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‘Showing the Flag’: Deterrence, and the Naval Armaments Industry

Like most naval strategists, Mahan and Corbett were preoccupied with the application of seapower in wartime; their writings pay little attention to the navy’s utility during periods of peace. For British decision-makers, however, the latter issue was often of real and immediate concern. The navy was the most visible symbol of British power and prestige abroad during the interwar period, and the Admiralty never questioned the link between naval strength and national influence. ‘The navy is the chief sanction of our Foreign Policy,’ Madden wrote in 1929; ‘it is hardly an exaggeration to say that every Foreign Office telegram is backed by it.’11 How to use the navy as a diplomatic tool in peacetime could be a complicated matter, particularly when the disposition of major fleet units was involved. The Admiralty regarded its main fleet as the most effective deterrent to hostile powers, and it was loath to disperse its forces for diplomatic effect. As long as foreigners knew that the navy could respond promptly to an attack on British interests, it assumed that the threat was unlikely to materialize. Politicians and diplomats generally shared these views, but were more likely to consider the movement of major warships as a means of sending signals both to friends and potential enemies. This is particularly true in the case of Japan.

The idea of modifying Japan’s behavior by substantially strengthening Britain’s naval forces in the Far East was raised on several occasions prior to the outbreak of the Pacific war. In 1937, a Cabinet committee recommended the despatch of two battleships to the Far East to induce Japan to cease its interference with British shipping in the region. Chatfield strongly opposed the idea, however, on the grounds that such a weak force would invite attack by offering the Japanese ‘a possibility of defeating the divided British forces in detail.’ If capital ships
were to be despatched, he insisted that they must be ‘in sufficient strength to defeat the full strength of the Japanese Navy.’ The movement of capital ships was suggested again in November 1938 by Sir Josiah Crosby, the British minister at Bangkok, who felt that such a move would help to ‘recover a measure of that prestige which we have been losing to Siam by comparison with our more blatant and brutally forceful opponents.’ Crosby later asserted that what was wanted ‘in this part of the world is a real sight of the British Navy in real force here and now, and less of indefinite assurances that we shall see it when the time comes.’ Sir Robert Craigie, the ambassador to Japan, also felt that the despatch of capital ships ‘at this juncture would afford a powerful deterrent against Japanese co-operation with the axis Powers.’ In his view, the Admiralty’s policy of concentrating its forces in European waters ‘has created here a false impression of British naval *impotence* in Far Eastern waters but there is still time to destroy this impression even on the assumption that no more than three capital ships could be spared for the purpose at present.’ If the government could be persuaded to give British diplomats in the Far East ‘a little straw with which to make our bricks,’ Craigie suggested that the ‘psychological effect on Japan would be greater if the ships were...sent out one by one at intervals of about a month.’ Such an unorthodox suggestion would give the Japanese ‘less to get excited about than would be the case if the whole squadron were to proceed together but it would at once raise the question in their minds “How many are they going to send?” The uncertainty would be salutary.’

The Foreign Office agreed that capital ships at Singapore would provide a powerful deterrent to Japan, but doubted that this could be achieved without weakening Britain’s position in Europe. As one official remarked, ‘the question of peace time dispositions depends on whether we consider that the deterrent effect on Germany (and Italy) of maintaining greatly superior forces in home waters is greater than the deterrent effect upon Japan of depleting our strength at home and in the Mediterranean in order to send forces to the F.E.’ The Foreign Office decided to approach the Admiralty on this question after a lengthy memorandum by one of its legal advisors, G. G. Fitzmaurice, argued that a small fleet at Singapore could ‘produce a very great, and probably a decisive, deterrent effect’, and that such a force could be provided if the five *Royal Sovereign* (‘R’) class battleships were not scrapped as planned in 1942–4. These ships were too old to be of much use in European waters, Fitzmaurice conceded, but they might still have a role