From Singapore to Tokyo Bay, 1941–45

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There were virtually no political or diplomatic relations between Britain and Japan from December 1941 until the end of the war. The relationship between the two countries was defined by the military and naval encounters in the Asia-Pacific war. An historical distinction has to be drawn between the Pacific war, which was a naval and island-hopping war, and the Asian war, which originated with Japan’s China campaigns in 1937 and spread to Indochina, Malaya, Indonesia and Burma. In the first the Americans carried the overwhelming burden, while in the Asian campaigns Britain and India shared the major role with the Chinese and the Americans.¹ There were inevitably points of tension between the two war zones; and the degree of Anglo-American cooperation which existed was an important factor in British policy towards Japan at the time. The greatest contribution to our understanding in this field has been the distinguished work of the late Professor Christopher Thorne.² But Britain also had diplomatic relations with China throughout the war and it is possible to deduce from these and other sources how British policy-makers viewed the progress of the war with Japan and how they saw the future of the East after the tide of war had turned.

In the absence of direct communications between Britain and Japan, it is the object of this chapter to indicate British attitudes to the various phases of the war.

The fall of Singapore, 1942

The British Empire suffered devastating blows in consequence of the dramatic Japanese victories in the first part of the war. Hong Kong, British Borneo and Malaya were swiftly captured. The sinking of the
battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battle cruiser *Repulse* was a great national disaster and evidence of the failure of Britain’s naval strategy in Southeast Asian waters. Malaya had been deprived by Whitehall of the necessary reinforcements and given a lower priority than other operational zones like the Middle East and Russia. Local officials were not faultless and the command structure was deeply flawed. But it appears to have been the leadership in London who, in the fraught atmosphere of global conflict, seriously underestimated the threat of a Japanese invasion of the Malayan peninsula.3

The fall of Singapore was a natural consequence of failures in Malaya. Instead of the main fleet which had been promised for its defence, only a small fleet was sent to the area. There was insufficient artillery, no tanks and some 16 battalions missing. The 158 aircraft available were fewer than half of those deemed essential to cater for the island’s defence. The surrender by General Percival at Singapore on 15 February 1942 was the most humiliating single feature of the whole campaign since it emphasized starkly the collapse of Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s strategy for containing the Japanese advance; and it was the greatest reverse experienced by the British Empire since the loss of the American colonies in the eighteenth century.

There was therefore a great outcry and the demand for guilty parties to be named. Recent research has discredited the myth that the British were taken by surprise by Japan’s landward invasion down the Malayan peninsula and over the causeway while the guns of the Singapore naval base pointed fruitlessly out to sea. On the contrary, Singapore strategists did expect the Japanese to attack the island from the rear. Military thinking was well aware of the necessity of re-inforcing the defence of the Malayan hinterland and precautions had been taken. But they proved inadequate.4

**Retreat from Burma**

The British position in Burma disintegrated rapidly after Singapore fell. Following Japan’s major offensive, Rangoon was taken on 8 March. The governor since 1941, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, retreated to Simla to form the Burmese administration in exile. The British Burmese forces were helped in their resistance by Chinese forces who were involved in order to keep open their vital supply-lines from Burmese ports to the Chinese hinterland. The Chinese came under the command of General Joseph W. Stilwell, chief of staff China and commander-in-chief of the