

BEWARE ASSUMPTIONS

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"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles."
– Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

SUN Tzu's aphorism aptly captures the central tenet of military intelligence and strategic planning. An enemy must be known to be fought with any degree of confidence; a principle that has led to ever more sophisticated intelligence organisations developing in countries around the world. Such investment in securing a sound knowledge of potential adversaries is shrewd given history is rich in examples of the risks associated with making assumptions, particularly in regard to things like culture, morale and intelligence – those less tangible elements of an enemy's make up.

A categorical example of this

is found in Britain's planning for war against Japan in the interwar period. This – principally Admiralty – planning was overwhelmingly based on racialised interpretations of Japanese culture. These interpretations were self-reinforcing and detrimental to the employment of more tangible intelligence. While there were of course numerous contributing factors to the fall of Singapore in 1942, the belief that the Japanese were an understood enemy is clearly of relevance. The following analysis represents a note of caution for strategists; highlighting the importance of constant questioning of assumptions by a grouping diverse in their knowledge, skills and experiences.

¹*National Problems, M.I.2., Japan 213., The National Archives (Hereafter TNA), WO 106/5528, p. 1.*

UNQUESTIONED ASSUMPTIONS

Japan was a potential enemy that the Admiralty believed they knew and understood. This knowledge was based around two factors. Firstly, an understanding of the Japanese character, which was highly racialised and imperialist in nature. Secondly, the belief that – as island nations – there existed an affinity between Britain and Japan and that as a result the latter's behaviour would be more familiar and predictable.

Racialised language was pervasive in British appraisals of Japan and its people. A typical intelligence assessment from the period epitomises understandings of the Japanese as 'intellectually slow... and lacking in brilliance'.¹ This unsubstantiated guesswork continued into formal planning for war, with the 1938 War Memorandum (Eastern) beginning with a characterisation of the Japanese as 'a cautious, thorough and methodical race... adept at imitation'. It was also

evident in the expectation that the Japanese would ‘cover up their confusion in an unexpected situation with aggressive action to the point of fool-hardiness.’² Such examples provide just a glimpse of the depth to which an inaccurate understanding of the Japanese character was ingrained in formal planning. When one considers statements such as these, it is unsurprising the extent to which commanders were shocked by the rapid and decisive advances made by the Japanese during their assault on the Malay Peninsula in December 1941.

Strategic planning for war against Japan was similarly hamstrung by an adherence to the belief that as Japan was an island it had the same strategic considerations as Britain.³ Consequently, plans were dominated by ideas of blockade; targeting Japanese seaborne supplies to create a situation

²WM (E) 1938, *Plans Division, section XIV, Table No.7., TNA, ADM 116/3673*, p. 62.

³Christopher M. Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 130-131.

⁴WM(E) 1931, *Appendix No.5, Japanese Dependence on Overseas Trade and the Possibilities of the Exercise of Naval Pressure on Such Trade, TNA, ADM 116/3118*, p. 4.

⁵Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 65.

⁶Andrew Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939: Preparing for War against Japan* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), pp. 245-247.

⁷Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, p. 136.

⁸Bell, *The Royal Navy, Seapower and Strategy between the Wars*, pp. 64-65.

⁹*The General Strategic Situation in the Western Pacific Vis-à-Vis Japan, C-in-C China Station to The Secretary of the Admiralty, 5th August 1935, TNA, ADM 116/3338*, p. 5.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Fleet Air Arm and Naval Treaties: Record of conversation at Admiralty between D.C.A.S. and D.C.N.S., 14th November 1934, TNA, AIR 9/2*, p. 5.



“IT IS CLEAR THAT INTELLIGENCE WAS NOT AT FAULT FOR THE LOSS OF SINGAPORE. INSTEAD, THERE WAS AN ASTONISHING INABILITY AMONG SENIOR FIGURES TO SEE AND ACT ON THE INFORMATION BEING PROVIDED TO THEM BY THEIR OFFICERS IN THE FIELD.”

where ‘the longer the war lasts, the worse will become her economic state’.⁴ Clearly, this vision of a protracted conflict in which Japan made no territorial gains and was slowly bled dry bears little resemblance to the 70 days it took them to advance down the Malay Peninsula and take Singapore.

ROLE OF ASSUMPTIONS OF BRITISH CHARACTER

Planning for war in the Far East against Japan was almost entirely the preserve of the Royal Navy. This was largely due to cultural traditions of the ‘British way’ in warfare; this idea eschewed land operations, instead envisioning entirely naval conflicts.⁵ The dominance of this approach had been reinforced by a reaction to the tremendous loss of life on land during World War I. It is hard to overstate the impact of the lessons drawn from the Great War on planning for conflict against Japan.

World War I reaffirmed, in the eyes of the Admiralty, the classical interpretation of the qualitative superiority of the Royal Navy.⁶ That the Royal Navy was composed of men who possessed a natural ‘affinity for the sea and an aggressive

fighting spirit’.⁷ While assertions of qualitative superiority were not allowed to influence the formal allocation of forces within plans, it was undoubtedly a feature within the culture of the Royal Navy at the time. It was a feature that allowed the Royal Navy to believe that it would be able to operate at great distance from home with at least the same level of effectiveness as the Imperial Japanese Navy would possess in their own waters.⁸

The single most significant lesson from World War I, however, was drawn from the failed Gallipoli campaign. Gallipoli provided senior leaders with a stark example of what can go wrong in combined operations and emphasised the strength of well sited defences against seaborne assault. It also contributed significantly to the single-Service approach to planning for conflict in the Far East. Together these factors made it incredibly hard for senior figures to comprehend the danger of Singapore’s position 9,000 sea-miles from home.

INCONSISTENCIES AND RECOGNISED PROBLEMS

The danger of the above points is found most clearly in the extent

to which they allowed strategic flaws to be overlooked or outright disregarded. It is wrong to say that Britain thought Singapore unassailable; there were in fact numerous considerations of the weaknesses at play, some of which seem almost prophetic. The combination, however, of assumed British superiority and Japanese inability was a potent combination that allowed senior figures at the Admiralty to disregard the problems in plans. Problems that were noted with increasing frequency by the late 1930s.

Significantly, there existed a clear difference in perspectives from those officers stationed in the region and senior figures at home. For example, Admiral Dreyer, while commander in chief of China station in 1935, submitted a report in which he bemoaned the Admiralty’s complacency in allowing Imperial Japanese Navy vessels access to British naval bases while Japanese policy forbade such visits.⁹ Dreyer also noted the advantage the Japanese would have fighting in waters familiar to them, highlighting the frequent familiarisation exercises Japanese officers were sent on.¹⁰

The most glaring and prophetic area of complacency within plans was the underestimation of airpower. This was enabled by the strategic adherence to seapower being of total dominance. The dismissal of the potency of the aerial threat is shown clearly by the remarks of the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff when in discussion with the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff in November 1934: ‘Policy would be to rely upon destroying the Japanese aircraft carriers and other aircraft carrying ships by means of attack delivered by fighting ships.’¹¹ Or in other words, that the strength of the gun, representing seapower, was enough to defeat any aerial threat at sea. This position was held in full cognisance of both the potency and doctrinal centrality

of airpower within the Imperial Japanese Navy by the late-1930s.¹² These remarks resonate with shocking clarity given the tragic fate the ships of Force Z met at the hands of enemy aircraft on the 10th December 1941.

A Japanese assault on Singapore was expected to be primarily conducted by air forces, an attack estimated to comprise ‘130 aircraft in four waves at 40-minute intervals from two large aircraft carriers’, an attack which the defences at Singapore would be ‘quite inadequate’ to meet.¹³ This is remarkably close to how the attack ultimately played out and the outcome was as predicted, Singapore’s defences indeed proved ‘quite inadequate’. The War Memorandum (Eastern) of 1938 even stated that the Japanese had the capability to put together a large assault force in total secrecy and that they would most likely attack by surprise.¹⁴ Given assessments made in 1933/1938 so startlingly paint a picture of how events would unfold in 1941/42, it is clear that intelligence was not at fault for the loss of Singapore.

“THROUGH ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY AND THE GENERAL HOMOGENISATION OF THE WORLD, WE CAN UNDERSTAND POTENTIAL ENEMY’S BETTER THAN EVER. HOWEVER, THE FALL OF SINGAPORE HIGHLIGHTS THE DANGERS THAT COME WITH OPERATING ON A FALSE UNDERSTANDING OF AN ENEMY.”

Instead, there was an astonishing inability among senior figures to see and act on the information being provided to them by their officers in the field and by their plans departments.

CONCLUSIONS

Knowing one’s enemy is vital and is something which has become easier as time has passed – through advances in technology and the general homogenisation of the world, we can understand potential enemy’s better than ever. However, the fall of Singapore highlights the dangers that come with operating on a false understanding of an enemy.

The British possessed a highly sophisticated planning structure and a body of officers with regional insight; both of these produced material which was shockingly prophetic of the

ultimate fate of Singapore.

Despite these warnings, senior figures at home failed to act, largely because they were unable to reconcile risks with their perception of the Japanese as a weak and ‘intellectually slow’ enemy. Danger occurs, therefore, when one gives into the natural temptation to believe intelligence and understandings are complete. One can never fully know an enemy; producing strategy based on the belief that an enemy’s character and likely courses of action are known, can only lead to mistakes and complacency.

Equally as dangerous are assumptions about one’s own strengths and capabilities.

While learning lessons from past conflicts would seem only beneficial, the lessons learnt by the Royal Navy about World War

I created a highly problematic culture, which promoted an idea of inherent superiority and made it harder to realise the seriousness of the Japanese threat.

The failure of British planning for war in the Far East demonstrates the importance of constantly questioning ‘known-knowns’, and particularly highlights the danger of believing an enemy to be wholly understood. Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of maintaining a distinction between an understanding of character and actual intelligence. While an understanding of both the characters of an enemy and oneself can be a great strategic tool, it should only be used to inform interpretation of intelligence, not to obscure it.

¹²Japanese Naval Air Service Annual Report 1938, Air Attaché Tokyo, TNA, ADM 1/9588, PP. 1-6.

¹³Points from the 116th C.O.S. Meeting, Defence of Singapore, TNA, AIR 9/2, p. 1.; The General Strategic Situation in the Western Pacific Vis-à-Vis Japan, C-in-C China Admiral Dreyer, 1933-1936, TNA, ADM 116/3338, p. 34.

¹⁴WM (E) 1938, p. 45.

