

## Summary of the Discussion Meeting on 12 March 2003

### BRITAIN'S GRAND STRATEGY FOR WAR AGAINST JAPAN

Speaker Dr Saki Dockrill, Senior Lecturer, Kings College, London

The Chairman, Rex Wait OBE, welcomed everyone to the meeting which was being held in the East India Club, built in 1807 for employees of the East India Company, and which had occupied the same premises ever since. News had arrived here of the victory at Waterloo.

The Speaker observed that British naval supremacy in 18 and 19th centuries had become eroded in the 20th century by industrialisation and United States supremacy. The First World War had seen the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent retirement of the United States into isolationism. Britain reduced her defence expenditure in favour of welfare and no war in Europe was expected under her ten year planning forecasts.

Following the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 relationships between Britain and Japan had remained friendly. In 1919 Admiral Jellicoe had advocated a British naval base at Singapore, approved in 1921. From 1931 the international situation deteriorated. Japan attacked Manchuria in 1932 and withdrew from the League of Nations. From 1934 Britain regarded Germany as the main potential enemy and Churchill thought attack by Japan unlikely.

The situation changed with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The United States persuaded Britain, its Allies and Holland to form a coalition against Japan under US direction. Britain regarded Singapore as the key to holding eastern Asia, but as the lowest priority, leaving the United States responsible for the Pacific area. Britain agreed to the importance of keeping China in the War on the Allied side. The Casablanca Conference 1943 approved a campaign in Burma. South East Asia Command was formed in 1943 with Mountbatten as Supreme Commander, but it was deprived of men and resources for use against Germany. Churchill was content to leave the Pacific War to the Americans, and suggested at the Second Quebec Conference that the British Navy and RAF should be placed under US command in the Pacific. The United States decided its main effort should be directed against the Japanese mainland, and estimated 18 months between Germany and Japan capitulating. President Roosevelt was determined that British, Dutch and French colonial rule should not be resumed when Japan surrendered.

In discussion John McEnery posed the question as to whether if Japan had attacked the Netherlands East Indies, not Pearl Harbor, the United States might not have entered the war. The Chairman asked whether Japan had earlier plans to invade South East Asia. Dr Dockrill said Japan had shown interest in invasion and had infiltrated the area. Masao Hirakubo OBE said as a young Japanese infantry officer he had hoped to help liberate the area of white colonialism.

Philip Malins

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