CHAPTER 13

DANGER FROM JAPAN, JULY-DECEMBER 1941

REMOTE from the political contention in Australia, events in the Far East were leading rapidly towards war. The danger in the Far East had been made secondary to domestic strife over a period of two months from the beginning of August. The changes of government themselves brought no significant changes in Australian external policy. Curtin and his senior Ministers had been familiar, through membership of the Advisory War Council, with what the Menzies Government had done and when they took office they continued on the same lines, while, through the Advisory War Council, the new Opposition associated itself with what they did. The only perceptible change was that the new War Cabinet seemed to revive in October some measure of hope that war with Japan might still be averted.

At this stage it would be helpful to cast a quick retrospective glance over Australian policy towards Japan during the course of the war. Up to the fall of France Australia was prepared to rely on British and American diplomacy to ensure adherence by Japan to the announcement by the Japanese Prime Minister on 4th September 1939: "Faced by the European War which has just broken out, Japan intends not to be involved in it. She will concentrate her efforts on a settlement of the China Affair." From time to time the Australian Government sought appreciations of the Far Eastern situation from Britain and, on those appreciations, made the decisions to send an expeditionary force overseas and to send her warships to the Mediterranean. Her own purpose, being involved in the war with Germany, was to be non-provocative towards Japan.

The fall of Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and France coincided with the various declarations by Japan of a "new order" in East Asia and a "co-prosperity sphere". Mr Arita summed up the policy on 29th June 1940: "Japan, while constructing a new order in East Asia, is paying serious attention to the development of the war and its repercussions in various quarters, including the South Seas. I desire to declare that the destiny of these regions—and any development in them, or any disposal of them—is a matter of grave concern to Japan in view of her mission and responsibility as a stabilising force in East Asia". Japanese propaganda swung to open support of Germany and Italy and, on 28th June, Japan presented to the United Kingdom demands for the withdrawal of the Shanghai garrison, the closing of the Hong Kong frontier and the closing of the Burma Road. While Britain and the United States were looking for the possibility of a Far Eastern settlement, Australia was influenced to a much greater extent by the fear that Japan would take advantage of the situation in Europe to further her interests even to the extent of war with the British Commonwealth. This Australian attitude was based on an Australian belief, founded in half a century of discussion of danger in the

East, that Australia would be one of the chief objects of Japanese attack. It now appeared to Australians that Britain would be unable and America would probably be unwilling to do anything to stop Japanese armed aggression. On 27th June 1940 the Australian Government informed the United Kingdom that it found it hard to visualise the acceptance by Japan of any proposals for a Far Eastern settlement restoring the complete independence and integrity of China. It felt that any British and American move towards ending the Sino-Japanese war would only be justified if the object was a three-party declaration by Japan, the British Commonwealth and the United States regarding the *status quo* in the Western Pacific, together with territorial guarantees, to which the United States would be definitely committed. Amplifying this view in a telegram to the United Kingdom on 25th July, Australia expressed the view that there was little hope of such a general settlement while Britain was at a disadvantage in Europe and that the best line would be to give way to Japan, only under *force majeure,* on questions which were not absolutely vital and to work in as close cooperation as possible with the United States. On 6th August Australia emphasised that it was hostile to a policy of "mere appeasement" to Japan. If it appeared that Japan was set upon provocation the British attitude should be firm but such as would, if possible, avoid war. It was also felt strongly that, where the ultimate issue was war with Japan, in the circumstances then existing, tactics of bluff should not be used. On 8th August, in a further telegram, Australia accepted as axiomatic the the advantage of a common policy in the Far East with the United States. Such importance was attached to agreement with the United States, leading to firm and exact assurances of American support in carrying through a joint or parallel policy, that a considerable modification of British Empire policy would be justified in order to secure such assurances. Australia concurred in the closing of the Burma Road for three months from 17th July as a prelude to discussions with Japan on a settlement and concurred too in the reopening of the road when the hope for discussions failed and, on the contrary, Japan entered the "Axis pact" on 28th September committing herself to give military, economic and political assistance to Germany and Italy.

For the remainder of 1940 and early 1941 Australia supported British and American economic measures against Japan and expressed the opinion that in pursuit of measures which were chiefly designed to prevent Japan from accumulating stocks of war materials or transferring them through the Soviet Union to Germany the following "vital principles" should be observed: (a) what was done should be done *pari passu* with the United States; (b) the measures should be consistent and coordinated, for pin-pricking and piecemeal measures would only be dangerously provocative.

The appointment of Sir John Latham as Australian Minister to Tokyo and his arrival in Japan at the end of 1940 afforded opportunities for the direct communication of Australian views to Japan, and the Minister's despatches recorded several occasions between February and August 1941 when he spoke with firmness and frankness to Mr Matsuoka and his

successor Admiral Toyoda on the hope for friendly relations and the resolution to resist attempts at Japanese domination.

In July 1941 Australia concurred with the Anglo-American proposals for the freezing of Japanese assets and virtual cessation of trade with Japan as a counter-measure to the Japanese occupation of southern Indo-China, but did so on the assumption and understanding that the United States would move first.[1]

These proposals raised in the mind of the Australian Government two further questions. On the one hand it was feared that if such action provoked Japan to war the Netherlands Indies and Australia would suffer first. On the other hand it was seen that this probability offered another opportunity for obtaining from the United States Government a clearer declaration of what it would do in the event of war. In a telegram to the United Kingdom Government, repeated to the Governments of all the other Dominions and to Australian representatives at Washington and Tokyo, on 23rd July, Australia said:

> As you are aware, we have always attached the highest importance to gaining an assurance of the collaboration of the United States in a course of action in the restraining of Japan. Now that the United States Government has decided to adopt severe measures in the event of a Japanese move in Indo-China, we feel strongly that the whole object of our policy in the Far East for the past year would be negatived if the British Empire now lagged behind the United States in the effectiveness and determination of its own counter-measures.[2]

Two days later a message from Menzies added:

> Having regard to our consistent attitude on this matter over the past year, and from the point of view of the highest interests of our national security, we would frankly find it impossible to justify embarking at this critical point on a course of action which might lead us into war with Japan unless some satisfactory understanding had first been reached with the United States . . . . It seems to us entirely feasible that in notifying the readiness of the British Commonwealth to concert with the United States in proposed economic action, the British Ambassador should intimate that we clearly realise the possible consequences of action, both for ourselves and the Netherlands, and that we assume that the United States Government also realises them. In a discussion which will arise on this basis, an indication of the United States' attitude will certainly appear. The nature of this in all probability will constitute the satisfactory understanding which we feel to be essential. We consider it vital, however, that the question should be raised in one form or another.[3]

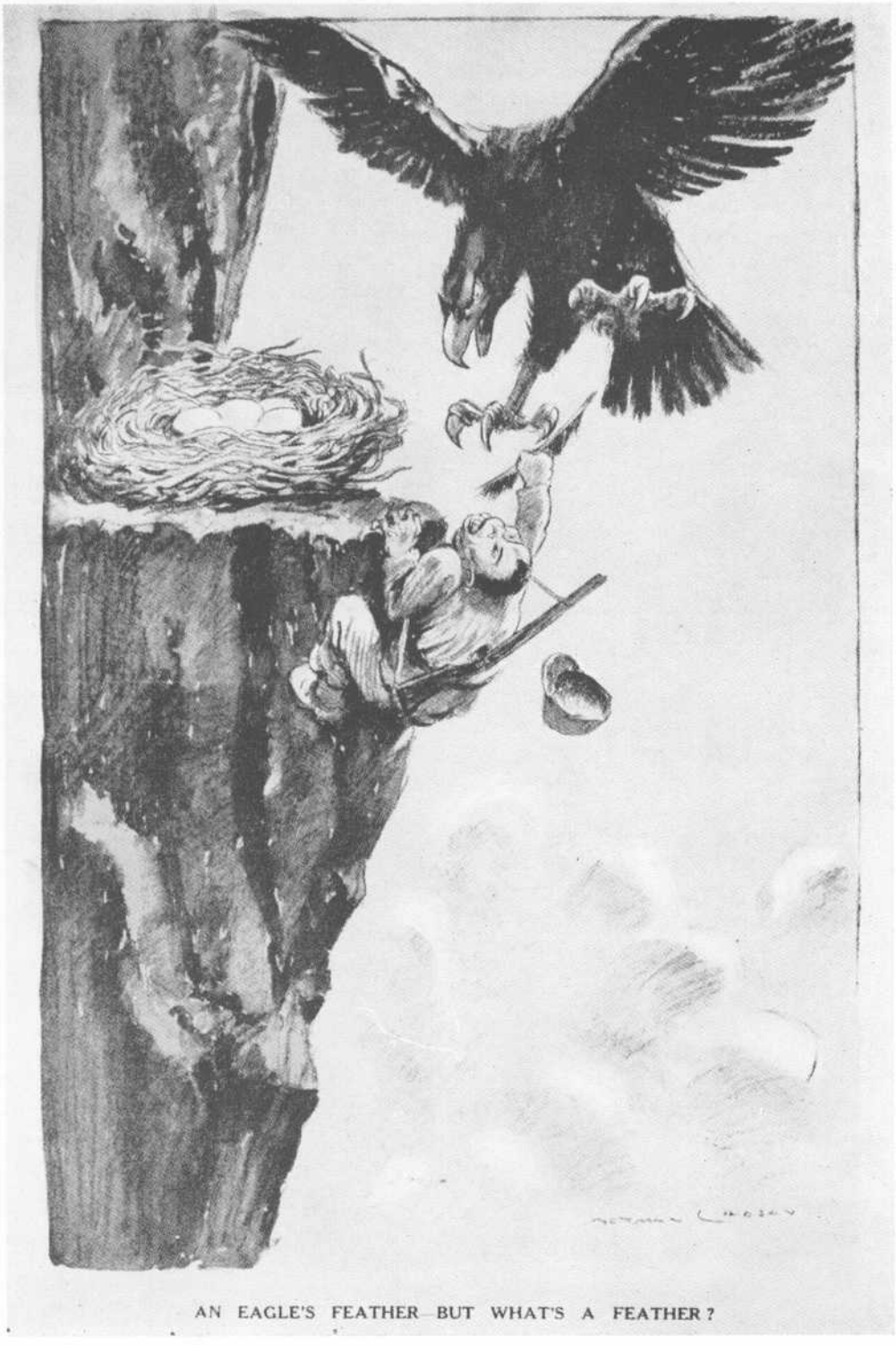
The United Kingdom did not think it advisable, nor did time allow, to seek a guarantee of armed support at that stage, and the joint economic action against Japan was taken by the United States, United Kingdom and other governments on 27th July (Australian time) without further discussion of the point. In reporting to the Advisory War Council on 29th July on the international situation, the Prime Minister indicated the views he had communicated to the United Kingdom and repeated the views, which he had put forward on behalf of Australia in London in the previous

[1] Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 25 Jul 1941.
[2] Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 23 Jul 1941.
[3] Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 25 Jul 1941.



Sun (*Sydney*)

From civvies to service issue: W.A.A.A.F. volunteers, September 1941.



Norman Lindsay in Bulletin *(Sydney), 24 Dec. 1941.*

A typical Australian comment on the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.

April and May, that a chalk line should be drawn to mark the limit of the Japanese southward advance and American support obtained to ensure that the limit was kept. Regarding the particular question of economic sanctions, Menzies expressed the view that they should be all-embracing and crippling in their effect, of sufficient extent to prevent supplies filtering through to Germany, and to prevent Japan from building up stocks of important war materials.[4]

On 30th July, following a cabled suggestion from Bruce that further discussions might well be opened immediately,[5] Menzies sent a message to the Secretary of State, again repeating it to the other Dominion Prime Ministers, urging that the position that would arise if serious Japanese reactions were provoked should be discussed urgently with the United States. His message continued:

> If the Americans feel in their hearts that in the event of warlike retaliation by Japan they could not remain aloof from the conflict, surely they can be made to see that a plain indication by them to Japan at this stage would probably avoid war. I recognise the traditional reluctance of the United States to enter into outside commitments in advance, but where the commitment seems inevitable, there is everything to be gained by promptly accepting it, and everything to be lost by delay. There is an apprehension in our minds and in the minds of leading members of the Opposition that the dangers in the Pacific are more dimly perceived elsewhere than by ourselves. We, vividly conscious of these dangers, are still convinced that the United States Administration is in the best position to dispel them. The faintest drift in our handling of the Japanese problem may mean that Japan will engage in policies from which at a later stage she cannot withdraw without a serious loss of face.[6]

The United Kingdom Government "welcomed" the Australian approach.[7]

During the first week of August both the United Kingdom and Australia had cause for increased concern in the situation in Thailand, next in the path of Japanese southward progress, and this concern came to a focus in the particular question which had been haunting diplomacy in the Far East for months. Should a guarantee of armed support be given to the Thais and, if given, would it have the least effect? Latham,[8] reporting from Tokyo immediately after the economic counter-measures had been applied, pointed out that the Anglo-American action, though speedy, had failed to prevent a Japanese move into Indo-China and that Japan would now prepare for her next step—probably a move to take Thailand under her "protection". The British Government should consider without delay how to prevent this. Casey proffered advice from Washington that Roosevelt and Hull should be approached and that, even if a firm undertaking of military support could not be obtained, the United States Government should be urged to give a warning to Japan against any further attempt at "expansion". The United Kingdom Government received from its own

[4] Advisory War Council Minute 413, 29 Jul 1941.
[5] Bruce to Prime Minister 28 Jul 1941.
[6] Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 30 Jul 1941.
[7] Secretary of State for Dominions to Prime Minister, 2 Aug 1941 (two messages).
[8] Latham to Minister for External Affairs, 29 Jul 1941.

representative in Bangkok appeals for British and American support of the Thai Government against Japanese pressure.

The course of Australian thinking at this stage is well illustrated in the records of a meeting of the Advisory War Council on 6th August, when Menzies informed members of the denunciation by Australia of her commercial treaty with Japan and the imposing of import and export controls against Japan. He then spoke of the efforts being made to induce the United States Government to take a stronger line.

The main elements in the situation which Menzies presented to the Council were, first, the maintenance of Anglo-American cooperation in economic measures against Japan; second, the possibility of obtaining United States cooperation in the issuing of a warning against Japan; third, a particular question raised by a request made by Thailand to know the attitude of Great Britain and the United States in the event of a Japanese attack; and fourth, the general question whether the United States could be relied upon to support the British Commonwealth in the event of war with Japan, and at what point Japanese aggression would involve Japan in war with Britain and the United States. Menzies underlined the importance of keeping in line with the United States. He also recognised the inability of Britain and the unwillingness of the United States to give material help to Thailand and the likelihood that this would throw the Thailanders into the arms of Japan.

The records of the meeting reveal that Menzies still held to the view which he had urged on the Foreign Office in London that war with Japan should not yet be accepted as inevitable and that a positive policy of seeking a discussion with Japan on the situation in the Pacific should be followed. In any such discussion, he said, it should be made clear to Japan that if Japan took certain steps, specifically defined, action would be taken against her, but this determination being understood, attempts should be made to clarify the policy of both sides.

Menzies, however, admitted that it was unlikely that either the United Kingdom or the United States would agree on such measures. He recalled the discussions at the time of the reopening of the Burma Road, saying that the United States Government would not agree to intervene, although it was entirely American trade that was being transported along this road. He also recalled that the Australian High Commissioner in London had sought to persuade the United Kingdom Government to secure a basis of settlement with Japan without success, and that he himself had urged the same point in London without result. Australia had urged the United Kingdom Government to press the United States to make a clear statement that they would support the British Commonwealth in war with Japan, and, after receiving an expression of agreement from the Dominions Office on this point, Australia had also urged that the elucidation of the United States attitude should be comprehensive, including the specific question of what the United States would do in case of Japanese aggression in the Netherlands East Indies or in Thailand. In Washington the Australian Minister had also been active trying to bring about some result.

Taking this view of the diplomatic situation, Menzies saw no room for independent Australian activity. The Council minutes reveal that Menzies had already rejected a proposal for a personal visit to Tokyo. The minute reads: "The Prime Minister said that the Japanese Minister to Australia had suggested to him that he should go to Tokyo in an endeavour to check the drift of the situation. He recalled, however, Mr Chamberlain's visit to Munich and the consequent criticism that he ultimately incurred for appeasement".

Regarding Anglo-American cooperation as the main essential in the effective handling of the Eastern situation, the Prime Minister rested his arguments on measures for bringing about such cooperation. Curtin, however, whose arguments appear from the records to be less definite and clear, was inclined to seek other possibilities. He agreed with the Prime Minister's view that a conference should be sought with Japan, and when he was faced with the difficulty of obtaining British and American acceptance of this view, he suggested that it might be conveyed to Japan that if Japan were willing to call a conference the United Kingdom would agree to it. To support this suggestion he commenced to build up a very hopeful explanation of Japanese policy and the chances of separating Japan from the Axis. The reasons for Japanese activity, he said, were first that she was trying to do something for the Axis as a matter of treaty obligations and, second, that she was trying to get into a strong position for bargaining when the war was over. Curtin was also in favour of the suggestion of trying to mark the limit of the Japanese southern advance, but said that the line should not be drawn before his suggested conference had been held as that would prejudice the discussion.

When Hughes raised a doubt whether any arrangement made with Japan could be kept, Curtin cited as an indication of Japanese trustworthiness their respect for the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1914-18 and their loyalty to the Axis. If, however, it was considered that war with Japan was inevitable, Curtin said, Australia should "bring pressure to bear on the United States of America to knock Japan out now". He did not indicate what form successful pressure on the United States might take.

It may be recalled that in the preceding twelve months Curtin had based his criticism of the Government's defence policy and the dispersal of forces to the Middle East on his firm assumption that war in the Pacific was inevitable, but now, at a time when the Far Eastern position was certainly much graver than it had been, he seemed to be cherishing momentary hopes that war could be avoided. Towards the end of the discussion, however, his hopes and his fears seemed to meet. The minute recording his final contribution to the discussion read as follows:

> Mr Curtin referred to the A.I.F. position in the Middle East and to the large supplies which we are sending overseas to the Central Provision Office, New Delhi, yet we were faced with the prospective entry into the war of Japan which will be active in areas in which we are vitally interested. He did not think that the United States of America would move until the Netherlands East Indies was attacked by Japan. He thought that the Japanese blow would fall on Siberia and that Japan's threat to the south was an attempt to immobilise Australia's cooperation with other

parts of the British Empire in the war against Germany and Italy. Though the United States might ultimately come in, enormous damage would have been done by Japanese raids. The A.I.F. would be away from the country and a state of affairs would arise which would be politically unmanageable. It was just as easy for the United Kingdom Government to make an agreement with Japan at this stage as it was for Japan to make one with Russia. Furthermore, once the impression was formed in the United States that we were easing up on Japan, it would be fatal to American cooperation.[9]

This straw-clutching discussion of diplomatic possibilities gave place to the concrete problem of what to do in Thailand. Bruce, in a personal message to Menzies from London on 8th August, said:

Questions of the highest policy have now to be determined . . . The United States, United Kingdom and Dutch Governments should now warn the Japanese Government that any extension of its southward movement into Thailand will be resisted. The difficulty with regard to this course is the doubt whether the United States would be prepared to join in any such warning and we have to consider what our course should be in the event of this proving to be the case. The alternatives would appear to be:

1. Do nothing and take no action unless we are attacked.
2. Issue the warning without the United Sttaes being associated with it.
3. Issue no warning but seize the Kra Peninsula immediately upon any infringement of Thai territory by the Japanese.
4. The seizure of the Kra Peninsula immediately without waiting for any further action by the Japanese.

In considering these four alternatives our objectives must be kept clearly in mind:
(a) To avoid war with Japan.
(b) To ensure United States will support us if we do become involved in war.

Bruce said that if the United States would not join in the warning he favoured issuing it without them as he thought this course offered the best prospect of avoiding war. He commented:

If the Japanese do not want war but are only testing how far they can go without precipitating it, the warning will halt them. If they are bent on war it will make no difference and will at least prevent our landing into war after Japan has seized more bases, making the defence of Malaya more difficult. To my mind this course offers the best prospect of early United States intervention. The warning would be given with the knowledge of the United States—obviously we could not take this step if the United States had protested against it—and if as a result of it we became involved in war I believe that the United States would soon be in, with the support of public opinion.[1]

After discussion in the Full Cabinet on the 11th, following the return of Menzies from his interrupted tour of State capitals,[2] Menzies addressed a message direct to Churchill, who was then keeping his rendezvous with Roosevelt in the Atlantic. At that Atlantic meeting, the Australian Ministers assumed, the question which they had asked should be taken up by the British Ambassador in Washington would now be discussed at the highest level of authority. The message, which was repeated to all Dominion Prime Ministers and to Casey, said:

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[9] Advisory War Council Minute 451, 6 Aug 1941.

[1] Bruce to Prime Minister, 8 Aug 1941.

[2] See Chapter 12, p. 496, above.

My colleagues and I have given anxious consideration to the Far Eastern position. We have, as you know, always regarded Singapore and Malaya as our vital outpost, and have at all times, as I indicated to the Foreign Office when in London, been prepared to join in a guarantee to the Netherlands East Indies.

We have also assumed that in the event of war with Japan, naval reinforcements, as discussed in London, with a nucleus of five capital ships, would be sent to the Far East. We now say and emphasise that an early despatch of capital ships east of Suez would itself be the most powerful deterrent and first step.

We also once more urge that, having regard to the grave tension at present existing, air and military reinforcements to Malaya should be vigorously expedited.

The position of Thailand now comes up for early decision, for events appear to be moving rapidly. Two urgent questions emerge:

(1) Should we, the British countries, be prepared to make it clear to Thailand and to Japan that any attack upon Thailand by Japan will be regarded by us as a *casus belli*?

(2) Should we announce this to the countries concerned independently of United States action or should we make it conditional upon American concurrence and active participation?

We are of the opinion as the Government of one of the two British Dominions which are most directly affected that the first question should be answered "yes" and that while every pressure should be maintained upon the United States, it would be an error to condition our action upon American action, though actual objection by the United States of America would of course be fatal.

Thailand's strategic position and resources are such that Japan's occupation of them would gravely imperil the safety of Singapore, the effective control of the waters around the Malay Peninsula, the Philippines and the Netherlands East Indies, and the maintenance of Chinese supplies along the Burma Road. Having regard to the realities in the Far East we do not believe that Japan wants Thailand merely as an end in itself. Its capture or control would be plainly a first step and it is the first step that counts.

After referring to the American attitude as "disappointing", Menzies added:

We feel that if we are prepared to fight America will not in fact desert us. A bold course ought to change the whole outlook.

Menzies wrote, too, of ensuring "the closest consultation and agreement with the Netherlands East Indies" and summed up:

If Thailand is abandoned and we delay our action we will be one country nearer to war, and in that war and in particular the defence of Singapore, Japan will be relatively stronger and we relatively weaker than at present.[3]

Menzies received on 13th August a reply from London stating that his message had been forwarded to Churchill and informing him that, in the meantime, news had been received that Roosevelt intended to continue to try to negotiate with Japan in continuation of an earlier American proposal for the neutralisation of Indo-China and Thailand under a joint guarantee by the United States, United Kingdom, Japan, China and others. Furthermore, on his return from the Atlantic cruise he intended to hand to the Japanese Ambassador a note which would contain a passage to the effect that "Any further encroachment by Japan in the South-West Pacific would produce a situation in which the United States Government would be compelled to take counter-measures, even though these might lead to

[3] Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 11 Aug 1941.

war between the United States and Japan". He would also add "something to the effect that it was obvious, the Soviet Union being a friendly power, that the United States Government would be similarly interested in any similar conflict in the North-West Pacific".[4]

When the Advisory War Council met on 14th August Menzies informed them that views had been exchanged with other Governments of the British Commonwealth and outlined the conclusions reached by the Full Cabinet and incorporated in the telegram of 11th August. Evatt asked whether that meant that if Japan attacked Thailand Australia would go to war. Menzies said that was the case. Evatt asked if the British Empire would go to war without the United States. Menzies said: "Yes, provided that the United States did not object".

After informing the Council that a secret meeting in the North Atlantic was taking place between Roosevelt and Churchill, Menzies said that he had been informed that they would make statements on war aims and on the proposed neutralisation of Thailand and the withdrawal of Japan from Indo-China. The Australian Government had emphasised to Churchill the importance of the Far East and had urged that it should not be regarded as something subsidiary. It was hoped that the Churchill-Roosevelt talks would lay down a firm and common course of action between the British Empire and the United States.

Curtin referred first to an interview he had had with the Japanese Minister in Canberra and the "intimidatory attitude" of the Minister "regarding the necessity for Japan to take the opportunity to break the A.B.D.A. [American, British, Dutch, Australian] powers". He then urged on Menzies the importance of locating a capital ship fleet at Singapore or an American fleet in the Philippines and argued that it would be unwise to make any threat to Japan without the power to carry it out. Menzies agreed with this but suggested that such a declaration would influence the United States towards a firmer stand.

Evatt, who was supported by Beasley, Forde and Makin, then raised an objection that the Full Cabinet had taken decisions which threatened war with Japan and there had been no consultation with the Council. Curtin reminded his colleague that the Government's cablegram of the 11th had stated the views that had been put forward by non-Government members of the Council over a period. Japan should not be given access to places which would make further advances possible.[5]

Already it would appear that domestic political issues had been introduced into the examination of the Far Eastern situation for, as soon as Menzies had completed his original statement, the minute records "a discussion as to the reasons for summoning the Full Cabinet and the abandonment of the Prime Minister's tour". Now, on the proposal that Menzies should return to London by air immediately to press Australian views, the international issue was subordinated to the domestic issue. The main point

[4] Secretary of State for Dominions to Prime Minister, 12 Aug 1941.
[5] Advisory War Council Minute 466, 14 Aug.

of the case made by Menzies was that there was still an enormous task to be done to convince the United Kingdom Government, and Churchill as much as anyone, of the vital significance of holding Singapore. As recounted above,[6] some of the non-government members had already made up their minds before they had come to the meeting that his proposal to go overseas was a political dodge and Menzies did not go. Action on this proposal was not decided by arguments relating to the war situation but by those relating to the contention for political power in Australia.

Leaving aside those elements of domestic politics which did in fact determine the outcome, it is a matter for speculation whether more determined and urgent measures by Australia in August 1941 to bring about the naval reinforcement of the Far East, as favoured by both Menzies and Curtin, and a more resolute front against Japan would have averted subsequent disasters. It is also a matter for speculation whether the presence of the Prime Minister in London might not have given Australia a more favourable place in the higher direction of the war when the conflict did eventually spread to the Pacific. Certainly those who opposed Menzies on this occasion eventually came to agree with the two points that there was still need to convince the British leaders of the dangers and the lack of forces in the Far East and that Australia should participate in higher policy decisions in the Pacific. The decision taken by the Advisory War Council against the views of both Menzies and Curtin in August 1941 certainly seems in retrospect a lost opportunity for pressing the interests of Australia.

The "warning" eventually given by Roosevelt was not as strong as the early reports had led the Australian Government to hope. On 17th August he informed the Japanese Government that if Japan took any further steps in pursuance of a policy or programme of military domination, by force or threat of force, of neighbouring countries, the Government of the United States would feel compelled to take immediately any and all of the steps which it might deem necessary towards safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of the United States and American nationals and towards ensuring the safety and security of the United States.[7]

Bruce, in a message from London, remarked that the language did not appear quite as firm as early reports of the Roosevelt-Churchill conversation had suggested, but added that Churchill had seen the text of Roosevelt's aide-mémoire to the Japanese Ambassador before he approved of the personal message to the Australian Prime Minister regarding the Atlantic meeting.[8] The language of Roosevelt's warning, however, was interpreted in the knowledge of the conversations. Its true import was elucidated in further exchanges between the Australian and United Kingdom Governments on the question of a public statement to be made by Britain. In a broadcast of 24th August, Churchill made it clear that Britain would range herself at the side of the United States if the latter became

[6] See Chapter 12, p. 496, above.

[7] *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Japan: 1931-41*, Vol II, p. 557 (Department of State publication).

[8] Bruce to Prime Minister, 25 Aug 1941.

involved in war with Japan. Later the United Kingdom Government felt that it was desirable to warn the Japanese Government "on our own part and directly that, apart from our support of the United States, we should be compelled in the interests of security of our own territories to take counter-measures in the event of further Japanese expansion".[9] Two alternative formulas were prepared and Australia showed a decided preference for one which would state that any further Japanese encroachment in the South-West Pacific area—a term which Australia found vague but hoped would include Thailand—would compel the United Kingdom Government to take counter-measures even though these might lead to war between Great Britain and Japan.[1] This proposal to make a British declaration and the parallel attempt to obtain a similar declaration from the United States were abandoned in response to American representations and in recognition of the constitutional difficulty of President Roosevelt in giving a reciprocal assurance.[2] In informing Australia of its intention to leave the matter as it stood, the United Kingdom said:

> You should, however, be aware that the general impression derived by our representative at the Atlantic meeting was that, although the United States could not make any satisfactory declaration on the point, there was no doubt that in practice we could count on United States support if, as a result of Japanese aggression, we became involved in war with Japan. In this connection, I should also invite attention to earlier messages which indicated that the United States Ambassador at Tokyo had made it clear to the former Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs that, as the United States are doing everything in their power generally to keep us supplied across the Atlantic, they obviously could not stand by and watch our lifeline being cut in the Pacific through an attack on Singapore or the Netherlands East Indies. The President assured His Majesty's Ambassador at Washington on 31st July that this would still be the United States attitude in the event of such a Japanese attack and Lord Halifax was later informed by the United States Secretary of State that this general definition of the United States position had recently been conveyed by Welles and himself to the Japanese Ambassador and Counsellor at Washington.[3]

The "warnings" to Japan, though perhaps in milder terms than expected by the Australian Government, were associated with a resumption of conversations with the Japanese representatives in Washington and these conversations revived prospects either of peace or of delaying the outbreak of war. Furthermore, the situation did seem to have improved. On 1st September Fadden, who had now succeeded to the Prime Ministership, received from Churchill an optimistic telegram referring to the situation in the Far East, for a variety of reasons, "not only as more favourable but as less tense". Churchill added:

> . . . as they become available we contemplate placing a force of capital ships, including first-class units, in the triangle Aden-Singapore-Simonstown before the end of the year. All this will be without prejudice to our control of the Eastern Mediter-

[9] Secretary of State for Dominions to Prime Minister, 28 Aug 1941.

[1] Secretary of State for Dominions to Prime Minister, 28 Aug, and Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 2 Sep 1941.

[2] Secretary of State for Dominions to Prime Minister, 2 Sep 1941.

[3] Secretary of State for Dominions to Prime Minister, 12 Sep 1941.

ranean. I can assure you that we are giving constant attention to all this, and you may be sure that we shall never let you down if real danger comes.[4]

Fadden, in a personal message to Churchill, expressed to him the deep gratitude of Australia for "the great success of the bold mission" which he had undertaken at the Atlantic meeting.[5]

The concern over Thailand in early August gave place in September to a renewal of optimism. A meeting of the Advisory War Council on 2nd September discussed the negotiations between the United States and Japan and took the view that time was running in favour of the Allies more than in favour of Japan. The Battle of the Atlantic was improving. The United States was established in Iceland and would shortly be convoying its own ships to this point and it was considered that the discussions between Churchill and Roosevelt had established the United States as the spearhead of the opposition to Japan, with United Kingdom support.[6] The publication of the Atlantic Charter had been hailed in Australia both as a momentous declaration of war aims and a demonstration of Anglo-American unity.[7] Churchill's assurance of naval aid was noted "with satisfaction" by the Advisory War Council at a meeting on 19th September,[8] and apparently was found so encouraging that, later in the same meeting, Curtin suggested that, in view of this assurance of aid, consideration might be given to a reduction in the "numbers of the members of the Militia force called up for duty and the period of training which others are required to undergo". He considered that the situation might warrant the transfer of men from army activities to munitions production.[9] The suggested transfer was, of course, not related solely to the greater confidence of security in the Far East, but also arose in some measure from the view expressed by Curtin in recent months that a readjustment was needed in the Australian war effort.

Meanwhile the decision had been made that Sir Earle Page should go to London. In a discussion with members of the Advisory War Council on the 12th September on the eve of his departure on a month-long air journey to London via Batavia, Singapore, Manila, and the United States, Page explained the general purpose of his mission. He said that he considered that Japan might still be deterred from entering the war if there were, first, greater naval and air strength at Singapore and, second, close collaboration between the United Kingdom and the United States in defence of their joint interests in the Pacific. Part of the results of the strengthening by the United Kingdom of its force at Singapore would be to ease the

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[4] Secretary of State for Dominions to Prime Minister, 31 Aug 1941.

[5] Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 4 Sep 1941.

[6] Advisory War Council Minute 475, 2 Sep 1941.

[7] E.g. The *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial of 16 Aug: "This unity of Anglo-American purpose, now formally attained and proclaimed, must have a powerful effect on the course of the struggle. A virtual partnership based on a complete agreement on all questions of principle has replaced the cooperation of the past two years of war. The United States has not yet taken her place in the firing line, but by this declaration the President has openly associated her with Britain in a manner which makes her, for all practical purposes, an unpledged ally".

[8] Advisory War Council Minute 514, 19 Sep 1941.

[9] Advisory War Council Minute 516, 19 Sep 1941.

Australian burden on both Budget and manpower which had been placed on her by the necessities of local defence. He would also take a line that Australia's noteworthy contribution to the war effort should give her a voice when decisions were being taken in London which affected Australia's interests. Permanent representation in the United Kingdom War Cabinet was essential because events in the Pacific were of such vital importance to Australia.

Curtin said that the essential point was not membership of the War Cabinet but the presence of a Minister constantly in London to press the Australian viewpoint. The strongest representations regarding the location of capital ships at Singapore were both important and urgent. The strategy of the war insofar as it affected Australian cooperation depended on the presence of capital ships at Singapore. The ability of Australia to contribute to the war effort overseas was contingent on this and on the outcome of negotiations which were then proceeding between the United States and Japan and if these discussions were satisfactory Australia could re-examine its total war effort to determine what it could best do and where it could best be done.[1]

At this time, when the nature of the limits of the Australian war effort were again under consideration, the argument was common that if Britain, by strengthening Singapore and by collaboration with the United States, could deter Japan from entering the war, Australia would be able to make a greater contribution to the war effort overseas, but, so long as Japan was a danger, the Australian contribution would be limited.

After the fall of the Fadden Government there was some speculation whether Page might be recalled. Curtin, however, readily confirmed him in his mission with the status of Special Representative of the Australian Government.

During this period, too, without interruption from the change of government, the permanent officers of the administration proceeded with their preparations against the possibility of war in the Far East. In response to the direction given to them at a meeting of the War Cabinet on 10th June 1941[2] the Defence Committee asked the Joint Planning Committee to review broadly the scope of the present arrangements for the production of joint operational plans to deal with the various possible forms of attack on Australia. The Joint Planning Committee's report was endorsed by the Defence Committee and submitted on 3rd September to the War Cabinet, which approved what had been done and directed that joint operational plans for the defence of Australian territory should be completed as soon as possible.[3] The papers placed before the War Cabinet did not include any submission regarding the nature of the military measures to be undertaken.

At that time the defence of Australia was still seen by the political leaders as being primarily the defence of areas remote from Australia. A

[1] Advisory War Council Minute 512, 12 Sep 1941.

[2] War Cabinet Minute 1136.

[3] War Cabinet Minute 1929, 3 Sep 1941 and War Cabinet Agendum 286/1941.

general strategical appreciation was presented to the new Curtin Government by the Commander-in-Chief in the Far East, Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, during discussions in Melbourne in mid-October. At a meeting of the Advisory War Council on the 16th Brooke-Popham said that it was now fully realised by the countries concerned that Burma, Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies, New Zealand and the Philippines comprised one strategical area and the defence of one of these countries would affect the defence of the others. The United States was now definitely taking measures to defend the Philippines and the Netherlands East Indies Government was fully determined to defend their own territory and to cooperate in the defence of Malaya. All indications were that Japan had temporarily diverted her attention from the south to the north, as it was thought that Russia's preoccupation in the war with Germany presented an opportunity for action to rid Japan of the Russian threat from Vladivostock. It would take Japan some time to concentrate for a move southwards, and for the next three months she would not be able to undertake a large scale attack in the south. This gave the Allies time to complete their defence and to perfect their plans. Japan had almost 35,000 troops in Indo-China which were required for the occupation of the country. A larger force would be necessary for the invasion of Thailand. It was possible that Japan planned to invade Thailand and work down the Kra Isthmus for an attack on Malaya in conjunction with a seaborne attack from Indo-China. The Commander-in-Chief thought that the existing Allied air forces in the Far East could cope with any aircraft the Japanese could base on their present aerodromes during the next three months, and a programme of expansion of Allied air strength had been drawn up to match Japanese aerodrome expansion. At the present time Japan had superiority in numbers but not in quality.[4]

In the course of discussion Brooke-Popham revealed, however, that shortages of equipment, particularly in anti-aircraft guns, still limited the protection of Singapore, and Curtin stressed that the urgent needs of the Far East should be represented strongly to the United Kingdom. Australia could only provide greater assistance in equipment for Singapore at the expense of Australian forces in the Middle East and Australian commitments to New Zealand, the Netherlands East Indies and the United Kingdom.

The discussion revealed, too, an increasing sense of American interest in the Far East other than the Philippines. Brooke-Popham reported that the United States was now making large shipments of equipment to Rangoon to be transported to China over the Burma Road and an American mission had been sent to China to report on the organisation of the road on the Chinese side of the frontier.[5]

More direct evidence of American energy came before the War Cabinet in October in the form of an American proposal, received through the

[4] At that time it was assumed, in the advice before Australian Ministers, that the Buffalo fighter was superior to any Japanese fighter.

[5] Advisory War Council Minute 533, 16 Oct 1941.

United Kingdom Government, that, in connection with the strengthening of their air defence in the Far East, certain air bases be made available to their forces at Rabaul, Port Moresby, Darwin and Rockhampton, the construction of such bases being left to the Commonwealth Government with United States financial and technical assistance. The United States also proposed to supply equipment under Lend-Lease to improve the defence of Rabaul and to give technical assistance for this installation, and asked, too, that certain Australian aerodromes might be used for the training and "familiarisation" of American personnel and for the storage of spare parts, fuel and bombs. Communication facilities were also requested. These representations, which were made, not primarily for the defence of Australia, but in connection with the establishment of an air route between Hawaii and the Philippines and operations to be conducted from the Philippines, were readily agreed to by the Australian Government and led to plans involving an expenditure of approximately £5,684,000 in Australia and its territory, but no work on them had been undertaken before war broke out in the Far East.[6]

Australia itself, adding to the measures previously taken for collaboration with the Netherlands East Indies and for the security of New Caledonia, had given further attention to the position of Portuguese Timor. Early in 1941 the Australian Government had become concerned at reports of Japanese activities in Portuguese Timor and particularly the way in which Japan was gaining support from the local population by arranging to purchase the exportable surplus of their coffee crop. As in the case of New Caledonia the first move by Australia was in the direction of giving commercial support to the Portuguese dependency. At the same time arrangements had been made to use Dili as an alternative stopping place on the Australia-Singapore civil air route and advantage was taken of this arrangement to appoint the Chief Flying Inspector of the Department of Civil Aviation, Mr David Ross,[7] as Australian Civil Aviation representative there. From the outset, however, it was indicated that Ross, who was furnished with light aircraft for his use, should also report to the Australian Government on the general situation in Portuguese Timor, both keeping an eye on what the Japanese were doing and also advising the Government on any opportunities which Australia could take to improve its position.

The measures for the defence of Timor in the case of Japanese action against the Portuguese were also discussed in the course of conversations with the Dutch and the British in February 1941, and it had been agreed to have certain Australian troops available with Dutch troops at Koepang in Dutch Timor.

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[6] War Cabinet Minutes 1398, 15 Oct; 1399, 15 Oct; 1416, 18 Oct; 1429, 22 Oct; Advisory War Council Minutes 545, 13 Oct and 585, 28 Nov; War Cabinet Agendum 333/1941 and 334/1941; Advisory War Council Agendum 126/1941.

[7] Gp Capt D. Ross, RAAF. Aust Consul in Timor 1941-42; escaped from Japanese; joined guerilla forces; Dir of Transportation and Movements RAAF to 1946. Of East Malvern, Vic; b. 15 Mar 1902.

Later in the year the possibility of a German move through Spain and Portugal caused the Department of External Affairs to draw attention to the possibility that, if control of the colony from Portugal were broken, Japan would probably seize the opportunity to take Timor under protective custody. The Government therefore approached the United Kingdom Government with a view to reaching an understanding between the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Australia regarding the occupation of Portuguese Timor, either jointly or by the separate forces of one of the three nations in the event of either German occupation of Portugal, a Japanese landing in Timor without the outbreak of war between Japan and the Allies, or, in the final extremity, in the case of war with Japan.[8]

The United Kingdom agreed with the sense of the Australian proposals and also proposed discussions with Portugal. For the purpose of these discussions the United Kingdom asked Australia whether, if Portugal agreed to accept reinforcements, Australia would be willing to accept commitments in respect of Portuguese Timor in addition to the commitments already accepted in respect of Ambon and Koepang. By a War Cabinet decision of 15th October Australia agreed that Portugal should be asked whether she was ready to accept outside help if help should be found necessary by the military authorities on the spot, and that both the Netherlands and Portuguese Governments should be asked to agree to local discussions between Australian, Dutch and Portuguese military authorities regarding the necessary preventive measures. The War Cabinet also decided that, in view of the threat to Australia which would arise from a Japanese occupation of Timor, Australia should cooperate to the fullest practical extent in measures for the defence of the colony. To that end the Australian air forces to be provided for reinforcement of Ambon and Koepang should also be available for operations in Portuguese Timor and an additional battalion of supporting troops should be made available to reinforce Portuguese Timor if the Portuguese agreed to accept reinforcements.[9] At the suggestion of the United Kingdom, Ross was given rank as Australian Consul at Dili in order to facilitate his work. Negotiations with the Portuguese Government had not been concluded when war came.

Another facet of the Far Eastern position to which increasing attention was being given in the second half of 1941, was the need to strengthen the machinery for consultation and control. Hitherto the Australian Government had made representations chiefly to London. The Government had used this entrance constantly, expressing views on matters relating to policy towards Japan, cooperation with the United States and the Netherlands East Indies, support for Thailand, the attitude to be adopted in case of a Japanese attack on Russia and the naval and air reinforcement of Singapore. The case made by Menzies for his own return to London and the eventual decision to send Page in his stead were a further expression of the view that any effective influence on the higher direction of the

[8] War Cabinet Minutes 1313, 13 Aug and 1333, 3 Sep 1941.

[9] War Cabinet Minute 1410, 15 Oct 1941. War Cabinet Agendum 270/1941.

war could best be exerted on Churchill, the British War Cabinet and its advisers in London. In the last quarter of the year, however, with the growing urgency of the situation in the Far East, a number of political problems appeared which were local in their incidence and there was also a growing amount of administrative devolution from London to Singapore, Shanghai and Hong Kong and a growing number of occasions on which inter-Allied interests could perhaps be coordinated on the spot instead of by remote control from London. About the time of the accession of Labour to power there was a marked move towards local consultation leading to local decisions.

The Singapore and A.B.D.A. conferences and the visits to Australia of Brooke-Popham, had given a measure of local consultation on regional matters. In early September the prospects of increased local discussion were enhanced by the arrival of Mr Duff Cooper at Singapore as Resident Cabinet Minister for Far Eastern Affairs. His appointment was largely modelled on the action taken by the United Kingdom in the Middle East, where a Minister of State had been appointed and a War Council formed representative of the three Commanders-in-Chief, the British Ambassador at Cairo, the High Commissioner of Palestine and the Governor of Aden. The position in the Far East, however, was not directly comparable and, from the commencement, there seems to have been some neglect to distinguish clearly between the problems of inter-Allied consultation and the problem of coordinating the activities of the diverse bodies responsible to the United Kingdom Government. The problem for the United Kingdom administration was that, in this region, there were officials of high rank reporting to the Foreign Office, to the India Office, the Dominions Office, the Colonial Office, the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Economic Warfare, the Ministry of War Transport and the Treasury.

Apart from Britain's own problem of coordinating the work of the various British instrumentalities in the Far East, there was also a problem of local consultation with the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand on matters of common interest to the three Governments. Duff Cooper visited Australia early in November and described to Ministers and members of the Advisory War Council his view that it would be of little help in peacetime to set up an inter-governmental council in the Pacific and his view that it would be best to prepare the skeleton of a Pacific War Council to be established at Singapore should war break out. During the discussion Curtin agreed that an inter-governmental council would not be of much assistance and thought that better results could be expected if a member of the British War Cabinet were appointed to Singapore and an arrangement made that his reports would go to the Dominion Governments at the same time as to the United Kingdom Government. Curtin appeared to be groping towards some sort of machinery for that measure of joint British Commonwealth responsibility in foreign affairs and defence which throughout his earlier political life he had most strenuously

opposed.[1] No standing arrangement for local inter-governmental consultation and no method for reaching local decision on higher policy had been achieved before war broke out.

Another problem which remained to worry the minds of political and military leaders was how and when the decision would be taken to go to war should the occasion arise. Since the A.B.D.A. conversations, the military commanders had been clear on the measures to be taken on the outbreak of hostilities but, short of resisting an attack on British territory or shipping, the commanders would have to await instructions from the United Kingdom before military action could commence. During October some exchange of telegrams took place between Australia and the Dominions Office in regard to the arrangements for inter-governmental consultation in the event of a move by Japan which would necessitate military counter-measures, and, in keeping with these arrangements, the Australian War Cabinet laid down a procedure by which it could be called together promptly in an emergency and by which all the relevant information would be placed before it. Australian representatives at Washington, Tokyo, and Chungking (where Sir Frederic Eggleston[2] had now taken up his post as Australian Minister) were warned to report developments from time to time.[3]

The change to a Labour Government in Australia in mid-October came at a time of rising hope in the possibility of averting war with Japan. There had been perhaps some inattention to foreign affairs during the political skirmishes of September but the Australian optimism was not simply a failure by Australians to read the portents. It also reflected views held elsewhere.

A characteristic assessment of the position was contained in a "Review of the Situation in the Far East", dated 26th September 1941, which was prepared in the General Headquarters, Far East, at Singapore and made available to the Australian Government. This memorandum stated that the present object in the Far East was to avoid war with Japan. This meant that the policy was "to deter Japan from going to such lengths that Britain would be compelled to face the results of war rather than accept the consequences of acquiescence". Since May 1941, it was considered, the situation had changed from being very much in favour of Japan to being very much against her. Among the factors noted was "the more positive attitude" of the United States. The German attack on Russia, coming so soon after Hitler had encouraged Matsuoka to sign the Soviet-Japanese Non-aggression Pact, was considered to have confused the minds of the Japanese rulers and the turning of opinion against the Axis had forced Matsuoka to leave the Japanese Cabinet. The Japanese move into French Indo-China had produced so violent a reaction as to warn Japan of the danger of war with the British Commonwealth, the United States and

[1] Advisory War Council Minute 560, 7 Nov 1941.

[2] Sir Frederic Eggleston. 1st AIF. MLA Vic 1920-27; Aus Min to China 1941-44, to USA 1944-46. Barrister; of Camberwell, Vic; b. Brunswick, Vic, 17 Oct 1875. Died 12 Nov 1954.

[3] War Cabinet Minute 1402, 15 Oct 1941 and Advisory War Council Minute 533, 16 Oct 1941.

the Netherlands. Other anxieties for Japan lay in the military alliance between Great Britain and Russia; the improved Allied situation in the Atlantic and Middle East; the "increasing anti-Axis attitude" of the United States; and the "virtual certainty of a military undertaking between the British and Dutch in the Far East".

The British in the Far East appeared to find equal ground for complacency in the belief that it would be "madness" for Japan to embark on war in the south while strong Russian naval, army and air forces existed in the Maritime Provinces and that if Japan chose to attack the Soviet Union—a course which was considered to be more "attractive" for the Japanese—she would not do so until she had clearer prospects of a quick success, for she would not stand up to a long blockade by the Allies and fight a war against Russia at the same time. Therefore, at the end of September, the British military estimation of the Far Eastern situation was:

> The Japanese must be uncertain whether or not Germany is going to bring Russia to terms before the winter. Even if Russia collapsed, the time that would elapse before the Japanese could disengage from the north would be considerable. As the weather in the South China Sea area between November and February inclusive is bad, it is highly improbable that Japan can be contemplating war in the south for some months.
>
> Japan is now concentrating her forces against the Russians and cannot suddenly change this into a concentration in the south. Our view is that she must therefore be anxious to avoid a war in the south in the next few months. She is consequently now susceptible to diplomatic pressure. Our strategic position would be greatly improved by a Japanese withdrawal from French Indo-China and we should now consider carefully whether, in conjunction with the United States of America, we could apply sufficient diplomatic pressure to cause it.[4]

Page, in the course of his journey to Malaya and across the Pacific and United States to London to take up his duties as accredited representative to the British War Cabinet also found encouragement. At a meeting in Singapore on 29th September he discussed the abovementioned "Review of the Situation in the Far East" with the Commanders-in-Chief Far East and China, Mr Duff Cooper, the Governor of the Straits Settlements, the British Ambassador at Chungking and the British Minister at Bangkok. By implication, the meeting accepted the reading of the situation which was contained in the "Review" but proceeded to express the "emphatic opinion" that the only real deterrent to further Japanese aggression would be a British fleet based on Singapore and in the absence of this fleet there was little doubt that Japan would be able to strike at her selected moment. The sense of urgency was modified in a further paragraph: "We feel sure that everything is being done to make provision for this requirement as soon as ships can be spared from other theatres which at the moment are active but we would stress the propaganda value of even one or two battleships at Singapore". Their particular recommendations included diplomatic

[4] Page Papers file 1 (a), No. 4. (The Page Papers are a series of documents assembled by Sir Earle Page in connection with his mission to London in September 1941, and deposited by him with the Commonwealth Archives at Canberra.)

measures side by side with military reinforcement and indicated a continuing faith in negotiations and in warnings.[5]

An equally hopeful picture was gained by Page from General MacArthur, commander of the United States Army Forces in the Far East, when Page saw him at Manila on 6th October. Japan was facing a critical situation, said the General. She was over-extended. Japan, in the fifth year of war with China, needed a long period of recuperation before she could undertake another major war. On the northern flank she was threatened by Russia. In the centre she was held by China and could neither go forward nor back. In the south she was confronted by a combination of major powers and the possibility of being involved in a war which might mean her extinction as a major power. She was allied with a major land power which was unable to bring any help to her. Japan had gone to the limit of her southward expansion if she wished to avoid war. Under present conditions the Allies could successfully resist further Japanese exploitation southward. During the present lull defences should be increased but not at the expense of more active fronts.[6]

In Washington on 20th October Page learnt of the reinforcement of the Philippines and plans for building up air strength and developing land forces so that, by early 1942, the safety of the Philippines would be ensured and, to quote General Marshall, the American forces would "constitute such a serious menace to Japan that she would be forced out of the Axis".[7]

This was the characteristic picture being presented to the Australian Government during October both from the United States and the United Kingdom.

A telegram received by Curtin from Churchill on 26th October expressed the view that Japan would not run into war unless or until Russia was decisively broken. The Russians were still resisting strongly; the winter was near. Even if Russia was broken Japan might wait for the promised invasion of Britain in the European spring of 1942 before attacking. Meanwhile, "in order further to deter Japan", the newest battleship, the *Prince of Wales,* was going to join the *Repulse* in the Indian Ocean and, as soon as they were ready, the four "R" battleships would be moved to Eastern waters.[8]

Apart from these heartening assurances of growing power to deter Japan, there were two lesser elements working in the Australian Administration. The new Cabinet and the new Minister for External Affairs, though having the advantage of previous membership in the Advisory War Council, were new to the job and, with this newness, enjoyed a marked con-

[5] Page Papers, file 1 (a), No. 6.

[6] Page Papers, file 1 (a), No. 7. Page's visit to Manila and to Washington came shortly after the United States General Staff had changed to a view that it was possible to establish in the Philippines "a force not only sufficient to hold the islands but also, and more important, strong enough to make it foolhardy for the Japanese to carry their expansion southward through the China Sea". See Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (1947), p. 388. Page collected the spray from this wave of optimism.

[7] Page Papers, file 1 (a), No. 9.

[8] Churchill to Curtin, 25 Oct.

fidence in their own diplomatic skill. Secondly, they had, by reason of a greater admiration of the Soviet Union, a ready faith that the Soviet Union should be a major factor in the Far Eastern events and that, if she had not so proved up to date, it was probably because she had not been handled properly by Great Britain and the United States. Both elements, though in themselves not decisive, tended to reinforce a belief in the possibility of the success of a diplomatic approach to Japan.

Perhaps the mood of the new Government can be most graphically illustrated by their attitude to the expeditionary forces—a question on which there was subsequently a certain amount of public misrepresentation. At that stage there was no question of the return of the A.I.F. to Australia but rather, as already indicated, the trend of thought was that, if security could be assured in the Far East, the contribution of Australia overseas could be maintained. Early in November Curtin, announcing that Blamey would return to Australia for consultation, made it clear that he would return to the Middle East after the consultations and that there was no suggestion that the A.I.F. might leave the Middle East. In Parliament he said categorically on 5th November, that the Government had no intention of recalling the A.I.F.[9] On the same date the Minister for the Army said that the decision to send the Armoured Division to the Middle East still stood.[1]

As late as 18th November Blamey, in discussion with the War Cabinet, clearly still had it in his mind that the 8th Division, then in Malaya, would eventually join the rest of the A.I.F. in the Middle East as originally arranged and said that he would prefer it to be serving there. The War Cabinet, however, decided that "no action should be taken at the present juncture for the transfer of the 8th Division from Malaya" in view of "the present Far Eastern situation and the negotiations now in progress for United States cooperation in Far Eastern defence".[2] As late as the 26th November, the War Cabinet took decisions for the reinforcement of the Middle East and plans to complete the Armoured Division for service in the Middle East, which make it clear that it still had in mind the maintaining of the military commitments of its predecessors.[3]

The Curtin Government also maintained a decision of the Menzies and Fadden Governments in regard to the relief of the 9th Division at Tobruk and the reconcentration of the A.I.F. as a single force, and in doing so showed no marked change of attitude on higher policy in regard to the nature of the Australian war effort.[4] Thus the Curtin Government, when it had shaken down into office, approached the Far Eastern events at the

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[9] *Digest of Decisions and Announcements*, No. 4, p. 3.

[1] *Digest of Decisions and Announcements*, No. 4, p. 6.

[2] War Cabinet Minute 1518, 18 Nov 1941.

[3] War Cabinet Minute 1520, 26 Nov 1941.

[4] War Cabinet Minute 1404, 15 Oct and Advisory War Council Minute 534, 16 Oct 1941. In view of suggestions made by Churchill in *The Second World War*, Vol III, pp. 367-72, regarding differences in the way in which Menzies, Fadden and Curtin handled this question, a closer examination of the withdrawal from Tobruk is given in Appendix 10. The military circumstances and consequences of the decision are discussed in the third volume of the army series.

beginning of November with confidence and some hope and had not yet found occasion to take exceptional measures in anticipation of an early crisis.

A change of Government in Japan in mid-October brought the Minister of War, General Tojo, to the Premiership but, although the expectation was that the new Ministry was likely to be stiffer and more narrowly bent on war than the Konoye Cabinet, the new Foreign Minister, Mr Togo, immediately told the United States that Japan wished to continue conversations and hoped to reach an agreement for peace in the Pacific.

In Washington, from 28th October onwards, Ambassador Nomura proceeded with conversations with Hull. The fact that these conversations were proceeding was perhaps more clearly seen by the Australian Government than any other development in the Far Eastern situation.

In order to see the Australian diplomatic activities in the Far East during November in the perspective of world events it is necessary to digress to consider certain elements in United States diplomatic activity during the same period. The new Australian Government looked to the United States for diplomatic leadership but appreciated imperfectly the way in which American leaders were looking at the same series of events.

One point which Australia did not fully appreciate was the strength of the American official view that danger in the Atlantic was the chief danger. The transfer of naval units from the Pacific Fleet to the Atlantic in May 1941 had indicated such a view, but other information on the point seems to have been unknown in Australia or overlooked. A second point was that Australia did not loom as large in American calculations about the Pacific as Australia thought she did—certainly not before the fall of the Philippines in 1942. A third point, disclosed in the Pearl Harbour investigation, is that from early November the United States Secretary of State and the United States Cabinet could have had no illusions, on the information before them, about the prospects of reaching a composition with Japan or of averting war in the Pacific.[5] A fourth point was the considered view of the American service chiefs that it was beyond American capacity to conduct an unlimited strategic offensive against Japan in the Western Pacific and that the only current plans for war against Japan in the Far East were to conduct a defensive war.[6] Australia had rated American power much higher, although her misapprehension was in part due to the failure to appreciate that the basic military policy and strategy to which the United States service chiefs and the President were already working made the defeat of Germany the primary objective and rejected the unlimited offensive against Japan because it would greatly weaken a combined effort in the Atlantic against Germany. In the light

[5] Navy Department, Washington: *Narrative Statement of Evidence at Navy Pearl Harbour Investigations before Admiral T. C. Hart, U.S.N., the Navy Court of Inquiry and Admiral H. Kent Hewitt, U.S.N.* See also: *Memoirs of Cordell Hull,* Vol 2, Ch 77.

[6] *Estimate concerning the Far Eastern situation* prepared for the President by the Chief of Naval Operations and Army Chief of Staff, 5 Nov 1941. The slow rate at which the United States would be able to develop an offensive against Japan had been discussed in print in America for years. There is no sign that any information on this point was known among those responsible for political decisions in Australia.

of what has since been disclosed, some of the diplomatic activity of Australia during November 1941 may now appear irrelevant but it can only be fairly judged against the Government's ignorance or misunderstanding of the elements of American policy mentioned above.

Replying on 4th November to communications received from London on 24th October, the Curtin Government, supported by the Advisory War Council and after consultation with the New Zealand Government[7] expressed the view that defensive measures to deter Japan from aggression should not close the door to an understanding with Japan so long as no vital interests were sacrificed during the course of any discussions and therefore that any warning to Japan should reiterate the willingness and desire of the British Commonwealth to seek a general settlement in the Pacific which protected the rights of all parties.

The Australian message also revealed continued faith in the value of a warning as a deterrent to Japan and a continued expectation that if Japan struck soon she would strike against the Soviet Union. Japan should be warned, the Australian Government said, that any attack by Japan on Russia would be resisted by force by the British Commonwealth, irrespective of the attitude of the United States of America. Every endeavour should be made to obtain the maximum collaboration of the United States, the Netherlands and China in the event of a Japanese attack on Russia but the warning to Japan should not be conditional on reciprocal undertakings by these powers. A reciprocal guarantee should be sought from Russia that if Japan attacked southward Russia would declare war on Japan but the warning to Japan should not be conditional on such an assurance.[8]

In London, on 4th November, Page and Bruce were completing the case which Page was to present on the following day to Churchill and to the British War Cabinet for strengthening the defences of Singapore. The case, strongly prepared, still reflected the view that war in the Far East was avoidable, that pressure could still be put on Japan and that negotiations might succeed. The argument, in effect, was to strengthen Singapore, deter Japan, maintain the present diplomatic advantage and then reap such incidental benefits as facilitating aid to Russia through Vladivostock, expediting supplies to Britain from Australia and Eastern countries, freeing Australians from home defence for overseas service, improving morale and gaining a useful psychological effect on the peoples of the Far East. More remotely, it was suggested that if such action did not deter Japan then Britain could fight at points chosen by her and not wait until Japan attacked, but the general tone of the case, which was naturally influenced by the audience to which it was to be directed, was still influenced by the confidence that Japan could be deterred and the hope that it might be possible without war to force Japan to withdraw from Indo-China and

[7] Prime Minister to Prime Minister of New Zealand, 30 Oct 1941.

[8] Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 4 Nov 1941. Repeated to the Prime Minister of New Zealand No. 456.

possibly under pressure, to make a satisfactory arrangement with China.[9]

During the same week a further indication of Australian hopes was given by a War Cabinet decision of 7th November, communicated to the United Kingdom on the 8th, to the effect that it was of the "utmost importance" to give every possible assistance to China with the idea of checking Japan. While American cooperation was desirable, British action should not be delayed merely on account of American hesitancy. The Australian share in the assistance to China was to give permission to Australians to volunteer for a Buffalo Squadron for China to be formed by the Commander-in-Chief, Far East.[1]

The meeting of the British War Cabinet on 5th November, at which Page stated the Australian case for strengthening Singapore by locating a battle fleet there and despatching substantial air reinforcements, agreed only to hold a special meeting to discuss the matter a week later. The case presented by Page on the 12th rested first on the value of increased strength as a deterrent to Japan and second on the value of "a resolute and determined line" in ensuring the cooperation of the United States. He still envisaged the possibilities that the Japanese attack might come on Russia, on China, on the Netherlands East Indies or on Thailand and the necessity in each case for Britain and Australia to take action against Japan. With regard to cooperation with the United States he expressed some doubts about the United Kingdom's insistence that the United States must always take the lead and thought that if Britain were more resolute America would recognise the necessity of coming to her aid. The whole case was drawn together by urging an increase in the air strength of Singapore.[2] The information given to Page at this meeting and transmitted by him to Australia was that if Britain found herself at war with Japan before Christmas and the United States remained neutral the Japanese would be able to move southward a much stronger force of capital ships than Britain could assemble. By February 1942, however, the Royal Navy would have the *Prince of Wales,* a battle cruiser (the *Repulse* or *Renown*) and the battleships *Resolution, Ramillies, Revenge* and *Royal Sovereign* in the Far East. A complete understanding had not yet been reached with the United States naval authorities. Further naval conversations with the Americans were planned to be held in the Far East in December. The Philippines were being strengthened. It was also represented to Page that the United States Naval Staff contended that it was unnecessary to maintain as many cruisers in Australian and New Zealand waters as the two Dominions were doing. Only 200 aircraft were in Singapore, although it was now planned to maintain 336 there. The Air Staff shared the view which had been pressed by Australia that a powerful striking force should be added and would give effect to it as soon as possible. If it became necessary to reinforce Singapore by medium bombers this could only be done at the expense of the Middle East. The garrison of Singapore

[9] Page Papers, file 1 (a), Nos 12 and 13.

[1] War Cabinet Minute 1482. Telegram from Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 8 Nov 1941.

[2] Page to Prime Minister, 14 Nov 1941.

was "something over 63,000 together with 14,000 volunteers". Shortages in field guns and anti-tank guns were admitted.[3]

At the meeting Churchill developed the view that the correct strategy was to move armed strength from theatre to theatre as the situation changed. It would be a strategic error to move forces to the Far East, "possibly to remain inactive for a year", which were now actively engaged against the Germans and Italians. We should maintain a stiff attitude to Japan but not become involved in war with her unless we had the assurance of United States participation. He did not believe that it was in Japan's power to invade Australia but he renewed his assurance that if Australia were "gravely threatened" Britain should cut her losses in the Middle East and move in great strength to Australia's assistance. Such a decision, however, was not one to be taken lightly. After referring to the difficulties of President Roosevelt, he declared it would be a great error to press the President to act in advance of American opinion.[4]

It was felt in some quarters that Page had allowed the question of reinforcement of Singapore to become entangled with the political questions related to the attitude of the United States but, if any criticism lies against him on that score, it also lies against the Australian Government in general. For the greater part of November there was an even more extensive confusion in Canberra between what was being done as a defensive measure and what was being done for the improvement of diplomatic relations.

In mid-November Evatt's assessment of the position was that the danger of armed aggression from Japan might reach its maximum in the period before the British battleships reached Singapore and that it was important both to gain time and to prevent Japanese suspicions from culminating in a desperate overt act by her. To this end he suggested to Britain that, while precipitate intervention in the American-Japanese talks might be harmful, some good might follow if Australia were to indicate her special interest in the talks and her intention to assist as much as possible in their satisfactory outcome.[5]

In a message of 16th November, Bruce, who, as on other occasions, appeared to be trying to drop a hint to the Australian Government that it was on the wrong track, raised the questions whether the conversations were merely designed to gain time or whether they were a genuine attempt to find a basis for a wide settlement in the Far East; if the atmosphere had changed when did this occur and what were the reasons for it; if in fact the United States was now seriously discussing with the Japanese the broad lines of a comprehensive settlement in the Far East what were these lines and what were the prospects of success.[6]

On the 17th November the American-Japanese talks entered their final stage with the first conversation between Hull and Kurusu. On the follow-

[3] Page to Prime Minister, 16 Nov 1941.
[4] Page to Prime Minister, 16 Nov, received 18 Nov 1941.
[5] War Cabinet Minute 1482. Telegram from Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 8 Nov 1941.
[6] Bruce to Prime Minister, 16 Nov 1941.

ing day a suggestion was made by the Japanese envoys for a temporary arrangement, or *modus vivendi,* and on the 20th handed to Hull a six-point proposal for the terms of such an agreement. To Hull this was clearly unacceptable from the start both because of its terms and because intercepted messages from Tokyo had indicated that Japan was moving to the final stage of negotiation.

To Canberra, however, they presented an opportunity. The reports received from Washington stated that proposals had been left with Hull by the Japanese Ambassador and that Hull had discussed them with the British, Chinese, Netherlands and Australian representatives in Washington. It was the first time for months, said Casey, that countries other than the United States had had anything tangible to work on and, although the proposal was unacceptable in itself it might, with modification, be made acceptable to all parties. If these negotiations failed war would not be far off and he added that he had been reliably informed that Kurusu had been instructed to obtain results one way or the other by 27th November.[7] The Australian Government quickly saw an opportunity, too, and encouraged Casey to pursue "discreetly" this chance to intervene in the conversations. The primary consideration was to prevent the breakdown of the talks. Evatt's comments mingled the substance of a Pacific settlement with the immediate concern to defer any Japanese attack. He looked to the possibility that from the Hull-Kurusu talks might emerge a suggestion for a conference of Pacific countries but at the same time he also looked to the "opportunities for considerable discussions, amendments, counter-proposals" and the further valuable time which might be gained thereby.[8] Casey warned him in reply that the Japanese were unlikely to allow themselves to be subjected to such delays and recalled the earlier reports he had made that perhaps only a few more days remained and the "gloomy view" of the prospects which Hull had given.[9]

The United Kingdom had also made some comments on the Japanese proposals and on the counter proposals which Hull might put forward, at the same time leaving the handling of the negotiations to him. Australia was informed of this action.[1]

The Australian Government was strongly of the opinion that Hull should not reject the Japanese proposals outright, that he should make counter-proposals and that he should seek a temporary *modus vivendi.* Behind this view was an opinion held by Evatt that everything possible must be done to avoid a breakdown of the talks, that a "rigid" American attitude was driving Japan towards a war of desperation, that the Soviet Union should not be overlooked and—lacking information which the Americans had about Japanese intentions—that "the Japanese are clearly anxious to avoid war themselves".[2]

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[7] Casey to Minister for External Affairs, 24 Nov 1941.

[8] Minister of External Affairs to Casey, 25 Nov 1941.

[9] Casey to Minister for External Affairs, 25 Nov 1941.

[1] Secretary of State for Dominions to Prime Minister (two messages), 24 Nov 1941.

[2] Comments made by Evatt on telegrams from Page in External Affairs files. Not only did the Australian Government lack the information which the Americans had obtained in November

In a telegram to Casey on the 26th on the hope for a *modus vivendi,* Evatt repeated suggestions that, as Japanese aggression in Indo-China had occasioned economic restrictions against Japan, those restrictions might be lessened in return for Japanese withdrawal from Indo-China provided that Japan gave a general guarantee against Japanese aggression elsewhere and entered into an understanding to negotiate a subsequent Pacific settlement at a later time. "On the whole this would be a Japanese diplomatic retreat, but it should be possible to give Japan a chance to retreat without inflicting unnecessary humiliation." He added that his suggestion was not appeasement but "merely strategical expediency at a crucial period in the war".

The earlier talk in Washington of the possibility of a *modus vivendi* had greatly scared China, who feared that any form of Japanese-American settlement would mean that she would lose the measure of American support she had received in the past and any hope of armed American support if the Japanese attack on her should be intensified. A protest by Chiang Kai-shek direct to Roosevelt had the effect of causing Hull to withdraw his proposals and make fresh proposals demanding complete Japanese withdrawal from China—a demand that killed any prospect of agreement. In this, too, Australia became active trying to overcome Chinese objections so that the talks might continue. On 29th November, following a suggestion made by Menzies in the Advisory War Council,[3] the Government informed Eggleston in Chungking that it was clear that the Washington talks would break down as a direct result of Chinese intervention, which apparently had been designed for the very purpose of preventing any agreement, and suggested to Eggleston that he point out to the Chinese the possible danger that, having prevented agreement, China might have to face an accentuated Japanese attack without being assured of American armed support and urge on them the desirability of obtaining some assurance from the United States of armed support if Japanese attacks increased. The Australian attitude to China was well summed up in some words ascribed to Curtin: "China does not want to be treated as a pawn in this game, but neither does Australia".[4]

The suggestion made by Menzies in the Advisory War Council contained the following points for communication to Chiang Kai-shek: (a) our

about Japanese plans, but they had received from their own representatives information to encourage hope in peace. K. Officer, Chargé d'Affaires, Tokyo, reported on 22nd November: "The Government's attitude all goes to confirm the view that they are genuinely anxious to secure agreement with United States and to avoid at present anything that might prejudice discussions in Washington . . . . One important question is how long the Government can hold their ground against the extremists and continue discussions". On the 29th: "Balance of opinion is that Government will allow some time for further consideration of these although it is believed military are pressing for showdown with a view to early operations". On 2nd December: "My appreciation is . . . the Government realise that, as the effect of freezing, Japan's capacity to attack is beginning to decline. The Government is genuinely desirous of avoiding a conflict with the United States and consequently will go some considerable way to secure an agreement with the United States. The principal difficulty will be that the Japanese Government must save their face with regard to their position in China but there should be wide grounds of bargaining as to the details of the eventual evacuation". It is evident that up to 7th December, when Officer reported a local belief that the talks would continue, the Japanese public and, with them, the foreign representatives were being hoodwinked. The advice from Chungking as late as 2nd December was that a strong attitude to Japan by Britain and America was the best method to check the Japanese and that any signs of weakening would produce an immediate Japanese advance. Eggleston reported the Chinese belief that Japan was not in a position to conduct large-scale operations.

[3] See Advisory War Council Minute 573, 28 Nov.

[4] Minister for External Affairs to Eggleston, 29 Nov 1941.

settled policy is to do nothing to prejudice the interests of China; (b) the present negotiations with Japan are of great value, and they should continue, in view of the importance of gaining time; (c) it may appear from the course of the negotiations that Chinese interests are not being safeguarded; (d) this, however, is not so, as the greatest possible advantages accrue to China by reason of the fact that the United States are firmly in the middle of the negotiations and they are becoming more and more involved and in the long run this is the best thing that could happen to protect the interests of China.[5]

Already, on the afternoon of the 26th, however, Hull had handed to the Japanese representatives a document detailing the fundamental principles on which a general Pacific settlement must be based but containing no reference to a *modus vivendi*.[6] A report received from Casey on 28th November, following a further visit to Hull, spoke of considerable Japanese military activity in Indo-China and an expectation of further aggression by Japan, possibly within three or four days.[7]

As a last hope, on Saturday the 29th Casey, who had also talked by telephone with Evatt earlier in the day, proposed an approach to the Japanese Ambassador through a third party offering to act as an intermediary for a resumption of the talks, but over the week-end the actual dangers in the Kra Isthmus dominated the situation and Curtin intervened and suggested that, in view of the changing situation, Casey should not proceed with the proposal.[8] Before the message from the Prime Minister had been delivered, however, Casey had received from Kurusu an invitation to a private talk and had visited him at the Japanese Embassy on the morning of the 30th. He offered to act as intermediary and to pass on to Hull any proposal that Kurusu might care to make in order to have the conversations resumed. Kurusu had no proposal to make other than that discussions should be taken up again on the limited Japanese proposals. Casey informed Hull of the conversation on the evening of the same day.[1] In the circumstances his action was approved in Canberra.[2] The effort had not been unwelcome to the United States and Hull had been assured of Australia's complete trust in his handling of the situation.[3]

Hull did indeed see Kurusu once again, at the request of the Japanese on 1st December, but even before the talk, Casey reported, he clearly had no hope that the situation could be saved as the Japanese were already on the march.

By this time, even while making the last efforts to keep the parties talking, Australia was beginning to see the situation more starkly as that of impending war and to think less of possible deterrents and diplomatic

[5] Advisory War Council Minute 573, 28 Nov 1941.

[6] Casey to Minister for External Affairs, 26 Nov (received 27th).

[7] Casey to Minister for External Affairs, 27 Nov.

[8] Casey to Minister for External Affairs, 29 Nov (received 30th), and Prime Minister to Casey 30 Nov 1941.

[1] Casey to Minister for External Affairs, 30 Nov 1941.

[2] Minister for External Affairs to Casey, 1 Dec 1941.

[3] Casey to Minister for External Affairs, 30 Nov 1941.

successes than of what would happen when war came. On 29th November Curtin, in a message to Australian representatives in London, Washington and Chungking, expressed his concern at the probability of the immediate breakdown of the Washington talks and his view that the talks should be prolonged. Even now, he said, it might not be impossible to achieve that end, but he passed from that hope to a consideration of the impending war and revealed the core of Australian anxiety. Would the lead given by the United States in talking be followed by a similar lead in armed defence against aggression? There seemed to him to be a grave danger of further armed aggression by Japan without any armed intervention by the United States. Curtin again raised the direct and practical question which Page had raised in London. What would be done in case of Japanese aggression against either Russia, Netherlands Indies, China or Thailand? He agreed with the view ascribed to Churchill that elasticity was desirable but, in view of impending events, thought Australia should know what Britain would do in each case either in the absence of United States armed support or with the assistance of the United States.[4]

Curtin's telegram had rather more urgency about it than his observations at the discussions in the Advisory War Council on the 28th from which the telegram had emanated. After recording that Evatt had expressed the view that an attempt should be made to determine in what contingencies Britain would go to war and whether her action would be conditional on participation by the United States, the Council minute reads:

> The Prime Minister said that the whole question was closely related to the progress of the Japanese-United States conversations which had just been discussed by the Council. He could understand the reluctance of the United Kingdom Government to do anything to anticipate the outcome of the conversations. The United Kingdom is making a major re-disposition of naval forces by sending a battleship force to Singapore; the United States are cooperating in a very effective way by establishing an air route between the Hawaiian Islands and the Philippine Islands and naval plans for the disposition and employment of the United States, British and Dutch naval forces are to be formulated at the forthcoming conferences at Singapore and Manila. Whilst there was no political agreement it was clear from the above that considerable progress had been made in the development of cooperation on the military level between anti-Axis countries in the Pacific.

It was after further discussion that the Council made the recommendation which led to Curtin's telegram of the 29th.[5]

This approach was similar in intention though wider in scope than the attempts earlier in the year to mark the limits of Japanese advance and define a *casus belli*. Bruce, in reply, reviewed the talks, revealing incidentally the current view that the breakdown had come through diplomatic mistakes and not because Japanese war plans had made success hopeless, and expressed doubt whether it would now be possible to resume them. Therefore the question of what action would be taken in various contingencies became of the utmost importance and Page would immediately take up this matter with the War Cabinet.[6]

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[4] Prime Minister to Bruce, 29 Nov 1941.
[5] Advisory War Council Minute 574, 28 Nov 1941.
[6] Bruce to Prime Minister, 30 Nov 1941.

On the same day Australia was informed by the Dominions Office of various indications that Japan was about to attack Thailand and seize strategical points in the Kra Isthmus and that, in Washington, Halifax was to ask the United States Government for its views on action to forestall the Japanese.[7] Later in the day they were told of a Netherlands East Indies report of a Japanese concentration at Palau. They were informed also of a suggestion by the Netherlands that the British, Dutch and Americans might associate themselves in the declaration of a defence zone, west and south of a line from Davao in the southern Philippines to Waigeo Island off western New Guinea and continuing east along the Equator; it was suggested that no vessels might enter this zone without notifying the Netherlands naval authorities.[8]

Curtin's reply to the first of these messages was to the effect that Australia would still like to know what Britain intended to do, with or without United States participation, in the event of a Japanese attack on any one of the four points mentioned. He also recapitulated the information which Canberra had received to the effect that there was likely to be a brief respite before a Japanese attack in the tropics because the commander of the tropical expeditionary force was still in Japan and because the attack would not come until after the breakdown of the Hull-Kurusu talks; that in the event of a Japanese attack on Thailand no definite understanding of armed support from the United States could be anticipated; and that Thailand regarded cooperation with Britain in the region of the Kra Isthmus with such suspicion that, if Britain were to occupy the Isthmus before an actual attack by Japan, Thailand would oppose the British with force. He suggested further efforts to obtain a definite statement on the attitude of Thailand.[9]

The Australian War Cabinet met on Monday, 1st December. Regarding the immediate threat to the Kra Isthmus, its view was that, as the plain intention of a Japanese attack on Thailand would be to establish bases from which to attack China, Burma and Malaya, Brooke-Popham should be given authority to move troops into the Kra Isthmus if reconnaissance definitely established that a Japanese force was approaching the Isthmus. Every attempt should be made to obtain the prior consent of Thailand, but if consent could not be obtained action would be justified without consent. The United States should be advised of British intentions and asked, at least, whether she had any objection to the British proposals. The minute concluded:

> In view of the most valuable initiative and assistance from the United States in the talks with Japan we think that the question of prior warning to Japan or other similar diplomatic action should rest with the United States. We again repeat our opinion that, even at this late stage, a further endeavour should be made to encourage the United States to establish a *modus vivendi* with Japan which can be made satisfactory to China as well as to the other powers concerned.[1]

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[7] Secretary of State for Dominions to Prime Minister, 30 Nov 1941.

[8] Secretary of State for Dominions to Prime Minister, 30 Nov 1941.

[9] Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 30 Nov 1941.

[1] War Cabinet Minute 1524, 1 Dec 1941.

These views were at once communicated to the United Kingdom.[2]

At this point a divergence of view between Churchill and the Australian Government appears. When Page and Bruce waited on Churchill on the morning of 1st December to press the Australian case for a definite understanding on what action should be taken in various prospective situations, they were told that the British attitude was to "march in line with the United States of America". In the event of Japanese aggression in any of the four areas mentioned Britain should not anticipate American action but immediately support it. Churchill's reason was that American opinion would react favourably to a war which America had entered in defence of her own interests but would be inclined to be antagonistic to the idea of entering a war into which Britain had already entered and for the purpose of coming to the assistance of Britain. If there were an attack on British territory by Japan Britain would immediately declare war on Japan but otherwise would wait for America. The Australian view was that the British nations should act with or without American assistance.[3]

On the advice of Bruce, who communicated the results of the interview with Churchill, Curtin immediately enlarged and gave precision to the Australian view. On this occasion he placed before the United Kingdom five prospective cases of Japanese aggression. First, if there were an intensification of the attack by Japan against China, especially in Yunnan and on the Burma Road, we should continue to give China all support short of declaring war, but should otherwise be content to follow the United States lead and not declare war against Japan unless United States armed intervention was certain. Second, if there were a Japanese attack on Thailand, we should not give armed support without an assurance of active cooperation from the United States, except that in the Kra Isthmus, which was an integral part of the defence of North Malaya, we should follow the advice of the competent military authority and occupy the region if an armed threat to the Isthmus was definitely established. Third, in the case of a Japanese attack on Russia, there should be a declaration of war by Britain against Japan. Public opinion would not tolerate anything less. This action, however, should be contingent on a Russian undertaking that if Britain were involved in war against Japan in the Pacific, due to southward aggression, Russia would consider herself at war with Japan. Such a reciprocal arrangement, if suitably notified to Japan, should in itself be a valuable deterrent against Japanese aggression. Fourth, Australia felt "very strongly" that an assurance of automatic armed support for the Netherlands East Indies in the case of attack by Japan should at once be given, irrespective of the American attitude. As in the case of Russia there should be a reciprocal undertaking by the Netherlands. Fifth, in the event of a Japanese attack on Portuguese Timor, Britain should declare war irrespective of the United States attitude and the reciprocal understanding which Portugal was willing to enter should be concluded. Finally

[2] Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 1 Dec 1941, repeated to Prime Minister of New Zealand.

[3] Bruce to Prime Minister, 1 Dec 1941.

Curtin again pressed for a decision on each of the five cases, subject of course to alteration in the event of change in the international or strategic situation.[4]

From the surrounding Australian documents, the divergence of the Australian view from that of Churchill appears to have been solely a divergence over the handling of the situation created by the uncertainty whether the United States, which had been accorded the initiative in negotiation, could be depended on for the initiative in armed resistance. The irony of the situation was that, while the Allies and America were qualifying their answer to every prospective problem and studying the refinements in their support for each other, Japan had already made a clear-cut decision that all, except Russia, would be her enemies and was undeterred by the prospect.

The final stage of the diplomatic measures to prevent war was initiated by the delivery on 2nd December to the Japanese representatives in Washington of a message from Roosevelt asking what were the actual reasons for the recent movements of Japanese forces and what were the intentions of the Japanese Government. The information received in Canberra from Washington was such as to justify higher confidence in American firmness. Australia did not seek to play a direct part but kept in touch with the discussions between Halifax and the President. Casey was instructed to keep a close watch on the position to ensure that no honorable chance of averting war was overlooked. "In doing this our obligations to the President for his leadership should be stressed. Will you express the hope of this Government that he perseveres with his noble task?"[5]

The reply from the Japanese to the President's enquiry was considered unsatisfactory and the President decided to send a message to the Emperor and if no reply was received to issue a warning. Australia in communications with the United Kingdom concurred in this procedure.

On 5th December the United Kingdom proposed that Britain should go beyond previous oral assurances to the Dutch and propose a military understanding by which each party would undertake to cooperate immediately to the fullest extent of its available resources in the event of the other party being forced to take military action to repel an attack upon any of its territories in the Far East.[6] The Australian Government approved, and recalled that it had always stood for a reciprocal undertaking with the Netherlands and had already given air support to the East Indies.[7]

On 5th December, the United Kingdom informed the Dominions that it had now received an assurance of armed support from the United States (a) if Britain found it necessary either to forestall a Japanese landing in the Kra Isthmus or to occupy part of the Isthmus as a counter to the Japanese violation of any other part of Thailand; (b) if the Japanese

[4] Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 2 Dec 1941.
[5] Minister for External Affairs to Casey, 6 Dec 1941.
[6] Secretary of State for Dominions to Prime Minister, 5 Dec 1941.
[7] Prime Minister to Secretary of State for Dominions, 6 Dec 1941.

attacked the Netherlands East Indies and Britain at once went to the support of the Netherlands; (c) if the Japanese attacked British territory. Accordingly the Commander-in-Chief had been instructed to move into the Kra Isthmus if reconnaissance established the fact that escorted Japanese ships were approaching the Isthmus or if the Japanese violated any other part of Thailand, and to put into effect the plans agreed to with the Dutch if the Japanese attacked the Netherlands East Indies.

Thus during November the Australian Government had been chiefly interested in preventing a breakdown of the talks, especially in the period before the arrival of British battleships at Singapore and the Indian Ocean, and in encouraging the United States to keep the diplomatic initiative on behalf of the democratic powers. They had also sought a determination of what should be done in the event of various types of Japanese aggression, and, behind their activities had been the hope that, if peace moves failed, the United States would also give leadership in armed resistance to Japan. Some criticism might lie against the Australian Government for having misread the situation. For nine months the United States Secretary of State had been conducting negotiations with Japan but by early November the talks had reached a point where any prospect of a peaceful settlement had disappeared and where Japan's intention to make war was clear. From the information now available but not then available in Canberra, the continuation of the talks by Kurusu during November and up to the eve of Pearl Harbour was an act of Japanese deception. Yet both the British and Australians appeared to assume that they had the diplomatic advantage, that the talks could be continued, and that other powers might intervene in them with a prospect of their leading to a general settlement in the Pacific.

In part, the Australian purpose was to buy time. That need had also been appreciated already by the United States and there was little occasion to urge the United States to keep on talking, for the administration was well aware that their own forces needed more time in the Pacific and that it was against the temper of their own people that any abandonment of peace should come first from America. Moreover the Australian purpose of buying time while promised reinforcements were arriving was incompletely served, for the Government's major interest during November was on negotiation and the discovering of means for a settlement rather than on reinforcement. While there was no formal acceptance of the promised British aid as sufficient, there certainly was the acquiescence of silence in the arrangements that were being made and, in view of later developments and later Australian policies, it should be noted first that during November Australia appeared to accept, as the most satisfactory arrangements that could be made by Britain in the circumstances, the British promises for the naval reinforcement of Singapore; second, that Australia herself had not yet made any major change in the nature of her own contribution to the war effort or in preparations for war in the Far East; third, that already Australia, recognising the limits of British aid, was looking chiefly to the United States forces if war should break out with Japan. Australia,

though still a little anxious about whether America would fight, apparently rated American power in the Pacific very high, and also seemed to be imperfectly aware or to misunderstand the American strategic view that gave first importance to war in Europe and the Atlantic and saw their role in any war in the Pacific as being defensive for a start.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that, at that time, the Australian Government still saw the main defence of Australia in the event of war with Japan as a defence remote from the coasts of Australia. On 4th December, in instructing the Defence Committee to review the strength and organisation of the three services to meet probable forms of attack on Australia, the War Cabinet stated the "primary requirement" as "to prevent an enemy from reaching Australia" and the purpose of the review was to see whether men could be taken from the militia to strengthen the navy and air force and help munitions production.[8] In discussing the role of the ships of the Australian Navy a week earlier, the War Cabinet had given special attention to its "vital commitments" in respect of escorting reinforcements, food and supplies to the A.I.F. in the Middle East and Malaya.[9]

The Australian Government and for the most part the Australian public seemed to keep the illusion that the initiative was with Britain and America and that Japan might be persuaded or intimidated. The truth that American capacity was limited to taking a defensive role in a war in the Pacific does not appear in contemporary Australian discussion. The picture seen was rather that if the Japanese were so foolish as to take warlike action they would be intercepted and checked by an Allied counter-move.

During the first week of December the news reported by press and radio to the Australian public made it seem clearer every day that war was coming to the Pacific. There was some contradiction and, even to the last, momentary revival of hope in negotiation but, from about 29th November onwards, the signs became more and more ominous. From 1st December the people read of emergency meetings of the War Cabinet, the summoning of service chiefs, and the postponement of leave for troops. From the 5th they watched the southward progress of Japanese expeditions and speculated where they would strike. They watched impatiently to read of the expected counter-move and of the expected check to Japan.

On the 8th Japan struck with dramatic force at Pearl Harbour and Malaya. Australia was shocked by the vigour and daring of the opening blows. Yet there was no dismay. Singapore was impregnable and the newest British battleships were coming as reinforcements to the Far East. The raid on Pearl Harbour, the exact consequences of which were not known in Australia until months later, was foolhardy. It had made certain what Australians had been hoping and doubting for months—that the United States would fight. Surely some madness had overtaken Japan to challenge so great an enemy with so spectacular an insult.

The event about which there had been recurrent discussion in Australia for more than half a century had at last come. Japan was attacking. "This

[8] War Cabinet Minute 1529, 4 Dec 1941. For details see Chapter 10, pp. 400-1, above.
[9] War Cabinet Minute 1522, 26 Nov 1941, and Advisory War Council Minute 569, 26 Nov 1941.

is the gravest hour of our history," said Curtin. "We have a heavy responsibility. I ask every Australian, man and woman, to go about their allotted task with full vigour and courage."

In a national broadcast later in the day he spoke of the course of discussions. The hands of the democracies were clean. The guilt for plunging the Pacific hemisphere into war was upon Japan, which had chosen the Hitler method and struck like an assassin in the night. Australia would go to battle stations in defence of a free way of living. The efforts of Australians in the past two years must be as nothing compared with the efforts they must now put forward. Let there be no idle hand. The road of service was ahead. Let all tread it firmly, victoriously. The Australian forces were not alone. The United States, Great Britain and her colonies and dominions, the great federation of Russian republics, the Netherlands East Indies and China were associated "in the common cause of preserving for free men and free women not only their inheritance, but every hope they have of decency and dignity and liberty".

"We Australians have imperishable traditions. We shall maintain them. We shall vindicate them. We shall hold this country and keep it as a citadel for the British-speaking race and as a place where civilisation will persist."