Britain.

[49]The appreciation was not printed for the War Cabinet until December 1940, TNA CAB 80/24-3

[50]TNA COS (40) 1043, TNA CAB 80/24-3.

defence of these interests must be assured.' This suggests a greater emphasis on the importance of Singapore than the Joint Planners had placed on it earlier in the year.

The Chiefs of Staff considered that, from a purely strategic point of view, Singapore was the 'proper place' to base a combined Anglo-American fleet.[51] Their argument for the primacy of Singapore over the existing US naval base at Honolulu was made on the perception that this would increase the likelihood of deterring Japanese moves to the south. It was recognised that the US was reluctant to deploy to Singapore, preferring to remain in their own bases, and that the presence of an American carrier-based fleet in Hawaii would be essential to deter the Japanese. This was effectively a tacit admission that there were indeed alternatives to Singapore.

Around this time a Foreign Office Telegram from the British Ambassador in Tokyo made clear that Italian setbacks in Egypt were making the Japanese anxious that the British could soon be in a position to finish in the Middle East and reinforce the Far East. [52] This raised the risk that the Japanese might try to invade Malaya before British forces there could be strengthened. Events in the Middle East did exert a strong influence in the Far Eastern theatre, at least in the minds of the Japanese.

On 15 May 1941, Dill repeated his strategic priorities to Churchill, arguing that the German intention in attacking British interests in the Middle East was not only to secure Europe, but also to provoke Britain into sending additional forces to the region, increasing the chances of a successful invasion of the UK.[53] Other than to repeat earlier arguments on the number of tanks Dill believed necessary to defend the UK, this was not extended to consider what additional force levels, in terms of numbers of tanks or otherwise, Germany would have to deploy to the Middle East to achieve their aims nor how quickly they could be re-deployed for a direct attack on Britain.

Dill concluded that 'the loss of the Middle East would be a disaster, but would not be vital; on the other hand the retention of Singapore is vital.'[54] Dill's prioritising

[51]The document went out under Sir Robert Haining, VCIGS's signature rather than Dill's.

[52]Telegram 2453, 16 December 1940. Repeated as an Annex to TNA COS (40) 1049, TNA CAB 80/24-3.

[53]15 May 1941, C.O.S (41) 78 (0), *The General Situation, with particular reference to the Mediterranean and Middle East*. CAB 80/57-3. It should be remembered that Dill did not include the loss of Southern Iraq or the Persian oil fields in this assessment of strategic priorities.

[54]15 May 1941, COS (41) 78 (0), *The General Situation, with particular reference to the Mediterranean and Middle East*. CAB 80/57-3. A marginal annotation on the document suggests that CNS (Chief of the Naval Staff, Pound) proposed that Dill's assessment

Singapore over the Middle East was based on the economic assumption that the loss of oil and rubber from Borneo and Malaya would be more damaging to UK and US war production than the loss of Egypt, but made no attempt to further explain or quantify this assumption. For his part, Churchill offered no explanation for the rationale of why he disagreed with Dill on the order of strategic priorities.[55]

Brooke: 'shipping must exercise a stranglehold on all our strategy' [56]

Neither Germany's invasion of Russia in June nor Japanese incursions southwards into Indochina in July caused Churchill or Dill to reassess their strategic thinking. As a result of their disagreement, Churchill lost confidence in Dill and by the Autumn of 1941 he was actively planning to replace him.[57] In November 1941 it was announced that Dill was to be superseded by Brooke as CIGS from 1 December.

To begin with, Brooke's strategic thinking did not differ markedly from Dill's. He wrote in his diary entry for 3 December that

> I am positive that our policy for the conduct of the war should be to direct both our military and political efforts towards the early conquest of North Africa. From there we shall be able to reopen the Mediterranean and to stage offensive operations against Italy.[58]

In a footnote to this entry, written after the war, Brooke congratulated himself on having developed a clear idea of the strategy for the war by his third day as CIGS.[59]

In retrospect, Brooke's self-congratulations appear slightly premature: his thoughts and actions at the time suggest that even if he had determined the ways and ends to

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that the 'loss of Singapore would *vitally* affect our ability to continue the war' should be changed to the 'loss of Singapore would *materially* affect our ability to continue the war' to be consistent with an appreciation earlier in the document.

[55]The issue of strategic priorities appears to have been one to which Churchill was personally rather sensitive. Brooke noted in his diary entry for 27 April 1941 that 'Kennedy [DMO] tried to give PM a rather pompous discourse on strategy in which he contemplated a fairly free evacuation of Egypt! This infuriated the PM and we had some trouble in calming him down!'. Danchev & Todman, *War Diaries*, p. 154.

[56]Danchev & Todman, *War Diaries,* p. 227.

[57]In September 1941 a Private Secretary noted that 'he [Churchill] has now got his knife right into Dill' and by 20 October, Brooke became aware of schemes for the replacement of Dill as CIGS.

[58]Danchev & Todman , *War Diaries,* p. 206.

[59]Ibid. , p. 206.

fight the war, he had not yet established the balance of means between different theatres.[60]

In particular, Brooke's views on the value of Singapore at the time appear uncertain. The policy for the Far East that he signed off on 20 December drew extensively on a Naval strategy report, which downplayed the significance of Singapore for both strategic and operational reasons.[61] Operationally, the report concluded that it was unsound to send capital ships to Singapore owing to the likely strength of the Japanese fleet and air cover from Malaya, Thailand and French Indochina.

Strategically, the report recommended that the ideal solution for the defeat of Japan was to bring together a combined British-American fleet equal or superior to the Japanese. However, it concluded that there was no single naval base in the region where such a joint fleet could assemble that would simultaneously satisfy American and British interests. American vital interests lay in the Pacific, the defence of Hawaii and the US West Coast; while British interests were the sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean and the defence of Australia and New Zealand from seaborne attack.

While it was possible for Dill to argue in the spring of 1941 that Singapore was the only naval base that could support both of Britain's vital interests, Japanese air supremacy in December 1941 made it operationally obsolete; and the divergent focus of American interests reduced its strategic significance from vital to useful. Although this was not explicitly stated in the Far East Policy Paper, the recommendations imply that the Chiefs of Staff's assessment was that the most likely outcome was for Malaya to fall but for Singapore Island to be besieged.

Despite this apparent relegation of Singapore's strategic value, the question of strategic priorities did not appear to be resolved. On 25 December 1941 the Chiefs of Staff

[60]The previous day Brooke and his fellow Chiefs of Staff had agreed to postpone an operation to raid the Italian coast due to concerns about Japanese action in Malaya. Later, on 23 January 1942, the Chiefs of Staff Committee agreed to send 18 Division to Singapore, a decision Brooke later regretted on the grounds it would have been more successful in Burma. As to when Brooke actually formulated his strategy, see Danchev & Todman's footnotes. p. 206.

[61]This report, *Future Navy Strategy*, (CAB 80/60) was produced on the direction of Churchill on 14 December 1941 (i.e. after the Japanese invasion of Malaya); and COS (41) 280(0) *Far East policy Report*, 20 December 1941, CAB 80/60. Brooke signed this as CIGS (Designate) along with the Vice Chiefs of the other two services, as the Chiefs of Staff were in Washington with Churchill at the time for the Arcadia Conference which combined the Anglo-American command structures.

considered the allocation of forces between the Middle East and Far East with regards to Churchill's proposal for Operation Gymnast which downplayed the significance of Singapore for both strategic and operational reasons.[62] Brooke's diary entry for that day noted that

> we laid down that first of all in importance comes the security of this country and its communications and after that Singapore and communications through [sic] Indian Ocean. This is correct as if the latter go the Middle East or possibly India may follow suit.[63]

So at this stage, Brooke appeared to still maintain Dill's strategic priorities, even though the Far East policy he endorsed cast doubt on the primacy of Singapore over Egypt.

It was during the period December 1941-April 1942 that the main difference emerged in Brooke's approach to strategic thinking compared to that of Dill. In February, Brooke began to appreciate that the availability of shipping to transport personnel and equipment was the major constraint on both the ways and means for British strategy.

The shipping shortage was caused by the threat of German U-Boat operations and Axis air attack in the Mediterranean and Atlantic. Although it was the need to divert vessels around the Cape of Good Hope and the time spent waiting in port for convoys to form, rather than the number of merchant ships, that limited strategic transport between theatres.[64] Brooke assessed that opening up the Mediterranean would free up the equivalent of a million tons of shipping, which would be vital for the invasions of Italy and France and then later to move forces from Europe to the Far East.

The development of shipping capacity as a strategic metric occurred too late for Brooke to apply it to the relative priorities of Egypt over Singapore. Japan's capture of the island in February 1942 saved Brooke from Dill's dilemma. Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that Brooke used his shipping metric to consider the military means required to hold the Japanese from then until the defeat of Germany.

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[62]Operation Gymnast was a British plan presented to the combined Chiefs of Staff during the Arcadia Conference to clear the Mediterranean for allied shipping by gaining possession of Morocco and Tunisia to secure the entire North African coastline (see Douglas E Delaney, *Churchill and the Mediterranean Strategy: December 1941 to January 1943*, Defence Studies, 2:3, (2002) pp. 1-26).

[63]Danchev & Todman, *War Diaries,* entry for 25 December 1941, p. 214.

[64]David, Edgerton. *Britain's War Machine*, (London: Penguin, 2012), Chapter 6.

Consideration of shipping did enable one strategic priority to be established; by August 1942, the Chiefs of Staff, now under Brooke's chairmanship, agreed that the port of Abadan was more important than Egypt.[65] This conclusion appears to have been reached through the consideration that all forces in the Middle East, India & Indian Ocean were dependent on Persian oil. A shortage of tankers meant that oil from the Americas could not make good the losses that would result from the fall of Abadan.

The final refinement of Brooke's strategic thinking, to relate the relative ability of the Allies to move resources between theatres, did not occur until at least a year later. Debates with the US as to the correct course of action to pursue following the securing of North Africa in 1943-44 led Brooke to consider how the connections between theatres affected the rate at which Germany could reinforce threatened areas compared with the speed at which the Allies could build up strength. Brooke's realisation was that in Italy north-south movement for the Germans took longer than transferring forces east-west between Russia and France, this would enable Allied operations in Italy to have a positive effect on operations in Normandy.

Conclusions

As we have seen, there was no standard methodology for making strategic assessments in use by either the War Cabinet or the Chiefs of Staff Committee in 1940. Instead, Dill and Brooke both had to derive their own frameworks to consider the balance of ways, means and ends. One theme that consistently emerges from reviewing the appreciations of the Joint Planners is that their work was essentially the production of high-level reviews of the current situation in a given theatre, which contained very little advanced planning at the operational level within each theatre on which to develop an understanding of the means required and the rates of build-up necessary to achieve strategic effects. In the absence of detailed staff work, Dill and Brooke developed two very different approaches to determine strategy.

Dill's use of tank numbers relative to German armoured strength is what is known as a static measure. The greatest weakness of this type of approach is that it did not account for qualitative differences between British and German armour. It also makes no allowance for other factors that affect likely performance in combat, such as control of the air or anti-armour artillery. In short, it was a measure only of quantity, not of effectiveness.

In comparison, Brooke's consideration of the tonnage of shipping capacity for manoeuvre is an example of a dynamic measure of strategic effect. This metric enables the movement between theatres and the rate of build-up relative to the enemy's strength to be considered. As a further refinement, Brooke generalised this to relative

[65]Danchev & Todman, *War Diaries,* entry for 4 August 1942.

movement between different theatres. This enabled him to understand the possible rates of build up for the Germans moving forces between the Italian and Normandy theatres, leading to the non-intuitive conclusion that it was quicker to switch between the Russian and Normandy fronts than from the Italian.

Both of these methods enabled Dill and Brooke to compare the means used; however, there is no evidence that either evaluated how the use of different ways would affect the required means. Neither applied their measures to determine strategic priorities between theatres. For example, the military means required to deter the Japanese from launching attacks on Malaya are likely to have been significantly different from those required to actually defeat their forces.

Similarly, the question of the priority of Egypt over Singapore was decided by the Japanese just as many of Britain's earlier strategic dilemmas were resolved by enemy action rather than through active British decision-making. Retrospective application of Brooke's method suggests that the impact of the loss of Egypt and the subsequent denial of the use of the Suez Canal to Britain would have had a far greater impact on the availability of shipping than did the loss of Singapore.

Hew Strachan has recently observed that strategy is a dialogue (usually of a civil and military nature), as well as an abstract calculation. [66] The importance of being able to maintain an acceptable personal fit to Churchill's thinking can be seen in the fates of both Dill and Brooke: they had to make strategic calculations, but they also had to persuade others. Brooke's method of thumping the table or declaring that he 'flatly disagreed' with a proposal was direct; Dill's approach was more charming and indirect and won over both Brooke and the US.[67]

Given that the basis of Churchill's strategic priorities was derived more from wishful thinking than Dill's understanding of strategy suggests that it may be time to rehabilitate Dill's reputation. Dill's career revolved around high-level thinking and through his time leading the Army's Staff College he influenced a strong informal network, that included not just his immediate successor, Brooke, but also the American Chiefs of Staff and political decision makers.

[66]Hew Strachan, 'Strategy in theory; strategy in practice', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 42:2, pp. 171-190.

[67]Anthony Harrison, *Archie Nye* (privately published, 1980), p. 12. Quoted in Alex Danchev, *Waltzing with Winston: Civil-Military Relations in Britain in the Second World War*. War in History (1995) 2 (2) pp. 202 – 230.

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