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OBLICZA WOJNY
TOM 7 • PRZED BITWĄ • ŁÓDŹ 2023
ISBN 978-83-8331-303-0 • s. 315–330
https://doi.org/10.18778/8331-303-0.15

BRITISH DIPLOMATIC AND MILITARY PREPARATIONS FOR THE PACIFIC WAR FROM 17 OCTOBER TO 7 DECEMBER 1941

Summary. The assumption of the post of Prime Minister of Japan by General Tojo Hideki on 17 October 1941 was interpreted in London as a prelude to further aggressive actions on the part of Tokyo. The purpose of this article is to examine what steps the British government took to prepare for a potential confrontation in diplomatic and military fields. A key reinforcement of British forces was the creation of the Far East Fleet squadron intended to serve as a primary deterrent, which was done at the expense of weakening the position of the British Navy in other areas. In contrast, land troops in the Malay region received only token support. The Air Force was in the worst position, as there were far too few aircraft for defensive purposes and they were not of the best quality. However, due to the involvement on other fronts and supplying military equipment to the Soviet Union, it was impossible to deliver more weapons to Southeast Asia. In the area of diplomacy, the main effort was directed at securing guarantees of support from the United States. However, due to the Neutrality Acts and the general reluctance of the American public to participate in the war, only verbal promises of assistance were obtained. Cooperation with the Dutch East Indies authorities went much better and they remained the most important ally for the British Empire in the area. In addition, attempts were made to enlist the cooperation of Thailand, but London's offer to that country remained extremely unattractive, as the British were unable to provide guarantees of territorial integrity for the Thais. All these factors, combined with a misreading of Japanese intentions, meant that Britain entered the armed conflict with Japan poorly prepared, leading to the defeat at the Battle of Malaya and the fall of Singapore.

Keywords: United Kingdom, Japan, World War II, Far East, Southeast Asia

In London, the resignation of Fumimaro Konoe as Prime Minister and General Hideki Tojo's assumption of power on 17 October 1941 was perceived as a harbinger of further Japanese aggression.[1] Indeed, a few weeks later, on

[1] A. Best, *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor. Avoiding War in East Asia, 1936–1941*, London–New York 1995, pp. 175–176; R. Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945*, Oxford 1995, p. 303.

7–8 December, the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor and Malaya took place. Thus, it is worth asking how the British prepared for this confrontation. This problem should be considered from both a military perspective (military reinforcements *sensu stricto*) and a diplomatic perspective (attempts to gain allies).

The day before the aforementioned change of the Japanese Prime Minister, a meeting of the British government took place, during which an attempt was made to assess the situation of the British Empire in Southeast Asia, including a discussion on a memorandum prepared by Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden concerning this particular geopolitical area.[2] Eden predicted that faced with economic sanctions, which would be devastating to the Japanese economy, the Japanese Empire would have to withdraw from its existing policy or go to war with the Allies. The implementation of the second scenario (i.e., starting a war) was held up by the ongoing Japanese-American talks in Washington, but their progress to date did not bode well. The parties had been unable to reach a compromise, and the chances to do so dwindled even further after Japanese troops invaded southern Indochina in June 1941. Prime Minister Tojo opposed any concessions to the Americans. As the chances of a breakthrough in negotiations diminished, the risk of Japanese aggression increased. For this reason, Eden's memorandum outlined potential lines of attack: Thailand (plans for Operation Matador had been prepared to counter an attack from this direction[3]), the USSR, and the Burma Road. In the context of these considerations, Eden suggested that the Chiefs of Staff should be tasked with creating new strategic plans in the event of a Japanese attack in the above–mentioned directions.[4]

There was a brief discussion of Eden's memorandum at the cabinet meeting. On the question of Thailand, Eden referred to a dispatch from Bangkok from Sir Josiah Crosby, the British diplomatic representative. According to the Foreign Secretary, this was the first time the Thais had expressed a genuine desire to cooperate with the British and the Chiefs of Staff should be consulted on this

[2] The National Archives London (hereinafter: NAL), Cabinet Papers (hereinafter: CAB) 65/XIX, Cabinet meeting of 16 October 1941, pp. 216–218.

[3] This operation, which had been prepared in 1940 at the Singapore Defence Conference, was to involve the preventive seizure of the Isthmus of Kra located within Thai territory – the narrowest part of the Malay Peninsula. R. Aldrich, *A Question of Expediency. Britain, the United States and Thailand, 1941–42*, "Journal of Southeast Asian Studies" 1988, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 231–232.

[4] NAL, CAB 66/XIX, Far Eastern Policy. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, pp. 13–14; F. Marks, *Facade and Failure. The Hull-Nomura Talks of 1941*, "Presidential Studies Quarterly" 1985, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 99–102.

possibility. Prime Minister Winston Churchill noted that in the event of an outbreak of a Japanese-Soviet war, the Soviets would certainly press Great Britain to declare war against the Japanese Empire. So far, London had made such a commitment only to the USA; Churchill felt that Britain should not make further such commitments. Churchill further stated that in the Far East, it was necessary for Britain to align its policy with Washington's.[5]

Setting British-American relations as the compass for every action and decision in Southeast Asia had hampered British political activity. After the meeting discussing Eden's memorandum, this way of doing politics was abandoned; however, this move did not assure safety, as Washington's statements about 'increased American involvement in the region' were not backed up by actual guarantees.

According to the prevailing opinion in the Foreign Office at that time, the Japanese government had collapsed because of the unsatisfactory course of the talks in Washington. This belief was expressed in a telegram sent on 17 October to the British Ambassador to the USA, Viscount Halifax, advising him to assure the Americans of London's full support and note that the British would prefer to prevent war with Japan.[6]

The reply from Halifax came the following day. According to US Secretary of State Cordell Hull, the situation in Japan was relatively calm and the government in Tokyo wanted to continue the talks in Washington. However, it was difficult to find a way to reach a compromise: first of all, any deal would be met with a negative reaction from the Chinese; and secondly, it would undo the effects of the hard political line that had been taken to date. Hull was prepared to consider a single small-scale 'barter' as a possible gesture of goodwill and instructed Halifax to consult Eden on the idea.[7]

Eden considered such a strategy to be wrong – in his view, it was impossible to influence the Japanese in this way. The only justification for such a move would be to obtain the materials and supplies needed for war. This was the position that Eden presented at the cabinet meeting on 20 October and it met with the approval of the other ministers. Eden also reported on a meeting with the

[5] NAL, CAB 65/XXIII, Discussion on the Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of 16 October 1941, pp. 121–122; R. Aldrich, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

[6] NAL, CAB 65/XXIII, Telegram No. 5653 from the Foreign Office to Washington, 17 October 1941, p. 125.

[7] NAL, CAB 65/XXIII, Telegram No. 4750 from Washington to the Foreign Office, 18 October 1941, p. 126.

Chinese ambassador, according to whom the new Japanese government would likely behave cautiously for the next three weeks and only after that time could aggressive actions be expected. This view was shared among the officials in the Foreign Office. The Chinese ambassador also believed that the USSR would be the most likely target for the Japanese attack.[8]

Churchill himself was convinced that the Japanese would not risk war with the so-called ABCD line[9] – at least not until the Soviet Union was eliminated. He expressed this view in a telegram to Australian Prime Minister John Curtin; the threat from the Japanese Empire was a major concern for the government in Canberra, which is why it pressed London on the question of sending a squadron of warships to the Far East. Churchill assured the Australians that the *HMS Repulse* battlecruiser, already operating in the Indian Ocean region, would soon be joined by the battleship HMS *Prince of Wales*. Later, naval forces in the region were to be further reinforced with four R-type battleships and a *Renown*--class battlecruiser.[10] Indeed, at a Defence Committee meeting on 20 October, it was decided to form a small fleet squadron centred around the *Prince of Wales* to serve as a deterrent.[11]

At the Cabinet meeting on 3 November, Eden presented a memorandum on strengthening defence cooperation with the Netherlands and the US in the Far East. He proposed laying down a proposal to sign a defence treaty between the Dutch government and Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, as yet another factor to deter Japan from war. At the same time, it had to be borne in mind that a significant weakness of such a pact was the lack of US involvement. According to Eden, this could be mitigated by keeping the US government informed of the whole matter and obtaining its public approval of the treaty.[12]

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[8] NAL, CAB 65/XIX, Cabinet meeting of 20 October 1941, p. 221; NAL, CAB 65/XXIII, Discussion on the Far East Question, p. 124.

[9] The ABCD line is a term used to describe a potential coalition of Allies in the East Asian region – the United States of America, Britain, China, and the Dutch. S. Ienaga, *The Pacific War, 1931–1945. A Critical Perspective on Japan's Role in World War II*, New York 1978, p. 132.

[10] NAL, CAB 65/XXIII, Telegram T.742 of 25 October 1941 to the Prime Minister of Australia, p. 129; NAL, CAB 65/XXIII, Cabinet meeting of 27 October 1941 – discussion of the situation in the Middle East, p. 128.

[11] A. Boyd, *The Royal Navy in Eastern Waters. Linchpin of Victory 1935–1942*, Barnsley 2017, pp. 310.

[12] NAL, CAB 66/XIX, Defence cooperation in the Far East with the Netherlands and the United States. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, p. 148.

Support from Australia and New Zealand was expected – the New Zealand government had already informed London in September that the Dutch should be given a guarantee of military assistance as soon as possible,[13] and the Australian authorities were even prepared to send their own troops to the Dutch East Indies.[14] Eden's proposal was discussed at a meeting of the British government, where it met with the support of the Secretary for India and Burma, Leo Amery, whereas the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, Viscount Cranborne, believed that British inaction in the event of a Japanese attack on Dutch possessions would have a very negative impact on relations with Australia and New Zealand. In contrast, given information from Chiang Kai-shek, Churchill believed that the target of the next offensive would be China, and for this reason, he argued, the United States should be pressed directly to declare its readiness to stop potential Japanese aggression and initiative in the region should be left to Washington. Government support was split and, as a result of this disagreement, discussion on Eden's proposal was postponed. Churchill was to make a direct request to US President Roosevelt for a 'public declaration' to secure British interests in the South East Asian region.[15]

Unfortunately, Washington was not ready for greater involvement: even American military commanders were opposed to making demands on the Japanese and engaging in actions against them. They were primarily concerned with the situation in the Atlantic and thought that their own military reinforcements in the Philippines were a sufficient deterrent to aggression. Meanwhile, the state of American–Japanese negotiations did not inspire optimism. Intelligence indicated that unless there was a breakthrough, the negotiations would be broken off, which meant that Japan had already begun preparations for war.[16]

Present at the next meeting of the British government, on 5 November, was Sir Earle Page, the Australian government's special envoy, who rightly pointed out that Japan's attitude indicated an imminent change in the situation. For

[13] NAL, CAB 66/XIX, Telegram from the New Zealand Government to the Dominions Office, 16 September 1941, p. 149.

[14] NAL, CAB 65/XXIV, Cabinet meeting of 3 November 1941 – discussion on the Foreign Secretary's memorandum, p. 1c.

[15] NAL, CAB 65/XXIV, Cabinet meeting of 3 November 1941 – discussion on the Foreign Secretary's memorandum, p. 1c-3.

[16] R. Dallek, *op. cit.*, pp. 304–306.

this reason, forces in South East Asia had to be immediately strengthened, primarily in terms of reinforcing the navy and air force. The reinforcement of the air force was of particular concern to the Australians: the number of aircraft required for carrying out defence operations in the Malay region was 336, while only 120 were presently combat-ready according to the Australian authorities. In Canberra's opinion, only adequate military strength could deter Japanese aggression. Churchill, in response, pointed out the problems concerning producing enough aircraft due to prior commitments to the Soviet Union and the extensive use of air force on various fronts. For his part, Secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, noted that the number of aircraft ready for use in Singapore was expected to reach 250 in the next two weeks. With the increased involvement of the navy in the region, this number was expected to be sufficient – the Chiefs of Staff's estimate of Malaya's defensive needs (336 aircraft and 9 brigades) had been determined in the absence of a fleet in the region.[17] The Prime Minister indicated that the very appearance of the *Prince of Wales* in Cape Town would have a deterrent effect on the Japanese. The Australians' demand to let Japan know that an attack on the USSR would be met with military intervention by the British Empire was considered by Churchill to be extremely damaging, as it posed a risk of a situation in which Britain would find itself at war with Japan without the US. To put the Australian envoy at ease, the Prime Minister expressed Britain's willingness to support Australia in the event of a threat, even at the cost of sacrificing its strategic position in the Middle East.[18]

Between 6 and 13 November, the British troops stationed in Malaya received a shipment of 25-pounder howitzers in sufficient quantity to equip 3 regiments, and 2-pounder anti-tank guns for one regiment. The howitzers replaced obsolete 18-pounder guns, which were to be used for stationary defence of airfields.[19]

Meanwhile, further tensions around Thailand began to mount. At a cabinet meeting on 11 November, Eden presented a message from Crosby, in which the diplomat reported that the Thai government would soon receive, or had already

[17] R. Callahan, *The Illusion of Security. Singapore 1919–42*, "Journal of Contemporary History" 1974, vol. 9, no. 2, p. 83.

[18] NAL, CAB 65/XXIV, Cabinet meeting of 5 November 1941 – discussion on the Far East Question, pp. 8–10.

[19] NAL, CAB 66/XIX, Weekly résumé on naval, military and air situation – 6–13 November 1941, p. 209.

received, an ultimatum from Japan. In these circumstances, the Foreign Secretary recommended attempting to influence the situation by economic means, i.e., the supplies of military equipment. This proposal was approved by the government. At the same meeting, the question of guarantees for the Dutch East Indies was also revisited. Eden expressed concern that a declaration of war against Japan in the event of its attack on the US, without giving a similar guarantee to the Dutch government, would be met with a negative response. Churchill responded to this statement with his standard mantra that this carried the risk of being at war with Japan without the US and Britain should wait to see how the situation would unfold. First Sea Lord Sir Dudley Pound suggested another way of assuaging the Dutch fears. The new commander of the Far Eastern Fleet, Admiral Sir Thomas Phillips, was to proceed, immediately upon assuming his post, to confer with US naval representatives on the preparation of plans for war with Japan. Thus, the Dutch side could also be invited to join the discussion. Eventually, the government authorised Eden to inform the Dutch authorities about these talks.[20]

On the same day, the Admiralty issued a formal order that the *Prince of Wales*, after reaching Cape Town, should remain there only for a short stopover and proceed to Ceylon, where it would meet up with the *Repulse* and from where the two ships would continue their journey together to Singapore.[21]

At the Cabinet meeting the following day (12 November), Sir Earle Page, the envoy of the Australian government, was again present. He stressed the importance of the British Empire's domains in the Far East and the need to ensure their security by keeping peace with Japan, which could only be achieved through cooperation with the US and military reinforcements. The Australian government understood that options in the latter matter were limited and appreciated the progress to date and the risk of sending the *Prince of Wales* to Singapore. However, there were still some shortcomings that needed to be remedied quickly. Page also outlined the Australian authorities' views on what the British reaction to the next steps of the Japanese Empire should be – in the event of a Japanese invasion of the USSR, Thailand, or the Dutch East Indies, the Australians believed the British response should be a declaration of war

[20] NAL, CAB 65/XXIV, Cabinet meeting of 11 November 1941 – discussion on the Far East Question, pp. 12–13; R. Aldrich, *op. cit.*, pp. 234–235.

[21] A. Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

and direct military engagement. Such a decisive approach would have represented a significant change in previous British policy. The second major point in Page's speech was the question of cooperation with the US, as Washington's position was still somewhat unclear. On one hand, the Americans continued to put economic pressure on Japan and were also determined to defend the Philippines, although they had previously assumed the need to evacuate the islands. At the same time, they still gave no clear guarantee of military support. According to the Australians, the British Empire's resolute stance would be met with sympathy by the American public, which would be a factor in prompting the US government to engage in war. Page also expressed his country's willingness to support the war effort with 150 000 men who could be earmarked for service outside Australian territory.[22]

This presentation of the Australian point of view was followed by a summary of the British Empire's military situation. Points that should be taken from this comprehensive description are primarily those relating directly to South East Asia. By early 1942, he Far East Fleet was to consist of HMS Prince of Wales, one cruiser (Repulse), and four R-type battleships. The British owed the possibility of creating the Eastern Fleet to the increased American involvement in the Atlantic. Admiral Pound expressed the hope that four more Australian destroyers would join this force. In the event of war, such a squadron consisting of joined British and Australian ships, lacking US naval support, would be far weaker than the Japanese navy. The main part of the US naval forces in the Pacific was still stationed in Hawaii, but there were some signs of changes: the Philippines was reinforced with nine destroyers and 12 submarines; organisational issues and war plans were to be discussed between the British, Americans, and Dutch.

After discussing the Royal Navy, the Cabinet moved on to the Air Force, the situation of which was presented by Marshal Sir Charles Portal, Chief of the Air Staff. About 200 aircraft were to be stationed in Singapore – a number thought to be sufficient for defensive purposes (maximum target number: 330 aircraft). Portal stressed that if the situation demanded, Malaya could be supported by bombers currently operating in the Middle East, but this should not be done until there was an imminent threat. Next, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General John

[22] NAL, CAB 65/XXIV, Cabinet meeting of 12 November 1941 – discussion on the Far East Question, pp. 22–25.

Dill, assessed the state of the British Army's ground troops: the number of soldiers in Singapore was around 63 000, with an additional 14 000 volunteers. They occupied fortified positions and had more than 200 anti-aircraft guns at their disposal. However, there was a shortage of field and anti-tank guns.[23]

Churchill was opposed to reinforcing forces in the Far East, as in his opinion it was probable that there would not be military escalation in that area even for another year. The Prime Minister preferred a strategy of redeploying forces where they were currently needed. This was, of course, dictated by necessity, but nevertheless, his reading of Japanese intentions was completely wrong. On the question of US involvement, Churchill noted that the situation was not straightforward because of the Neutrality Acts and the need for Congressional approval for a declaration of war. He agreed that Washington was already significantly involved in the Allied war effort, if only through the Lend-Lease Act and the provision of escorts for convoys. Nevertheless, in his opinion any attempts to pressure President Roosevelt to speed up the process would be misguided. The Prime Minister sought to reassure Page again of Britain's willingness to sacrifice other fronts to ensure the security of his country. In doing so, he emphasised that, in his view, Japan was not able to threaten Australia. According to Eden, at that point, it was the Dutch East Indies (and not Australia) that was the most threatened area. Britain had no obligations to the Soviet Union in Asia, nor did Moscow have any obligations to the British in this area. What is particularly interesting is that the Soviets did not seek to change this situation. By contrast, in Thailand, the Isthmus of Kra was identified as an area of strategic interest for Britain.[24] On 16 November the Hong Kong garrison was reinforced with two infantry battalions from Canada. On the same day, the Prince of Wales arrived in Cape Town escorted by two destroyers. Following the Admiralty orders, the squadron set sail as early as 18 November.[25]

The Southeast Asia issue did not come up again at the Cabinet meeting until 24 November. Japanese-American negotiations were underway in the US and the British had been briefed on the proposals put forward by Saburō

[23] NAL, CAB 65/XXIV, Cabinet meeting of 12 November 1941 – discussion on the Far East Question, pp. 25–27.

[24] NAL, CAB 65/XXIV, Cabinet meeting of 12 November 1941 – discussion on the Far East Question, pp. 27–29.

[25] NAL, CAB 66/XIX, Weekly résumé on naval, military and air situation – 13–20 November 1941, p. 262; A. Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

Kurusu the Japanese government's 'special envoy': in return for the withdrawal of Japanese forces from the southern part of Indochina, the Allies were to end the economic blockade of Japan and cease their support for the Chinese. Such demands were obviously unacceptable. According to Eden, the Japanese were making exorbitant demands and offering only token concessions in return. It was therefore inappropriate to continue negotiations based on these proposals but to make an analogous tough offer for the Japanese. Churchill himself was reluctant to make any economic concessions to the Japanese. He recognised that maintaining economic pressure would significantly improve the British position in the Far East.[26]

Reports from Thailand, at the same time, raised concerns. Japanese pressure on the country was so strong that there was considerable risk that the Thai government would succumb to it. Attempts to influence Bangkok through economic support were proving insufficient. In the course of discussions on this matter, it was agreed that it would be most effective to offer some aircraft to Thailand. The Chiefs of Staff were therefore tasked with seeing if there was any possibility of assisting Thailand in this way.[27]

On 29 November, HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse met in Ceylon. Although Japan was aware of the formation of the Far East Fleet by the British, Tokyo was still preparing for a confrontation; therefore, it appeared that the deterrent function of the squadron had failed before the ships even reached their destination. Despite this, there was no re-evaluation of the previous strategy and the ships continued their journey to Singapore, where they arrived on 2 December. In late November/early December, 25-pound howitzers for two regiments were still delivered to Malaya. On 28 November, a combat alert was issued for British troops in the Far East, and on 1 December a mobilisation of volunteer forces was announced. Information related to the ongoing US–Japanese negotiations in Washington also did not spark optimism During the negotiations a proposal was made to soften economic sanctions in exchange for a reduced Japanese military presence in Indochina. However, these ideas were met with negative feedback from the British, Dutch, and Chinese, which prompted the

[26] NAL, CAB 65/XXIV, Cabinet meeting of 24 November 1941 – discussion on the Far East Question, pp. 40–41.

[27] NAL, CAB 65/XXIV, Cabinet meeting of 24 November 1941 – discussion on the Far East Question, p. 41.

US to abandon these notions. Incoming reports of the redeployment of Japanese troops to the south seemed to confirm the conclusion that the political situation in the Far East was becoming increasingly tense.

In Churchill's view, the movements of the Japanese army indicated that its next target would be Thailand. Such a conclusion called for a reconsideration of the operation to seize the Kra Isthmus, and the Dominion authorities were consulted on the matter. The Australian government represented the position that Japanese aggression against Thailand would necessitate a military response by the British Empire in consultation with the US government, which, after all, had publicly committed itself to respond to further aggressive actions by Japan. The Australians also recommended trying to obtain Bangkok's consent to carry out Operation Matador, whereas South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts was quite optimistic that the Americans would certainly provide assistance in the event of British involvement in some sort of a conflict in the Far East. At the same time, he regarded the seizure of the Kra Isthmus as a defensive step intended to protect Malaya against a Japanese invasion. New Zealand authorities presented a slightly more cautious approach, proposing to attempt military cooperation with the Thais while seeking some form of American assistance. However, they left the final decisions to London and promised support for its actions in this matter. The most moderate opinion came from Canada. According to Prime Minister Mackenzie King, under no circumstances should the British be drawn into a war without the United States, which was perfectly in line with Churchill's own position.

Feedback from the Dominions did not change the Chiefs of Staff's view of the situation. They, too, believed that as long as there was no guarantee of US military support, no initiative should be taken in Southeast Asia. The mere occupation of the Isthmus of Kra by the Japanese was not, in the military view, a sufficient reason for military intervention. Churchill, on the other hand, warned against looking too optimistically at US–British relations. Despite Washington's increasing commitment to the Allied operations, US participation in the war was not yet decided. For this reason, the Prime Minister was also opposed to British military intervention, not only in the event of a potential Japanese occupation of the Isthmus of Kra, but also in the event of a Japanese attack on the USSR or the Dutch East Indies. For this reason, once again the fear of American neutrality paralysed the British government. The only decision made

by Churchill was to send another imploring telegram to Roosevelt asking Washington to put pressure on Tokyo. Eden, on the other hand, was not happy with the situation faced by the Dutch, who still could not count on any guarantees from London. He only hoped that the American involvement might soon increase enough for the British government to gain more options in this respect.[28]

On 26 November, news of Japanese navy movements 'south of Formosa' reached Washington. For Roosevelt, this was proof that there was no point in continuing negotiations given their insincere treatment by the Japanese. The last attempt to salvage the situation was a message from the President to Emperor Hirohito on 6 December, in which he called for the withdrawal of the Japanese Imperial troops from Indochina. While Roosevelt knew in fact that this initiative was futile, it may later have served to convince public opinion that war was unavoidable.[29]

Telegram No. 5519 from the British Embassy in Washington of 1 December contains a highly significant statement that an attack by Japan on either British or Dutch dominions would also concern the United States. This news opened up new possibilities in British Far Eastern policy. Eden again brought up at the government forum the issue of guarantees for the Dutch East Indies. Washington also expressed its support for the seizure of the Isthmus of Kra, provided that it should be preceded by at least an attempt to obtain consent from the Thai government. In Eden's opinion, this removed the obstacles to carrying out that operation, even though in his view there was no chance of cooperation from Bangkok. Indeed, as recently as November, the British consulted the Thai government about the possibility of cooperating on the issue, but the idea was met with a negative response from Prime Minister Phibunsongkhram. London was unable to guarantee security for the rest of Thailand and was therefore not an attractive partner for the Thai government. In his memorandum, Eden suggested that Crosby, the aforementioned diplomatic representative in Bangkok, should still be consulted on this matter.[30]

[28] NAL, CAB 65/XXIV, Cabinet meeting of 1 December 1941 – discussion on the Far East Question, pp. 50–51.

[29] R. Dallek, *op. cit.*, pp. 308–310.

[30] NAL, CAB 66/XX, Far Eastern Policy. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, p. 82; R. Aldrich, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

Under the influence of this new information, Churchill finally agreed to issuing a declaration of support for the Dutch at a cabinet meeting on 4 December. Following a telegram from Washington, the British government also gave permission to the command in the Far East to carry out Operation Matador, in the event of a Japanese invasion of Thailand. It was also discussed how to get the Thais to resist the Japanese. In the end, the Cabinet decided to propose to the Americans making a joint declaration of support to the authorities in Bangkok, without specifying the details of such potential support. These decisions were telegraphed to, among others, the commander of the Far East Fleet, Admiral Phillips, who was staying in Manila.[31]

A few days later, on 7 and 8 December 1941, the Japanese launched their offensive against the Allies in the Far East by attacking the American base at Pearl Harbor and launching an offensive in Malaya. The following days and weeks clearly demonstrated how unprepared the British Empire was for the confrontation.[32]

While the most important step in strengthening the British military position in the Southeast Asian region in the final weeks before the outbreak of war, was the creation of the Far East Fleet, it had virtually ceased to exist by 10 December when the Japanese air force sank HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* during the Battle of Kuantan. The condition of the British Air Force also left much to be desired. Assurances by RAF Chief of Staff Marshal Portal and the Secretary of State for Air Sinclair that there would be between 200 and 250 aircraft in the Malaya region and that these would be sufficient for defensive purposes were unrealistic, as in fact, in December 1941, there were only 158 aircraft in the region. The ground troops were also in a difficult situation. There were no armoured troops at all and a dire shortage of anti-tank weapons – in November, anti-tank guns for just one regiment had been delivered. Modern artillery was also not supplied in sufficient numbers: in November and December, shipments for only five regiments arrived. Some soldiers were not fully trained, and only two battalions arrived from outside the region for the Hong Kong garrison during the entire period described here.[33]

[31] NAL, CAB 65/XXIV, Cabinet meeting of 4 December 1941 – discussion on the Far East Question, pp. 72–73.

[32] E. Mawdsley, *December 1941. Twelve Days that Began a World War*, Padstow 2011, pp. 152–175.

[33] *Ibidem*, pp. 231–234; R. Callahan, *op. cit.*, pp. 85–86.

The authorisation for Operation Matador came too late. In addition, due to the indecisiveness and reluctance of the commanders of the British army, it was further delayed because of the continuing fear that the implementation of the operation would lead to the British side being regarded as the aggressor by the Japanese. This could have adversely affected further attempts to enlist American support in the absence of concrete guarantees. When the relevant orders were finally given, it was too late – the isthmus was already held by Japanese troops.[34]

Little was also achieved in the field of diplomacy. The Thai side was not won over; only cooperation with the Dutch was moving forward. Attempts to secure absolute American support also failed. Unofficial declarations of assistance in the event of the outbreak of war, given quite freely by Roosevelt in his talks with Halifax, among others, did not translate into written guarantees. The American president himself was later to state in conversations with Stalin and Churchill that "if it had not been for the Japanese attack, he would have had great difficulty in getting the American people into the war,"[35] as indeed, only 51% of American citizens were convinced that the US would soon find itself at war with Japan.

The above-mentioned argument therefore clearly shows that London did not adequately prepare for the confrontation with Japan. To a large extent, of course, this was due to objective reasons – their extensive involvement on the fronts in Europe and Africa meant that the British Empire could not afford to adequately reinforce the potential war front in the Far East. However, it is more difficult to justify the fact that the full potential of existing forces, e.g., the Dominion troops, was not used. In this context, a much more dangerous mistake was the misreading of the threat posed by Tokyo, which significantly affected the outcome of the military confrontation. It was these errors that significantly contributed to the defeat of the British Empire's forces in the Malayan armed struggle and the fall of Singapore just two months after the start of war hostilities.

[34] R. Aldrich, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

[35] R. Dallek, *op. cit.*, pp. 307–310.

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BRYTYJSKIE PRZYGOTOWANIA DYPLOMATYCZNE I MILITARNE DO WOJNY NA PACYFIKU OD 17 PAŹDZIERNIKA DO 7 GRUDNIA 1941 ROKU

Streszczenie. Objęcie stanowiska premiera Japonii przez generała Tojo Hideki 17 października 1941 r. zostało odczytane w Londynie jako zapowiedź kolejnych agresywnych kroków ze strony Tokio. Celem artykułu jest zbadanie, jakie działania podjął brytyjski rząd, aby przygotować się do potencjalnej konfrontacji z Japonią na polu dyplomatycznym i militarnym. Kluczowym wzmocnieniem było utworzenie eskadry Floty Dalekowschodniej, mającej w założeniu funkcjonować jako podstawowy czynnik odstraszający. Dokonało się to kosztem osłabienia pozycji brytyjskich sił morskich na innych obszarach. Wojska lądowe na obszarze Malajów otrzymały natomiast jedynie

symboliczne wsparcie. W najgorszej sytuacji było lotnictwo, gdyż samolotów było zdecydowanie zbyt mało do celów obronnych, ponadto nie były to jednostki o najlepszej jakości. Ze względu jednak na zaangażowanie na innych frontach oraz na dostarczanie sprzętu wojskowego do Związku Radzieckiego niemożliwe było wysłanie większej ilości uzbrojenia do Azji Południowo-Wschodniej. Na polu dyplomacji starano się przede wszystkim o zapewnienie gwarancji wsparcia ze strony Stanów Zjednoczonych. Lecz ze względu na *Ustawę o neutralności* oraz ogólną niechęć amerykańskiego społeczeństwa do udziału w wojnie udało się jedynie uzyskać werbalne obietnice pomocy. O wiele lepiej układała się współpraca z władzami Holenderskich Indii Wschodnich, które pozostawały najistotniejszym sojusznikiem Imperium Brytyjskiego na tym obszarze. Poza tym próbowano pozyskać do współpracy Tajlandię, ale oferta Londynu dla tego kraju pozostawała wyjątkowo nieatrakcyjna. Brytyjczycy nie byli w stanie zapewnić Tajlandii gwarancji integralności terytorialnej. Te czynniki, w połączeniu z niewłaściwym odczytaniem japońskich intencji, sprawiły, że Wielka Brytania przystępowała do starcia z Japonią słabo przygotowana, czego skutkiem były klęska w bitwie o Malaje i upadek Singapuru.

Słowa kluczowe: Wielka Brytania, Japonia, II wojna światowa, Daleki Wschód, Azja Południowo-Wschodnia

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БРИТАНСКАЯ ДИПЛОМАТИЧЕСКАЯ И ВОЕННАЯ ПОДГОТОВКА К ВОЙНЕ НА ТИХОМ ОКЕАНЕ С 17 ОКТЯБРЯ ПО 7 ДЕКАБРЯ 1941 Г.

Аннотация. Вступление в должность премьер-министра Японии генерала Тодзио Хидэки 17 октября 1941 г. было воспринято в Лондоне как заявление о дальнейших агрессивных шагах со стороны Токио. Цель статьи – рассмотреть, какие действия предприняло британское правительство для подготовки к возможной конфронтации с Японией в дипломатической и военной областях. Ключевым усилением стало формирование эскадры Дальневосточного флота, призванной выполнять функции основного средства сдерживания. Это было сделано за счет ослабления позиций британских военно-морских сил на других направлениях. В области дипломатии были предприняты усилия, чтобы заручиться гарантиями поддержки со стороны США. Однако из-за Закона о нейтралитете и общего нежелания американской общественности участвовать в войне были получены только устные обещания помощи. Гораздо лучше было сотрудничество с властями Голландской Ост-Индии, которая оставалась важнейшим союзником Британской империи в этой области. Кроме того, предпринимались попытки склонить Таиланд к сотрудничеству, но предложение Лондона для этой страны оставалось крайне непривлекательным. Британцы не смогли предоставить гарантии территориальной целостности страны. Эти факторы в сочетании с неправильным истолкованием намерений японцев означали, что Великобритания вступила в столкновение с Японией плохо подготовленной, что привело к поражению в битве при Малайе и падению Сингапура.

Ключевые слова: Великобритания, Япония, Вторая мировая война, Дальний Восток, Юго-Восточная Азия