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MIDWAY AND THE INDIAN OCEAN

Jeremy Black

While we are at war with Germany and Italy we do not possess the naval resources necessary to maintain the command of the Indian Ocean against any heavy detachment from the main Japanese fleet.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

Winston Churchill's remark to the Secret Session of the House of Commons on 23 April 1942 provides the key to this article, an attempt to focus on the strategic significance of Midway.¹

American victory at Midway may well be a self-evident proposition to Americans and others contemplating the course and significance of the struggle between America and Japan between 1941 and 1945 for dominance of the Pacific. Yet that struggle does not exhaust the importance of that battle, and it particularly behooves a non-American to comment on the wider significance of Midway. Such a task could be profitably repeated for other battles seen as turning points, notably Stalingrad, El Alamein, the Atlantic convoy battles of the spring of 1943, and Kohima (in northeastern India in April 1944, where British and Indian forces repulsed the Japanese). Each is too readily

approached in terms of the particular combatants who fought the battle, with a tendency to underplay its wider significance.

As far as Midway is concerned, my general perspective is the issue of the prospects for, and success of, coalition warfare during the Second World War, and my specific concern is serious British weakness in the Indian Ocean region. Coalition warfare faces problems and creates irritations, but it can also be a crucial force multiplier. In the Second World War, the Allies confronted multiple issues, both political and military, in

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pursuing coalition warfare. A coalition that included Joseph Stalin, Chiang Kai-shek, and Charles de Gaulle was scarcely going to be easy, and alongside the inherited distrusts and special interests that they represented, there were also serious problems in Anglo-American relations, both political and military. Indeed, there is a rich literature on the subject.²

In contrast, there is no such extensive literature on the deficiencies of Axis coalition warfare, and this is appropriate, because despite the extent to which the totalitarian regimes of the Axis had more in common than the Allies, they failed as an effective alliance.³ In particular, the two leading Axis powers, Germany and Japan, were unable to create a military partnership, nor to provide mutual economic assistance that in any way matched that of the Allies, strained as relations among the latter were. German and Italian submarines were to link up in the Indian Ocean with the Japanese, but they did not mount any large-scale concerted operations.⁴ German plans for war with the United States made little of the prospect of Japanese assistance and preferred to focus on the possibility of using naval power and, subsequently, when that ceased to be even remotely plausible, on the prospect of “wonder weapons.”⁵

Germany and Japan indeed fought what were in essence two separate wars, and there was little in the way of coordination or cooperation between them, and still less between Italy and Japan. In Eritrea, Italy had a colony on the Red Sea, with a port at Massawa, where destroyers were based, and, in Somalia, another on the Indian Ocean, with a port at Mogadishu; both, however, were conquered by the British before there was any prospect of cooperation. Mogadishu was captured by a force from Kenya on 25 February 1941, Massawa following on 8 April, falling to a force from Sudan, while Berbera in British Somaliland, which the Italians had conquered in August 1940, was recaptured on 16 March 1941 by a force from Aden, in an amphibious operation.

The Italian navy was large and modern and included six battleships, nineteen cruisers, and 113 submarines, although no aircraft carriers. This fleet, however, was largely confined to the Mediterranean, although Italian submarines took part in the Battle of the Atlantic from 1941. With the British in control of Egypt, the Italians were in no shape to intervene in the Indian Ocean, irrespective of the problems posed by a lack of fuel, air cover, or determined leadership.

The high point of German-Japanese coordination was Germany's decision to declare war on the United States after Pearl Harbor, an attack Hitler had sought to encourage by pressing forward military operations against Moscow. This declaration of war, however, was essentially the product of the deterioration in American-German relations, rather than a means to assist Japan;⁶ the declaration of war did not lead to any concerted attempt at grand strategy.

The only sphere in which such an attempt might have been possible was the Indian Ocean, with German pressure on the Middle East interacting with Japanese advances on India and in the Indian Ocean. British policy makers, indeed, feared joint pressure in the form, for example, of a possible German advance through Turkey, prior to the launching of Operation BARBAROSSA, or, subsequently, through the Caucasus.

These concerns were a second tranche of earlier fears about the Germans exploiting support in Iraq and (Vichy) Syria, as they had sought to do. This had led to the British invasion of both in the summer of 1941.

The fears of an advance through Turkey did not materialize. The Germans did not invade, and had they done so, they would have found the Turkish army capable of mounting a formidable resistance. Moreover, any advance through Turkey would have encountered serious logistical and transport limitations and problems. Pressuring Turkey into granting transit rights would have been a difficult question, but the situation would have had to be more dire for such pressure to succeed.

In the event, the planned German advance to the Azerbaijani oil fields near Baku in late 1942 was thwarted by Soviet resistance and by Hitler's focus on the capture of Stalingrad. By then, anyway, the British and Soviets had occupied Iran (from 25 August), capturing Tehran on 17 September. Persia provided a crucial route for Lend-Lease supplies to the Soviet Union, as well as giving British India considerable defense in depth in the event of German success in the Caucasus or the Middle East.

In practice, the German threat to the Indian Ocean came most directly via Egypt. The Germans had driven back the British in Libya in 1941, and, having been forced to fall back in November 1941, returned to the offensive in early 1942. On 20 June 1942, following the German success in the battle of Gazala, the key Libyan port of Tobruk, a forward defense for Egypt, fell, and the Afrika Corps then advanced into Egypt. In July and September, however, Erwin Rommel tried and failed to break through the British defenses in order to advance on Alexandria and the Suez Canal. The German advance created considerable pressure and led to an atmosphere of crisis, as well as to the departure of the Mediterranean fleet from Alexandria. Yet the attacks were held, while the pro-British ministry in Egypt kept the significant Axis elements that existed there at bay.

As a consequence, the Axis threat to the Indian Ocean region came from Japan. This region was crucial to a number of strands in the Allied war effort. Via the Indian Ocean came Allied aid to both China and the Soviet Union, as well as oil from the Middle East. The Indian Ocean was also central to the defense of Egypt and the Middle East, as well as to the articulation of the British imperial

system, notably the deployment of Indian, Australasian, and South African forces. Indeed, in his *Rulers of the Indian Ocean* (1927), Admiral George A. Ballard noted:

As regards its present form or fabric the Empire may be roughly divided into an occidental half—including the British Isles—and an oriental; which are held together commercially and strategically by the Imperial lines of communication across the Indian Ocean; the whole being kept in contact with foreign lands throughout the East by the trade routes traversing the same water-space. If those connections are cut, the two halves of the Empire will fall apart as surely as night follows day.⁷

Born in India, Ballard (1862–1948) was a product of empire, who had served in Sudanese (1884), Burmese (1885–86), and Chinese (1900) waters, as well as being director of the Operations Division of the Admiralty War Staff.

The vulnerability of the British Empire to Japanese attack had been a major theme in prewar planning and had led, in particular, to the scheme for the development of a major naval base in Singapore. As early as 1919 an Admiralty memorandum had warned that the Royal Navy was likely to be weaker than that of Japan in the Far East. It suggested that using Hong Kong as a base would expose the fleet and that instead Singapore should be developed, as it was sufficiently far from Japan to permit reinforcement without peril.⁸

By the 1930s, the British planned to send a major fleet to Singapore in the event of war with Japan.⁹ In 1940, however, the naval situation deteriorated sharply. Germany's victory over France took the latter's navy out of the Allied camp, greatly increasing British vulnerability. This issue was greatly exacerbated by Italy's entry into the war in June 1940, which exposed Britain's position in the Mediterranean. The establishment of forward submarine bases in the German conquests of Norway and France made Britain's Atlantic supply routes far more exposed than in the First World War. In 1941, the Royal Navy took heavy losses in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. In such circumstances, it was unsurprising that the First Sea Lord complained in September 1941 of a shortage of cruisers, adding that "the destroyer situation is even worse," when explaining why he could send none to the Far East.¹⁰

Concerned about the war with Germany, the British mistakenly hoped that the defense of Malaya and Singapore would benefit from the strength of the American fleet in the western Pacific, and they also seriously mishandled their own naval units in the face of Japanese airpower. A powerful squadron, though without any carriers (due to the damage suffered by the intended one), was sent from Singapore to contest the Japanese landings in Malaya, but on 10 December Japanese land-based naval bombers sank the key units, the battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battle cruiser *Repulse*. These were the first ships of these types

sunk in open sea solely by air attack, and their loss demonstrated the vulnerability of capital ships without air cover against air attack. The poorly conceived and executed plan of the force commander, Sir Tom Phillips, also reflected wider issues, including deficiencies in air-sea coordination.¹¹

Two months later, in the battle of the Java Sea (27 February–1 March), Allied naval forces unsuccessfully attacked a Japanese fleet en route to Java. The Japanese fleet was well coordinated, enjoyed superior air support, and benefited from better torpedoes; for their part, the American, Australian, British, and Dutch warships lacked an able commander and experience of fighting together. The Allied fleet was destroyed.

By then, Singapore had fallen to Japan (on 15 February), followed on 8 March by Rangoon in Burma. With their conquest of Malaya, Singapore, Sumatra, and Burma, the Japanese were best placed to advance into the Indian Ocean region, where indeed they occupied the Andaman and Nicobar islands in March, which had been evacuated by the British.

In April, the Japanese under Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, with five carriers and three hundred planes, launched an expedition into the Indian Ocean. The main Japanese strike force advanced to the south of Ceylon, raiding the port of Colombo, sinking a destroyer, and downing twenty-seven British aircraft for nine of their own. On the 5th, at 1:55 in the afternoon, the Japanese also sank two British heavy cruisers, *Devonshire* and *Cornwall*, to the southwest of Ceylon. Nagumo followed on 9 April by an advance to the east of Ceylon, from which a raid was launched against the key naval base of Trincomalee. Caught at sea, the small carrier *Hermes* and the Australian destroyer *Vampire* were sunk at nine o'clock that morning. (Commissioned in 1924, *Hermes* had a tonnage of only 9,765 and an overall length of 181.8 meters, not quite six hundred feet, and carried only twenty-five aircraft.) The Japanese then withdrew.

A separate squadron—Malaya Force, under Vice Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa—sailed from Mergui, in southern Burma, steaming west between the Andaman Islands and the Nicobars. On 6 April, from off the coast of eastern India, Ozawa launched raids on the ports of Cocanada and Vizagapatana and attacked shipping in the Bay of Bengal, sinking twenty-three merchant ships, twenty in one day. (Ozawa had been in operational control when the British warships were sunk on 10 December 1941 and was to go on to command the First Mobile Fleet during the battle of the Philippine Sea in 1944.) In addition, in April 1942, off India's west coast, Japanese submarines sank thirty-two thousand tons of shipping.

The British Eastern Fleet, under Admiral Somerville, was a considerable force, with three carriers (two of them new), five old battleships, and five cruisers, but the Japanese attack had come when it was off its cruising area south of

Ceylon, to refuel and rewater at Addu Atoll in the distant southern Maldives. The warships sunk by the Japanese had been sent to Ceylon for repair and escort duties, and their loss made Somerville uneasily aware of his weakness. He correctly thought that his carrier aircraft were unable to compete with the more numerous and better Japanese aircraft and that this deficiency left the battleships vulnerable. As a result, Somerville sent the battleships to Mombasa, in Kenya.

Had the Japanese been able to establish a permanent naval presence in the Indian Ocean, they would have threatened not only the British position in India but also that in the Middle East, challenging Britain's oil supplies from the Persian Gulf and its routes to Australia. The buildup of Ceylon's garrison to a strength of two divisions by the close of March 1942 was a response. As there was to be no Japanese landing, this force was not tested, and it is easy for historians, when space is at a premium, to ignore such moves. However, they throw light on strategic preferences. The troops deployed in Ceylon could not be sent to protect India against an advance from Burma, as Field Marshal Wavell, the commander in chief in India, wished; also, the decision reflected the determination of the Chiefs of Staff to maintain oceanic links. Had the Japanese landed an invasion force on Ceylon, it is difficult to see why they should not have repeated earlier successes: British fighting quality was no stronger, although the civilian population was resolved to resist the Japanese. In his war diary, Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, Commander in Chief Ceylon, noted, "Ceylon, on my arrival there on 21st January [1942], was virtually defenceless. . . . [T]he problem of retaining control of the coastal waters of Burma was quite beyond our powers in the absence of either air superiority or fast patrol craft with good AA [antiaircraft] armament so numerous that we could afford substantial losses."¹²

The Japanese advance forced Somerville to think about the need to protect the Arabian Sea, and thus tanker sailings from the Persian Gulf, as well as the routes from both the Gulf and the Red Sea down the coast of East Africa to the Cape of Good Hope. This was done by withdrawing the fleet to Bombay (modern Mumbai) and Mombasa, which seemed advisable not least as the main Japanese fleet, without a base in Ceylon, was forced to rely on distant Singapore. Nevertheless, there was acute concern about the security of Ceylon, even of the whole of India. The navy was no longer in a posture of forward defense and, crucially, was unable to prevent an invasion. As there was no effective air cover to protect India, the situation appeared more dire than that facing Britain in 1940 when threatened by German invasion.

In response, the British were encouraged to press forward their plan to seize Madagascar from Vichy French forces. In March, intercepts had indicated that Germany was urging Japan to occupy the island, and the British feared the basing of Japanese submarines there. On 5 May, the main port of Diégo Suarez was

attacked; its defenders surrendered on 7 May, although additional operations from September were necessary to achieve the island's final surrender on 5 November. This was Britain's first major amphibious success of the war.

The fate of Madagascar was indicative of that of Ceylon, as air superiority supplied by two carriers was important to British success at Diégo Suarez, the British being faced by no significant airpower on the part of Vichy, and certainly by no carrier. The crisis ended with most of the Japanese warships' being deployed for the attack on Port Moresby planned for early May, the attack that was to lead to the battle of the Coral Sea.

The Japanese raid into the Indian Ocean is not only one of the great counterfactuals (what-ifs) of the war but also a key indication of the importance of Midway. There was a greater vulnerability in the Indian Ocean than that of the United States in the far larger Pacific. Instead, however, of pursuing their potent advantage against the secondary enemy and possibly preempting the invasion of Madagascar and crippling British oil movements, the Japanese sent their carriers into the Pacific theater against their strongest opponent. Of course, had the Japanese concentrated on the Pacific theater throughout and not launched the raid into the Indian Ocean at all, they might have been in a better position to exploit their initial advantage in the Pacific, not least by putting pressure on the remainder of the American Pacific Fleet.

As it was, four of the carriers Nagumo had taken into the Indian Ocean were destroyed at Midway. This defeat led the Japanese to postpone their plans to advance in the southwest Pacific, toward New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa. Losses at Midway also reduced Japanese strategic options for future campaigns in the Indian Ocean, while also making it less dangerous for the Americans to prepare to mount attacks in the Pacific, which in turn further reduced Japanese options in the Indian Ocean.

After Midway, the Japanese still had a large navy that was particularly strong in battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. Yet their losses in 1942 cost the Japanese their lead in carrier strength, and by the spring of 1943 only one fleet carrier (as against light carriers) was prepared for conflict. The others were damaged. Three more fleet carriers were due for completion that year, but the Americans were planning or building far more. There was also a major disparity as far as cruisers, destroyers, and submarines were concerned.

The marked difference in industrial capability and effective war mobilization of the two powers was readily apparent, and this difference was to be accentuated by naval action. Whereas the Japanese navy could not strike at the American economy, the inroads of American submarines greatly affected the movement of raw materials to Japan and, therefore, its industrial capability.

The contrast between the two economies was also seen in the construction of merchant shipping, in which the Americans opened up a massive lead.

As a result, they could attack with greater safety. Off the island of Guadalcanal in the southwest Pacific, from August 1942 to February 1943, there was a struggle for the naval dominance correctly seen as crucial to the struggle there on shore. In the battle of the Santa Cruz Islands on 26 October 1942, a strong Japanese fleet, including four carriers, attacked an American fleet containing only two carriers, and the Americans lost one of them. However, the heavier loss of Japanese aircraft and, even more important, aircrew was a major blow. From mid-November, however, the Americans were successful in defeating the Japanese off Guadalcanal.

Thanks to Midway, and the war in the Pacific generally, the British were obliged to deploy only limited naval strength against Japan until the closing year of the war. The total Japanese concentration on the Pacific from May 1942 ensured that there were no more raids into the Indian Ocean, and no British warship was lost there in 1943. Instead, the British fleet focused on the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, notably in supporting the invasion of Italy in 1943. Whereas the British had had two carriers to cover the attack on Madagascar in May 1942, from January 1943 there were none in the Indian Ocean until October, when an escort carrier arrived. In turn, after D-Day, Britain was able to transfer much of its navy to take part in the war with Japan.

This contribution looked toward Britain's subsequent naval cooperation with the United States, both in NATO, which was to be created in 1949, and during the Korean War (1950–53). The Indian Ocean remained a key area of British naval activity and leadership until Britain's withdrawal from "East of Suez" from the late 1960s, but this presence was dependent on the extent to which alliance with the United States covered British maritime interests in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Similarly, the British naval position in the Indian Ocean helped the Americans to focus on the Pacific.

Midway therefore can be understood as a crucial episode in the geopolitics of the war and as a vital contribution to coalition politics and warfare. It was of a part with the movement of American fighters to northern Australia from 17 March; the battle of the Coral Sea (7–8 May) helped strengthen the defense of Australia, but in the meantime there had been plans to abandon the north and to focus on defending a line north of Brisbane.

As Churchill was the first to note, American support for the continuation of the British Empire was limited and conditional. Yet, even if indirect, it could be crucial. Once the empire was gone and Britain's position in South Asia changed dramatically with Indian independence in 1947, it became difficult to think back to the geopolitics of the situation, let alone to appreciate the value of India

to Britain and others. The United States and the Soviet Union would probably have defeated the Axis even had the situation in India and the Indian Ocean become far worse, but Britain, understood as the British Empire, would have been able to contribute far less. Moreover, the possible domino effect on the Pacific War of a weakening of the Chinese position as a result of greater instability in India is worthy of contemplation. The Americans would have had to focus on air attacks on Japan from the Pacific rather than, as originally, from China.

These points serve as a reminder of the degree to which strategy involves an understanding of the relationships between different spheres of operation and the associated prioritization of tasks and commitments. The Axis powers proved deficient in such understanding compared to the Allies, although the latter faced grave difficulties in trying to manage their responses to these relationships.

Counterfactualism, the what-ifs of history, has a bad academic press.¹³ Let me therefore close with entries from the diary of General Sir Alan Brooke, the chief of the Imperial General Staff, to remind us of the sense of threat felt at the highest level of British decision making. For 6 April 1942:

On reaching COS [the Chiefs of Staff Committee] I discovered that most of the Japanese fleet appeared to be in the Indian Ocean and our Eastern Fleet retiring westward. Up to present no signs of transports. I don't like the situation much as we are very weak in the Indian Ocean. I have been trying to get First Sea Lord to fix up with the Americans some counter move toward Japan to cover this very predicament that we are in, but he has failed to do so up to present.¹⁴

Brooke was even gloomier next day: "COS at which we looked into the unpleasant situation created by entrance of Japanese fleet into Indian Ocean. Just what I had been afraid of and had been trying to get First Sea Lord busy about during whole of last week. Also frantic calls for air support from Wavell, which according to Portal there is little chance of meeting. I suppose this Empire has never been in such a precarious position throughout its history!"

On 10 April, he added, "Usual COS meeting, mainly concerned in trying to save India from the Japs. A gloomy prospect with loss of command of sea and air."¹⁵

NOTES

I benefited from the opportunity to deliver an earlier version of this as the Naval War College Midway Lecture in 2009 and to a meeting of the Naval Order of the United States at Newport, Rhode Island, as well as

from the comments of Captain Stan Carpenter, USN.

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8. British Library, London, Department of Manuscripts, Additional Manuscripts [hereafter BL] Add 49045 fols. 1–2.
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11. C. M. Bell, “The ‘Singapore Strategy’ and the Deterrence of Japan: Winston Churchill, the Admiralty and the Dispatch of Force Z,” *English Historical Review* 116 (2001), pp. 604–34.
12. BL Add 74806.
13. See Jeremy Black, *What If? Counterfactualism and the Problem of History* (London: Social Affairs Unit, 2008).
14. The First Sea Lord was Sir Dudley Pound.
15. Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, *War Diaries, 1939–1945*, ed. Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), pp. 245–47.