EARLY in February 1941, while Mr Menzies was on his way to England, Australian newspapers suddenly flared into headlines about danger in the Far East. "We stand in danger," "Danger of Hostile Action," "Australia in Peril of Attack," "War Threat to Australia," "Warning of Crisis." These were some of the labels placed above reports emanating from a meeting of the Advisory War Council on 5th February about the situation in the Far East, combined with suggestions that not only had the war changed but that the character of the Council had also changed. "From being a purely advisory body tending to be preoccupied with relatively minor grievances," ran a report in the Melbourne Herald, the "Council has been transformed overnight into a body of men acutely conscious that their transcending function is to unite and sink political differences." The Sydney Sun, after referring to "dramatic revelations", added that they would probably have the effect of securing greater Labour cooperation with the Government.  

An examination of the information before the Advisory War Council does not indicate that the outlook in the Far East on the 5th February was so changed in character as to justify the raising of an alarm. The news about Japan concerned chiefly her activities in relation to the peace treaty between Thailand and Indo-China and her attempts to extend her influence in both countries.

The Council meeting on 5th February was the first meeting held since the departure of Menzies. It was also the first meeting attended by Curtin since 16th December. The Government was represented only by Fadden, and by Spender who had bustled home from Malaya full of information about its weaknesses.

The discussion on Japan took place at the request of the non-Government members. As Minister for the Army, Spender set out several broad considerations affecting Australian interests, and Curtin followed with a long assessment of the state of the war, leading him to the conclusion that the next six months would be fatal to one side or the other. It was therefore essential that internal friction should be dissipated and that all sections of the community should put their best efforts forward to maintain full Australian and Empire integrity. He thought that while major questions of this nature were demanding attention matters such as petrol rationing, the ban on overtime and other relatively unimportant questions should be

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1 Herald (Melbourne), 6 Feb 1941.
2 Sun (Sydney), 6 Feb 1941.
3 From information published since the war, we know that in January 1941 the Japanese naval staff had begun to study a carrier raid on Pearl Harbour (see J. C. Grew, Ten Years in Japan (1944) and S. E. Morison, The Rising Sun in the Pacific (1948)). The information available in February 1941 in Australia, however, was limited to that summarised in the present chapter. Curtin's very acute concern with Australia's danger at this stage would appear to have been the result of his own private brooding over the war rather than of the receipt of new information.
placed in the background. His view of the strategical position was that
the danger to Australia would come in the first place from the sea and,
secondly, from the air, while the army would only be brought into full
action if both the navy and the air force had failed. This led him to the
advocacy of the reinforcement of the Australian Naval Squadron, although
in the course of the advocacy, he admitted that the situation in the
Mediterranean, North Africa and the Atlantic indicated that at present
reinforcement was not practicable.

The Chiefs of Staff were then called into the meeting and were ques-
tioned, mainly by the non-Government members, regarding various possi-
bilities in the defence of Australia. In the course of this questioning the
Chief of the Naval Staff and the Chief of the Air Staff both referred to
the problems of defence which were being caused by labour difficulties,
the Chief of the Naval Staff saying that the effective defence of Australia
was not being hampered in any way by the withholding of any authority
by the Government but that the naval effort was being set back by con-
tinuous strikes and labour problems in shipyards and docks which, of late,
had shown a twenty-five per cent lag in output over earlier months. At this
the non-Government members expressed the view that the delays might
largely be overcome with better publicity in Australia as to the real war
position. The final paragraph of the minute reads: “Non-Government
members agreed that as a result of the frank discussion that had taken
place they had come to a fuller appreciation of the alarming situation
that Australia was in and recommended that a press statement should be
issued so that the position might be brought nearer home to the general
public”.

The Council then adjourned to meet again later in the evening and
approve of a draft press statement which had been prepared in the mean-
time. This statement read as follows:

The Acting Prime Minister, in a statement issued tonight, said that the meeting
of the Advisory War Council today had been attended by all members, with the
exception of the Minister for the Navy, Mr Hughes, who had not fully recover-
ed from a recent illness.

At the meeting (Mr Fadden added) special consideration had been given to the
recent trend of affairs in the international situation and the resultant effect on the
defence of Australia. To enable this to be done, the Council deferred the agenda
paper which had been prepared.

A searching review was made of the Australian defence measures which had
been taken in hand by the Government to meet any emergency which may arise.
During this discussion the Chiefs of Staff were called into consultation. The discussion
covered such questions as the protection of Australian overseas and local seaborne
trade, the disposition of our naval forces, the activities of the Royal Australian Air
Force and the defensive measures taken or in hand for sea, land and air defence,
particularly in the localities which were vital to the defence of Australia.

The Council was told of the War Cabinet proposals to further speed up defence
activities, particularly in relation to the protection of Australia from enemy attack,
and to obtain the maximum industrial effort in munitions production and other war
industries which were always so vitally necessary to Australia and now more vital
than ever.

It was evident from the discussion (Mr Fadden said) that all members of the
Council realised Australia, equally with the Empire as a whole, is now entering
upon a period in which its very existence is at stake and that great responsibility rests upon all sections of the community to ensure that the maximum effort is exerted to carry us through the vital months ahead and to ultimate victory.

The issuing of a statement on behalf of the Council was in itself unusual. The official records of the Council suggest that the sole purpose of Curtin in persuading the Council to issue a statement on this occasion was to try to awaken the nation to a greater war effort and, in particular, to have an effect on industrial unrest. Late in the same meeting he spoke with concern about the state of opinion in Australia, complaining that the newspapers were both giving too much attention to the "irresponsibles" in trade unions and also recording too fully the entertainments and social activities of the wealthy classes in such a way as to create discontent in the minds of the poorer people. Referring to strikes in shipyards, he said:

If it can be brought vividly home to the members of the unions engaged in such activities that the lack of ships and of degaussing and paravane equipment was causing the loss of lives of fellow unionists in the Seamen's Union, they would readily agree to forego all their objections and make extreme efforts to remedy the situation to the best of their ability. The general public did not realise the danger that lay at their very doors. There was an urgent need for the public generally to be shocked into a proper realisation of the position.⁴

It was apparent, too, from other remarks made by Curtin at various stages of the meeting, that he had been giving considerable thought to the position of Australia in the event of war in the Far East, appreciating both the weaknesses in that region and the need for the concentration of a larger effort in the immediate present in the main theatres of war. He suggested, however, that Australia should reinforce Singapore instead of sending more troops to the Middle East and, it then being divulged to the Council that the War Cabinet had decided to despatch a brigade group to Malaya,⁵ he said that, if possible, further troops should be sent.

The way in which the mind of Curtin was working is further indicated by the records of a meeting of the Council a week later. The Council had before it the regular statement on international affairs prepared for its meetings by the Department of External Affairs and, in the course of the meeting, the Acting Prime Minister also read out cablegrams received since the previous meeting reporting on the Far Eastern situation. These reports included a message from the Dominions Office referring to various "straws in the wind" which, though no one of them was conclusive in itself, supported a view that the Japanese might already have decided to push southward, even if this meant war. Latham had reported from Tokyo on some of these matters rather more quietly and less apprehensively. Australian Censorship and Intelligence had also reported an instruction by a Japanese shipping company to its office in Sydney that dispensable employees were to return to Japan and that the Commonwealth Bank had received a number of applications for withdrawal of funds by Japanese women leaving Australia.

⁴ Advisory War Council Minute 130.
⁵ See Chapter 6, p. 297 above.
The general discussion followed a normal course, with Beasley characteristically cross-examining Ministers, until Curtin intervened and, picking up a reference made in the cablegrams to the possibility that the first Japanese move might be to demand the surrender of Hong Kong, started to discuss the whole of the possibilities in the Far East and the peril of Australia. He suggested that Japan, by refraining from forceful attack farther south than Hong Kong could hope to save herself from American intervention for the time being and, by indicating her intentions of dominating the foreign areas adjacent to Japan and withdrawing her attack from Communist China, she might hope to placate the Soviet Union and strengthen Russo-Japanese relations. Looking beyond this immediate probability, as he saw it, Curtin then considered the possibility of eventual American intervention in the war. He thought that if the war was going against the Allies, the United States might concentrate in the first instance on strengthening Great Britain in the Atlantic and leave it until later "to get back the outposts of Empire".

The transfer of American naval forces from the Pacific to the Atlantic would be disastrous to Australia. He summed up his view of the possibility of American aid by saying that, if Australia were drawn into war in the Pacific, she must stand alone for the time being and that even if America intervened, immediate assistance would not be available. The two questions which required immediate attention, therefore, were the strengthening, if possible, of the naval force at Singapore and ensuring the utmost efficiency of the Australian air defences to counter air attack which, in the early stages, would possibly be sporadic but nevertheless have serious results.

Curtin then made what was, in effect, although not so stated, an attack on the delusions which he himself had nurtured before the war and during the early months of the hostilities in Europe. He referred to "the attitude of neutral European nations before they had been invaded that no action must be taken of a provocative nature". He felt to some extent there was reluctance in the same direction in Australia. There should be no emulation of the attitude of the neutral European nations and the fear of provocative action. He doubted whether any advantage could be obtained by hesitancy, and suggested that Australia should muster her forces for her own defence, and that orders should be issued immediately for a test mobilisation. This would not hasten enemy action as undoubtedly the enemy had full plans completed and it was only a question of time as to when they would put them into effect.

Curtin also found additional reasons for having a test mobilisation in the effect such action would have on Australian opinion. A test mobilisation would be costly and would immediately affect the output of industry but its eventual result would be stimulation of all industrial output while its immediate advantage would be the test of the Australian war machinery

*Although it is extremely doubtful whether Curtin had any direct information on the point, his assessment of the position was very close to the accounts subsequently received by the Government of an interview in Washington between Roosevelt and Halifax. See page 331 below.*
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and the rectification of deficiencies found to rest therein. Cost must not be regarded.

Spender stated that he had plans in hand already for "a partial test mobilisation" but he demurred at the cost of a full test. Curtin pressed harder, however, and recommended to the War Cabinet in his own name that Australia be put on a war footing at once. His reasons were that such action would have a "psychological effect on the public in bringing them to a full realisation of the position"; deficiencies would be laid bare and steps would be taken to rectify them; it would result in training not only fighting forces but also the civil population; it would bring the civil population to some realisation of the danger of air attack on cities by high explosive and incendiary bombing and gas; and it would bring to light the paucity of anti-aircraft protection.

Curtin then passed to a discussion of the current industrial troubles in Australia. He suggested that the leaders of industry, both employers and employees, should be called together to be given information which would clearly bring home to their minds the seriousness of the situation. There would be some leakage of information, even with censorship, but the results would not by any means be more serious than the present fifth columnists' activities. If the leaders of industry could be given the facts the results would be effective.

The Ministers hesitated and pointed out various practical difficulties in the way of a full test mobilisation. Referring particularly to industry and transport, they suggested that it was undesirable knowingly to strain the machine to breaking point simply to carry out a test. Let plans and tests go step by step, taking the vital areas first.

Eventually the non-Government members, knowing that plans were under review for partial mobilisation, joined in a recommendation to the War Cabinet, replacing the personal recommendations of Curtin, that "in view of the serious international situation and the menacing attitude of Japan" plans for a mobilisation of the armed forces of Australia should be taken in hand so that Australia could be put on a war footing immediately the necessity should arise. Then Fadden warned members of the secrecy of the matters discussed and asked them to refrain from making information available to the press. A prepared statement would be made in the name of the Council.

Curtin, revealing still more clearly his concern with stirring the people of Australia to a realisation of danger, at once submitted a short draft of a press statement. Objection was taken by other members on the ground that it might create a panic. Eventually, after discussion between Fadden and Curtin, a statement was issued in the name of the Acting Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Non-Communist Labour Party as follows:

The Advisory War Council, at its meeting today, considered certain cable messages received by the Government dealing with recent developments in the international situation. The nature of these messages led the Council to decide to adjourn until tomorrow afternoon because in the meantime the position will be reviewed by the
War Cabinet in consultation with the Chiefs of Staff of the services. The Chiefs of Staff have been asked to come to Sydney to attend a special meeting of the War Cabinet tomorrow morning.

As the Commander-in-Chief of the Forces in the Far East, Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, is now in Australia he has been invited to be present.

The Advisory War Council will meet later in the day and the Chiefs of Staff will be invited to discuss the present situation.

We think we should tell the people of Australia that it is the considered opinion of the War Council that the war has moved on to a new stage involving the utmost gravity. At the meeting today a complete review was made of the existing situation and its implications. These can only be described as of most serious import.

It is necessary to say that various contingencies of the next few weeks have been taken into account and effective preparatory measures have been taken.

Australia has been at war now for more than a year, our sea, land and air forces each have been gallantly and effectively engaged in various theatres of war in this crucial conflict. Each arm of the services has proved its mettle incontestibly.

What the future has in store is at present not precisely clear. What is clear is that Australian safety makes it essential that there should be neither delay nor doubt about the clamant need for the greatest effort of preparedness this country has ever made.

The last five paragraphs of this statement were a modification of Curtin's original draft, from which had been excised such sentences as "the people of the Commonwealth are advised that the maximum preparations are in train and that these are being made with maximum speed", and "events now widen the area of the general conflict; they bring it closer to our shores".

Again, although on this occasion the Council did have before it reports suggesting a deterioration in the general diplomatic situation in the Pacific, the change in the Far Eastern situation would not then appear to have justified so definite a statement or the creation of an impression that the Council had received news which vitally altered prospects of peace in that region.

By this time Curtin had not only convinced the Advisory War Council and was in process of convincing the public that great danger was ahead, but he had also caught up both Fadden and Spender into the feeling of dire urgency. The press had also made liberal use of the news contained in the successive statements issued by the Council, and various other political leaders on both sides of the House had joined in the call to the country to arouse itself. Fadden issued additional statements in his own name following the War Cabinet meeting of 13th February, including the sentence "In plain words, we find ourselves in serious danger of hostile action near if not upon our own coastline."

At a further meeting of the Advisory War Council in Sydney on 14th February, when the Commander-in-Chief in the Far East, the Chiefs of Staff and four additional Ministers were present as well as Council mem-

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8 Advisory War Council Minutes 145 and 147, 13 Feb.

9 Sun (Melbourne), 13 Feb 1941.
bers, Curtin again took the lead in discussion of Singapore and, inevitably, that discussion turned to the great importance of equipment and the need for the maximum effort in Australian industry. Earlier in the same day, Curtin had met union officials in private conferences at the Sydney Trades Hall, explaining the war situation to them and appealing for a maximum effort. He recounted this action to the Council. At the close of the meeting he again returned to his main theme, stating that Australia was passing through a critical period of imminent danger and it was desirable that the public should be informed. He realised that this might to some extent create a panic but positive results would be obtained. Immediate action which concerned Australia now was to ensure that all our forces were provided with proper equipment and machinery of war.

The effect of the Fadden-Curtin statements about the Far East was reduced in the succeeding days by various incidents. The veteran Minister for the Navy, Mr Hughes, was openly sceptical. When reporters rushed to the Chief of the General Staff, General Sturdee, on his arrival in Sydney for the special meeting of 14th February, he was reported to have said that he did not know why the Chiefs of Staff had been summoned and would be glad to be told. From even higher quarters, the United States Secretary of State was quoted to the effect that he had no official knowledge of reports of an urgent situation. Furthermore, Menzies added to the disparagement of the statement when, in the course of a statement in London on 21st February, he expressed hopes for peace in the Pacific and of reaching agreement and friendly relationships with Japan, although warning that it must not be thought by anybody that “Australia was either unwilling to defend herself or incapable of defending herself”. The non-Government members were particularly annoyed by Menzies' statement. In a telegram in response to their criticisms the Prime Minister explained that in reality his statement was addressed to the British Foreign Office and was intended to challenge what he regarded as a fatalistic attitude towards relationship with Japan. He could not accept the idea that Australia was to drift inevitably into war with Japan and, although not suggesting a policy of retreat or appeasement, believed that the British Commonwealth should have a positive policy of thrashing out differences with Japan and, if necessary, telling Japan just where the limits of tolerance ended. In brief, there should be a positive policy of friendliness with firmness on everything that was really vital, instead of taking it for granted that Japan would make war.2

For their part, however, the members of the Advisory War Council believed that their press statements, combined with the despatch of a brigade of Australian troops to Malaya, “had been effective in staying the hand of Japan in regard to any southward penetration she may have

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1 Lt-Gen Sir Vernon Sturdee, KBE, CB, DSO; CRE 5 Aust Div 1917-18; GSO 2 GHQ BEF 1918. CGS, Aust 1940-42 and 1946-50; Head of Aust Mil Mission in USA 1942-44; GOC First Army 1944-45. Regular soldier; of Toorak, Vic; b. Frankston, Vic, 16 Apr 1890.
2 Advisory War Council Minute 206, 6 Mar.
had in mind". For this far-fetched claim, however, the historian can find no substance. It is difficult, too, to accept the statements issued by the Council as being a response to an international situation, unless one assumes that the political leaders were so nervy and excitable that they could no longer weigh the facts before them. The records already quoted also indicate the large part that purely domestic considerations played in shaping the Council's action and Curtin's advocacy of action.

Some of those who witnessed the events were disposed at the time to rate the move as only a political dodge to attract attention away from Menzies and London to Canberra and the Labour Party, and to foster an impression that the Opposition had a better knowledge of the needs of Australia and was more capable of giving dynamic leadership through the Advisory War Council than was War Cabinet. Others saw in it a dramatic assertion by Curtin of the priority of the Far East over the Middle East, where the triumphs of the A.I.F. at Bardia and Tobruk in January had given the nation a touch of glory and where there were signs that Australia would become more deeply involved. These are, however, interpretations of motives that necessarily remain obscure. The recorded evidence suggests that, far more persuasive than either of these two possible reasons, was the purpose of rousing the people into a greater war effort.

Three elements are clearly discernible in the statements made. One was an attempt by Labour itself to end industrial unrest by bringing to the people a keener realisation of the danger of the country and the need for a stronger war effort. Besides the quotations from Curtin was the earlier and more emphatic demand by Forgan Smith, Labour Premier of Queensland at the interstate convention of the Australian Workers' Union on 3rd February: "To retain our country and protect our free institutions we must work like hell and fight like hell". The period was one of activity by Curtin and others among the trade unions to overcome the obstructive influence of those left-wing industrial leaders whom they publicly dubbed "irresponsibles".

A second element was the special concern with the home defence of Australia conceived as the resistance to a Japanese attack. Labour and a great number of other Australians had always regarded Japan as the main danger and the one against which Australia should make major preparation. Curtin's reflections on the war during his absence from Canberra had undoubtedly made him more acutely aware of the peril of his country.

The third element, seen in statements made by parliamentarians outside the Advisory War Council was the criticism by implication that the Government had neglected to prepare adequately for the defence of Australia against Japan, that it did not see the danger as clearly as Labour saw it, and that it had not done all that Labour would have done. Labour shared in the credit that was given for arousing the country from complacency and was able to draw the moral that the reason why the people

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*Advisory War Council Minute 174, 28 Feb.

*Sydney Morning Herald, 4 Feb 1941.
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had to be aroused was because the defences entrusted to the Government were sadly lacking.\(^5\)

At first, newspaper editorials interpreted the statements on their face value. "Ministers and Labour leaders have clearly received and are responding to electrifying information transmitted from overseas", said the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 7th February, and, on the 14th, under the heading "Storm Clouds Lower" the same paper said that the joint statement issued on the day before could "only be read as the intimation that little hope is now entertained of Japan's refraining from actively assisting Hitler in the war", and it went on to read the moral that internal political differences must be submerged. Other newspapers, who for the past three months had been complaining of complacency, welcomed the various pronouncements and, in some cases, excused any severe emphasis if only it succeeded in calling the people from a "rosy dream".\(^6\)

Not everyone accepted them so readily however. In Parliament, in the course of an angry scene with frequent interjections, Ward declared that the grave warning issued by the Council was a hoax, and that it had been deliberately arranged by the Government in order to prevent discussion of "such scandals as 'Fostar's Army Boots' and 'Abbco's Bread' ". Ward, who had been so often the spokesman of some of those Labour groups whom it had been Curtin's intention to stir into a sense of responsibility, must have been unusually ill-informed about what was taking place within his own party if he were really unaware of the fact that it was not the Government but his own party leader who had taken the chief part in shaping the Council's action, and that Curtin's concern had been to ensure that the major and vital issues of the war were given attention and that the whole national effort was lifted above those rather less important questions which, since the beginning of the war, Ward and some of the other Labour cross-benchers had made their whole meat and drink.

Moreover, there was inevitably a reaction when it was found that no immediate danger appeared. For example, the *Age* (Melbourne), which had written respectfully of the first announcement in its editorial columns of 7th February, attacked "alarmist statements" on the 17th February. While admitting the seriousness of the war outlook, the paper said:

> It is however essential to employ language as strictly applicable as possible to current development and to avoid indulgence in anything savouring of melodrama. The statement published jointly last week by three political leaders and members of the War Council . . . might of course be regarded as evidence of the Government's vigilance, of its desire to give to the people the Government's confidence, and to invite from them their cooperation. It would, however, appear that there was something precipitate about the implicit suggestion of an immediate outbreak in the Pacific, with the prospect of Australians being implicated as active agents, and of an early attack on this country as a new enemy's probable objective. Yet these impressions were very definitely created. Almost as soon as the broadcast ceased, anxious enquiries as to what it actually meant were being received at *The Age* office from

\(^5\) *The Australian Worker* 12 and 19 Feb.

\(^6\) *Daily Telegraph* 7 Feb.
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all parts of the State. The announcement of the War Council's sudden adjournment, the hasty consultations with Chiefs of Staff, the expressed considered opinion of the War Council that "the war had moved to a stage involving the utmost gravity"... the cumulative effect of all this on the public mind would seem to have been imperfectly estimated... Into thousands of homes last week's startling message suddenly crashed. Before its grave purport could be clearly comprehended it had concluded, leaving behind a mass of hurried and necessarily confused impressions. Inevitably misapprehensions and innocent distortions augmented the general sense of alarm... Despite the upheaval suddenly introduced last week, the truth is that the Far Eastern situation remains much as it was.

The statements by the Advisory War Council might have been justified if they had had the effects on industry which Curtin had anticipated. It is doubtful whether they did. There was one other aspect of the matter. Whatever the effect on home affairs, foreign relations had been mishandled. On one side of the world the Prime Minister, with the backing of War Cabinet and the knowledge of the Advisory War Council, was about to engage in discussions which had as their ultimate purpose a closer concert between the United States of America and Great Britain either to deter Japan or to prepare against Japan. The Australian declarations, made without warning or consultation with any other government, popped noisily into the Pacific scene.

Less than a fortnight before the "scare" started, the Australian Minister for External Affairs, Stewart, who was not a member either of the War Cabinet or the Advisory War Council, had made a public statement reciprocating an appeal for better understanding by the Japanese Foreign Minister, Mr Matsuoka, and welcoming the appointment of Mr Kawai as Japanese Minister to Australia. He spoke of striving for the maintenance of peaceful relationships in the Pacific, while recognising the dangers and opposing domination by force. The current course of Australian policy as being applied in Tokyo, London and Washington was to try, if possible, to persuade Japan that her best interests lay in the solution of her problems by peaceful methods. It may have been consistent with that policy to demonstrate that Australia was strong, determined and ready, although that point might have been demonstrated more convincingly after the American attitude had been made clear. What the Curtin-Fadden-Beasley statements demonstrated was that Australia was worried and fearful—a piece of evidence that was not likely to do much either in dissuading or warning a potential aggressor.

While the joint statements by the party leaders had been occupying the headlines, the Government and its advisers had been continuing steadily in private the consideration of the problems of Far Eastern defence in consultation with the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the Netherlands. While passing through Batavia and Singapore on his way to London, the Prime Minister had agreed, after discussions with the Governor-General of the Netherlands East Indies and with the Commander-in-Chief in the Far East, Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, that Australia would participate in

*Current Notes, Vol 10, No. 2, pp 44-49.*
While the Advisory War Council was expressing concern at the state of Australian morale, the cartoonist suggests that the patient was in rude health. The “doctors” from left to right: J. A. Beasley, John Curtin, W. M. Hughes, A. W. Fadden and P. C. Spender.
further staff conversations with British, Dutch and New Zealand representatives at Singapore starting on the 22nd February. It was then that arrangements were made for Brooke-Popham to visit Australia, from 8th to 18th February. On 4th February, the War Cabinet approved of arrangements for the departure of the Australian delegation.

Throughout February close and technical attention was being given to the problems of security in the Far East. The chief immediate result of these discussions was a greater precision in defining the responsibility of the various interested governments. They also revealed more clearly the way in which the Governments were thinking about the problem and in particular the different shapes which the situation took when viewed from Europe by Britain and from the South-West Pacific by Australia.

Both Governments were agreed on the basic assumption that the possibility of a major expedition by Japan against Australia or New Zealand could be ruled out initially but, when they moved to the second proposition that the main defence must be found in the security of Singapore, points of difference between them emerged regarding certain aspects of the naval strategic plan. These differences primarily concerned the respective importance of the Indian Ocean and of the Tasman Sea but expanded into different conceptions regarding the Middle East and the Pacific—security guaranteed by Britain and security guaranteed by the United States.

Arising out of the exchange of views on the results of the Singapore conference of October 1940, the United Kingdom asked Australia and New Zealand, by telegram received in Canberra on 28th January 1941, to consider some modification of the proposals for the return of Australian and New Zealand cruisers to home waters in the event of a Japanese move southward. The Singapore conference report had left naval plans incomplete without showing specific dispositions of vessels to various areas, but it will be recalled that Churchill, in his message of December, had drawn a picture of the building up of a naval, military and air force in the Middle East and keeping it in a "fluid condition" either for war in the Middle East or for the reinforcing of Singapore. Sea communications in the Indian Ocean were vital for the building up of such a force, for its maintenance and for any eastward movement by it and were also vital for the transport of Australian and New Zealand supplies to the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom military advisers, after further work on the Singapore documents, now suggested that, in an emergency, the use of Australian and New Zealand naval forces should not be wholly "local" but might assist in the protection of Indian Ocean communications.

The Australian Chiefs of Staff, however, thought that the importance of the Tasman Sea had been overlooked. They argued that, under present conditions, the relief of Singapore depended essentially on United States naval assistance and therefore the Japanese must be prevented from gaining a foothold across the line of approach, Honolulu-Fiji-Darwin-Singapore. The South-West Pacific area must be considered as a whole, irrespective

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*In the event New Zealand was represented by the Australian delegation. See page 329 below.*
Beginning of a mission. The Prime Minister leaves Rose Bay Flying Base, Sydney, for London on 24th January 1941 in company with Mrs Menzies. Mr Fadden farewelled his colleague.
"Cripes, I wonder if the jockey was hurt!"
of station limits, and the strong argument for adequate naval and air forces and stronger defences in that area applied to the Tasman Sea. Furthermore, the war effort of Australia and New Zealand had its principal focus in that sea and if command were lost in the Tasman the transport or trade of both Dominions would cease or be reduced to a trickle. It was in fact an extension of the Indian Ocean route to Britain by way of the Cape. In a war with Japan the Tasman Sea area would be very open to attack and, in the absence of an adequate British cruiser force, a Japanese cruiser force in the Tasman could hold up Australian and New Zealand trade and shipping indefinitely outside the range of shore-based aircraft. It was considered that part of the main Japanese plan in any attack on Malaya or the Dutch East Indies would be to place a cruiser force in the Tasman, possibly backed up by a heavier unit or aircraft carrier. The Australian Chiefs of Staff, therefore, held to the Singapore conclusions and considered that on the return of the Australian and New Zealand naval forces their main dispositions should be in the Tasman Sea area, with regular allocation of cruisers for convoy escort, “at any rate until U.S.A. has shown her hand”.

The War Cabinet, in forwarding these arguments to the United Kingdom Government, expressed concern at the lack of precise information as to British naval strength in the South-West Pacific area and asked for a full statement on the forces available and any action proposed to augment them in the event of hostilities with Japan. They suggested further discussions of the subject at the further talks in Singapore which were then being arranged.

As the result of decisions taken by the War Cabinet at the same meeting on 12th February, Fadden also communicated with Menzies, then in the Middle East, informing him of the Government’s action and expressing its concern in regard to the position in the Far East and the lack of information regarding British intentions. As a partner in Empire affairs and having a brigade of troops in the “danger area”, Fadden said, Australia should know in advance what hostile actions on the part of Japan were likely to be regarded as a casus belli and what moves would be countered by other means than war. He therefore suggested that Menzies should press for a “frank appreciation”, together with an indication of the extent to which the United States or the Netherlands might cooperate. By another telegram, the High Commissioner in London was asked to make informal soundings regarding the extent to which Canadian forces might be used in the Pacific.

Consequent on decisions taken by the War Cabinet on the 12th, “in view of the seriousness of the general international situation”, the Australian Chiefs of Staff prepared a long and comprehensive appreciation of the Far Eastern position and this was considered at a meeting on the 14th February at which Sir Robert Brooke-Popham was present. Brooke-
Popham had given "advice and assistance" in the preparation of the appreciation by the Chiefs of Staff.

Earlier in the day, members of the Advisory War Council had held a meeting with Brooke-Popham present and had been shown copies of the Chiefs of Staff's appreciation. A procedure at that time unusual was followed and the Council recommended the proposals by the Chiefs of Staff for adoption by the Government.

The appreciation assumed that an attack on Australia, if it came at all, would come after an attack on Malaya; the retention of Singapore was vital because the main requirement for security in the Far East was a capital ship fleet; there must be the "closest coordination and assistance" to ensure the security of the Netherlands East Indies, as it vitally affected the security of both Singapore and Australia; and while the sea routes in the Indian and Pacific Oceans were of vital importance for the maintenance of trade and the continuance of the war effort in the Middle East and the United Kingdom, the security of the South-Western Pacific area was essential for the safe passage to and operation of an American fleet in the East Indies area in the event of American participation. In the absence of either a British or an American fleet with capital ships the defence of territory must depend primarily on the local forces in each area. While the defence of the whole area, including Malaya, Netherlands Indies, Australia and New Zealand, was one strategic problem, the responsibility of each government for the defence of its own interests and of common interests should be clearly defined as well as a scheme by which forces drawn from the whole strategic area could be rapidly concentrated at any threatened point. The Australian and New Zealand area of responsibility should include Timor, the Mandated Territory of New Guinea and Nauru. It was considered that the complete plan for the disposition of the naval forces in the Far East should be discussed, the total Australian and New Zealand naval forces still being regarded as the minimum in Australian and New Zealand waters. The provision of garrisons within the Australia area would involve new commitments and, having in view the limits of the capacity to equip troops, these commitments should have priority over any others in the Far East. The 8th Division should be retained for use in the Australian area and the Far East and the present arrangement for it to proceed to the Middle East to join the Australian Corps should be cancelled. The Australian Government, like other governments in their respective areas, should use its available air forces and establish ground facilities in its area in the way best calculated to prevent or deter the Japanese from establishing naval and air bases within striking distance of vital Allied interests and, by using advanced operational bases, should assist in achieving the common aim of concentrating air forces rapidly at any point from the collective resources of all areas. Information should be sought regarding the need for supplies of food, munitions and other necessities to Malaya from Australia after the outbreak of hostilities, and liaison officers from each of the services should be appointed for duty in the Netherlands East Indies. In approving of the Chiefs of Staff's recom-
mendations on 14th February, the War Cabinet in effect accepted those responsibilities for itself within the defined area and made it the object of the Australian delegation to Singapore to have similar obligations accepted by the governments responsible for other areas. The decision also meant a modification of the previous plans regarding the use of the A.I.F.

In the course of the meeting the War Cabinet had heard from Brooke-Popham that his most immediate need at Singapore was munitions and more aircraft. He was not pressing for the rest of the 8th Division to be despatched to Singapore, but, if the Australian Government should agree to make it available, he would welcome it, for with such an augmenting of his force, he would spread his defences to British Borneo—a move which he thought most desirable.

Sir Robert, in response to questions, also disclosed some of his ideas regarding Singapore. His plans were based on the assumption that Singapore could defend itself for six months until capital ships could arrive to relieve it. Plans for its defence provided for control of the Straits to be maintained but there were no fixed defences on the north side of Singapore. Even if Johore were taken this would not prevent the island itself from holding out. If the Japanese proposed to attack Singapore they would act in the first instance by a process of infiltration from Thailand and then gradually move down the Kra Isthmus toward Singapore before declaring war. The defence plan provided for troops to be established as far north as possible to hold the whole Malayan Peninsula. It would be of great assistance to him in providing for the defence of Singapore, if a clear policy could be defined in regard to the actions on the part of Japan that would be regarded as a casus belli and he hoped that the line could be drawn at the penetration of southern Thailand.

That was the picture of the defence of Singapore, key to Far Eastern security, presented to the Australian War Cabinet nearly twelve months before the attack on Singapore. At the same meeting their own Chief of the Naval Staff said that a battle squadron was the minimum necessary at Singapore, but he did not consider it possible, with British commitments elsewhere, to provide for this unless America joined in the war. Brooke-Popham repeated Churchill's assurance and the direction given to him to hold Singapore until capital ships could be sent.2

As arranged, the British, Dutch and Australian service representatives met at Singapore in the last week of February, the Australians also speaking on behalf of New Zealand, and drew up an agreement, without commitment to their governments, for mutual reinforcements in the event of aggression. The Dutch were to provide submarines for operations in the South China Sea, and one fighter squadron and three bomber squadrons to reinforce Malaya. Four bomber squadrons, it was estimated, would be available from Malaya to reinforce the Netherlands Indies. Australia would provide troops and an air striking force at Darwin to reinforce Ambon and Koepang if required. The conference also reached agreement on the

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2 War Cabinet Minute 802 of 14 Feb and Agendum 64/1941 of 13 Feb.
particular actions by Japan which would necessitate the naval and military authorities concerned advising their respective governments to take active military counteraction. A suggestion for the prior definition of an act of aggression and automatic measures by the Commanders-in-Chief on the spot was put forward but was not approved by the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff when the conference report was referred to them.\(^3\)

In this connection the military advisers had reached the opinion that Japan was determined to gain control over Indo-China and Thailand in preparation for further moves. If Japan moved in strength into southern Thailand this would be the disclosure of an intention to attack Malaya and such a move should be regarded as a *casus belli*.

The fact that Thailand had such military value to Japan also stimulated the idea that something should be attempted, by diplomatic methods and possibly by a guarantee of support, to preserve the integrity of Thailand and to stiffen the Thais in resistance to Japanese pressure. The consideration of the military side of the defence of Allied interests in the Far East was surrounded with reports regarding the diplomatic possibilities, although it would appear that in the Australian War Cabinet the military appreciation was more clearly in the minds of ministers than the diplomatic. It is true that on 12th February a memorandum was sent up to War Cabinet from the Department of External Affairs but it gave scant value to the possibilities of effective diplomatic measures and in any case seems to have taken a minor place in War Cabinet's deliberations.

Diplomatic interest centred at that moment on the acceptance by Thailand of Japanese mediation in the frontier dispute between Thailand and French Indo-China. In part, this had been the result of the diplomatic ineptness of those who might have been expected to prefer that Japan and Thailand should be kept apart. The United States of America, which took a high-souled view that Thailand was the aggressor, had been unwilling to come in as mediator and Vichy France had been stiff and uncompromising. They had both upheld the sanctity of the principle of a return to the status quo before negotiation but they had also pushed Thailand closer to Japan. In a despatch dated 1st February, which was repeated to Australia, the British Minister in Bangkok, Sir Josiah Crosby,\(^4\) bemoaned that for six months Britain had been fighting a lone battle in Thailand, hampered rather than aided by those who should have cooperated with her.

The acceptance of Japanese mediation was followed by the designation of a Thai mission to proceed to Tokyo. Fears were current that the Japanese might use the occasion to obtain a military pact with Thailand or an agreement for the occupation of naval and air bases and other facilities in Thai territory.

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\(^3\) R. Brooke-Popham, "Operations in the Far East from 17th October 1940 to 27th December 1941", Supplement to *London Gazette*, 20 Jan 1948. Para 44.

Latham, reporting to Canberra on 4th February, said that, believing that the line should be drawn in Thailand, the British Commonwealth should do what it could to strengthen its forces near the Thai border, warn the Thai Government against giving footholds to Japan and encourage them to resist both by offering them "all aid in our power" and by disabusing them of the idea that they would escape subjection by yielding to Japan. Having decided what it would do the British Commonwealth should inform the United States Government fully of what it was doing and hope that the United States would stand by them in case of Japanese attack. Menzies, in a cablegram from Cairo on 14th February, based on his observations in Batavia, Singapore and Bangkok en route, expressed the belief that if Japan were told exactly where the chalk line was drawn she would hesitate to engage in a venture in which her navy might be defeated. The key to the situation was a strong attitude by the United States but he also asked War Cabinet to consider whether, in order to help stiffen the Thais against Japanese pressure, Latham might be accredited to Thailand and go to Bangkok to use whatever influence he could.

At the time Menzies was probably unaware of the results of an interview in Washington between President Roosevelt and the British Ambassador, Lord Halifax, on 8th February. Telegrams from the Australian Legation, Washington, dated 12th February (received in Canberra on 13th February) and from the Dominions Office dated 14th February (received in Canberra on 15th February) reported that Roosevelt, while leaving it doubtful whether the United States would come into the war if Japan attacked only Dutch or British possessions, also said that, even if the United States were to be involved in the war with Japan, he felt that to fight an active war in the Pacific would mean a dangerous diversion of forces and material from the main theatre of operations which, in his view, was the Atlantic and Britain. Therefore, should the United States become involved in war, he thought they would have to fight a "holding war" in the Pacific.

The War Cabinet, on 18th February, decided only to direct the attention of Menzies to these reports from Washington and expressed the opinion that it would be inadvisable to accredit Latham to Thailand so that he might help to exert his influence diplomacy against surrender by Thailand to Japanese pressure. At a subsequent meeting further diplomatic information was simply "noted".5

A few days after his arrival in London, Menzies, who momentarily, as the result of travel among the troops and through the battlegrounds of Northern Africa, had been out of touch with all that had been passing in Tokyo, Singapore, Bangkok and Australia, made the statement about the hope of peace with Japan which so much annoyed the Advisory War Council because they thought it undermined their statements about pressing danger. In the subsequent weeks, Menzies without objection from, even if not with positive endorsement from the War Cabinet, continued to try

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5 War Cabinet Minute 832, 18 Feb 1941 and 846, 27 Feb and War Cabinet Agendum 77/1941.
in London to shift the foundation of diplomatic measures from an assumption that war with Japan was inevitable to a hope that, with firmness, Japan might still be persuaded that continued aggression would end in disaster.⁶

There was one big limitation to what Australia was trying to do. Whether one still placed hope in diplomatic measures or whether one wanted only to define a casus belli in order to make effective military preparations, nothing could be achieved without the United States of America. Australian external policy during this period cannot be understood without appreciating the fact, acutely realised by the Australian Government at the time, of Australian weakness unaided in the Pacific. It would be easy to criticise from one aspect or the other particular acts of Australian foreign policy. In the case of China, as has been seen, the Australian Government had been at times less conscious of the rights of China than of the risk of offending Japan but when, in November 1940, the United Kingdom represented the financial and military straits of Chungking, the Australian Government replied emphasising the importance of assisting China, because of the danger to Australia if China should abandon the struggle, and urged the need for representations to the United States to obtain such assistance.⁷ In the case of Thailand, the Australian War Cabinet was unwilling that Australia should take even the mildest measures and one of the most influential reasons was the dwindling of hope, following reports of the Roosevelt-Halifax conversation of the 8th February 1941, that effective support from the United States in the Pacific could be expected.⁸ The prospects of effective action rested on the United States, because the nations of the British Commonwealth, being heavily engaged in a fight against Germany, were weak in the Pacific. Thus for diplomatic measures or military preparations the key was in Washington.

⁶ See Chapter 8, p. 348, et seq below.
⁷ War Cabinet Minute 650, 20 Nov 1940.
⁸ War Cabinet Minute 770, 12 Feb 1941 and Agendum 71/1941.